Intimate Encounters: Sympathy in the Modernist and Contemporary Novel

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to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English In February 2019

I certify that all material in this thesis which is not my own work has been identified and that no material has previously been submitted and approved for the award of a degree by this or any other University.

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Abstract

This thesis explores ideas of sympathy in the works of modernist authors D. H. Lawrence, Virginia Woolf and Elizabeth Bowen, and contemporary novelist Ian McEwan. Read in parallel with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, this study argues that in the selected modernist and contemporary texts sympathy takes place between feeling bodies that exist in constant interaction with each other and the world. My chosen authors challenge the view that fellow feeling is synonymous with gaining rational knowledge of other minds; on the contrary, their works suggest that feeling for and with others often transcends the limits of cognition. As such, obtaining a clear view of other minds cannot only fail to lead to intimacy but it can even be considered violent and dangerous. The authors at the centre of this thesis are suspicious of hyper-visibility because they associate it with desires for subordination and possession, ideas that acquire an unprecedented urgency in the aftermath of the First and Second World Wars. Instead of clear sight and rational knowledge, my chosen writers place sympathy in a semi-luminous zone of ambiguity, where the other's contours remain blurred and not easily discernible yet this haziness allows for the emergence of an alternative 'manner of seeing' rooted in affective attention to the fragile human body. As such, this thesis shows the existence of a different kind of modernism that is interested in haziness instead of clarity, soft flesh instead of hard biological matter, and imperfection instead of totality. The last chapter of this study, dedicated to McEwan's engagement with modernist legacies, argues that modernist ideas about fellow feeling are still relevant in twenty-first-century literature, continuing to energise and challenge contemporary thinking.

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Acknowledgments

My greatest debts are to my supervisors, Kirsty Martin and Laura Salisbury, not only for their intellectual insights, which have been indispensable to this project, but also for their emotional support and faith in my work. It has been a pleasure to work with them, and I am grateful to them for having shown me the kind of scholar I would like to become one day.

A number of people have generously offered their advice and help at various stages of this project. I thank Jana Funke, my 'step-supervisor', for her time and support at a time when I needed extra help. Thanks are also due to Lorna Wilkinson and Joshua Powell for carefully reading and commenting on different chapters of this thesis. I express my gratitude to Petronia Petrar, Erika Mihálycsa and Carmen Ardelean, whose teaching at undergraduate level and in high school motivated me to embark on postgraduate studies.

I am grateful to my friends for cheering me up in times of desperation but also for the endless hours of laughter we spent together. There are no words to express my gratitude to my parents, László Nagy-Seres and Júlia Nagy-Seres, and my brothers, Szilárd and Norbert, for their unconditional love and sympathy, and for surviving my years of absence. Finally, this thesis would have never materialised without the love and unwavering belief of BV. I thank him for putting up with me and never doubting I can complete this project. He has taught me what genuine sympathy means. This thesis is dedicated to him.

Introduction

> All is solemn, all is pale where she [Miss Lambert] stands, like a statue in a grove. She lets her tasselled silken cloak slip down, and only her purple ring still glows, her vinous, her amethystine ring. There is this mystery about people when they leave us. When they leave us I can companion them to the pond and make them stately. When Miss Lambert passes, she makes the daisy change; and everything runs like streaks of fire when she carves the beef. Month by month things are losing their hardness; even my body now lets the light through; my spine is soft like wax near the flame of the candle. (Woolf, *The Waves* 32–33)

One of the six protagonists of Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* (1931), Rhoda, contemplates the mystery that surrounds Miss Lambert, her tutor in the boarding school. There is a strange interplay of presence and absence, materiality and abstraction in this passage. Miss Lambert is at once statuesque, firmly rooted, and evanescent, embraced by an unexplainable pallor. She seems untouchable, as though her 'silken cloak slip[s]' through Rhoda's and the reader's fingers, yet she is also 'stately' and statuesque, unmistakable with her glowing purple ring. Miss Lambert becomes semi-transparent, enveloped in pallor while also having an embodied presence, as her gestures ('she makes the daisy change; and everything runs like streaks of fire when she carves the beef') remain etched in Rhoda's memory. By observing Miss Lambert's movements, Rhoda realises how things, including her own body 'lose their hardness' and opacity, 'let[ting] the light through' and softly yielding to 'the flame of the candle'. Rhoda's response to Miss Lambert suggests the essential ingredients of interpersonal intimacy (as interpreted in the works of my chosen authors): semi-luminosity, plasticity and a sense of mystery indecipherable by rationality. Woolf proposes that possessing clear and unambiguous knowledge about others is impossible but this does not necessarily have to lead to failed sympathy. On the contrary, as this thesis will argue, vagueness, the inability to see and know with certainty, can often facilitate and foster intimacy.

Literary modernism has more often been associated with clarity and preciseness than blurredness. In his Imagist manifesto Ezra Pound defined

modern poetry as ‘hard and clear, never blurred nor indefinite’ (Kolokotroni et al. 269), the latter qualities being linked to the literature of the nineteenth century (especially Symbolist poetry, presumably), which Pound considered ‘a rather blurry, messy sort of period’ (*Literary Essays* 11). T. E. Hulme claimed that modern poems should not be ‘dragging in infinite’ and they have ‘nothing to do […] with mystery, or with emotions’ (133). Pound and Hulme rejected ideas of mystery and infinitude because they connected them to emotions, sloppiness and softness, which should be avoided by modernists due to their fluid and ungraspable nature. In Pound’s and Hulme’s view, modernist poems should be ‘hard’ – have a well defined form, whose boundaries remain solid in the reader’s hands – and ‘clear’ – guide the reader towards light instead of keeping him/her in a misty half-obscurity.

Haziness, nevertheless, as several critics have recently argued, might be central to our understanding of literature in general, and modernism in particular. By reading modernist works in parallel with early twentieth-century cinema and photography, Beci Carver suggests that ‘Granular Modernists’ – such as Joseph Conrad, T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden, and Samuel Beckett – at times preferred vagueness to clarity in their attempt ‘to see [their] experiments through to the end, and to get on with life’ (180). David Russell also proposes an alternative way of exploring intimacy in literature, and though his main focus point falls outside of modernism, his arguments are highly relevant to modernist criticism. In his exploration of the concept of tact, Russell seeks to provide answers to the vital question of ‘whether there are other things we can do with people, with any objects of our attention, than know them. And whether coming to an answer about, or exposing the truth of, something or someone is the most useful, or the most imaginative, or the most kind thing we can do with them.’ (2)

The authors at the centre of this thesis have been, to a different extent and in different ways, suspicious of ‘knowing’ others. Elizabeth Bowen wrote that ‘the most interesting people are those whom we continue to know the least […]. To them, with their shadowy background and untold secrets, the imagination, fascinated, returns.’ (Hepburn, *People, Places, Things* 399) Bowen talks about the act of fiction writing and her comments refer to literary characters but could equally be applied to real-life people and works of art. This thesis proposes that there are affinities between how we feel for our fellow beings and art objects, such as paintings and sculptures, and indeed literary texts. D. H. Lawrence’s

fascination with the paintings of the French Post-Impressionist artist Paul Cézanne (1839–1906), or Virginia Woolf's admiration for the ancient Greek statues of the Acropolis suggest that fellow feeling might lie in a gesture of *un*knowing by opening towards the mystery and partial visibility of the other. As such, imperfect vision – the inability to see and know with clarity – becomes an important theme in this study, opening up the possibility for an exploration of the relationship between verbal and visual modernisms.

Indeed, art was important for my modernist authors. Lawrence did not only write on art (especially Cézanne's paintings) but he was also a painter, while Woolf was surrounded by Post-Impressionist artists and art critics, such as her sister, Vanessa Bell, Roger Fry and Duncan Grant, not to mention that her great-aunt, Julia Margaret Cameron (1815–1879), was one of the most famous female photographers of the nineteenth century. Before becoming a professional writer, Bowen wished to become an artist and went to the London County Council School of Art but after a few months she abandoned her artistic ambitions (Hoogland 8).

A parallel reading of modernist literature and modern as well as earlier art movements shows that feeling sympathy is not synonymous with a tight grip or clear sight. As my chosen modernist writers suggest, there are subtler ways of "handling" others, even if these will never lead to complete epistemological truth. The works of Lawrence, Woolf, Bowen and contemporary novelist Ian McEwan show that sympathy resides in a semi-soft and blurred realm, where bodies touch other bodies without taking possession of each other. The body, read through the lens of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's (1908–1961) phenomenology, represents a living entity that, surpassing the limits of its biological confinements, reaches out to and interweaves with the world. Following Merleau-Ponty's ideas of embodiment, this study suggests that sympathy happens in the phenomenal body that is neither a purely biological machine nor a rational mind, but living and vulnerable flesh inevitably embedded in the texture of the world. In other words, sympathy takes place between relational bodies. This relation, however, is not always unproblematic. The novels of Lawrence, Woolf, Bowen and McEwan also reveal the *rough edges* and *blind spots* of this particular strain of fellow feeling, which is not entirely devoid of desires for subordination and violence, and sometimes might even prove to be insufficient for creating lasting bonds. In what follows the introduction will offer a brief historical overview of fellow feeling, after

which it will explain the rationale for reading literary modernism in parallel with phenomenology, followed by a discussion of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of embodiment. The following sections will focus on the renewed interest in the feeling body and emotion in modernist studies, and finally the last section will explore the importance of blurred vision in the literature and philosophy of the first half of the twentieth century.

Sympathy and empathy

Before starting to discuss modernist ideas of fellow feeling, it is important to offer a brief historical overview of sympathy and empathy, two closely related terms. In the eighteenth century, the two major philosophers of sympathy, David Hume (1711–1776) and Adam Smith (1723–1790) offered different definitions of fellow feeling. In *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* (1751), Hume argued that the capacity of feeling for others is 'a principle in human nature': every person feels an inward urge to contribute to other humans' wellbeing, which represents the basis for moral decisions (219). At the same time, Hume believed that sympathy is a 'contagious' act that enables rationally unexplainable forms of social communication: sympathy 'makes us enter deeply into each other's sentiments, and causes […] passions and sentiments to run, as it were, by contagion thro' the whole club or knot of companions (*Essays* 273). Hume, of course, was not alone in advocating the contagious nature of feelings. In the eighteenth century it was a widely held belief that emotions live an existence of their own and are transmitted between humans, a theory that often caused great anxieties (Pinch 1).

In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), Smith went further than Hume, suggesting that sympathy is actually an imaginary identification between two subjects. As Ildikó Csengei succinctly summarises: in Smith's theory, '[t]he result is an intersubjective identity created through a partial bodily and affective identification, which implies borrowing the feelings that belong to the other person – that is, placing parts of the other into the self' (52). According to Brigid Lowe, while Hume defined sympathy as a form of 'intersubjective communication', Smith identified its roots in distant spectatorship, a view that influenced nineteenth-century literary discussions of fellow feeling (10). While several critics of Victorian literature have proposed a view of sympathy as distant spectatorship,

Lowe argues that in the fiction of certain Victorian novelists, such as Charles Dickens and George Eliot, fellow feeling preserves its positive value, partly due to the emphasis these novelists place on the 'bodily manifestations of sympathy': 'Dickens's characters grow hot, laugh, and eat out of sympathy' (10).[1]

Hume's and Smith's theories illustrate two extreme interpretations of sympathy that, to a certain extent, have survived in contemporary discussions of empathy, to which I will shortly turn. Hume's account encourages a view of sympathy as a passive, biologically hardwired state, which triggers altruistic behaviour and moral action, while Smith's version suggests that sympathy is a cognitive act of imagination that facilitates our understanding of others' inner states. Though in different ways, both theories seem to ignore the role of the living body: while Hume transforms the body into a mechanism programmed to sympathise, Smith emphasises the importance of the mind's abstract capacity to project the other's inner world into the perceiver.

The kind of sympathy in which many modernists were interested, differs significantly from earlier definitions of fellow feeling, an umbrella term that, for the scope of this thesis, encompasses sympathy, empathy and other forms of inter-human communication. Lawrence's, Woolf's and Bowen's writings show that sympathy is neither an automatic bodily reflex nor a purely cognitive act. Kirsty Martin suggests that sympathy in modernist fiction is at once rooted in the body and transcends corporeal boundaries, creating a vitalist rhythm that unites self and other in a cognitively ungraspable bond: '[F]eeling [seems] both based in the senses and yet difficult to map exactly onto bodily senses, both experienced by the individual as intense inner sensation and also something that seems to leave one bereft of autonomy' (*Modernism* 7). While Martin locates fellow feeling in the vitalist energy transcending strictly corporeal confines, this thesis proposes that sympathy happens *in* the feeling body. The phenomenal body is always already stretching beyond the borders of its physical boundaries by being embedded into and interacting with its environment. The living body on which this thesis focuses, can be described as malleable and yielding to its surroundings, while at the same time fragile, ruthlessly exposed to violence and destruction, a characteristic that became painfully evident in the aftermath of the First and Second World War.

[1] For an example of a critic interpreting sympathy as distant spectatorship, see Audrey Jaffe. *Scenes of Sympathy: Identity and Representation in Victorian Fiction*. Cornell University Press, 2000.

In discussions of fellow feeling in the modernist period the question of terminology arises inevitably. Though the term 'sympathy' was still widely used in the first half of the twentieth century, after 1909 it coexisted, or in certain contexts was even superseded by the new and more fashionable word 'empathy'. The term 'empathy' was coined by psychologist Edward Bradford Titchener (1867–1927), who translated it from the German *Einfühlung*, meaning 'feeling into'.[2] In literary circles the concept of empathy was first theorised by English novelist, essayist and art critic Vernon Lee (pseudonym for Violet Paget, 1856–1935), who in the essay collection, *Beauty and Ugliness and Other Studies in Psychological Aesthetics* (1912), investigated the viewer's feelings for art objects, such as paintings, sculptures and architecture. Lee believed that an object of art causes physical alterations in the beholder's body (tense muscles, quick breathing), which give birth to pleasant or uncomfortable emotions. These emotions, in turn, are projected back onto the art object and experienced by the viewer as though they were inherent properties of the object (Burdett 3–4). For Lee aesthetic feelings represented dynamic entities that could be exchanged between the viewing subject and the seen art object. As such, though experienced as corporeal symptoms, emotions actually resided outside the body, in the environment from which they could be borrowed and into which they were returned. Though, as Burdett argues, 'the body never quite goes away' for Lee, her later writings show a distancing from the body as her attention turns towards the cognitive aspects of aesthetic empathy: beauty is not so much an inherent property of the art object but a mental quality invented by the viewer (23, 25).

Lee's turn to what later came to be known in psychology as cognitive empathy marks a watershed moment in the history of fellow feeling. Indeed, in recent discussions of empathy, the emphasis seems to predominantly fall on the cognitive-cerebral aspects of fellow feeling. Since the discovery of the so-called 'mirror neurons' in 1992, many neuroscientists have attempted to locate empathy in a specific region of the brain.[3] Cognitive empathy means understanding what

[2] See Edward Bradford Titchener. *Lectures on the Experimental Psychology of the Thought-Processes*. New York: Macmillan, 1909.

[3] In 1992 neuroscientists at the University of Parma discovered by accident that a certain groups of neurons in the brains of macaque monkeys fired not only when the animals performed an action, but also when they observed someone else carry out the same action, for example a human being taking out nuts from a box. These groups of neurons became to be known as 'mirror neurons'. Vittorio Gallese. '"Being Like Me: Self-Other Identity. Mirror Neurons, and Empathy." *Perspectives on Imitation: From Cognitive Neuroscience to Social Science*, edited by Susan Hurkey and Nick Chater, MIT Press, 2005, pp. 101–118. It is important to mention that although

the other goes through (mostly through the act of imagination), while affective empathy is synonymous with experiencing the other's feelings (Keen 27–28). Although there is no consensus regarding the definition of empathy, the term has recently become a buzzword advocated by scientists, philosophers, politicians and journalists as the key to building a more caring and better-functioning society.[4] The phrase most commonly associated with empathy is 'stepping into the other's shoes', or 'look[ing] at the world through other people's eyes', as the project leaders of the Empathy Museum put it.[5] If one does a Google search for the word 'empathy', the most frequent images show two interlinking heads/brains, corroborating the meaning of empathy as cognitive perspective taking. Those following the 'mirror neuron'-strand and claiming that empathy is hardwired in the brain, suggest that we are able to empathise with other humans because we have more characteristics and abilities in common than we have previously thought. Among the advocates of this theory one can find scientists, humanities scholars, and interestingly, fiction writers too. One of the most prominent British novelists interested in the topic of empathy is McEwan, who has written extensively on the evolutionary roots of fellow feeling in his essays and articles.

McEwan thinks that one of the best ways of honing empathetic skills is through the reading of literature.[6] In a 1994 interview he said that '[…] fiction is a

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the idea of mirror neurons has had a lot of influence in the cultural sphere, the status of that research in neuroscience itself is not very firm. Many neuroscientists have started to question the role of mirror neurons in empathy. See, for example, Gregory Hickok, *The Myth of Mirror Neurons: The Real Neuroscience of Communication and Cognition*. New York, W. W. Norton and Co., 2014.

[4] See, for example, Mark Honigsbaum. 'Barack Obama and the "empathy deficit".' *The Observer*. 4 January 2013; Sasha Gonzales, 'Empathy: Why we need more of it in a polarised world, and how to cultivate the human touch.' *South China Morning Post*, 22 February 2018.

[5] The Empathy Museum is a 'travelling museum [that] explores how empathy can not only transform our personal relationships, but also help tackle global challenges such as prejudice, conflict and inequality.' Previous projects/exhibitions include, for example, 'A Mile in My Shoes', housed in a shoebox-shaped building, where visitors could try on and walk in other people's shoes and listen to their life stories (in the form of podcasts): 'The stories cover different aspects of life, from loss and grief to hope and love and take the visitor on an empathetic as well as a physical journey.' For more information see www.empathymuseum.com/index2.html. It might be worth considering the language of the last sentence: visitors embark on an 'empathetic as well as a physical journey'. This formulation suggests that empathy is equated with imagination and cognitive role taking, mental faculties clearly separated from the body. The project leaders admit that empathy is vaguely related to corporeal sensations too, but these seem to occupy secondary roles compared to the imaginative function of empathy.

[6] For McEwan, the kind of literature (especially fiction) capable of improving empathy is rooted in the 'real' world. In an interview with Zadie Smith, McEwan claimed: '[…] I do have a sneaking sympathy with the view that the real, the actual, is so demanding and rich, that magical realism is really a tedious evasion of some artistic responsibility' (n.p.). Zadie Smith. 'Zadie Smith Talks with Ian McEwan.' *Believer: Book of Writers Talking to Writers*. McSweeneys, 2005. www.believermag.com/an-interview-with-ian-mcewan/. Accessed 30 November 2018. As Laura

deeply moral form in that it is the perfect medium for entering the mind of another. I think it is at the level of empathy that moral questions begin in fiction' (Louvel et al. 4). Empathy, in McEwan's view, is an essential prerequisite of human nature, at the heart of which lies the individual's ability to imaginatively enter other consciousnesses and gain intimate, inside knowledge of them. Literature, and the novel in particular, represents a fruitful terrain for imagining oneself in the other's situation, which can transform us into moral and responsible subjects. According to McEwan 'we are innately moral beings, at the most basic, wired-in neurological level' (Louvel et al. 4), and as a result of 'our common nature' and 'our general understanding of what it means to be someone else', we are able to read and enjoy literature of remote times and cultures (McEwan, 'Literature, Science, and Human Nature' 19, 5).

McEwan views empathy as a biological phenomenon, hard-wired in the brain, which ensures our moral nature: our ability to enter other minds and gain knowledge of other people's thoughts and feelings. Literature represents the perfect territory where we can hone our empathetic skills, since reading fiction requires that we scrutinise characters' consciousness, which in turn leads to our becoming moral agents, attentive to real people in our real surroundings. These ideas chime with the philosophy of Martha Nussbaum and the works of literary critic Wayne Booth, both of whom have suggested that literary texts (especially those portraying real-life scenarios) have the role of 'enlightening our passions' and offering moral guidance in our everyday lives and relationships (Nussbaum, *Upheavals* 381).[7]

McEwan's insistence on 'our common nature' raises some unsettling questions. Is empathy based exclusively on analogy, on aspects we have in *common* with our fellow beings? Is there a minimum threshold of commonality under which we cannot talk about empathy? As Sophie Ratcliffe reminds us, the relationship between fellow feeling and analogy is complex and difficult to pin down. She argues that '[w]e turn to analogical modes of thought […] because

Salisbury concisely formulates: 'For McEwan, […] the novel, as a liberal form, is at its most penetrating when it is bound to the realm of sensibility, to attempts to explore and get to the heart of the world as it is, rather than to […] utopian forms that […] [want] to change it.' Laura Salisbury. 'Narration and Neurology: Ian McEwan's Mother Tongue.' *Textual Practice, vol.* 24, no. 5, 2010, pp. 883–912, p. 884.

[7] See Wayne Booth, *The Company We Keep: An Ethics of Fiction*. University of California Press, 1988; Martha C. Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature*. Oxford University Press, 1990; Martha C. Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: The Intelligence of the Emotions*. Cambridge University Press, 2001.

there are limits to our sympathetic comprehension' (4). In other words, analogy, or identification are not inherent components of fellow feeling but something to which we recur precisely due to the fractured and incomplete nature of our attempt to understand others. These fractures and gaps represent the differences between self and other, which make a total union with other entities impossible. Yet these gaps play an important role in interpersonal relationships, allowing for a form of proximity that does not aim at dissolving distinctions between subjects.

The question whether literature promotes empathy by enhancing 'our common nature' remains a highly debated topic in contemporary culture. While philosophers, such as Nussbaum, favour this view, many literary critics are wary of drawing a direct correlation between fiction reading and empathy, as a force triggering real-life altruistic action. As Martin clarifies, her study of modernist sympathy 'does *not* claim that by feeling for others, or by feeling for art we become more altruistic' (1, my emphasis). Though I recognise the relevance of the topic of literature reading and empathy, my study will not address this problem. I am primarily interested in the possibilities and limitations of fellow feeling *within* literary works. I mainly focus on the interaction between fictional characters but I also discuss writers', and to a lesser extent, readers' feelings for literary characters. My question, however, is not whether or how fiction reading facilitates real-life pro-social action, but how the kind of sympathy in which my chosen authors were interested, examined through the lens of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, can provide an alternative, possibly more sympathetic way of reading (modernist) literature.

Various reasons have led to my decision to use the term 'sympathy' instead of 'empathy', the most important being that the modernist authors this thesis focuses on did not employ the word 'empathy' despite being probably familiar with it. More importantly, empathy is most frequently associated with cognitive faculties, such as imagination and role taking, which are crucial but not exclusive skills in interpersonal encounters as presented in the works of Lawrence, Woolf, Bowen, and McEwan. Nevertheless, some literary critics disagree with the usage of the word 'sympathy' in modernist studies. Meghan Marie Hammond, for example, suggests that modernist literature illustrates the turn from sympathy to empathy, which happened at the beginning of the twentieth century. By the end of the nineteenth century, Hammond argues, the meaning of sympathy became blurred, and inadequate to express the change that took place

in early twentieth-century discussions of fellow feeling (7). She identifies this change in the unprecedented preoccupation with the mind due to the rise of modern psychology (1). According to her, the exploration of empathy sheds new light on 'a strain of modernism […] that is inward-looking, concerned with "getting inside" minds' (2). Hammond defines modernism as 'a literature that is both focused on bridging psychological distance and intent on finding new ways of representing consciousness' (27). But modernist fellow feeling was equally interested in bridging bodily distance, while also showing the difficulties and dangers of this endeavour. Sympathy, as I interpret it, is not merely a problem of entering other minds, but also of extending one's corporeal boundaries in order to touch and be touched by the world, including other human beings. As such, this thesis nuances the meaning of the mind as something inherently coupled with the body, and not an abstraction existing outside or above the body.[8] The kind of modernism emerging from this study is not anti-mental, not even anti-rational but rather pre-rational, able to open to the world and view it with wonder. The meaning of sympathy might have become blurred by the beginning of the twentieth century, as Hammond suggests, but this did not curtail modernists' interest in this particular form of fellow feeling. On the contrary, qualities of haziness and mystery remained crucial to modernist understandings of intimacy.

Hammond's reluctance to write on sympathy is understandable from a twenty-first century perspective. In the last decades sympathy has fallen out of grace, being most commonly associated with pity, a kind of passive and helpless state in which the sympathiser feels sorry for but does not necessarily act to alleviate the other's suffering. For many modernists, however, sympathy had a far more complex meaning, imbued with connotations of what is nowadays called empathy. As Ratcliffe suggests, (modernist) sympathy 'still includes the notion of feeling *with* another person' (19, my emphasis).[9] What is more, the concept of sympathy is closely related to wonder and mystery, two terms of crucial

[8] Drawing on philosopher Andy Clark's theory of the 'extended mind', Patricia Waugh reads modernist fiction, especially Woolf's novels as illustrating the mutual interdependence of mind and body: 'Thinking is not simply the individual's private and internal mental "manipulation of symbol but is "meshed" with a substrate of embodied sensorimotor capacity, a body entangled with an environment, a history and other mind-body-environment complexes'. Patricia Waugh. '"Did I not banish the soul": Thinking other-wise Woolf-wise.' *Contradictory Woolf: Selected Papers from the Twenty-First Annual International Conference on Virginia Woolf*, edited by Derek Ryan and Stella Bolaki. International Virgina Woolf Society, Clemson University Press, 2012, pp. 23–42, p. 33.

[9] Sympathy is usually defined as 'feeling for', while empathy as 'feeling with' others. See Keen, pp. 4–5.

importance to modernist feeling, and which have less to do with cognitive understanding, than with a whole-body orientation to the world (Ratcliffe 17).

Phenomenological literature and literary phenomenology

Besides the mentioned novelists, a central figure of this thesis is the French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty. I will read his philosophy of embodiment in parallel with the fiction of Lawrence, Woolf, Bowen, and to a lesser extent, McEwan, showing how literature and philosophy can sympathetically illuminate each other. Instead of looking for direct connections between phenomenology and modernist literature, or treating either field as a source of influence for the other, this thesis sets out to investigate the affinities between philosophy and modernist fiction by showing how they might mutually illuminate each other and help us better understand a particular form of sympathy that emerged in the first half of the twentieth century – a historical period burdened with military conflict and death. As such, the methodology employed in this thesis is close to what Ariane Mildenberg calls 'a kinship of method between modernism and phenomenology' (2–3, emphasis in original), or Cleo Hanaway-Oakley describes as 'parallel philosophies' that are 'likely to originate in a collective cultural history' (3, 4). The investigation of this 'collective cultural history' reveals how sympathy is rooted in a careful attention to the fragility of other bodies, which will never become fully transparent to the beholder's gaze, yet their half-visible nature is precisely what allows for the emergence of a form of fellow feeling the aim of which is not epistemological appropriation but sensuous proximity.

At the same time, due to its nature of employing characters in concrete everyday situations, modernist fiction also reveals the shortcomings of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. While the philosopher tends to view the subject's sympathetic coexistence with the world as an example of perfect harmony, in which self and other exist in proximity while retaining their separateness, modernist writers show the difficulties of drawing any clear lines of demarcation between acts of intimacy and violence. The semi-transparent zone of sympathy is often darkened by the primordial forces of aggression, as in Lawrence's *Women in Love* (1920), or painfully illuminated by the intruding lights of personal and historical treachery, as in Bowen's *The Heat of the Day* (1949). In other words, the modernist works

examined in this thesis suggest not only the vulnerability of individual bodies but also the immense fragility of the body's coexistence with other bodies.

One of the basic principles that link my modernist authors' works to Merleau-Pontian phenomenology is their shared interest in the mystery of the world, a quality that, in contrast with popular belief, does not impede but rather facilitates interpersonal bonding. According to the writers on which this study focuses, mystery is not synonymous with complete opacity: the impossibility of getting intimate knowledge of others. Rather, human beings are semi-transparent, partially opened to others, while never fully understandable. What is more, knowing others is not limited to rational comprehension but happens rather in and through the living body, or more precisely in the interaction of bodies.

In *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), Merleau-Ponty argues that ambiguity shows how humans' existence cannot be explained through dichotomies such as nature and culture: '[f]or man, everything is constructed and everything is natural' a complexity that results in a form of behaviour that 'deflect[s] vital behaviors from their direction [*sens*] through a sort of *escape* and a genius of ambiguity' (195, emphasis in original).[10] Ambiguity, for Merleau-Ponty, can only be experienced as an embodied state, since it is the body through which we communicate with the world, the former being at once a subjective, first-person experience and a mode of becoming part of a universal generality that transcends our consciousness (204). Mystery, in other words, both permits and restricts our communion with the world, a quality of crucial importance for Merleau-Ponty and modernists. Ambiguity allows for the acceptance of one's limits, or as Carole Bourne-Taylor and Ariane Mildenberg put it, in a form of 'humility [that] lies in the recognition of one's limited powers', just as in modernist literature, where 'the world is there to be invested and its mystery will remain' (13). The perceiver's inability to fully grasp the other (by which Merleau-Ponty means both human and nonhuman beings), at least in a cognitive sense, gives birth to a sense of continually renewing wonder, the possibility of re-experiencing the world with fresh eyes. Wonder, at the same time, as Ratcliffe suggests, is a crucial component of sympathy, which 'might comprise not only a realization that we ourselves may be the object of other people's feelings and emotions but […] [that] our world-view is not necessarily definitive, that it may be one bewildered

[10] Hereafter *PP*.

with prejudgments, and that there may be other worlds' (19). Phenomenological ambiguity and wonder, as Lawrence's, Woolf's, Bowen's, and McEwan's works suggest, allow for the subject's sympathetic coexistence with a world that can never be fully possessed or understood, yet which repeatedly opens to and envelops the wonderer.

Lawrence, Woolf, Bowen, McEwan, and Merleau-Ponty are not obvious thinkers to group together. On the literary side, Lawrence and Woolf were often hostile to each other's works, as Martin puts it (10), and Woolf's relationship with Bowen was also uneasy: Woolf did not quite make up her mind whether she actually liked Bowen's fiction, and called the latter 'conventional' (*Diary* 4: 86). The greatest "misfit" of this thesis, however, is McEwan, who can hardly be called a modernist, at least not if we interpret modernism as a temporally bound literary period. McEwan started to write after Lawrence, Woolf and Bowen died. Despite not living in the same historical period as my modernist authors, McEwan engaged with modernist legacies in various ways. What explains his presence in this study, however, is not only his preoccupation with modernist traditions in general but his active involvement in contemporary discussions of fellow feeling.[11] McEwan has promoted himself as a defender of the humanities in general, and literary fiction in particular. One of the basic values of literature, according to him, lies in its ability to enhance readers' empathy, which in turn triggers compassion and pro-social action in real-life situations. This thesis remains reluctant to draw any direct links between fiction reading and real-life altruism. Instead, this study argues that McEwan's novels, read in conjunction with modernist accounts of fellow feeling, show that sympathy is located in the phenomenal body, always embedded in a historical, social and cultural world. As such, the scope of this thesis is at once chronological – offering a historical overview of fellow feeling in British fiction in the first half of the twentieth century – and generic, looking at those components of interpersonal intimacy that remain stable over time, simultaneously nourishing and troubling our understanding of what it means to feel for and with others in the twenty-first century.

The decision of grouping Lawrence, Woolf, Bowen, and McEwan with Merleau-Ponty also requires some explanation. Lawrence and Woolf died before

[11] Several critics, such as David James, Laura Marcus, and Brian Finney, have drawn attention to McEwan's engagement with the modernist canon. These ideas will be discussed in detail in my McEwan chapter.

Merleau-Ponty published his first major work, *The Phenomenology of Perception*. Bowen outlived Merleau-Ponty, but there is no evidence that she might have been familiar with his philosophy. However, Bowen did know about, possibly even read the works of other phenomenological and existentialist French philosophers and friends of Merleau-Ponty, such as Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) and Simone de Beauvoir (1908–1986). Bowen came to know Sartre through her friend Raymond Mortimer (1895–1980), critic and literary editor of the *New Statesman*. In a 1945 letter to her lover, Charles Ritchie, Bowen expressed her interest in Sartre's work: 'If you do see the NS [*New Statesman*], I hope you haven't missed the sharp little rap Raymond delivered to Existentialism in general, Sartre in particular. […] I do want to read *Huis Clos*…' [Sartre's 1944 play, translated as *No Exit*] (Glendinning 80). Merleau-Ponty did probably not read any of my chosen modernists' works, though he was familiar with European literary modernism: he often made references to authors, such as Marcel Proust and Franz Kafka. Merleau-Ponty might also seem an odd choice when it comes to discussions of sympathy, as he has not been considered a theorist of sympathy/empathy as some other phenomenologists, such as Edith Stein (1891–1942), have been. Yet Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, precisely due to its open-ended nature seems to be the closest to the kind of sympathy at the heart of this thesis. His *oeuvre* is imbued with ideas of fellow feeling, even if he rarely uses terms such as sympathy or empathy.

When discussing Woolf's fiction in the light of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, critics have usually looked at the two writers' works from an ecophenomenological perspective. In her article 'Virginia Woolf and the Flesh of the World' (1999), Louise Westling elaborates on the ways in which Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology illuminates Woolf's preoccupation with the forces of the universe. In *Ecocriticism in the Modernist Imagination* (2016), Kelly E. Sultzbach investigates how, in Woolf's works, ideas of 'wholeness' are shaped by the complicated relationship between humans and the natural environment (82–144). Mildenberg's approach differs from the aforementioned critics' in that abandoning a strictly ecological framework, she reads Woolf's *The Waves* and Cézanne's *The Large Bathers* (1906) through the lens of Merleau-Ponty's theory of interrelatedness, rejecting previous readings of Woolf's novel as preoccupied exclusively with inwardness, arguing instead that 'Woolf's voices turn inward only

to discover that they cannot escape being pulled out by a world within which they are already immersed as carnal beings' (106).

Fewer critics have observed the affinities between Lawrence and phenomenology in general, or Merleau-Ponty's works in particular. Youngjoo Son briefly mentions the possibility of discussing Lawrence's essay 'Why the Novel Matters' (written c. 1925) in parallel with Merleau-Ponty's concept of the chiasm (114). Ulrika Maude argues that Lawrence and Merleau-Ponty shared an interest in the primacy of perception, a pre-rational experience of the body that Lawrence called 'blood-consciousness'. Through an analysis of the representation of illness in Lawrence's early novel, *Sons and Lovers* (1913) and his short story 'Sun' (1925), Maude suggests that Lawrence's illness narratives reveal an irreconcilable chasm between the phenomenal and material body ('D. H. Lawrence, Merleau-Ponty, and the Phenomenology of Illness' 186).

Similarly, Bowen's fiction has been rarely linked to phenomenology. Maud Ellmann observes that in Bowen's fiction, furniture's ability to reciprocate the human gaze can be read as a 'paranoid exaggeration of Merleau-Ponty's theory' ('Elizabeth Bowen: The Missing Corner' 77). In her unpublished doctoral thesis, Katy Alexandra Menczer also emphasises the 'hallucinatory or uncanny' (2) nature of visibility in Bowen and Merleau-Ponty, arguing that Bowen's novels test the boundaries of the domestic space, which the Anglo-Irish author presents as a haunting ghost, though 'a ghost with a body' (9). 'This bodily presence', Menczer writes, 'makes the strange presence known to us; known but not necessarily understood; known somatically, through a sympathetic contraction of sinews, a responsive tingling of nerves' (9). While her argument is close to the central premise of this thesis, that is the significance of a pre-reflective form of embodiment, similarly to Ellmann, Menczer, at least partially, approaches Bowen's fiction from a psychoanalytic perspective by examining Merleau-Ponty's affinities with Freud. Rochelle Rives analyses Bowen's description of domestic interior in *The Death of the Heart* (1938) in parallel with phenomenological discussions of space, quoting Merleau-Ponty's definition of hallucination, which 'causes the real to disintegrate before our eyes, and puts a quasi-reality in its place', returning 'us back to the pre-logical basis of our knowledge' (150). Bowen, however, Rives suggests, complicates Merleau-Ponty's claim in that her texts present 'a dialectical relationship between the empirical certainty of the object and the essential prelogical "knowledge" of hallucination', allowing for the

experience of the world through objects that create the possibilities of (fellow) feeling (150).

In McEwan's case, the aim of this thesis is not to directly read his works in tandem with phenomenology. Although some critics have drawn links between his fiction and phenomenological ideas, as I will discuss in my last chapter, McEwan has never considered himself a phenomenologist. Furthermore, McEwan's fascination with (neuro)scientific theories of empathy, which claim that humans' ability to empathise is evolutionarily coded in the brain, might also seem at odds with phenomenological ideas about interpersonal attachments. Yet McEwan's fiction, often contradicting his journalistic claims, shows subtle affinities not only with phenomenological interpretations of embodied intimacy but also with modernist ideas of fellow feeling, as presented, more prominently, in Woolf's works. As such, the final chapter of this thesis has a double scope: it examines how modernist ideas about sympathy have influenced McEwan's understanding of fellow feeling, while also revealing the intertextual sympathies between McEwan's novels, *Atonement* (2001) and *Saturday* (2005), and modernist fiction, with emphasis on Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927).

Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology of embodiment

Since this thesis will repeatedly return to Merleau-Ponty's ideas of embodied intimacy, it is important to offer an overview of his philosophy. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty describes the subject's communion with the world as an act of mutual interaction: 'I am, as a sensing subject, full of natural powers of which I am the first to be filled with wonder. Thus I am not, to recall Hegel's phrase, a "hole in being," but rather a hollow, or a fold that was made and that can be unmade.'[12] (223) In contrast with the hole, which suggests emptiness and lack, the hollow indicates a mutually created space of togetherness, filled with presence. In his interpretation of the Merleau-Pontian hollow, Galen Johnson writes that subjectivity is '"hollowed out" from the outside rather than an interior master seeking domination of the outside and the other. It is the individual, yet

[12] As the translator of *Phenomenology of Perception*, Donald Landes, remarks in the Endnotes, the phrase 'hole in being', is probably taken from Alexandre Kojève's lectures on Hegel, which Merleau-Ponty attended in the 1930s. For more on the English translation of Kojève's selected letters, see: Alexandre Kojève. *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Sprit*. Translated by James H. Nichols, Jr. Cornell University Press, 1980.

the individual who belongs to others and the outside much more than the individual who makes demands and claims on others and the world' (168). In other words, the phenomenological hollow is not a form of retrieval from the external environment but a fold created by and in the texture of the world.

Merleau-Ponty illustrates our sympathetic communion with the world (including human and nonhuman agents) through the image of self-touch, two hands clasping each other. Genuine togetherness, however, does not occur in the exact overlapping of palms and fingers but in that space of imperfection or hollow where the two hands unite without merging into undistinguishable wholeness. In his last, unfinished work, *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964), Merleau-Ponty elaborates on this phenomenon, which he calls reversibility:[13]

> But this hiatus between my right hand touched and my right hand touching, between my voice heard and my voice uttered, between one moment of my tactile life and the following one, is not an ontological void, a non-being: it is spanned by the total being of my body, and by that of the world; it is the zero of pressure between two solids that makes them adhere to one another. My flesh and that of the world therefore involve clear zones, clearings, about which pivot their opaque zones […]. (148)

The zone of 'zero pressure' does not create a hole but a space devoid of violent coercion and desire for subordination, where knowledge gained about the other will always remain incomplete; yet this imperfectness remains an inherent component of sympathy. This idea chimes with Merleau-Ponty's description of phenomenology as 'unfinished' and 'inchoate', attributes that do not signify 'failure' but rather reveal 'the mystery of the world' (*PP* lxxxv). Moreover, following on from Merleau-Ponty's contention that the tactile and the visible are often inseparable, our contact with the world does not take place in pure transparency but 'clear zones' are always enveloped in mistiness. Since the human subject itself is not a transparent object, its relation with other objects of the world is inherently ambiguous and characterised by an amalgamation of clarity and obscurity. Woolf often called this interplay of opacity and luminosity 'semi-transparency', a concept that encapsulates the essence of sympathy, which is

[13] Hereafter *VI*.

poised between light and darkness, hard matter and fleeting impressions. The subject, Merleau-Ponty argues in 'Eye and Mind' (1960),[14]

> sees itself seeing; it touches itself touching; it is visible and sensitive for itself. It is a self, not by transparency, like thought […] but a self by confusion, narcissism, inherence of the see-er in the seen, the toucher in the touched, the feeler in the felt – a self, then, that is caught up in things, having a front and a back, a past and a future… (*The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader* 124)

The individual is not a clear glass panel but 'a self by confusion', on the surface of which misty patches and dark shades merge with rays of light. Yet Merleau-Ponty does not fail to emphasise the importance of the subject's three-dimensionality: being 'caught up in things' is not synonymous with being lost among them. On the contrary, while being made of the same 'flesh' as the world, the self's corporeal boundaries are not completely erased: 'having a front and a back, a past and a future' is ultimately one of the basic preconditions of harmonious coexistence with the universe, which contains the capacity to be touched while remaining separate. In *The Visible and the Invisible* Merleau-Ponty defines flesh (*chair*) as neither matter, nor mind or substance but an '"element" of Being':

> To designate it [flesh], we should need the old term "element," in the sense it was used to speak of water, air, earth, and fire, that is, in the sense of a *general thing*, […] a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being. […] [The flesh is] [n]ot a fact or a sum of facts, and yet adherent to *location* and to the now. (139–140, emphasis in original)

In his collection of lectures entitled *Nature*, written around the same period when he was working on *The Visible and Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty defines his theory of flesh as an empathetic act: '[M]y body [is] interposed between what is in front of me and what is behind me, my body [is] standing in front of the upright things, in

[14] Hereafter 'EM'.

a circuit with the world, an *Einfühlung* with the world, with the things, with the animals, with other bodies' (209). *Einfühlung*, nevertheless, is not synonymous with oneness. Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the simultaneous proximity and separateness in our encounters with the flesh of the world is important, because his putative definition of the flesh as collapsing difference between self and other represents one of the most common reasons for poststructuralists' critique of phenomenology.

Jacques Lacan accuses Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of being too fixated on the eye/I and creating the illusion of the familiarity and knowability of the scrutinised object. According to Lacan, the phenomenological view distorts the essential quality of the gaze, which lies in its capacity to approach the other as the unfamiliar, the locus of 'strange contingenc[ies]' rather than known certainties (72). Lacan's observation is well founded as Merleau-Ponty did indeed lionise the 'unfamiliar gaze'. In *The World of Perception* (published in French in 1948), he wrote that 'there is something healthy about [the] unfamiliar gaze', which allows the subject to view the world from a different, 'below' perspective (89). Interestingly, he uses a modernist example to corroborate his point: the transformation of Gregor Samsa, the protagonist of Kafka's *The Metamorphosis* (1915), into an insect, allows him to look at his family from a previously unknown perspective (89). Merleau-Ponty, however, does not view the 'unfamiliar gaze' as the manifestation of the absurd. On the contrary, he thinks that the perspective of the below represents the possibility of sympathy, 'the ground for those rare and precious moments at which human beings come to recognise, to find, one another' (90).

Jacques Derrida also critiques Merleau-Ponty for reducing the other's fundamental unknowability and untouchability to something familiar, erasing thus the essential gap in interpersonal communication (191).[15] For Merleau-Ponty,

[15] However, as Laura Doyle argues, Lacan and Derrida did not unequivocally dismiss phenomenology but also used it 'as a source of inspiration' (xv). Indeed, as Doyle puts is, poststructuralism's and postmodernism's rejection of phenomenology is often based on a misconception, namely the misinterpretation of Husserl's emphasis on 'return[ing] to the things themselves', a statement that many poststructuralist critics read as a suggestion that things can be fully known (Doyle xvi–xvii). But as Doyle clarifies, '[f]or Husserl, the "things themselves" refer to the things as "phenomena", which is to say as they are *perceived* by consciousness; and it is important to know that his insistence on a "return" is a call "back" from *science's* positivistic and mathematical truth claims about the phenomenal world' (xvii, emphasis in original). As such, Husserl, similarly to Merleau-Ponty, actually states that the world cannot be experienced in an objective way, outside of the subject's consciousness, and in this respect phenomenology comes close to the philosophy of Derrida and other poststructuralist thinkers (xvii). Laura Doyle, editor. *Bodies of Resistance: New Phenomenologies of Politics, Agency, and Culture*. Northwestern

however, the flesh is not a homogeneous mass, violently incorporating the other. He highlights that no matter how close my own vision is that to 'what the other sees', I can 'never [fully] rejoin the other's lived experience' (*VI* 10). Or as Johnson puts it, for Merleau-Ponty, flesh 'is verbal and adverbial, process and not substance or matter' (168). Flesh is not synonymous with dead matter but designates the dynamic and live relationship between self and world.

Though I do not think that Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology collapses differences between self and other, his ideas can at times create the illusion of the subject's perfectly harmonious coexistence with the universe. He presents intimacy in an idealistic way, as a space of complete safety and love, devoid of egocentrism and desire for domination. Nevertheless, as the investigation of sympathy in modernist literature shows, interpersonal proximity is, at times, burdened with feelings of suppression and control. In modernist fiction, Merleau-Ponty's ideal hollow can at times transform into a painful and unbridgeable gap, which besides love and care, also accommodates violence and lack of respect for the other. While the main aim of this thesis is to explore the affinities, or sympathies, between literary modernism and Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, the following chapters will also reveal some underlying tensions between literature and philosophy.

The phenomenological and modernist body

In the last three decades there has been a (re)turn to the body in the humanities. As Patricia Waugh suggests, critics have started to pay attention to embodiment partly as a form of reaction against previous understandings of corporeality 'as "written," as text, mutually reinforcing a fantasy of disembodiment and human invulnerability' ('Writing the Body' 133). In postmodern theory, the body, as living material thing, often became lost in the intricate nets of language. Applying different methodological frameworks, several poststructuralist thinkers

University Press, 2001. Husserl's call to 'return to the things themselves' appears in his *Logical Investigations*. Translated by J. N. Findlay, vol. 1, Humanities Press, 1970, p. 252.

interpreted corporeality as determined by social, historical and cultural discourses rather than biological attributes.[16]

Although theories that view the body as a biological automaton, a socially written entity or a computer program are still prevalent in the contemporary cultural landscape, philosophical and literary studies interested in living bodily matter have recently proliferated, often in parallel with a renewed interest in mid-century phenomenology. Philosophers such as Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, and Shaun Gallagher have returned to phenomenology, especially Merleau-Ponty's theory of embodiment to suggest that, as Thompson puts it, 'our primary way of relating to things is neither purely sensory and reflexive, nor cognitive or intellectual, but rather bodily and skillful' (247). The interpretation of the body as a living entity in constant interaction with the world has acquired unprecedented importance among literary scholars and art historians too. As Corinne Saunders, Ulrika Maude and Jane Macnaughton argue in the introduction to *The Body and the Arts* (2009), the major part of the chapters constituting the collection, focus on 'the fleshly, experiencing, living body, best theorized by Maurice Merleau-Ponty' (4).

Modernist critics, in particular, have shown a keen interest in the relationship between phenomenology and literature and art, not least because of a turn to the feeling body in modernist criticism. Though the critical framework of these studies varies, and not all of them employ a strictly phenomenological perspective, they share a renewed interest in the feeling *corpus* of modernism. In *Haptic Modernism* (2013), Abbie Garrington investigates touch as one of the basic methods of forging interpersonal ties. She suggests that the works of Lawrence, Woolf, James Joyce, and Dorothy Richardson, read in conjunction

[16] For example, for Michel Foucault, the body represents an object written by institutionalised knowledge and authority. Michel Foucault. *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. 1975. Vintage Books, 1995. Another major theorist of embodiment, Judith Butler views gender and sexuality as social performances rather than biological givens. Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble*. 1990. Routledge, 2006. It is worth noting that Butler reflects on the charge brought up against her in the Preface of *Bodies That Matter*: 'Theorizing from the ruins of the Logos invites the following question: "What about the materiality of the body?" Actually, in the recent past, the question was repeatedly formulated to me this way: "What about the materiality of the body, Judy?"' Judith Butler. *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"*. 1993. Routledge, 2011, p. viii. At the same time, many feminist critics, in their attempt to challenge the supremacy of the male body, established a strain of feminism called by Elizabeth Grosz, 'corporeal feminism', which analysed bodily experiences unique to women: menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and lactation. Elizabeth Grosz. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, Indiana University Press, 1994. Other 'corporeal' feminists include Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous. For a more recent discussion of 'corporeal feminism' see Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman, editors. *Material Feminisms*. Indiana University Press, 2008.

with new scientific and technological inventions such as the cinema, show the emergence of a new corporeal sense rooted in the sensuous movements and gestures of the body. In *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature* (2005), Santanu Das explores the role of tactility in interpersonal relationships between soldiers but also between combatants and nurses. He argues that touch, 'the most intimate of the senses' allows us to better understand 'the ambiguous zone' of male intimacy in the trenches, while also throwing light on the possibilities and limitations of nurses' empathy for wounded soldiers (32, 26). Although Das and Garrington do not rely extensively on phenomenology, both acknowledge Merleau-Ponty's significance in discussions of the body in modernist literature. Similarly, the First World War represents the historical setting of Ana Carden-Coyne's study, *Reconstructing the Body* (2009), in which she argues that post-war descriptions of the body merge 'the classical tradition with modern attitudes [that] infused corporeality with the vibrant gesture of reconstruction' (2). The possibilities of healing and putting together the war-torn body acquired unprecedented importance for Lawrence, Woolf, Bowen, and McEwan. The war experience questioned assumptions that bodies are hard and impenetrable mechanisms, and demonstrated the vulnerable, 'easily torn, not easily mended'-nature of flesh (McEwan, *Atonement* 304). Consequently, since individual bodies are made of vulnerable, living matter, sympathy can only happen between fragile flesh-and-blood entities, not automata or immaterial minds. As David Hillman and Ulrika Maude put it, 'bodies (in literature, and not only there) always need other bodies' (6).

All three of my chosen modernist novelists lived through the First World War, and Bowen experienced the Second World War too. Though neither of them did actually witness the war in the trenches – Lawrence due to medical reasons, while Woolf and Bowen due to their gender – they were deeply touched, or indeed wounded by its brutalities. As Marina MacKay puts it, 'even the most civilian of modernists were working in a social and cultural environment saturated and transformed by total war' (*Modernism, War, and Violence* 12). They firmly rejected military violence, among many other reasons, because it obliterated the feeling bodies of individual subjects, transforming them into indistinguishable masses of lifeless automata, or as Woolf poignantly writes in *Jacob's Room* (1922), 'fragments of broken match-stick' (136). Merleau-Ponty was also personally affected by the Second World War. He enrolled in the infantry in 1939

and was discharged in the summer of 1940 due to an injury (Andrews 20). As a civilian living in Paris during the German occupation, he was forced to face the devastating effects of the war on people's quotidian lives. McEwan was born after 1945, and did not have any first-hand experience of the Second World War, which nevertheless represents the historical setting of his novel *Atonement* (and *Saturday* is also written in the shadow of the war in Iraq). The war plays an important role in discussions of sympathy in *Atonement* because it represents the cultural-historical setting in which the protagonist, Briony Tallis, is brutally confronted with the fragility of the human body. As such, while the war is not the major or exclusive focus of this thesis, it nevertheless represents a factor that has significantly shaped ideas of sympathy and belonging in modernist and contemporary fiction.

Another reason why modernist scholars have become interested in the phenomenal body can be explained by the emergence of a new branch of modernist studies that has sought to challenge modernism's exclusive association with inwardness.[17] Indeed, modernism – especially the high modernist aesthetics of Woolf, Joyce and T. S. Eliot – has often been interpreted as a literary period mainly preoccupied with abstract consciousness, the workings of the immaterial mind. Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane describe the modernist period as 'a new era of high aesthetic self-consciousness and non-representationalism, in which art turns from realism and humanistic representation towards style, technique and spatial form in pursuit of a deeper penetration of life' (25). Bradbury and McFarlane's definition can be narrowed down to three interlinked concepts: aesthetics, inner consciousness (as opposed to external reality), and the absence of human presence in favour of formal qualities. Modernists' reliance on 'technique' and form allegedly allows for 'a deeper penetration of life', a glimpse of the intricate workings of the psyche, insufficiently explored in the materialistic world of the nineteenth-century realist novel. Bradbury and McFarlane's claim is of course well founded. After all, modernist writers themselves promoted inwardness and aesthetic composition

[17] AnnKatrin Jonsson argues that the works of Joyce, Woolf and Djuna Barnes challenge the Descartian notion of the subject, one 'that restrains and dominates instead of remaining open, approachable and exposed'. AnnKatrin Jonsson. *Relations: Ethics and the Modernist Subject in James Joyce's* Ulysses*, Virginia Woolf's* The Waves *and Djuna Barnes's* Nightwood. Oxford and Bern, Peter Lang, 2006, p. 21.

as major hallmarks of early twentieth-century art and literature.[18] However, they did not turn away from external materiality or 'humanistic representation', especially if we understand by the latter the sentient human flesh. What they dismissed was a view of the body as inert matter, a 'mechanism moved by springs' (Merleau-Ponty, *PP* 365). In *Jacob's Room* Woolf offers a poignant critique of humans' description as disembodied abstractions: the image of the uncontrollably shivering 'tin soldiers' creates a jarring atmosphere, an almost viscerally painful (reading) experience (136).

Bradbury and McFarlane are not alone in accusing modernism of inwardness. Peter Nicholls also argues that modernism sacrificed the sentient body to aesthetic form. He identifies the roots of modernism in mid-nineteenth-century French poetry, and suggests that Charles Baudelaire's poem 'To a Red-haired Beggar Girl' (1845–6), illustrates the 'triumph of form over "bodily" content on which one major strand of modernism will depend' (4). According to Nicholls, Baudelaire's male spectator, who watches a girl on the street, objectifies the female body, not because he views her as a sexual item, but because 'he takes her as an occasion for a poem' (2). In other words, he transforms the woman into an abstract aesthetic form serving his artistic purposes. Furthermore, Nicholls associates this kind of aesthetic with an ironic, detached and possessive gaze that cruelly robs the woman of her lived fleshly existence (3). Nicholls views the ironic gaze, which he interprets as an important component of modernist aesthetic, as opposed to emotional proximity. The literary texts at the centre of this thesis, however, show that there are other forms of viewing too. Sight, as advocated by my chosen authors, can also be imbued with affective attention to and care for the other's embodied reality. In other words, emotions are not necessarily absent in sight but they rather have the power to soften our gaze, bringing the object of perception closer.

[18] In her essays Woolf accused the Edwardians' materialistic approach that failed to capture the 'myriad impressions' of the mind, those 'innumerable atoms' that 'shape themselves in the life of Monday or Tuesday' (*Essays* 4: *160*). In his Imagist manifesto, Ezra Pound identified poetic value in the formal qualities of the poem, which should be written in clear and concise language, without any sentimental superfluity (269).

Emotion, affect and feeling

Lawrence's, Woolf's, Bowen's, and McEwan's works show that emotions, experienced in and by feeling bodies, matter to modernism and contemporary fiction. It is important to clarify at this point that this thesis does not make any formal distinction between emotion, affect and feeling, terms that are mostly used interchangeably in the following chapters. However, I prefer the concept of emotion and feeling to affect because the latter, as defined by affect scholars, does not necessarily, or not always, seem to be congruent with how fellow feeling works in my chosen texts. As Gregory Seigworth, Melissa Gregg and Sara Ahmed argue, there is no universally accepted definition of affect in the contemporary cultural landscape (3).[19] The two main sources of present affect theories can be traced back to two sources. The first is Silvan Tomkins's psychobiology of affects that represents the basis of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank's essay 'Shame in the Cybernetic Fold' (1995). The second is Gilles Deleuze's 'Spinozist ethology of bodily capacities', a source of influence for Brian Massumi's 'The Autonomy of Affect' (1995) (Seigworth and Gregg 5).[20] While Tomkins defines affect as biologically innate, and differentiates between nine basic affects, Deleuze interprets affect as an in-between state, an immanent meeting space between things, humans and non-living entities (5–6).

The critical framework of this thesis is not fully compatible with either of the above-mentioned directions. In the works of Lawrence, Woolf, Bowen and McEwan, feelings are neither strictly located in the biological body nor in an immanent space between interacting entities. Rather, emotions are experienced in the phenomenal body: the sentient flesh intricately intermingled with the texture of the world, without becoming indistinguishably enmeshed in it. As Merleau-Ponty puts it in 'The Film and the New Psychology' (1945): 'Emotion is not a

[19] Antonio Damasio distinguishes between emotion and feeling, arguing that feeling is a perception of physical changes in the body, together with the mental images that trigger these alterations, while emotion is a 'mental-evaluative process', the actual interpretation of bodily states. Antonio Damasio. *Descartes' Error*: *Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain*. Picador, 1994, p. 145, p. 139.

[20] Modernist scholars have found both branches of affective studies helpful in casting new light on literary modernism. Julie Taylor reads Djuna Barnes's fiction in parallel with Tomkins's theory of affect, while Charlotta P. Einarsson thinks that Samuel Beckett's dramas are closer to Deleuze's version of affect theory. See Julie Taylor. *Djuna Barnes and Affective Modernism*. Cambridge University Press, 2012; Charlotta P. Einarsson. *A Theatre of Affect: The Corporeal Turn in Samuel Beckett's Drama*. Stuttgart, *ibidem*, 2017.

psychic, internal fact but rather a variation in our relations with others and the world which is expressed in our bodily attitude' (*Sense and Non-Sense* 53). For Merleau-Ponty and the writers discussed in this thesis, emotion is neither an abstract mental faculty nor a biological mechanism but a state felt in the relational body that never ceases to open onto the world.

In a phenomenological context, any arbitrary distinction between emotion and affect becomes meaningless. As Sianne Ngai succinctly summarises, the divide between the two terms originates in psychoanalytic discourses, in which the third-person perspective of the analyst (affect) had to be separated from the first-person experience of the analysand subject (emotion) (25). Certain affect theorists, such as Massumi, have gone further in distinguishing emotion from affect, suggesting that while emotion is a conscious and narratively structured act, affect remains in a pre-conscious, cognitively incomprehensible and semantically unordered state (Ngai 25). While feeling is often portrayed as a pre-cognitive event in the works of my chosen authors, it always requires the presence of a sensing body-subject. Affect, however, does not always work as a mere antecedent to conscious thought, as some critics have suggested. Marta Figlerowicz, for example, is not interested 'in the unconscious rawness of affective experiences' but rather 'in the means by which they make their way into our or somebody else's consciousness' (5). But feelings, as a phenomenological reading of modernism shows, do not necessarily 'make their way' to consciousness. In other words, modernist characters do not always *make* sense of their feelings but simply *sense* as a result of their corporeal imbrication in their surroundings.

The type of feeling in which this thesis is interested, is neither a purely third-person nor a first-person experience, if by the latter we mean a Cartesian ego. Rather, as Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi argue, phenomenology shows how '[m]ost of our encounters are not third-person puzzles solved by first-person procedures. They are second-person interactions in which I easily have a sense of what is going on with the other person based on our common pragmatic or socially contextualized interactions.' (176) The human subject is not simply *affected* like a piece of inert bodily lump but also *affecting* (even if not necessarily in a conscious-rational way). This interplay of being affected while affecting creates a space of encounter in which second-person communication becomes possible.

When it comes to discussions of modernist emotion, the question of gender is significant. Attempts to recuperate feeling in modernism have often been linked to gender. In her 1991 book, *Sentimental Modernism*, Suzanne Clark suggests that there is a direct link between the critical neglect of feelings and women writers in modernist studies. She argues that female writers were considered to be 'entangled in sensibility, were romantic and sentimental by nature, and so even the best might not altogether escape this romantic indulgence in emotion and sublimity' (2). Words such as 'entangled' and 'indulgence' show how women's writing was seen as emotionally chaotic in comparison with the 'clear hard' works of the 'Men of 1914'. Feelings, therefore, were associated with women, or at least with writers who were considered in some way feminine and indulgent. Lawrence represented one of the most evident examples of this latter category. Anthony Cuda describes Lawrence's novels as works 'blaze[d] through with fiery revelations' (2), while Maude calls him 'anti-rational' (*Bloomsbury Companion* 10). As such, Lawrence's style seems to differ significantly from the so-called hard and rational male modernists, such as Eliot and Pound.

Nevertheless, critics have recently started to soften the hard lines of demarcation between female (or feminine) emotional writing and rational male works. Cuda, for example, demonstrates how emotion, or what he calls 'passion' – the 'desire […] to both know and feel what it means to be the moved instead of the mover' – was central to Eliot's creative work (5). This study concentrates on two male and two female authors to show that sympathy cannot be reduced to a feminine mode of feeling and thinking. This, however, does not mean that gender is unimportant in the following chapters. Woolf, for example, critiques some Edwardian male writers for their tendency to present characters as hyper-visible and completely knowable through the detailed description of their material environment. For Woolf and Bowen, this method of characterisation remains imbued with a sense of falsity and authorial arrogance, representing thus the lack of writers' sympathy for fictional characters. Woolf also challenges gender stereotypes in her engagement with ancient Greek statuary in *Jacob's Room*, by focusing on the anonymous and neglected female "sculptor"-figures of the interwar period, whose attempts at memorialisation differ strikingly from the monument-making efforts of their male counterparts. As such, while gender remains an underlying presence throughout this thesis, the type of fellow feeling

at the centre of this study resists the privileging of female or feminine emotions. Though in somewhat different ways, feelings mattered for many modernists, and indeed continue to matter for many contemporary writers, male and female alike.

Phenomenological sight

The strand of emotional modernism explored in this thesis is concerned with a form of sight that differs from the ironic and detached gaze that Nicholls associates with modernism. Vision, as interpreted in this study, is intricately intertwined with other senses, especially touch, while being characterised by a sort of sensual mistiness that nourishes intimacy. Before analysing the importance of phenomenological sight to modernism, however, it is important to offer a brief overview of the history of vision in Western culture. After all, Nicholls's interpretation of sight as satiric detachment is far from being unfounded.

Vision has been linked to ideas of distance, irony, subordination and importantly, rationality in Western culture at least since the time of ancient Greece. In Greek philosophy and science, vision was synonymous with abstract and rational knowledge: as Bruno Snell notes, the Greek word for knowledge, *eidenai*, means 'the state of having seen' (Snell 198; qtd. in Jay 24). Greek philosophy celebrated sight as the manifestation of 'disinterested, monologic, epistemic truth over mere opinion or *doxa*' (Jay 26). Vision was deemed more valuable than other senses because it made possible the creation of objective and measurable knowledge instead of fleeting and subjective impressions. Another cultural period that seemed to embrace the Greeks' lionisation of vision was the Enlightenment. One of the most famous philosophers of French Enlightenment, René Descartes (1596–1650), put forward a theory of vision based on the mechanical operation of the eyes. In *Dioptrique* (1637), he interpreted light as rays reflected from the surface of an object, which hit the eye. However, the eyes prove to be insufficient, since images on the retina appear in an upside-down format, and it is the role of the mind to "turn" them and facilitate vision (qtd. in Johnson, *The Retrieval* 25). To put it in a simplistic way, Descartes defined sight as a two-phase phenomenon: the mechanical operation of the eyes followed by the mind's activity of reversing images on the back of the retina (25). This theory of vision allows us to comprehend the reasons for which Merleau-Ponty found Descartes's views problematic (besides the latter's separation of

mind and body). Merleau-Ponty rejected both empiricism and intellectualism, since the first objectified the body, presenting it as a biological automaton, while the latter completely dismissed corporeality in favour of the immaterial mind.[21] According to Merleau-Ponty, vision cannot be reduced to either a third-person mechanical bodily schema or first-person intellectual model. Sight happens not *in* the biological body or abstract mind, but *through* the phenomenal body's movements in the world.

Indeed, for Merleau-Ponty, vision is never a form of distant spectatorship but touch and sight intricately intermingle in our everyday perceptions and interpersonal relationships. The visible is not an unreachable realm, available only to the eyes, but represents the sensuous flesh of the world surrounding the perceiver. To put it differently, the visible is not in front of the subject but all around him/her. The phenomenological gaze is imbued with tactile properties, and 'envelops, palpates, espouses the visible things' (*VI* 133). Or as the philosopher puts it in 'Eye and Mind': 'Vision is the meeting, as at a crossroads, of all the aspects of Being' (147). Vision thus represents a 'crossroads', a space of meeting, which allows for the unfolding of a complex form of sensory intimacy. Merleau-Pontian sight is never unidirectional and cannot be reduced to a conscious act of looking or capturing the object of perception. The kind of tactile vision advocated by Merleau-Ponty destabilises any dualist categories of subject and object, mind and body, rationality and sensuousness.

Merleau-Ponty's ideas about phenomenological vision have attracted the attention of modernist critics. Hanaway-Oakley reads Merleau-Ponty's theory of tactile vision in parallel with James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922), arguing that sight is not a phenomenon that regards only the eyes but the whole, three-dimensional body, more precisely the body's position in space. Both Merleau-Ponty and Joyce use the image of the stereoscope to illuminate the embodied nature of sight: 'For

[21] Empiricism is a philosophical theory that argues that perception is rooted in non-intentional experience derived from raw sensorial data. Merleau-Ponty rejects empiricism because, as Taylor Carman puts it, 'ordinary perceptual awareness simply is not an awareness of sensations, but of things out in the world – people, situations, events'. Taylor Carman. 'Between empiricism and intellectualism.' *Merleau-Ponty: Key Concepts*, edited by Rosalyn Diprose and Jack Reynolds, Acumen, 2008, pp. 44–56, p. 44. On the other hand, Merleau-Ponty also dismisses intellectualism because this fails to take into account the pre-cognitive nature of phenomenological perception. In other words, what I see, touch, smell and taste is not a mere projection of my intellect but a consequence of my embodied coexistence with a world of sensations. Merleau-Ponty summarises the shortcomings of empiricism and intellectualism in *Phenomenology of Perception*: 'Empiricism cannot see that we need to know what we are looking for, otherwise we would not go looking for it; intellectualism does not see that we need to be ignorant of what we are looking for, or again we should not go looking for it' (30).

Merleau-Ponty, the 3D images that stereoscopes present are immediately *perceived* in 3D because of our body's immediate repositioning of itself, rather than through a separate action of the intellect' (88, emphasis in original). In other words, the phenomenological subject is not limited to the role of detached onlooker but (s)he becomes a dynamic participator in the act of perception. Joyce, nevertheless, was not the only modernist preoccupied with the embodied nature of vision. Lawrence, Woolf and Bowen rejected detached and rational sight in favour of a softer vision that brought the object of perception in sympathetic, semi-luminous proximity without completely erasing the bodily distance between seer and seen. As Woolf wrote in 'Street Haunting: A London Adventure' (1927): The eye, 'the central oyster of perceptiveness', is 'not a miner, not a diver, not a seeker after buried treasure' (*Essays* 4: 481, 482). The soft eye that has cast off its rough 'shell-like covering', is finally able to observe the beauty of a winter street, the 'floating islands of pale light', which gently illuminate 'men and women' (481). Woolf's wandering eye acquires a flexibility, or even plasticity that allows the beholder to sympathetically reach out to the surrounding world. At the same time, the female flâneur's gaze, in contrast with Baudelaire's spectator, poises delicately between abstract aesthetics and corporeal reality. As she watches the 'dwarf' in the shoe shop, Woolf's beholder muses on the beauty of the little woman's gestures and movements:

> Look at that! Look at that! she seemed to demand of us all, as she thrust her foot out, for behold it was the shapely, perfectly proportioned foot of a well-grown woman. It was arched; it was aristocratic. […] She got up and pirouetted before a glass which reflected the foot only in yellow shoes, in fawn shoes, in shoes of lizard skin. She raised her little skirts and displayed her little legs. (483)

At a first glance, the description of the feet might suggest the seer's wish to transform the 'dwarf' into an aesthetic object. The 'shapely, perfectly proportioned' and 'arched' foot almost reminds the reader of a smoothly chiseled ancient Greek statue. Yet the prose resists such a straightforward interpretation. While zooming in to the feet, the spectator's eyes neither freeze the woman's body nor reduce her whole-body existence to a mere close-up of her feet. Though absorbed in the abstract beauty of the scene, the beholder's gaze is never entirely

divorced from the embodied reality of the perceived. The seer's attention rests delicately on the subtleties of the 'dwarf's' gestures: the pirouetting movements of her legs and the wobbling of her clothes. Woolf's female flâneur feels an irresistible attraction for the little woman, who is at once a statuette-like art object and a flesh-and-blood human being, whose thoughts and feelings remain partially hidden from the beholder's eyes. The onlooker can never know with certainty but only guess the 'dwarf's' state of mind: 'Seeing nothing but her feet, she [the 'dwarf'] imagined *perhaps* that the rest of her body was of a piece with those beautiful feet' (483, my emphasis). This perhaps-quality of sight represents a central topic in the modernist period, when the need for an alternative kind of vision, characterised by softness, flexibility and haziness, acquired an unprecedented urgency. The tactile gaze favoured by the authors central to this thesis, was able, to borrow Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's words, to 'reach out, to fondle, to heft, to tap, or to enfold', while acknowledging its epistemological limitations (14).

In the aftermath of the First, and even more emphatically, the Second World War, writers and philosophers started to become increasingly worried and suspicious about sight as a method of gaining knowledge about others. Sight became associated with rigidity, distance, superiority and violence, attributes that were at odds with sympathy and related feelings of love, kindness and compassion. In his essay on Merleau-Ponty, Edward Said wrote that the Second World War made possible the emergence of a kind of philosophy – of which Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology was an example – that rejected mechanistic views and became weary of 'ossified precision that seemed incapable of touching man' (55). Phenomenologists advocated a different way of relating to the world, which in contrast to Cartesian dualism, examined the workings of the living body, and presented a theory 'that seemed *capable* of touching man'.

Indeed, the Second World War marked a significant rupture not only in history, but one could argue, in the history of philosophy too. As Said suggests, in the philosophy of post-Second World War French philosophers, one can detect a tendency of returning to the living body as the primary locus of interpersonal sympathy. By no means do I want to suggest a homogenous reading of post-war philosophy. The philosophers who started to publish during and after the war employed at times radically different perspectives and methodologies, and they often violently fell out with each other after long periods of friendship, as Merleau-

Ponty's case with Sartre demonstrates.[22] Though the reason for their alienation from each other can be mainly put down to political disagreements, the two philosophers' interpretation of vision (and the visual) also differs on various points. While Merleau-Ponty argues that vision allows for the unfolding of the subject's sympathetic relationship with the other, Sartre elaborates on the dangerous and paranoid nature of sight. In *Being and Nothingness* (1943), Sartre reverses previous philosophical theories that approached the problem of other minds exclusively from the seer's perspective, and suggested that in interpersonal relationships actually the Other is 'the one who looks at me and at whom I am not yet looking, […] the one who is present to me as directing to me but never as the object of my direction' (360). Despite their different views, nevertheless, what unites Merleau-Ponty with Sartre, and other mid-century French philosophers such as Emmanuel Levinas (1906–1995), is their shared suspicion of clear and omniscient sight that permits an unmediated access to other minds.[23] Instead, they associate clear and rational vision with ideas of violence and supremacy, which culminated in the brutal violation of the other's corporeal existence and integrity, most poignantly illustrated in the two world wars.[24]

As the philosophical and literary works examined in this thesis show, the objectifying and penetrating gaze is imbued with cruelty and lack of attentive care for the vulnerability of the other's embodied existence. Vulnerability represents an important precondition of sympathy in the philosophy and fiction of the post-

[22] Merleau-Ponty could not accept Sartre's radical left views, and in 1953, he not only ended his friendship with Sartre but also stepped down from the editorial board of *Les Temps Modernes*, an influential journal that the two philosophers edited together for years. See Taylor Carman. *Merleau-Ponty*. Routledge, 2008, p. 5.

[23] Levinas's (a Lithuanian-born Jew whose whole family was killed in the Second World War) philosophy is rooted in the face-to-face encounter between self and other, which he defines as the foundational ethics in human relationships. In *Totality and Infinity* (1961), he writes: 'For the presence before a face, my orientation toward the Other, can lose the avidity proper to the gaze only by turning into generosity, incapable of approaching the other with empty hands. This relationship established over the things henceforth possibly common, that is, susceptible of being said, is the relationship of conversation. The way in which the other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*, we here name face.' (50) As Jill Robbins observes, it is important to note the anti-visual nature of Levinas's reading of facial encounters, in which the gaze transforms into generosity and language: 'The (ethical) necessity for this transformation stems from Levinas's assertion that vision is a violent way of relating to the other. […] [I]t is unable to respect what is infinitely other' (137). See Jill Robbins. '*Visage, Figure*: Reading Levinas's *Totality and Infinity*.' *Yale French Studies*, no. 79, 1991, pp. 135–149.

[24] In *Downcast Eyes*, Martin Jay includes among anti-visual French philosophers Jacques Lacan, Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida, Luce Irigaray and others. Jay argues that what united these philosophers is their 'profound suspicion of vision and its hegemonic role in the modern era' (14).

war period. As Levinas writes in *Totality and Infinity*: 'Love aims at the other; it aims at him in his frailty [*faiblesse*]. […] To love is to fear for another, to come to the assistance of his frailty.' (256) At the same time, being attentive to the other's fragility also presupposes the beholder's own vulnerability, openness and willingness to go beyond his/her position as the supreme possessor of epistemological truth. It involves the acceptance of one's limitations in seeing and comprehending other minds. If I am unable to embrace my own fragility and behold my fellow being from a vulnerable perspective, I ignore the reversible nature of my position: the fact that I am seen as well as seer, and in these functions I am interlaced with the visible: the flesh of the world. Sympathetic sight does not work like a stage lamp suddenly illuminating the object of perception from above. Indeed, the authors central to this thesis often showed a deep suspicion of unambiguous, blinding light the aim of which is to reveal or "catch" its object.

Out of the four novelists of this thesis, Lawrence was probably the most distrustful of light, which he often associated with technology and warfare. As such, Chapter One argues that in Lawrence's fiction written during and after the First World War, he advocates darkness as a form of sensuous and sensual unity between people as well as humans and the universe. In *Women in Love*, he interprets obscurity as the medium in which the pre-conscious, sensual gestures of the body are free to unfold without the restrictions imposed by the rational mind. In *Women in Love* and his essays written in the 1920s, Lawrence identifies as one of the major problems of modern society humans' inability to reconnect with the primordial, anti-visual darkness of certain ancient civilisations, such as the Egyptians. At the same time, while undoubtedly preferring darkness to light (at least artificial light), he was also aware of the dangers of total obscurity, which risked annihilating humans' individual contours, transforming them into undistinguishable masses, a concept linked to warfare in Lawrence's writings. Towards the end of his life, despite never entirely abandoning the contradictions at the heart of his earlier writings, Lawrence became increasingly suspicious of extremities such as light and darkness. Instead, as his posthumously published *Sketches of Etruscan Places* (1932) demonstrates, he viewed the perfect manifestation of sympathy in the half-illuminated cave paintings of the Etruscans. The concept of sympathetic semi-luminosity was further developed and became a central topic in Woolf's *oeuvre*.

Chapter Two discusses how Woolf often associates excessive luminosity with the characterisation methods employed by Edwardian male writers, who try to capture characters through painstaking material descriptions, placing them under the sharply illuminating rays of a lamp. In *Jacob's Room*, Woolf critiques her predecessors' approach, showing its failure to reveal the feelings and thoughts of the phenomenal body-subject. Instead, for Woolf, intimacy is analogous to the hazy searchlight of the lighthouse, which gently envelops living and dead, past and present in a delicate halo of sympathy. Although the damage created by the war cannot be mended or the dead resurrected, *To the Lighthouse* suggests that in the shadowy zone of sympathy there are still possibilities of forging bonds.

Bowen was also suspicious of too much clarity in interpersonal relationships, as I show in Chapter Three. Karen, the protagonist of *The House in Paris* (1935), muses on the violent nature of her mother's penetrating gaze, which transforms people into sharply illuminated mechanisms, whose emotions and actions can be reduced to well-defined reasons and motivations. In her wartime short fiction, Bowen draws a link between luminosity and cruelty. The opening of 'Mysterious Kôr' (1944), describes how the full moon inundates London, exposing it to the eyes of air bombers, and making the blackout 'laughable' (728). The moon's cruel all-searching gaze affects whole communities of Londoners but also individual people, such as the hopelessly wandering pair of Arthur and Pepita, who are unable to find an intimate space of their own, far from the surveying eyes of intruders. At the same time, while locating sympathy in the semi-luminous sphere of ambiguity, Bowen also suggests the insufficiency of haziness in fellow feeling. In her Second World War novel, *The Heat of the Day*, Bowen shows the limitations and dangers of half-light as a meeting zone between individuals. Instead of gently enveloping humans, mistiness can also lead to a form of mis- or non-understanding that erases any possibilities of sympathy and love.

McEwan's insistence that fellow feeling is rooted in the 'real' world might seem at odds with the form of imperfect and sensual vision celebrated by Lawrence, Woolf and Bowen. Yet, as Chapter Four argues, *Atonement* and *Saturday* show that the 'real' world, including human beings and art works, is far from being transparent and easily comprehensible. Through the image of the broken and partially mended vase in *Atonement*, McEwan suggests the complex

and complicated nature of intertextual sympathy: the cracks remain faintly visible in the glaze of the porcelain, reminding the reader at once of the breakage with modernist tradition, and of the latter's emphatic presence in the matter of the contemporary novel. McEwan's later novel, *Saturday*, draws attention to the limitations of the omniscient (medical) gaze, highlighting the importance of the non-visual, or at least half-visual affective gestures that will never lead to complete understanding of other minds, but which represent the preconditions of our sympathetic embeddedness in the world.

This study, therefore, traces the pleasures and difficulties of feeling for and with others in the modernist and contemporary novel. A phenomenological reading of sympathy allows for the emergence of a kind of modernism, which does not necessarily prefer abstraction to embodiment and irony to emotion but which is preoccupied with the sensuous and vulnerable body: its potentials and limitations of forging emotional bonds. Sympathy, the works of Lawrence, Woolf, Bowen, and McEwan suggest, does not lead to a direct and unambiguous access to other minds, but it nevertheless creates a semi-transparent zone of intimacy where the perceiver's eyes can gently caress the other's hazy silhouette. This study will explore the empathic yet often unsettling presence of fellow feeling in modernism, while also touching on the legacies of modernist sympathy in contemporary fiction, showing how sympathy continues to pose urgent questions for twenty-first-century readers.

D. H. Lawrence: the ‘widening circle’ of sympathy

> Pervin moved about almost unconsciously in his familiar surroundings, dark though everything was. He seemed to know the presence of objects before he touched them. It was a pleasure to him to rock thus through a world of things, carried on the flood in a sort of blood-prescience. He did not think much or trouble much. So long as he kept this sheer immediacy of blood-contact with the substantial world he was happy, he wanted no intervention of visual consciousness. […] It was a pleasure to stretch forth the hand and meet the unseen object, clasp it, and possess it in pure contact.
>
> […]
>
> The rich suffusion of this state generally kept him happy, reaching its culmination in the consuming passion for his wife. But at times the flow would seem to be checked and thrown back. Then it would beat inside him like a tangled sea, and he was tortured in the shattered chaos of his own blood. He grew to dread this arrest, this throw-back, this chaos inside himself, when he seemed merely at the mercy of his own powerful and conflicting elements. How to get some measure of control or surety, this was the question. And when the question rose maddening in him, he would clench his fists as if he would *compel* the whole universe to submit to him. But it was in vain. He could not even compel himself. (54, emphasis in original)

In the above quotation from Lawrence’s short story ‘The Blind Man’ (written in 1918, published in 1922 in the collection *England, My England*), the protagonist, Maurice Pervin, muses about the pleasures and difficulties of living in darkness. Pervin lost his sight after a war injury, which left him not only blind but also with a visible facial scar. Nevertheless, despite his disability, Pervin has not only learned to manage everyday tasks around the farm but he also developed a sensuous ‘blood-contact with the substantial world’, which, the short story suggests, represents a more authentic mode of existence than that of sighted characters, such as Isabel or her friend, the socially awkward but intelligent lawyer, Bertie Reid. Pervin moves in a pre-conscious unity with the world, in a

blind tactile contact that allows him to become an organic part of the 'flood [of] blood-prescience'. There are times, nevertheless, when the unseen harmony transforms into a feeling of helplessness and deep frustration, giving space to an irrational desire for violence: 'he would *compel* the whole universe to submit to him'. Pervin's attempt, however, is doomed to failure, as the world seems to exceed his human power. In such moments, the wish for cosmic unity comes under increased threat, and the universe risks becoming an annihilating power, devouring the subject and erasing his/her individual contours.

'The Blind Man' represents a perfect illustration of the contradictory nature of what Lawrence called in *Women in Love* (1920) the 'dark knowledge' of the ancient Egyptians (319).[25] From the early 1910s until his untimely death in 1930, Lawrence never ceased to show interest for a form of embodied sympathy based on the unseen union of people, as well as humans and their surrounding environment. He located this kind of intimacy in the sentient body, more precisely 'in the sheer immediacy of blood-contact', the blood representing the vital fluid responsible for the circulation of fellow feeling. Lawrence explicitly formulated his theory of 'blood-sympathy' as early as 1915, though he had been concerned with these ideas earlier (*A Propos of 'Lady Chatterley's Lover'* 326). In December 1915 he wrote to Bertrand Russell:

> Now I am convinced of what I believed when I was about twenty – that there is another seat of consciousness than the brain and the nerve system: there is a blood-consciousness which exists in us independently of the ordinary mental consciousness, which depends on the eye as its source or connector. […] This is one half of life, belonging to the darkness. And the tragedy of this our life […] is that the mental and nerve consciousness exerts a tyranny over the blood-consciousness, […] which is only death […]. (*Letters* 2: 470)

The genuine source of sympathetic coexistence, according to Lawrence, is rooted in blood-consciousness, the 'half of life belonging to darkness', which can only be activated through sensuous tactile contact rather than visual means associated with cognitive supremacy. A life dominated entirely by the brain and

[25] Hereafter *WL*.

nerves is, in Lawrence's opinion, wasted, due to its disconnection from the vital source of sympathy.

Though Lawrence had been interested in questions of 'blood-sympathy' before 1915, it is not coincidental that he started to formulate his thoughts as a kind of doctrine during and after the war, in a period when phrases such as 'death' and 'tyranny' acquired unprecedented weight. Lawrence's dismissal of the 'tyranny' mental consciousness 'exert[ed] over […] blood-consciousness' can be linked to his hatred for the war, which he repeatedly described as a force ruthlessly tearing the fabric of embodied sympathy. In another letter written in December 1915, he said to Katherine Mansfield:

> I want you and Murry [John Middleton Murry, Mansfield's husband] to live with us, or near us, in unanimity: not these separations. […] Let us […] keep together, several of us, as being of one spirit. Only let there be no personal obligation, no personal idea. Let it be a union in the unconsciousness, not in the consciousness. […] [L]et us all try to be happy *together*, in unanimity, not in hostility, creating, not destroying. (*Letters* 2: 482, emphasis in original)

Lawrence invited the Murrys to stay with him and Frieda in Cornwall, where he intended to move from London, partly as an escape from the destroying effects of the war in the capital.[26] In his letters written at the end of 1915, Lawrence repeatedly urged his friends to engage in an 'unconscious' and 'impersonal' intimacy, which facilitates creation, not destruction.[27] Lawrence often used terms such as 'unconscious', 'impersonal' and 'inhuman' interchangeably, to denote a

[26] In the autumn of 1915, Lawrence repeatedly described London as an apocalyptic city, partly due to the frequent Zeppelin bombings. In a letter addressed to Lady Ottoline Morrell, he wrote: 'Last night we [Lawrence and Frieda] were coming home when the guns broke out, and there was a noise of bombs. Then we saw the Zeppelin above us, just ahead, amid a gleaming of clouds: high up, like a bright golden finger, quite small, among a fragile incandescence of clouds. And underneath it were splashes of fire as the shells fired from earth burst. […] It seemed as if the cosmic order were gone […]. So it seems our cosmos is burst, […] the stars and moon blown away, the envelope of the sky burst out, and a new cosmos appeared, with a long-ovate, gleaming central luminary, […] with its light bursting in flashes on the earth, to burst away the earth also.' (*Letters* 2: 390)

[27] It is important to note that Lawrence's use of the term 'unconscious' differs from Freud's psychoanalytic concept. Lawrence disliked Freud's theories because the latter associated the unconscious with repressed feelings, while for Lawrence it represented the sensuous-sensual core of human existence. In *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious* (1922) Lawrence mocked psychoanalysts: 'They have crept in among us as healers and physicians; growing bolder, they have asserted their authority as scientists; two more minutes and they will appear as apostles' (7).

form of physical consciousness that differed strikingly from 'the ordinary mental consciousness'. As Michael Bell puts it, the impersonal ego did not mean the cognitive, Cartesian self for Lawrence, but rather the 'non-moral awareness of a "beyond self" which provides the ultimate imperative for all life decisions, the non-teleological "purpose" of existence' ('Lawrence and modernism' 186). In other words, Lawrence does not set the body, as mere biological matter, against the rational mind, but he views the living and feeling body as the locus of a different kind of mentality, which he calls 'blood-consciousness' or 'physical mind' (*WL* 318).

Indeed, the question of impersonal existence represented a topic of great interest for Lawrence, as several critics have recently noted. Jeff Wallace suggests that Lawrence's preoccupation with the nonhuman originates from his readings of materialist theories advocated by scientists such as Charles Darwin, Herbert Spencer and T. H. Huxley. Wallace shows how despite Lawrence's own anti-scientific assertions, 'it would not be implausible to read the whole of [his] creative project, as sharing with post-Darwinian science, [the] exploratory quest to delineate man's place in nature' (17). Fiona Becket examines Lawrence's interest in the non-conscious self from a psychoanalytic point of view, arguing that unlike many of his contemporaries, Lawrence pinpoints 'the birth of consciousness not in thought or language but in the blood, and advocates the values of "blood consciousness" as a non-deliberate, non-cerebral feature of human being' (226). However, as Becket points out, in Lawrence's vocabulary blood refers to a kind of universal life fluid rather than racial difference (226). Kirsty Martin reads Lawrence's works through the lens of vitalism, proposing that while he locates sympathy in the body, he also pays attention to how fellow feeling is driven by energies transcending human volition (132–187). At the same time, Martin highlights the perils of Lawrence's emphasis on purely sensuous-sensual sympathy, which risks annihilating people's autonomy, creating space for brutality, as shown, for example, in *The Plumed Serpent* (1926) (133).

While drawing on the above-mentioned scholarly works, this chapter focuses on the impersonal from a different perspective. *Women in Love* (written during the First World War) shows how Lawrence's quest for impersonal 'dark knowledge' was at once a deeply desired and anxiety-inducing state. While darkness represents the medium in which bodies can sensually and mindlessly communicate, blind union is simultaneously imbued with the danger of

annihilating socially and historically determined individuals, who merge into a kind of primeval obscurity associated by Lawrence with 'primitive' cultures.[28] Reading *Women in Love* in parallel with Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of the phenomenal body, this chapter suggests that intimacy happens between sensing and living bodies, capable of intertwining with the texture of the world without losing the solidity of their individual boundaries. Yet this sympathetic harmony often proves to be fragile, turning from gentle coexistence to uncontrollable violence, as shown in the opening quotation from 'The Blind Man'. Contradictory forces of light and darkness, brain and blood consciousness, rationality and sensuality pervade Lawrence's *oeuvre*, from *The Rainbow* (1915) and *Women in Love* to his non-fictional works of the late 1920s, such as his essays on Paul Cézanne and *Sketches of Etruscan Places* (written in 1927, and published posthumously in 1932). As such, this chapter takes up the challenge to explore Lawrence's above-mentioned writings in parallel with Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, throwing light on, but with no intention to fully illuminate, the unresolved conflicts at the heart of Lawrence's works.

'I am a historical structure': the social nature of sympathy

In *Women in Love*, in the chapter entitled 'Rabbit', Gudrun and her private art tutee, Winifred, Gerald's youngest sister, spend some time in the garden, where they try to tame Winifred's erratic rabbit, aptly named Bismarck. When Gudrun finally manages to lay hands on it, the rabbit violently grazes her arm and tries to escape, but Gerald's sudden appearance saves the situation, as he succeeds in momentarily immobilising the animal. Gudrun's and Gerald's tussle with the rabbit, anticipates the lovers' tumultuous, forcefully violent relationship. The description of the fight between Gudrun, Gerald and the animal, bears a striking similarity to later sex scenes in the novel. The rabbit is depicted as 'lusty', a 'thunder-storm' that literally shakes Gudrun as she struggles to hold it in her arms (240). The animal's forceful movements, in turn, awaken a 'passion of cruelty' in the woman (240). When Gerald takes the rabbit from Gudrun, the furious animal

[28] As Michael Bell suggests, the word 'primitive' should always be understood 'within implicit quotation marks', as it reflects not so much the aesthetic values of pre-modern art forms but the biased perspective of Western art history. Michael Bell. 'Primitivism: Modernism as Anthropology.' *The Oxford Handbook of Modernisms*, edited by Peter Brooker et al., Oxford University Press, 2010, pp. 353–367, p. 353.

makes ‘itself into a ball in the air, and lashe[s] out, flinging itself into a bow’ (241). Man and woman become united in the irrational, viscerally frightening fight against the uncontrollable beast: Gudrun is passionately drawn to ‘the power of lightning in Gerald’s nerves’, his ‘magical, hideous white fire’ (242).

Erotic desire and aggression intricately intertwine, foreshadowing the dangers inherent in the couple’s later liaison. They feel connected in their passionate wrath against the rabbit, and the narrative indicates the perils of their alliance, rooted in feelings of vindictiveness and rage, ultimately leading to destruction: ‘There was a league between them, abhorrent to them both. They were implicated with each other in abhorrent mysteries.’ (242) The first thing that strikes the reader in this passage is a complete absence of tenderness. The lovers’ attachment acquires a mechanical, artificial overtone, as the words ‘league’, ‘abhorrent’, and ‘implicated’ suggest. Being in a ‘league’ fails to provide a safe and intimate space, where Gerald and Gudrun could engage in a mutually reassuring gentleness; on the contrary, their strange, ‘abhorrent’ alliance is fuelled by the very same violence against which they set out to unite their forces in the first place. The rabbit, which after a moment of stillness, ‘burst[s] into life […] as if shot from a gun’, and starts to run around the court, creates a ‘tense hard circle that seemed to bind their brains’ (243). This newly established bond between the lovers, precisely due to its ‘hard’ and cerebral nature (resisting sympathetic softening and opening to the other), anticipates the annihilating nature of their passion.

At a later moment in the novel, when Gerald visits Gudrun in her family home during the night, their sexual encounter bears uncanny echoes of the rabbit-scene. As Gerald enters Gudrun’s room stealthily, and starts to undress, the woman ‘listened, watching, hoping no one would hear the starched linen crackle. It seemed to snap like pistol-shots.’ (344) The rigidity of the linen, whose cracking resembles gunshots, envelops the lovers in a ‘tense, hard circle’, inside which their bodies unite in a form of togetherness shadowed with traces of violence and isolation:

> Into her he poured all his pent-up darkness and corrosive death, and he was whole again. […] And she, subject, received him as a vessel filled with his bitter potion of death. She had no power at this crisis to resist. The

> terrible frictional violence of death filled her, and she received it in an ecstasy of subjection in throes of acute, violent sensation. (344)

Their sexual interaction reminds the reader of a forceful fight, doomed to end in the subjects' painful destruction. Though Gerald feels restored to a kind of pre-natal wholeness ('as if he were bathed in the womb again'), his sensation of totality is achieved at the cost of the dissolution of the woman, who transforms into a passive object in his arms (344). In other words, wholeness is not created in the phenomenological hollow between two touching bodies, but rather in the isolated, closed-off sphere of separate individuals. Instead of feeling complete with the woman, Gerald reaches fulfilment through his lover, an act that makes Gudrun feel an immense loneliness: 'And here was she, left with all the anguish of consciousness, whilst he was sunk deep into the other element of mindless, remote, living shadow-gleam. They would never be together.' (346) The relationship between Gudrun and Gerald is doomed to failure partly because, as Graham Hough suggests, 'even the sensual bond between them is never complete' (83).

Gerald's possessive, and arguably selfish gestures in the first sex scene inevitably raise the question of misogyny, and Lawrence has been accused of the latter on numerous occasions. One of the most well known critiques of Lawrence's treatment of female sexuality can be attributed to Kate Millett, who claimed that Lawrence's sexual politics is based on his refusal to allow his female characters to achieve emancipation and individual freedom (260). Such a reading, however, runs the risk of missing out on the complexity of Lawrence's views on male-female relationships and the intricacies of erotic desire in *Women in Love*. Gudrun might indeed, for a moment, seem like a helpless victim subordinated to Gerald's selfish passion. But at the same time, for Gudrun, as shown in the rabbit-scene, eroticism and aggression often go hand in hand; their fusion not only fuels the lovers' sexual attraction but also anticipates the destructive nature of their bond.

Marianna Torgovnick suggests that one of the most significant differences between *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love* can be grasped in the way they 'narrate' sexuality. While in the earlier novel, sex is 'integrated into the texture of experience', several erotic scenes in *Women in Love* are 'abrupt and isolated', severed from a 'spiritual dimension' and 'family context' (38, 41). Though I do not

necessarily think that this sharp contrast is unequivocally true for all sex scenes in the two novels, I agree that the failure of Gudrun's relationship with Gerald lies partially in their isolation, not only from each other, but also from what we might call, after Merleau-Ponty, the flesh of the world.

Near the end of *Women in Love*, when the two sisters accompanied by their partners, arrive to the Alps, Gudrun and Gerald retreat to their room, before joining Ursula and Birkin for tea. Gudrun is fascinated by the texture and colour of the wooden panel, and describes her sensation 'like being inside a nut' (400). Yet this feeling of warm homeliness proves to be fragile. As Gudrun looks out of the window, she becomes more and more oblivious of Gerald's closeness behind her, until she gradually transforms into a 'crystal in the navel of snow', and '[is] gone' (401). Gerald experiences an acute sense of loneliness: he feels endlessly separated not only from the woman, whose body he cannot connect to, but also from the outside world, the snowy landscape, into which Gudrun seems to have melted: 'He saw […] the great cul de sac of snow and mountain peaks, under the heaven. And there was no way out. The terrible silence and cold and the glamorous whiteness of the dusk wrapped him round […]' (401). Gerald's thoughts can be read as a prediction of the end of the couple's relationship as well as of the man's literal death: 'the glamorous whiteness of the dusk' foreshadows Gerald's death in the snow, preceded by his lonely skiing experience, after which he returns to Gudrun 'isolated as if there were a vacuum round his heart' (460). Sympathetic coexistence remains an impossible endeavour for the lovers, because they remain sealed off in their own separated worlds, in an inescapable state of lonely togetherness.

Similarly to Gerald, who feels disorientated in the 'cul de sac of snow', Gudrun, despite her enchantment with the beauty of the rose-tinted blue twilight, experiences a sense of irreparable loss: 'She could *see* [the landscape], she knew it, but she was not of it. She was divorced, debarred, a soul shut out.' (403, emphasis in original) Sight, in this passage, becomes synonymous with a mere physical property of the body: the eyes' capacity to register visual stimuli. This kind of mechanical immersion in the visible, however, as both Lawrence and Merleau-Ponty suggest, is burdened with dangers. Merleau-Ponty highlights that phenomenological perception, including sight, cannot be reduced to the biological functions of disparate sense organs: 'Blue is what solicits a certain way of looking from me, it is what allows itself to be palpated by a specific movement of my gaze.

It is a certain field or a certain atmosphere offered to the power of my eyes and of my entire body.' (*PP* 218) Gudrun's gaze has lost its tactile capacity, a faculty of the phenomenal body necessary for the subject's corporeal engagement with the world, including other human beings. Her look becomes empty and distant, thus failing to bring the external world in tangible closeness. Her body, to borrow Merleau-Ponty's phrase, exists in a '[de]synchronized' unity with the flesh of the universe, as she transforms into an 'inert milieu', passively 'affected' by a quality of the visible (*PP* 219).

As Merleau-Ponty highlights in *Phenomenology of Perception*, phenomenological interaction between self and world presupposes the activation of what he calls binocular vision. This form of sight does not result from the mechanical summing up and union of images perceived separately by the two eyes. Instead, one is able to see in the phenomenological sense of the word 'when the two eyes cease to function in isolation and are used as a single organ by a unique gaze' (241). The synthesising capacity of the eyes, however, 'is not accomplished by the epistemological subject, but rather by the body […] which carries itself through all of its resources toward a single term of its movement' (241). In other words, binocular vision, which facilitates the forging of intimacy with other people and the surrounding world, cannot be reduced to either a conscious activity of the mind or a simple mechanism of the biological body; rather, it can be defined as a capacity of the phenomenal body to reach out and feel the 'carnal presence' of other entities (242). This 'perceptual synthesis' cannot be 'accomplished in the transparency of consciousness', but requires 'all of the latent knowledge that my body has of itself' (241). Gudrun fails to engage with the twilight landscape, or indeed with Gerald, in a phenomenological sense partly because her sympathy is not rooted in a 'latent', pre-conscious bodily knowledge, but rather in a detached, rational sight that 'divorce[s]' her from the flesh of the visible, making her 'a soul shut out'.

While in Gerald's affair with Gudrun, the characters' withdrawal into their own individual sphere leads to an irreconcilable isolation and the impossibility of meaningful communication, through Birkin's liaison with Ursula, Lawrence shows a different, though not unproblematic, version of union-in-separateness. In the chapter entitled 'Excurse' the lovers go for an afternoon drive, which, after Birkin telling Ursula that he must go back to Shortlands to have tea with Hermione,

transforms into ‘a crisis of war between them’ (306).[29] Ursula accuses Birkin of being dependent on his ‘spiritual brides’, who, at the same time ‘aren’t common and fleshly enough’ to satisfy him (306). Her furious remarks make it clear that she prefers to be identified with the second category. Partly echoing Lawrence’s derogatory opinion on getting ‘sex in [the] head’,[30] Ursula calls Birkin a ‘purity-monger’, ‘deathly thing’, ‘obscene and perverse’ (307).[31]

Yet Ursula’s viewpoint is not unequivocally presented as the dominant one. Birkin suggests that Ursula and Hermione represent two extremities, both of which are flawed in their own ways: ‘“It may all be true, lies and stink and all,” he said. “But Hermione’s spiritual intimacy is no rottener than your emotional-jealous intimacy”.’ (308) Birkin is torn between Hermione’s abstraction and Ursula’s physicality, and he considers both a form of ‘hateful tyranny’, a desire for violent appropriation: ‘Why could [the two women] not remain individuals, limited by their own limits? […] Why not leave the other being free, why try to absorb, or melt, or merge?’ (309) Birkin’s musings are problematic, if not for other reasons, at least for their tendency to reduce Hermione and Ursula to a well-defined personality trait. As such, he seems oblivious to the fact that he is committing the same ‘hateful tyranny’ of which he blames the two women. Nevertheless, his inner torments illuminate the complexity and difficulty of his vision of ‘the perfect relation’: ‘star-equilibrium which alone is freedom’ (316, 319).

Lawrence’s musings on the link between intimacy and freedom can be brought into dialogue with Merleau-Ponty’s ideas about the nature of liberty, as elaborated in the final section of *Phenomenology of Perception*. Merleau-Ponty questions the existence of an individual self, separated from the world surrounding it, including other human and nonhuman beings. As such, individual

[29] It is important to note the linguistic play at stake in Lawrence’s use of the word ‘excurse’. According to the *OED*, ‘excurse’ is an obsolete noun, defined as ‘an outrush, raid, hostile sally’. *Online Oxford English Dictionary*. www.oed.com. Accessed 4 November 2018. Ursula’s interaction with Birkin in this chapter is not devoid of violent outbursts, both on verbal and physical levels. For example, she forcefully throws some rings (received from Birkin) in the man’s face. Furthermore, Lawrence’s vocabulary throughout the chapter is peppered with military allusions.

[30] The phrase getting ‘sex in your head’ appears, for example, in Lawrence’s review of Ben Hecht’s *Fantazius Mallare: A Mysterious Oath* (1922): ‘The tragedy is, when you’ve got sex in your head, instead of down below where it belongs […]’ (216). D. H. Lawrence. *Introduction and Reviews*, edited by N. H. Reeve and John Worthen, Cambridge University Press, 2005.

[31] Ursula’s accusation against Birkin reveals the complexity of Lawrence’s works. While Birkin has often been considered Lawrence’s mouthpiece, in ‘Excurse’, the male protagonist stands for ideas Lawrence firmly contested elsewhere: abstraction, rationality, falseness. Sheila MacLeod claimed that Birkin is ‘certainly [Lawrence’s] mouthpiece’ (38), while Graham Hough argued that Birkin is ‘the embodiment of Lawrence’s ideas; in fact, the first of many self-dramatisations of Lawrence the prophet’ (75). Sheila MacLeod. *Lawrence’s Men and Women*. Heinemann, 1985.

freedom is necessarily a 'freedom *together*', as Birkin puts it in of his conversations with Ursula (152, emphasis in original). In Merleau-Ponty's words: 'Far from my freedom being forever alone, it is in fact never without accomplices, and its power of perpetually tearing itself away leans upon my universal engagement in the world.' (*PP*, 479) According to the phenomenologist, our embodied existence is interlaced with the world (by which he means social, historical, and cultural relations) to such an extent that we are unable to find a sense of liberty through cutting off these intricately entangled ties. As he formulates:

> I am a psychological and historical structure. Along with existence, I received a way of existing, or a style. All of my actions and thoughts are related to this structure […]. And yet, I am free, not in spite of or beneath these motivations, but rather by their means. For that meaningful life, that particular signification of nature and history that I am, does not restrict my access to the world; it is rather my means of communication with it. (*PP*, 482)

This 'means of communication', however, also presupposes the subject's ability to delineate his/her individual place in the world in a historically and socially determined moment in time. In other words, the form of sympathy Merleau-Ponty advocates in *Phenomenology of Perception* is not merely a transhistorical union with the universe, since any human being, from the moment of coming into the world, is already a 'psychological and historical' structure, circumscribed by a socio-cultural context that influences his/her bonds with the surrounding environment. In *Women in Love*, Lawrence is highly aware of the historically determined nature of sympathy, while at the same time he also shows how the boundaries of fellow feeling are flexible enough to open, even though briefly, to a timeless mythical realm.

The paradoxical nature of sympathy – being at once historically circumscribed and impossible to locate in time – can be best captured in the figure of Ursula. In 'Excurse', after Ursula and Birkin leave 'behind [the] memorable battle-field' of their violent fight, and experience 'peace, just simply peace', they decide to have high tea in a Southwell inn called Saracen's Head (311, 310). On their way to the inn, they pass by a cathedral, which Ursula recognises as her

father's beloved minster, often visited by her parents at the beginning of their courtship (312). As the dusk starts to settle and the minster bells play a hymn, Ursula feels suspended, like in a dream: 'It was like dim, bygone centuries sounding. Above she could see the first stars. […] This was no actual world, it was the dream-world of one's childhood – a great circumscribed reminiscence.' (312) In Ursula's 'great circumscribed reminiscence' personal, historical, and mythical dimensions intertwine in complex ways. The cathedral represents at once the remnant of a historical period (similarly to the fourteenth-century inn, in the courtyard of which she listens to the bells), and a space imbued with the personal memories of a more recent, familial past (the minster being a kind of sacred meeting place for Ursula's parents). At the same time, the melody coming from the clock tower transports Ursula into a realm that transcends the boundaries of historical reality: 'The world had become unreal. She herself was a strange, transcendent reality.' (312) The woman's memories, strangely entangled with fantasies, go beyond historical time by stretching back into a distant world of mythical past. Ursula's twilight experience differs significantly from Gerald's and Gudrun's sense of dusk in the Alps. Gerald is overwhelmed by a feeling of suffocating terror as he feels himself 'wrapped' in the 'cold and glamorous whiteness of the dusk', while Gudrun experiences a sense of poignant loneliness due to her inability to reach out to the rose-tinted sky with her whole body, instead of gazing at it with a mechanical-detached look from behind the window. For Ursula, on the other hand, the slowly settling dusk, which gently reveals the shape of the minster, 'below in the hollow', opens up a faintly luminous space of sympathy, in which she can feel connected both to her immediate surroundings and a dream world transcending physical reality (312).

Ursula's 'circumscribed reminiscence' can be linked to Merleau-Ponty's ideas about subjectivity and interrelatedness. He writes in *Phenomenology of Perception* that we cannot achieve total subjectivity by severing our bonds with our surrounding reality, because 'even in [our] most radical reflection, [we] must already grasp around [our] absolute individuality something like a halo of generality' (474). In *The Visible and the Invisible* Merleau-Ponty employs the same word as Lawrence to describe the relationship between self and world: 'From the sole fact that I *circumscribe* [the other], […] [(s)he] is cut out in my universe; there is an intersection of my universe with that of the other' (80, my emphasis). It is perhaps not coincidental that both writers use a circular image to

capture the complexity of self-other relationships. Similarly to Merleau-Ponty's subject, who is enveloped in 'a halo' of socio-historical relations, Ursula feels her existence being encircled by forces beyond her consciousness. This phenomenological net, however, does not divorce Ursula from her environment but rather connects her to it, while at the same time ensuring the preservation of her individual bodily contours.

Ursula is perhaps the Lawrence heroine who comes closer to embodying Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological philosophy. From a very young age, as shown in *The Rainbow*, she struggles to fulfil her desire for freedom and autonomy, while simultaneously remaining attached to her family. *The Rainbow* captures Ursula's contradictory feelings in the image of the kite. Shortly before moving from Cossethay with her family, Ursula is overwhelmed by a burning desire to escape from the place where she spent her childhood:

> It hurt her that she could not be at ease with [the people at Cossethay] any more. And yet – and yet – one's kite will rise on the wind as far as ever one has string to let it go. It tugs and tugs and will go, and one is glad the further it goes, even if everybody else is nasty about it. So Cossethay hampered her, and she wanted to go away, to be free to fly her kite as high as she liked. (*The Rainbow* 389)

The above passage can be found in a chapter suggestively entitled 'The Widening Circle'. The expanding circle, just as Ursula's 'circumscribed reminiscence' in *Women in Love*, and Merleau-Ponty's halo, represents an important motif in Lawrence's novels, as it indicates the flexible, semi-soft nature of circular boundaries. The circle does not rigidly enclose the subject, separating him/her from the environment, but its borders can be stretched in order to incorporate new possibilities and relationships. The widening circle creates a kind of phenomenological hollow, a tactile-visual meeting space, at once limited by and open to the world. The image of the kite, at the same time, encapsulates the essence of Lawrence's concept of 'freedom *together*'. The kite is freely and uncontrollably carried by the wind but the former is also anchored to the hands holding its string. If the hands released their hold, the kite would dissolve in the universe, curtailing the possibility of sympathetic coexistence. Ursula's concept of independence and her later love for Birkin in *Women in Love*, are grounded in

a simultaneous wish to break free from parental ties and a constant, unexplainable urge to let her kite be guided back to her familial roots. Her seemingly paradoxical attitude represents one of the fundamental differences between her and Gudrun's views on sympathy and love. Despite being at times violently hostile towards her family, Ursula, nevertheless, remains attached not only to her personal past but also to a more distant mythical time. Gudrun, on the other hand, for the most part of the novel, remains enclosed in her 'tense, hard circle', feeling isolated and disconnected from past and present bonds.

Women in Love and the dangers of 'primitive' darkness

Ursula is not the only character connected to the historical and mythological past. In 'Excurse' Birkin is repeatedly described as an 'Egyptian Pharaoh', 'seated in immemorial potency, like the great carven statues of real Egypt' (*WL* 318). He feels a mysterious power in his body, 'a force in darkness' which makes him 'awake and potent in that other basic mind, the deepest physical mind' (318). While driving the car with Ursula by his side, he finds it difficult to verbally express his feelings, and instead abandons himself to the 'pure living silence, subtle, full of unthinkable knowledge and unthinkable force' (318). Birkin's perfectly still darkness, nevertheless, is momentarily interrupted by a 'lambent intelligence' located in his upper body: 'His arms and his breast and his head were rounded and living like those of the Greek, he had not the unawakened straight arms of the Egyptian, nor the sealed, slumbering head' (318). It is not coincidental that Lawrence likens Birkin's upper body, especially his head to Greek physiognomy. The head represents the locus of sight and consciousness, which, in Lawrence's interpretation, dominate the lower, more sensual and instinctive parts of the body. As he formulates in *Fantasia of the Unconscious* (1922): '[B]elow the waist we have our being in darkness. Below the waist we are sightless. When […] our life is polarised upwards, towards the open, sun-wakened eyes and the mind which sees in vision, then the powerful dynamic centres of the lower body act in subservience […]' (189). Lawrence accuses ancient Greek civilisation of breaking 'the spell of "darkness"', contributing thus to the 'development of the conscious ego' ('Art and Morality,' *Study of Thomas Hardy* 165). In contrast, in ancient Egypt, humans did not '*see straight*' but fumbled in the dark […] and felt their own existence surging in the darkness of other creatures' (165, emphasis in original).

According to Lawrence, while the absence of 'straight' sight in Egypt allowed for a form of coexistence rooted in tactile proximity, or what he calls in *Fantasia of the Unconscious* seeing with 'the dark soul' (103), the Greeks destroyed the preconscious harmony between self and world by placing the conscious ego in the limelight.

Lawrence's interest in ancient Egyptian culture can be traced back to the 1910s, around the years when he was working on *Women in Love*. In a letter to Gordon Campbell, dated 21 September 1914, Lawrence wrote about his visit to the British Museum, where the Egyptian and Assyrian sculptures inspired him to formulate his theory of vision:

> We want to realise the tremendous *non-human* quality of life – it is wonderful. It is not the emotions, nor the personal feelings and attachments, that matter. These are all only expressive, and expression has become mechanical. Behind us all are the tremendous unknown forces of life, coming unseen and unperceived as out of the desert to the Egyptians […]. (*Letters* 2: 218)

In his letter to Campbell, Lawrence made it clear that the 'unknown' and 'unseen' force he sought were different from Freud's concept of the unconscious: 'I am not Freudian and never was – Freudianism is only a branch of medical science – interesting' (218). Lawrence did not think of the non-conscious ego as consisting of repressed feelings, but he considered it the deepest and most authentic part of the self, which had come under increased threat due to the mechanisation and intellectualisation of human life. What is more, Lawrence associated the mechanical explicitly with warfare, which, as he poignantly put it, 'makes [him] sick' and hateful towards mankind: 'They are fools, and vulgar fools […]. I don't even mind if they're killed. But I do mind those who, being sensitive, will receive such a blow from the ghastliness and mechanical, obsolete, hideous stupidity of war, that they will be crippled beings […]' (218). According to Lawrence, the kind of vision that might save humans from mechanical death can be found in ancient Egyptian culture. The Egyptians did not 'see straight' but instead employed a sort of backward vision, which allowed them to grasp the 'tremendous unknown forces of life' 'behind' them, and by blindly 'fumbl[ing] in the dark', become united with the surrounding universe. Lawrence pits against the dark union, advocated by

Egyptian art, the illuminated and perfectly 'rounded' Greek statues, which, as he puts it in an essay entitled 'Him With His Tail in His Mouth' (1925), illustrate the 'cutting apart business' (*Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine* 316). 'Greek rationalism', according to Lawrence, is partly to be blamed for the loss of harmonious coexistence between humans and environment, a form of unity that characterised many older, 'primitive' artistic styles, such as the Egyptian, Aztec or Etruscan civilisations (*Sketches of Etruscan Places* 58).

In the decades preceding Lawrence's writing career, many art historians, especially in German-speaking countries, started to interpret art history as a kind of evolutionary theory that evolved from 'primitive' cultural trends (rooted primarily in tactility) to refined and complex styles, founded on vision, the allegedly noblest sense. In 1901, Austrian art historian, Alois Riegl (1858–1905), published a book entitled *Late Roman Art Industry*, in which he introduced the term *Kunstwollen* (a kind of *zeitgeist*, the artistic expression of the spirit of a particular historical period), which explains the shift from pre-modern artistic styles to classical and late Roman periods. Among Riegl's areas of research was Egyptian art, which he associated with tactility, in contrast with Greek architecture and statuary, which appealed more to sight. However, the distinction between touch and sight remained problematic for the Austrian art historian. He described Egyptian art as *nahsichtig* (literally 'near-sighted'), interpreted as a kind of tactile vision that presupposes the object's bodily proximity (25). On the other hand, Greek culture illustrates the concept of *Normalsicht*, a form of perception that privileges sight but at the same time does not completely disregard tactility (25). Though, as Fiona Candlin suggests, Riegl did not wish to establish a hierarchy of different artistic periods and their corresponding sense perceptions, he nevertheless provided a theory according to which Egyptian art is 'the result of a primitive sensory apparatus that could not easily distinguish individual objects. The Egyptians were like small children learning to focus' (Candlin 140). Candlin's summary of Riegl's views might help us to reassess the problematic nature of Lawrence's fascination with 'primitive' cultures.

Towards the end of 'Excurse' Birkin's 'fumb[ling] in the dark' acquires explicitly sensuous and erotic connotations. After sending a telegram to Ursula's parents, he steps out of the 'lighted' post-office, and the couple is enveloped in total obscurity (319). As they drive in the night, the lovers are overwhelmed by an irresistible desire for tactile contact. Ursula wishes '[t]o touch, mindlessly in

darkness to come in pure touching upon the living reality of him, […] his thighs of darkness', while Birkin knows 'her darkly, with the fullness of dark knowledge, […] like an Egyptian, steadfast in perfectly suspended equilibrium' (319). When they arrive to 'a little circle of grass', Birkin immediately extinguishes the lamps of the car. The sense of sight cancelled, he seeks tactile unity with Ursula, as he embraces 'her forever invisible flesh': 'Quenched, inhuman, his fingers upon her unrevealed nudity were the fingers of silence upon silence, […] never to be seen with the eye, or known with the mind, only known as palpable revelation of living otherness' (320). Though this visionless, mystical unity proves to be fragile, Birkin and Ursula nevertheless, succeed in momentarily creating Birkin's ideal of 'star-equilibrium': 'a pure balance of two single beings', who experience, through tactile union, each other's 'living otherness' (*WL* 319, 148).

Some critics have interpreted the final scene of 'Excurse' as an illustration of Lawrence's phallic vision. Linda Ruth Williams, for example, argues that the form of obscurity lionised by Lawrence is always associated with males, while female characters are simply drawn (if not forced) into their father's or lover's aura of darkness (22–23). As she puts it, Birkin's darkness 'infects' Ursula, who submits mindlessly to his blind sensuality (36). Indeed, Birkin's description as an 'immobile, supremely potent' Egyptian pharaoh, 'full of unthinkable knowledge and unthinkable force' poses some difficult questions (318). In *Women in Love* and his non-fictional writings Lawrence repeatedly depicts Egyptian statues as potent and robust, possessing a 'pure and magic control, […] a force in darkness' (*WL* 318). Evidently, this representation of Egyptian statuary is problematic for various reasons: besides its connotations of masculine supremacy, Lawrence's tendency to reduce Egyptian art to the sculptures of pharaohs (as omnipotent rulers) is also disconcerting.

Nevertheless, as Bell persuasively argues, Lawrence's view on the 'primitive' remains a complex problem in *Women in Love*. Bell suggests that Lawrence is the most successful at presenting the 'primitive' other when he pays attention to the spatial, temporal and cultural distance that separates modern humans from ancient civilisations. Birkin's reaction to the wooden statuette of an African woman in labour, which he sees in Halliday's flat, represents such as an example. Birkin's ability to see the statuette as an aesthetic object, expressing a worldview that differs significantly from his own, allows him to 'appreciate its nature without supposing that he can, or should, identify with it in a literalistic way'

(Bell, *Language and Being* 129). He senses in the statuette something that he, as a modern man, has lost and though he longs for this pre-conscious spirit of wholeness, he also remains aware of the impossibility of reaching it through direct identification with the 'primitive'.

In 'Excurse', on the other hand, the 'primitive', this time associated with the figure of the Egyptian pharaoh, becomes problematic precisely due to Birkin's failure to take into consideration his own historical distance from the mythical past. As Bell puts it, Birkin's literal identification with the Egyptian ruler creates tension because 'there is an emotional rhetoric which tries to render directly an experience fundamentally alien to his consciousness' (129). In contrast to Ursula, who manages to maintain her historically 'circumscribed' identity while simultaneously being transported to a timeless-magical realm, Birkin is cut off from historical time in his mainly unsuccessful attempt at dissolving within the mythical. His failure originates partly from his refusal to accept his historically and socially determined human condition. He believes in his ability to breach the confines of historical time and attain a total union with the Egyptian pharaoh, an illusion that impedes him to realise the impossibility of his endeavour caused by the fact that the 'awakened' Greek spirit is already indelibly impregnated in his (upper) body. Birkin's Egyptian 'dark knowledge' acquires connotations of danger because it threatens to erase differences between living beings. Obscurity cancels the contours of individual shapes, and renders the human flesh 'forever invisible'. As shown in 'Excurse', Lawrence runs the risk of straining the meaning of inhuman mythical darkness to such an extent that the phrase loses its original significance of sensuous-sensual knowledge, and instead comes to denote an inhumane force that threatens to dissolve the essential interpersonal differences at the heart of sympathetic coexistence. In other words, the 'tremendous non-human quality of life', associated with Egyptian darkness and initially set against the 'mechanical […] stupidity of war', risks becoming another form of violence, showing, in a paradoxical way, uncanny similarities with militarism.

In 'With the Guns' (1914), an essay written around the time when he was working on *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*, Lawrence explicitly linked darkness with the inhumane treatment of soldiers in the war. He recalls a scene he witnessed in Germany, at the bottom of the Alps: 'amid woods and corn-clad hills […] [there] were three quick-firing guns, with the gunners behind. At the side, perched up on a tiny platform at the top of a high pair of steps, was an officer

looking through a fixed spy-glass' (*Twilight in Italy and Other Essays* 81). The guns are described as possessing a will of their own, while the soldiers become mere prolongations of the 'cold machine' (82), executing, in a state of blind subordination, the orders of the officer looking at them rigidly through his 'fixed spy-glass'. In a further passage Lawrence describes a night attack in which the soldiers formed

> a mass of scarcely visible forms, lying waiting for a rush. […] If [a] shell […] had dropped among them, […] [t]here would just have been a hole in the living shadowy mass; that was all. Who it was it did not matter. […] There was only the mass lying there, solid and obscure along the bank of the road in the night. (82)

Lawrence's portrayal of soldiers under fire reveals the underlying violence in presenting people as mere obscure masses, devoid of unique contours. The depiction of humans as 'solid and obscure' abstractions curtails any feelings of sympathy due to the failure of caring for the individual differences impregnated in the 'flesh and blood, […] soul and intelligence', which constitute the living human matter that has been ruthlessly 'shed away' by the 'iron insensate will' (82). One of the main reasons why Lawrence hated the war can be captured in militarism's tendency to make human subjects invisible, erasing their bodily outlines, which melt into a universal and seemingly invulnerable darkness. This illusory sense of immunity gives the essay its viscerally poignant tone. If soldiers are abstract masses, their wounds are equally abstracted: the exploding shells create unseen holes in the shadowy matter, an image that reinforces a sense of complete indifference to the fragile and bruised human flesh. Darkness transforms soldiers' bodies into a kind of black hole that absorbs violent blows whose effects remain unperceivable in the living human fabric.

While in *Women in Love*, darkness associated with pre-modern civilisations, despite its connotations of danger, remained a desirable state, representing a way of returning to the 'physical mind', in other writings, such as in 'With the Guns', Lawrence explicitly linked obscurity to military power and cruelty, which leave no space for sympathetic coexistence. Lawrence's contradictory ideas about dark unity continued to occupy central stage in his later works too. While he never abandoned his theory of dark vision as a sensuous

bodily immersion in the world, in some of the writings preceding his death, such as *Sketches of Etruscan Places*, he started to explore the possibilities of a form of sympathy rooted in half-luminosity rather than total obscurity. Before turning to *Sketches*, however, the next section will explore the aesthetic affinities between Lawrence's writings and Paul Cézanne's art, a parallel that allows a better understanding of Lawrence's interpretation of embodied vision as an important prerequisite of sympathy.

Lawrence and Cézanne: the 'appleyness' of human character

In his essay 'Introduction to These Paintings' (1929), Lawrence contemplates not only the artistic merits of Cézanne's pictures but also, implicitly, the similarities between his own and the French painter's methods. Lawrence describes Cézanne as 'the sublime little grimalkin […] [which has] come back […] to form and substance and *thereness*, instead of delicious nowhereness', the latter being, in Lawrence's opinion, a characteristic of Impressionism (*Late Essays* 197, emphasis in original).[32] What Lawrence admires in Cézanne is the latter's ability to convey the world in its material substance, though not in the form of a mere realist imitation appealing to the eyes, but rather through a sense of physicality that yields not so much to vision as to touch: Cézanne 'wanted to touch the world of substance once more with the intuitive touch, to be aware of it with the intuitive awareness, and to express it in intuitive terms' (211). As the frequent repetition of the adjective 'intuitive' implies, Lawrence turns to Cézanne's paintings because in the former's view, the real value of the French painter's art lies in the abandonment of the Impressionists' 'optical cliché' and the embracing of the bodily and non-rational dimension of the object of perception (211). As Lawrence puts it, Cézanne 'wished to displace our present mode of mental-visual consciousness, the consciousness of mental concepts, and substitute a mode of consciousness that was predominantly intuitive, the awareness of touch' (211).

Lawrence's interpretation of Cézanne's art chimes with Merleau-Ponty's appreciation of the French painter who, according to the philosopher, wanted 'to make *visible* how the world *touches* us': '[In Cézanne's pictures] we see the depth, the smoothness, the softness, the hardness of objects' (Merleau-Ponty,

[32] My aim here is not to comment on the artistic validity of Lawrence's artistic claims, but rather to trace some similarities between his literary aesthetics and Cézanne's art.

'Cézanne's Doubt', *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Readers*, 70, 65, emphasis in original).[33] Besides the tangible qualities of Cézanne's paintings, Merleau-Ponty also notes the presence of an 'inhuman' element in the painter's portraits, which makes his people seem 'strange': his pictures 'suspend [existing] habits of thought and reveal the base of inhuman nature upon which man has installed himself' ('CD' 66). By exploring Lawrence's and Merleau-Ponty's shared attraction to Cézanne, we can gain a better insight into Lawrence's understanding of people's inhuman nature and its role in interpersonal relationships.

In his essays on visual art, Merleau-Ponty often reflects on Cézanne's motivations for painting human faces as objects. In 'Cézanne's Doubt' Merleau-Ponty quotes Cézanne, who reportedly said that portraying the human face 'as an object' does not obscure the subject's psyche (66). In the philosopher's interpretation, Cézanne did not wish to paint lifeless and mechanical models, devoid of thoughts and feelings. On the contrary, the painter wanted to capture his subjects' complex inner world in an indirect way, through colour rather than minutely detailed, sharp outlines. As Merleau-Ponty writes: 'One's personality is seen and grasped in one's glance, which is, however, no more than a combination of colors. Other minds are given to us only as incarnate, as belonging to faces and gestures.' ('CD' 66) Merleau-Ponty is fascinated by Cézanne's art because the former finds in it a confirmation of his own phenomenological ideas of embodiment: a person's inner world is not concealed by an opaque corporeal layer but becomes visible precisely in and through the body.[34] This effect does not render the subject alien or lifeless but rather motivates the viewer to engage with the art object on a more sensuous and affective level, involving what Lawrence called 'the whole imagination', 'that form of complete consciousness in which predominates the intuitive awareness of forms, images, the *physical* awareness' ('Introduction to These Paintings' 212, 207, emphasis in original).

[33] Hereafter 'CD'.

[34] Several art historians have commented on Cézanne's ability to imbue his figures with life and mobility, while simultaneously creating an 'appley' effect. Susan Sidlauskas, for example, argues that Cézanne did not reify his human models but rather 'injected a capacity for near-human empathy and response into everything he painted', including nonhuman entities (n.p.). Susan Sidlauskas. 'Emotion, Color, Cézanne (The Portraits of Hortense).' *Nineteenth Century Art Worldwide*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2004, 19thc-artworldwide.org/autumn04/67-autumn04/autumn04article/299-emotion-color-cezanne-the-portraits-of-hortense. Accessed 26 August 2018.

A genuine appreciation of Cézanne's art presupposes the beholder's bodily-affective approach, or as Lawrence put it in 'Art and Morality' (1925), seeing 'with your blood and your bones, as well as with your eyes' (167). Lawrence's view was shared by some of his fellow writers too. The Austrian poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1875–1926), for example, wrote how Madame Cézanne's figure can be truly apprehended only in the blood: 'my blood describes it within me, but the naming of it passes by somewhere outside and is not called in' (70). Since Lawrence felt attracted to Cézanne's paintings due to their depiction of bodily matter, he vehemently rejected any interpretation of Cézanne's art as purely abstract, focusing exclusively on geometrical forms and spatial structure. Lawrence partly wrote his essay 'Introduction to These Paintings'[35] as a critique of Clive Bell's and Roger Fry's interpretation of Post-Impressionism, and importantly, their introduction of the term 'significant form'.[36] Bell defined the concept as 'a combination of lines, or of lines and colours, that moves me aesthetically', and considered Cézanne's art a perfect example of how 'significant form' awakens aesthetic emotions in the beholder (12). In 'Introduction to These Paintings' Lawrence accuses 'the critics' of having turned Cézanne's apples into abstractions: 'Then [they] stepped forth and abstracted his good apple into Significant Form […]' (203). Lawrence harshly critiques the Post-Impressionists' reliance on 'Significant Form', which he considers a mannered abstraction without essence, a shadowy replica of palpable, living substance. In a passionately aggressive attack, he calls certain modernist painters, such as Henri Matisse and Maurice de Vlaminck, 'shadows, minds mountebanking and playing charades on canvas', while art critics appreciating the mentioned painters' art are 'enlightened corpses of connoisseurs' (204).[37]

It is not coincidental that Lawrence reproached Bell and Fry for turning Cézanne's apples into abstractions. For Lawrence, the apples represent the

[35] Hereafter 'ITP'.

[36] In a 1928 letter to S. S. Koteliansky, Lawrence asked his friend to send him a copy of Roger Fry's book on Cézanne. Lawrence then added: 'It would make a good starting point for me to write a good peppery foreword against all that significant form piffle' (*Letters* 7: 82). A few weeks later, in January 1929, Lawrence wrote to Kot again, telling him that he had finished his essay on Cézanne, in which '[I have] slain Clive Bell. […] What a fool Clive Bell is!' (*Letters* 7: 125).

[37] Lawrence's allegedly straightforward dismissal of Bloomsbury art critics' celebration of abstract form, however, can be misleading. As Anne Fernihough argues, Lawrence's and Fry's writings on Cézanne show at least as many similarities as disagreements, and Lawrence was probably more influenced by Fry's criticism than the former admitted in 'Introduction to These Paintings' (117–129). Anne Fernihough. *D. H. Lawrence: Aesthetics and Ideology*. Oxford University Press, 1993.

hallmark of Cézanne's art: instead of lecturing the viewer about the painting's geometrical composition, they confer a sense of tangibility, almost prompting the beholder to stretch out and grasp them. This mysterious sensuousness of the apples has the power to arrest the viewer, who turns his/her bodily-affective attention to the work of art. However, the tangibility of apples is far from being realistically restrictive: the fruit do not create the impression of being rigidly fixed within the borders of the picture. Rather, Cézanne achieves an effect of dynamism as though the apples were engaged in a sympathetic interaction with each other. Cézanne's refusal to pin down the "identity" of apples fascinated Lawrence, and the latter applied what he called the subject's 'appley' nature to Cézanne's portraits too ('ITP' 212).

In 'Introduction' Lawrence quotes the French painter's notorious words – 'Be an apple!' – which the latter allegedly told his models when they failed to sit still. Lawrence interprets this imperative in a way that chimes with his own literary aesthetics:

> It is the appleyness of the portrait of Cézanne's wife that makes it so permanently interesting: the appleyness, which carries with it also the feeling of knowing the other side as well, the side you don't see, the hidden side of the moon. For the intuitive apperception of the apple is so *tangibly* aware of the apple that it is aware of it *all round*, not only just of the front. The eye sees only fronts, and the mind, on the whole, is satisfied with fronts. But intuition needs all-aroundness, and instinct needs insideness. The true imagination is for ever curving round to the other side, to the back of presented appearance. (212, emphasis in original)

Lawrence admired Cézanne's ability to capture the mysterious, unseen 'appleyness' of his models, that not-easily-grasped dimension which cannot be directly conveyed through conventional visual techniques. According to Lawrence, the essence of human character lies precisely in that part of the subject's being which is only partially captured through sight and rationality. The 'appley' nature of the other is revealed only if one approaches him/her intuitively, with a tangible-physical awareness, an affective, 'all round' attention to the hidden, invisible parts of his/her bodily existence. As both Lawrence and Merleau-Ponty suggest, Cézanne's portraits succeed in awakening and retaining the

beholder's attention because instead of offering a straightforward insight into the subject's mind, they direct the viewer's tactile-visual awareness to the indistinctly visible. By refusing to provide clear answers, or to borrow Merleau-Ponty's words quoted earlier, by 'suspend[ing] habits of thought', Cézanne's portraits expose the 'appleyness' of the models, whose existence cannot be pinned down to a particular idea or feeling but remains open to a multitude of interpretative possibilities.

Lawrence's intuitive reading of Cézanne has been recently corroborated by the infrared reflectograms of the paintings. Similarly to X-radiography, infrared reflectography is a technique that allows art historians to examine different paint layers and better understand the technical composition of a painting. Underlining Lawrence's interpretation, Dita Amory suggests that the infrared reflectogram of *Madame Cézanne in the Conservatory* (1891) shows how Cézanne 'was concerned primarily with the placement of the figure, but rather than definitive contours, he drew, very freely, multiple lines – zones of possibility – that allowed him to keep his options open and gradually home in on contours as he applied color' (49). Lawrence tries to capture Cézanne's ability to create 'zones of possibility' in the concept of 'appleyness', on which he elaborated in detail in 'Introduction to These Paintings' and 'Art and Morality'.

In order to better grasp Lawrence's understanding of humans' 'appley' nature, it is important to briefly return to his earlier essay 'Art and Morality', in which he contemplated the artistic value of Cézanne's still lifes. The French painter's apples represent the opposite of what Lawrence calls the 'All-seeing Eye', a form of conscious vision that separates figures from other figures and the background, thus making 'each man […] an identity, an isolated absolute […] a Kodak snap, in a universal film of snaps' (165). Cézanne's apples, are not realistic in the sense that, in Lawrence's view, a snapshot is, but rather they encapsulate a plethora of reading possibilities: '[s]ometimes they're a sin, sometimes they're a knock on the head, sometimes they're a bellyache, sometimes they're part of a pie, sometimes they're sauce for the goose' (166). In other words, the 'unsteady' nature of the fruit allows for the unfolding of their multifaceted existence, ungraspable through conscious sight, or the movements of the 'All-seeing Eye' (166). As such, Lawrence was drawn to the French painter's works due to their resistance to let themselves be rigidly nailed down.

In ‘Introduction to These Paintings’ Lawrence identifies as one of his favourite paintings the portrait of Madame Cézanne in a red dress because he considers it a perfect illustration of the principle of ‘appleyness’ (212). In Lawrence’s opinion, Cézanne made the hands and face of his figures – including his wife – ‘rudimentary’ ‘because if he had painted them in fully they would have been cliché’ (212). Lawrence’s appreciation of the Madame Cézanne portraits stems from their ‘rudimentary’ and blurred qualities, which subtly hint at the unseen and unknown aspects of her personality without unambiguously exposing them to clear light. During his life, Cézanne painted at least twenty-nine portraits of his wife, Hortense Fiquet (1850–1922), in several of which Madame Cézanne wears a red dress (Amory 3). In his essay Lawrence does not specify which portrait he has in mind, but two of the most famous paintings he probably knew were *Madame Cézanne in a Red Dress* (1888–90, currently held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) and *Madame Cézanne in a Yellow Chair* (1888–1890, currently held at the Art Institute of Chicago). A detailed analysis of these art works goes beyond the scope of this chapter, but a brief glance on the second portrait is important insofar it illuminates Lawrence’s literary aesthetics.

In *Madame Cézanne in a Yellow Chair*, Hortense sits in a chair in a long red dress, with her hands joined and her eyes slightly averted. One of the first things that strike the viewer is her perfect oval-shaped face, which almost creates the impression of being sculpted, its surface smoothed, excluding any irregularities. This technique, however, does not result in a minutely detailed, realist representation. The peculiarity of the woman’s face comes partly from its fragmentariness: the distorted quality of her eyes and mouth, and the strange illusory absence of her left ear, which render her persona mysterious, making the beholder continuously reappraise his/her abilities to capture the painted figure’s inner world.

At a first glance, the ‘appley’ and statuesque face of Madame Cézanne might seem rigid and impenetrable, devoid of any identifiable thoughts and feelings. Nevertheless, what Lawrence found fascinating in the portrait is precisely Cézanne’s ability to soften hard borders, and reveal the interrelatedness of human and nonhuman shapes.[38] Although the viewer sees

[38] Cézanne’s biographer, Alex Danchev also notes that the artist’s tendency to paint his models’ heads like apples, does not necessarily suggest a desire for objectification or lack of emotion; on the contrary, it can be interpreted as a sign of love: ‘everyone [Cézanne] loved is associated with fruit, sooner or later’ (158). Alex Danchev. *Cézanne: A Life*. Profile Books, 2012.

only a fragmentary part of Hortense's complexion, the woman's body creates an impression, to appropriate Lawrence's phrase, of 'all-aroundness'. The oval-shaped outlines of the face do not seal off an unreachable, hidden mind but they rather open up the body's boundaries to the domestic environment in which the subject's corporeal existence is already imbricated. We cannot visually grasp the woman's topknot, left ear or nape but we are intuitively aware of their existence, their interlacing with the colours of the background, just as the front of her body forms a soft-hued prolongation of her surroundings. The 'grey-blue greenness' of the wall (as Fry put it) is reflected in her eyes, neck and fingers but also in the folds of her dress and in the abstract motifs of the chair (Fry, *Letters* 2: 465). Furthermore, the red shades of her dress appear on her cheek, the yellow tints of the chair can be detected in her eyebrows and forehead, and the brown line in the wall is painted with the same colour as her hair. Cézanne's mastery of colour creates an effect of firmly soft solidity: although different shapes can be relatively clearly delineated in the painting, their contours are not rigidly fixed but retain a great degree of flexibility, which in turn transmits a sense of malleability to the viewer him/herself. This kind of plasticity is what Lawrence called the 'appleyness' of Madame Cézanne, which invites the beholder's bodily response to the work of art. As Lawrence formulates, a genuine appreciation of Madame Cézanne's portrait presupposes the viewer's 'physical awareness', a form of 'true imagination' through which one does not pin down the object of perception with a fixing gaze but rather caressingly envelops it with an exploring look. Lawrence's 'true' or 'whole' imagination can be defined as a bodily-intuitive attention that transcends the limitations of rational sight by being able to 'curve round to the other side' and reveal the 'back of presented appearance': the hidden parts of the subject's existence.

Lawrence did not dwell too much on the use of colour in the Madame Cézanne portrait, but he observed the intricate interrelatedness of subject and environment, which he attributed to Cézanne's ability to create a harmony of movement and rest, 'to make the human form, the life form, come to rest. Not static – on the contrary. Mobile but come to rest. And at the same time he set the unmoving material world into motion. Walls twitch and slide, chairs bend or rear up a little, cloths curl like burning paper.' ('ITP' 213) In other words, Lawrence suggests that in Cézanne's portraits human figures are not artificially separated from the background but they are interlaced with their environment in a way that

they almost represent an extension of their surroundings. Humans exist in a mutually formative relationship with non-living entities: subjects incorporate the stillness of objects while the latter acquire a lively quality, which is then (re-)transmitted to human figures in an infinite cycle of interactions, or as Rilke famously put it: '[i]t's as if every part were aware of all others' in Cézanne's paintings (71). The sense of consciousness Rilke mentions is not a rational phenomenon but is closer to what Lawrence called the 'physical awareness', a form of sensuous perception that creates space for sympathetic coexistence. Merleau-Ponty also notices the dynamic aspect of Cézanne's paintings in which the world becomes 'a system of colors across which the receding perspective, the outlines, angles, and curves are inscribed like lines of force; the spatial structure vibrates as it is formed' ('CD' 65). This vibratory quality allows for a dynamic interaction between figure and background, which can no longer be unequivocally separated but become interwoven in the intricate tapestry of sympathy.

In Lawrence's and Merleau-Ponty's interpretation, Cézanne refused to view human figures and objects as rigidly solid and fixed entities; instead, he wished to capture them in the act of becoming, in their dynamic interweaving in the phenomenal flesh of the world. As Lawrence put it, Cézanne had an 'intuitive feeling that nothing is really *statically* at rest […] as when he watched the lemons shrivel or go mildewed, in his still-life group, which he left lying there so long so that he *could* see the gradual flux of change […] ('ITP' 213–4, emphasis in original). Cézanne believed that the artist's aim is to capture what Lawrence called in 'Art and Morality' the 'intertwining flux' (167), a sense of dynamism that appertains neither strictly to the object of perception nor to the sensing subject but is born in the interaction between self and world, or to appropriate Merleau-Ponty's words, in an 'inter-world where I make as much room for the other as I do for myself' (*PP* 373). Commenting on his own landscape paintings, Cézanne said: '[T]he earth [in Provence] always has a vibrant quality, a sharpness which makes the light tremble and the eyes flicker, but feel how subtle, how soft it is' (Gasquet 160). The 'vibrant quality' represents a characteristic of the earth but at the same time it belongs to the perceiving subject, whose eyes start to 'flicker' as an act of response to the spectacle. In *The Visible and the Invisible* Merleau-Ponty describes the subject's rapport with the universe in terms of vibration:

> [M]y movements and the movements of my eyes make the world vibrate – as one rocks a dolmen with one's finger without disturbing its fundamental solidity. With each flutter of my eye-lashes a curtain lowers and rises, though I do not think for an instant of imputing this eclipse to the things themselves; with each movement of my eyes that sweep the space before me the things suffer a brief torsion, which I also ascribe to myself […]. (*VI* 7)

On a first reading it might seem that Merleau-Ponty's idea is a reverse formulation of Cézanne's: the philosopher seems to suggest that the world's vibration is actually a consequence of the perceiver's eye movements. However, one can detect a slight hesitation in Merleau-Ponty's argument. While he attributes objects' mobility to the subject's blinking gesture, at the same time he acknowledges the impossibility of identifying the precise origin of vibration: things become distorted in front of the flickering eyes but the subject's stability is also shaken in the act of perception. Lawrence's and Merleau-Ponty's fascination with Cézanne thus stems partly from the painter's ability to capture the vibratory existence of his object matter while simultaneously showing how this sense of dynamism is neither the inherent property of the thing nor the projection of the viewer's gaze, but rather a phenomenon dependent on the intercorporeal coexistence of beholder and world. The emphasis falls on the word 'intercorporeal', suggesting how Cézanne himself and his later admirers, among them Lawrence and Merleau-Ponty, thought that both the creation and interpretation of art transcend the realm of conventional forms of seeing. As art critic Jonathan Crary argues, Cézanne's work 'coincides with much more than a domain of the optical. […] [The painter] became attentive to the body, its pulsings, its temporalities, and to the intersection of that body with a world of transitions, of events and of becoming' (289). Lawrence formulates a similar idea in 'Art and Morality', where he emphasises the non-visual (or at least non-conventionally visual) merits of Cézanne's *oeuvre*, drawing a contrast between Cézanne's art and humans' condemnable 'habit' of 'visualizing *everything*' (165, emphasis in original):

> Each man to himself is a picture. That is, he is a complete little objective reality, complete in himself, existing by himself, absolutely, in the middle of the picture. All the rest is just setting, background. To every man, to every

> woman, the universe is just a setting to the absolute little picture of himself, herself. (165)

What Cézanne's later critics, Lawrence, Merleau-Ponty and Crary, appreciate, is the painter's ability to 'disclose the provisional and fluid nature of visual experience' through the distortive flickering of the glancing eye, rather than through sharpness and clarity associated with the fixed, unmoving eye (Crary 300). Cézanne's art questions Western metaphysical definitions of sight as a source of objective, infallible knowledge; instead, his *oeuvre* (especially his later works) activates the phenomenological gaze: the movements of the flexible eyes that do not stare at the object of perception, trying to freeze it, but rather, to borrow Merleau-Ponty's beloved word, envelop the other, 'curving round to the other side' and unveiling the concealed parts unavailable to conventional vision. In Lawrence's opinion, Cézanne achieves this effect through revealing the 'appley' nature of his figures: their soft solidity that allows for their intimate imbrication in the flesh of the world.

Nevertheless, an examination of Lawrence's views on Cézanne would be incomplete without briefly elaborating on the writer's tendency to present Cézanne as a 'primitive' painter. Lawrence's repeated emphasis on the intuitive and physical nature of the painter's works, and more importantly the sharp contrast he draws between Cézanne's and other Post-Impressionists' *oeuvre*, pose some problematic questions. As already mentioned, in 'Introduction to These Paintings' Lawrence accuses Matisse and Vlaminck of creating dead shadows, formal abstractions without any bodily essence. Cézanne, on the other hand, chose to 'draw' differently not because he did not understand anything 'about drawing or significant form or aesthetic ecstasy [but because] he didn't give a spit for them' (206). In Lawrence's interpretation, Cézanne became a great artist when he abandoned the struggle between mental-rational and bodily consciousness, which characterised the initial phase of his career, and embraced the physical and sensual qualities of life (206–7). As such, Cézanne showed 'honesty', while Matisse was nothing more than 'a clever mental creature' who 'prostitute[d] [his] body to [his] mind' (207).

The contrast Lawrence makes between Cézanne and his fellow painters, however, is not only untenable but also runs the risk of offering a highly subjective, and partially falsified portrait of the French artist. Cézanne, after all,

was heavily influenced by Post-Impressionism, and as several art historians have argued, he did 'give a spit' for formal qualities and technical accuracy. The infrared reflectograms of his paintings reveal his preoccupation with geometrical shapes, and though his paintings contain unfinished spaces, or to borrow Amory's phrase, 'zones of possibilities', the composition of his works – from the arrangement of apples to the position of Madame Cézanne's eyes – suggests a conscious, and indeed measured, artistic choice. Charlotte Hale, who has examined the portraits of Madame Cézanne in detail, claims that Cézanne had a habit of going back to certain details on the painting after the paint had dried, and the model was no longer present (qtd. in Elderfield 133, 136).[39] Furthermore, a close look at the artist's sketchbooks shows that he was a conscious draftsman who did indeed utilise his academic training (in drawing) when planning his paintings (Shelley 109). Ultimately, by locating Cézanne in an anti-Post-Impressionist canon, Lawrence risks neglecting the cultural context from which the painter emerged and which determined his artistic development. By trying to save Cézanne from 'ready-known cliché[s]', Lawrence, at times, ignores certain aspects of the painter's art, while celebrating others, in order to make them fit his own literary aesthetics of physical sympathy ('ITP' 212). In *Sketches of Etruscan Places*, written roughly in the same years as his Cézanne-essays, Lawrence elaborates on an artistic theory that resembles his reading of Cézanne in many ways. In *Sketches*, however, Lawrence paid a more careful attention to the historical-cultural context in which the Etruscan cave frescoes were painted. This, to an extent, proved to be a more suitable task for Lawrence because the Etruscan paintings were literally created in a pre-modern period, an era that Lawrence associated with cosmic sympathy: humans' harmonious bodily coexistence with the universe.

Towards 'complete vision': *Sketches of Etruscan Places*

As Simonetta de Filippis remarks in her introduction to *Sketches of Etruscan Places*, Lawrence's interest in Etruscan culture dates back to his early twenties, when he immersed in books such as Honoré de Balzac's *The Magic Skin* (1831) and James G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890–1915) (de Filippis xxiii).

[39] The exhibition catalogue to which Elderfield refers, is Charlotte Hale. 'A Template for Experimentation.' *Madame Cézanne*. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 2014–2015.

However, Lawrence started to consider writing a book on the Etruscans only in 1926, when he was staying in Italy, and planned to visit the archeological remnants of Etruria (de Filippis xxiii). Due to health reasons and his preoccupation with *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (he was working on the first and second drafts), he was forced to postpone his trip, but when he finally had the opportunity to admire the Etruscan cave frescoes, he became fascinated with Etruscan art, which he viewed as a perfect illustration of his ideas of embodied sympathy:

> The subtlety of etruscan [sic] painting, as of Chinese and Hindu, lies in the wonderfully suggestive *edge* of the figures. It is not outlined. It is not what we call 'drawing.' It is the flowing contour where the body suddenly leaves off, upon the atmosphere. […] There is actually no modelling. The figures are painted in flat. Yet they seem of a full, almost turgid muscularity. It is only when we come to the late Tomb of Typhon that we have the figure *modelled*, Pompeian style, with light and shade. (123–124, emphasis in original)

Lawrence preferred the frescoes of earlier periods, in which he detected an organic and harmonious relationship between figure and background, in contrast with the 'modelled' paintings, heavily influenced by the Roman style. What is more, he made an evident link between Roman culture and military violence, more precisely fascism that started to gain power at the time. He resented the fact that the original name of the Etruscan town Corneto-Tarquinia was changed by the Fascists into Tarquinia, to reflect the Roman origins of Italy: on the plaque located on the city gateway one can see the 'Latinised etruscan [sic]' name 'Tarquinia', 'put up by the Fascist power to name and unname' (31). At the same time, it is important to mention that Lawrence's wish to establish a contrast between the Etruscan and Roman styles, led to an arbitrary and somewhat falsified presentation of Etruscan art. As David Ellis argues, Lawrence tends to ignore certain aspects of Etruscan civilisation, such as their cruel treatment of slaves. Ellis notes how Lawrence ignores historical facts that proved the violent nature of the Etruscans, such as 'a painting in one of the tombs, which shows a man with a sack over his head being attacked by a dog held on a leash' (352).

Similarly to his reading of Cézanne, Lawrence neglects facts that did not suit his goals, and magnified those characteristics that justified his own perspective.

Despite its highly subjective nature, *Sketches* nevertheless remains an important text in helping critics to gain a better understanding of Lawrence's literary aesthetics. Lawrence set against the Romans' aggressive form of memorialisation and racial supremacy the Etruscans' ability to exist in a common 'blood-stream' with the universe (124). The 'small, dainty, fragile, and evanescent' 'wooden temples' and frescoes of the Etruscans, with their 'freely-modelled' figures, 'gay dancing creatures, rows of ducks […] and faces grinning and putting out a big tongue' preserve the 'fluid and changing' quality of life more authentically than the 'heavy monuments' of the Romans (32). Therefore, the Etruscans' artistic achievement 'is a task surely more worthy […] than conquering the world or sacrificing the self or saving the immortal soul' (33). Lawrence showed an acute sensibility for the fragility and ephemerality of human life, which, in his opinion, the Etruscans rendered masterfully in their cave paintings, statuettes and buildings, ultimately, in the 'things that are alive and flexible, which won't last too long and become an obstruction and a weariness' (33).

At the same time, Lawrence's antipathy for the Romans nods back to his earlier ideas about an evolutionary approach to art history, as put forward by Riegl. In Lawrence's view, the 'primitive' style of the Etruscans and Egyptians, based on universal tactile contact rather than rational vision, is far more authentic and easier to sympathise with than the allegedly more sophisticated artworks created by the Greeks and Romans.[40] All the things Lawrence appreciates in twentieth-century Italy (at least his own version of Italy) originated from Etruscan culture, which he considers the opposite of an oppressive, violent regime, epitomised by the Romans:

> Because the Roman took the life out of the Etruscan, was he therefore greater than the Etruscan? Not he! Rome fell, and the Roman phenomenon with it. Italy today is far more etruscan [sic] in its pulse, than

[40] Lawrence believed that Etruscan art, similarly to Egyptian culture, evoked the sense of touch. He considered the banquet scene in the Tomb of the Painted Vases as a perfect illustration of the 'slow flow of touch': 'Rather gentle and lovely is the way [the man] touches the woman under the chin, with a delicate caress. That again is one of the charms of the etruscan [sic] paintings: they really have the sense of touch; the people and the creatures are all really in touch. […] Here, in this faded etruscan [sic] painting, there is a quiet flow of touch that unites the man and the woman on the couch, the timid boy behind, the dog that lifts his nose, even the very garlands that hang from the wall' (54).

> Roman: and will always be so. The etruscan [sic] element is like the grass of the field and the sprouting of corn, in Italy: it will always be so. Why try to revert to the Latin-Roman mechanism and suppression? (36)

The image of the growing grass and sprouting corn suggests a sense of regeneration, corroborated by the repetition of the phrase 'it will always be so'. The cornfield evoked in *Sketches* differs strikingly from the apocalyptic image of the 'corn-clad hills' in 'With the Guns', where the 'iron' soldiers create a dark mass of abstraction totally incompatible with the golden hill, the 'beautiful blue sky' and 'white clouds from the mountains' (*Twilight in Italy* 81).

Furthermore, as de Filippis briefly mentions, Lawrence's view of Etruria owes much to Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, especially to chapter IX, entitled 'The Worship of Trees' (xxiii). Indeed, in this section Frazer elaborates on the sacred significance of trees for different nations, and at the beginning of the chapter he mentions how a Roman general led his troops in the previously unexplored forest separating Rome from central Etruria: 'it was deemed a most daring feat when a Roman general, after sending two scouts to explore its intricacies, led his army into the forest and, making his way to a ridge of the wooded mountains, looked down on the rich Etrurian fields spread out below' (8). There is a sense of violence in this passage, as though the Roman general committed sacrilege by literally invading the forest and then looking down on the fertile Etruscan fields from the top of a mountain, with the evident desire of conquering them. As such, the general bears a slight resemblance to the officer in 'With the Guns', 'perched up' on the top of the steps and staring at the abstract mass of soldiers through a 'spy-glass'. In *Sketches* Lawrence formulates his evident rejection of military suppression in general, and more particularly his implicit critique of the Fascist Party and its glorification of Roman heritage. Instead, he believes that modern humans should (at least partially) embrace the preconscious harmony that characterised many ancient civilisations, such as the Etruscan and Egyptian.

Indeed, we can see a striking resemblance between Lawrence's views on Etruscan and Egyptian art.[41] As Abbie Garrington observes, in Lawrence's

[41] In *Sketches* Lawrence drew explicit parallels between the two civilisations. He likened a tumulus at Cerveteri to an Egyptian tomb: 'Beyond again is a rock doorway, rather narrow, and narrowing upwards, like Egypt. The whole thing suggests Egypt […]' (17). Later, Lawrence described his visit in a tumulus at Vulci as 'burrowing inside some ancient pyramid', literally groping his way in the cave dimly lit by the guide's flickering candle (150–1).

writings, the ‘hieroglyphic way of seeing’ becomes ‘quintessentially haptic, given the conflation of figure and ground offered by Egyptian depictions that do not contain shadow or foreshortening, and therefore invite the touch’ (157). Following in the footsteps of Riegl, Lawrence associates techniques such as shadowing and foreshortening with the mental and ocularcentric art of the classical Greek and Renaissance periods, which ‘crucified’ the ‘procreative body for the glorification of the spirit, the mental consciousness’ (‘ITP’ 203). Lawrence considers Plato ‘an arch-priest of this crucifixion’, as the latter’s cave allegory transformed palpable matter into mere shadowy abstraction, thus making the world a ‘wide tomb full of ghosts, replicas’ (203). Partly distorting Plato’s original idea, Lawrence formulates an idiosyncratic definition of the notion of shadow: ‘[B]y shadow I mean idea, concept, the abstracted reality, the ego. We are not solid. We don’t live in the flesh.’ (203) For Lawrence, ‘liv[ing] in the flesh’ means a state of bodily-sensuous immersion in the surrounding world, which is best represented in ‘primitive’ arts that require a sort of hieroglyphic vision.

As Garrington also notes, Lawrence draws a parallel between the hieroglyphic sight of ancient civilisations and the intuitive perception of the child: ‘When a child sees a man, what does the child *take in* […]? Two eyes, a nose, a mouth of teeth, two straight legs, two straight arms: a sort of hieroglyph which the human child has used through all ages to represent man’ (‘Art and Morality’ 164, emphasis in original). For Lawrence, the flat, two-dimensional stick man figures drawn by Egyptians and Etruscans illustrate the organic bodily harmony humans established with their environment: a form of coexistence in which the human ego did not occupy a position of dominance. Instead, the ‘flowing contour’ of the flat silhouettes allowed for the subject’s sensuous intertwining with the world, without annihilating his/her individual borders. In Etruscan paintings, ‘things appeared alive […] in the dusk of contact with all things’, yet at the same time, ‘each thing had a clear outline’ and was related to other entities in a common ‘blood-stream’, ‘unbroken, yet storming with oppositions and contradictions’ (*Sketches* 124, 125). The phrase ‘dusk of contact with all things’ recalls Ursula’s experience in ‘Excurse’, when gently enveloped in the fading luminosity of the twilight, she immerses in the flesh of the world.

Lawrence’s depiction of the Etruscan frescoes echoes his ideas on Cézanne’s portraits formulated in ‘Introduction to These Painting’ and ‘Art and Morality’. The ‘suggestive edge[s]’ of the Etruscan figures recall the softly blurred

outlines of Madame Cézanne's body, which appears as a continuous prolongation of the pictorial background. Furthermore, in *Sketches* Lawrence defines 'the dusk of contact' as an emotional 'fusing' of 'mentally contradictory' things, 'so that a lion could be at the same moment also a goat, and not a goat', in a similar vein as Cézanne's apples could represent 'sometimes […] a sin, sometimes […] a knock on the head' or a 'bellyache' (*Sketches* 124; 'Art and Morality' 166). The impossibility of pinning down the identity of the 'thing' with exactness, however, is not an artistic flaw, but just as in Cézanne's still lifes and portraits, imprecision suggests the subject's multifaceted nature and allows the viewer's greater interpretative freedom. As Wallace succinctly puts it: what is at stake in *Sketches* 'is the ability to think the human in terms of multiplicity and synchronicity, to reconsider organicism not as wholeness but as an "unthinkable" agglomeration of contradictory states which together constitute only a "potential"' (189). What Lawrence calls in 'Introduction to These Paintings' Madame Cézanne's 'appleyness', appears in *Sketches* as the 'horsiness' of the Etruscan horse, admired by Lawrence during his visit in The Tomb of the Baron (510–500 B.C.):

> What is it that a man sees, when he looks at a horse? […] For a man who sees not as a camera does when it takes a snapshot, not even as a cinema-camera, taking its succession of instantaneous snaps; but in a curious rolling flood of vision […]. [T]he camera can neither feel the heat of the horse, his strange body; nor smell his horsiness; nor hear him neigh. […] The eye really 'sees' all this. It is the complete vision of a child, full and potent. But this potent vision in us is maimed and pruned as we grow up […]. (127–128)

As in his musings on Cézanne, in *Sketches* Lawrences advocates an alternative vision, a kind of perception that differs significantly from the realistic 'camera vision' that sees things '*as they are*' (*Sketches* 127, emphasis in original). The cold and rigid camera-eye is unable to register the 'horsiness' of the horse, which cannot be simply defined as the mere sum of visual impulses but consists of an amalgamation of sensorial attributes, requiring the activation of touch, smell and hearing alike. The traces of this 'complete vision' which, Lawrence deemed, modern humans have lost, can be found in the child's way of looking at the world

as well in the cultural artifacts of certain pre-modern civilisations. At the same time, Lawrence's emphasis on 'complete vision' draws attention to the importance of sight in artistic (and interpersonal) sympathy. Undoubtedly, Lawrence continued to dismiss sharp visual clarity, but in contrast with the uniform Egyptian darkness advocated earlier in *Women in Love*, in *Sketches* his attention turned towards the partially dim, semi-luminous atmosphere surrounding the frescoes. He considered the sight of figures (as mere imitations of reality) insufficient for a genuine artistic experience, but he also realised that total obscurity curtails the very possibility of the viewer's emotional response. The artistic value of the Etruscan frescoes lies in their ability to reveal how things are 'alive […] in the dusk of contact with all things', a state of half-luminosity in which silhouettes do not merge into an indistinguishable mass of darkness but retain their softly drawn individual borders.

In order to truly appreciate Etruscan art and Cézanne's paintings, Lawrence suggests, it is not enough to visually interpret the interplay of forms and colours, or what Bloomsbury art critics called 'significant form'. Instead, the fixed and rigid eye needs to acquire a sense of softness and flexibility, qualities which result in a form of tender vision that is capable of enveloping the object of perception, revealing not only the front but also the 'back of presented appearance'. This kind of sight (similar to Merleau-Ponty's concept of binocular vision) represents the opposite of rational, sharp focalisation that is unable to perceive figure and background in unity, instead it emphasises the centrality of the (human) subject, which becomes a symbol of dominance for Lawrence. As he puts it in 'Art and Morality': the human figure becomes 'a complete little objective reality […] in the middle of the picture. All the rest is just setting […]' (165). Lawrence's artistic vision is close to Noël Carroll's concept of emotional attention.[42] The kind of attention advocated by Carroll can be described as a process of sympathetic selection, which does not place one figure above or in front of the other, but while collecting all details into 'significant wholes' (in the sense of 'potentials', as Wallace puts it), it preserves their individual boundaries: 'The emotions operate like a searchlight, foregrounding […] details in a special phenomenological glow' (226). The 'phenomenological glow' of the searchlight

[42] Martin uses Carroll's quotation to show the contradiction between emotional attention and 'the monotonous surface of *The Plumed Serpent*' (179).

does not fall sharply on one privileged detail but rather embraces the figures in a semi-luminous halo, the 'widening circle' of sympathy.

Lawrence knew well what it meant to explore paintings under the dim glow of a 'searchlight'. His beloved Etruscan frescoes were painted on the walls of subterranean tombs that could be visited with a guide, who used an acetylene lamp to light the way (*Sketches* 44). Lawrence described his encounter with the first fresco in the Tomb of Hunting and Fishing as a softly luminous experience, devoid of sharp clarity not only due to the absence of daylight but also because of the damaging effects of time. However, the marks of the 'paleness of time' (45) do not hinder the viewer in appreciating the artwork; on the contrary, they facilitate a deeper response by activating 'complete vision': a complex bodily reaction characterised by an amalgamation of various sense perceptions. Indeed, Lawrence depicted the acetylene lamp as an object that activates not only sight but smell too: '[t]he lamp begins to shine and smell' (*Sketches* 44). Furthermore, acetylene lamps (or carbide lamps) were also known to produce heat, and were used by cavers and miners to prevent hypothermia (Matthews 30). As such, besides sight and smell, the lamp also presupposed the sense of tactility. At the same time, the type of carbide lamps used in caves, had a reflector behind the flame, which made the light cast in a semi-circle, improving peripheral vision, instead of sharply directing the rays onto a specific point in space, creating thus the perfect ambience for a whole-body, sympathetic exploration.[43]

Lawrence's 'widening circle' of sympathy, though never devoid of contradictions and conflicts, achieves its full roundness in *Sketches*. In his musings on Etruscan art, Lawrence formulates a theory of fellow feeling based on the harmonious and sensuous coexistence of humans and the universe, a form of proximity he identified in pre-modern cultures. Though his celebration of 'primitive' darkness remains present in *Sketches*, a faint beam of light starts to make its way into the text, softly illuminating the frescoes surrounded by the 'paleness of time'. Virginia Woolf, the central figure of the next chapter, will expand on Lawrence's ideas of semi-luminosity, showing the importance of half-light in interpersonal and aesthetic sympathy. However, Woolf draws attention to the significance of shadows, which, in contrast with Lawrence, she does not view as mental abstractions but soft shapes imbued with colour and physical

[43] For further details on the operating mechanism of the acetylene lamp, see: www.americanhistory.si.edu/collections/search/object/nmah_872185.

substance, capable of, even if only partially, restoring harmony and bringing solace.

Virginia Woolf: 'the manner of our seeing'

> It is thus that we live, they say, driven by an unseizable force. They say that the novelists never catch it; that it goes hurtling through their nets and leaves them torn to ribbons. This, they say, is what we live by – this unseizable force. (137)

The often-cited quotation from Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room* (1922) is fraught with references to tactile failure: 'unseizable', 'never catch it'; 'goes hurtling through their nets'.[44] Indeed, Woolf's novel has often been either accused or praised for its abstract qualities such as the absence of a clear storyline and the disembodied nature of the protagonists. One of the first commentators of the novel, Leonard Woolf called the book a 'work of genius' but at the same time drew attention to the 'strange' ephemerality of characters which he described as 'ghosts […] puppets moved hither & thither by fate' (*Diary* 2: 186). As Woolf records in the same diary entry, her husband 'doesn't agree that fate works in this way' (186). However, while Leonard considered the novel Woolf's 'best work' so far, other reviewers were not unequivocally convinced by her literary innovations. W. L. Courtney, a reviewer for the *Daily Telegraph*, for instance, employed the same puppet-metaphor as Leonard Woolf, but in an undoubtedly pejorative sense: 'Mrs Woolf confidently chatters as though she were seated in an armchair playing with her puppets' (Majumdar and McLaurin 104). To associate Woolf with a puppeteer, as this chapter argues, falsifies the essence of her writing, which is grounded in her rejection of 'confident' 'playing with' others, a form of violent interaction closely linked to patriarchal and military logic.

[44] Hereafter *JR*.

Later critics have also observed the “uncatchable” nature of Jacob’s character, which resists the reader’s attempt to pin him down. Kathleen Wall identifies as one of the defining characteristics of the novel the narrator’s limited perspective, which can be noticed in the protagonist’s continuous absence, or what she calls the ‘Jacob-shaped hole’ of the narrative (306), while Alex Zwerdling calls Jacob a ‘classic instance of psychological inscrutability in fiction’ (62). All these metaphors – ghost, puppet, hole – underline Jacob’s elusive character, which, according to critics, continuously escapes the reader’s touch by retreating into immateriality.

In her introduction to *Jacob’s Room*, Sue Roe argues that the modernist novel, especially Woolf’s experimental works, have radically questioned the relationship between the longing subject and the object of desire: ‘If we cannot ever fully know ourselves, how could it ever be possible to possess another person? Desire is a striving for that which cannot be known; the object of desire constantly falls just outside the boundaries of the subject’s reach.’ (p. xxv). But does Jacob completely elude those wishing to capture him? This might be the case if we insist on using the term ‘desire’ when discussing interpersonal relationships in the novel. After all, desire means yearning for an unreachable object (as soon as it is grasped, even if only partially, it ceases to be desire). Nonetheless, if we opt for ‘sympathy’, we will find that in Woolf’s fiction human beings are not portrayed as infinitely opaque and impenetrable to each other. Sympathy, in the sense in which I have used it throughout this study, often contains elements of erotic yearning, but is not limited to these. The form of fellow feeling at the heart of this thesis is a nuanced, historically and culturally determined phenomenon that emerged in the modernist period, plagued by the major military conflicts of the twentieth century: the two world wars. Woolf, similarly to her fellow writers, Lawrence and Bowen, was deeply concerned with the possibilities of feeling for others after the wars as well as following a significant artistic shift in literature: the emergence of modernism as a partial reaction to earlier literary periods, such as the Edwardian period.

While working on *Jacob’s Room*, Woolf had strong reasons to turn against Edwardian writers, especially Arnold Bennett, who in 1920 published a series of essays under the title *Our Women*. In his collection Bennett argued that men possessed higher cognitive and creative capacities than women, and the latter could never reach male intellectual standards, despite their improved access to

education. Bennett's book was reviewed favourably by Affable Hawk (pseudonym for literary critic Desmond MacCarthy, 1877–1952) in the *New Statesman*, a fact that compelled Woolf to write an outraged letter to the editor of the newspaper. In this letter Woolf defended women's creativity, going back to Sappho, whom even Plato and Aristotle considered a great poetess (*New Statesman*, 9 October 1920, 15–16). Indeed, *Jacob's Room* abounds in references to ancient Greek culture, and Woolf uses Greek allusions (of statuary) to simultaneously critique male creativity – characterised by rigidity and hardness – and unveil the unrecognised artistic activity of a whole generation of interwar women, who provided a softer, more sympathetic way of modelling human nature in the aftermath of the First World War.

For Woolf, sympathetic character-making means an artistic approach that renders the other as finitely and fragmentarily knowable. Sympathy does by no means presuppose that one can gain complex knowledge about the other. On the contrary, the essence of fellow feeling lies in the impossibility of arbitrarily possessing the object of sympathy. Total ownership is a kind of violence firmly rejected by Woolf, but the inability to establish tangible intimacy is equally disregarded, a fact that has often been overlooked in Woolf criticism. As such, Woolf's characters are not mere ghosts (as Leonard Woolf suggested) or holes in the narrative fabric (as Wall remarked) but they can rather be considered 'hollows' in the phenomenological sense of the word.[45]

By reading Woolf's works in parallel with Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of sympathetic perception, this chapter explores what it means to feel for the living and fragile body, often exposed to violent forces beyond human control. Through tracing Woolf's artistic interests – that range from classical Greek statuary to

[45] Sarah Cole has gone so far as to suggest that *Jacob's Room* is infused with a sense of 'inhumanity' originating from the protagonist's unfinished nature: 'In setting him up for violent death, […] Woolf has built obliteration into his very being. At its most extreme, we might even say that the novel's formal proclivities, its construction of pattern and shapes […] is pitted against its humanity. To keep true to its vision of people as little bits of historical flotsam, the novel leaves its own creations empty, hollow.' (240) Cole's interpretation seems indeed 'extreme'. After all, *Jacob's Room*, as I will argue, is rather a novel of remembrance than obliteration; or to put it differently, a novel built of worn memory shards, carefully put together by the people who have once loved, despite only partially knowing, Jacob. Moreover, the novel's preoccupation with 'pattern and shapes' is not necessarily a sign of 'inhumanity' but rather a technique (partially influenced by Roger Fry's Post-Impressionist theories) that allowed Woolf to explore how the intricate coexistence of form and colour can trigger our sympathetic response. And finally, while people, especially soldiers, are indeed helplessly exposed to violent historical forces, human character in *Jacob's Room* is not always an empty hole but a hollow whose flexuous borders encircle softly its fragile contents. Sarah Cole. *At the Violet Hour: Modernism and Violence in England and Ireland*. Oxford University Press, 2012.

nineteenth-century photography and Post-Impressionism – I examine the possibilities and dangers of capturing human character in *Jacob's Room* and *To the Lighthouse* (1927).[46] For Woolf, at least in her 1920s novels, ideas about knowing human nature intertwine with acts of memorialising: narrator and characters alike are preoccupied with ways of memory preservation. By rejecting official forms of memorialisation (such as the erection of grandiose war monuments), Woolf advocates an alternative form of remembrance, which instead of glorifying either famous statesmen or anonymous masses, turns, with careful attention, to the individual contours of vulnerable and imperfect bodies.

'If I were a painter': Post-Impressionism and the phenomenology of touch

Merleau-Ponty's and Woolf's ideas about intimate coexistence elucidate each other on several levels. During a visit at the home of his friend, Timmy Durrant, Jacob meets his sister Clara, whose attraction is hard to resist. Jacob offers to help Clara pick grapes in the greenhouse, where, while holding the ladder for her, he is mesmerized by her ineffable beauty:

> 'There's another bunch higher up,' murmured Clara Durrant, mounting another step of the ladder. Jacob held the ladder as she stretched out to reach the grapes high up on the vine.
> 'There!' she said, cutting through the stalk. She looked semi-transparent, pale, wonderfully beautiful up there among the vine leaves and the yellow and purple bunches, the lights swimming over her in coloured islands. Geraniums and begonias stood in pots along planks; tomatoes climbed the walls.
> 'The leaves really want thinning,' she considered, and one green one, spread like the palm of a hand, circled down past Jacob's head. (51)

As he admires Clara among the ripe bunches of grapes, Jacob observes how she gradually becomes half-transparent, at once pale and inundated with the colours of nature. Her paleness acquires an almost ghostlike quality, an idea further corroborated by her actions, her mounting of the step, which renders her out of Jacob's reach. But Woolf, notoriously preoccupied with every single word

[46] Hereafter *TTL*.

written on the pages of her novels, is careful enough not to portray her female protagonist as a mere bodiless phantom.[47] Instead, the narrator emphasises the *semi*-transparency of Clara, who is not clearly see-able and easily graspable nor completely obscure and untouchable. Indeed, she is partly hidden by the hanging vine leaves and grapes but at the same time she becomes a prism, absorbing sunlight and emanating the colours of the rainbow that correspond to the hues present in her natural environment: yellow and purple (grapes), and green (leaves). Clara's depiction reminds the reader of a Post-Impressionist painting, an idea further corroborated by a passage in Woolf's unfinished memoir, 'Sketch of the Past' (1939–1940), in which she explicitly likens her writing activity to visual arts. After describing the recalling of childhood memories as a state of 'lying in a grape and seeing through a film of semi-transparent yellow', she continues:

> If I were a painter I should paint these first impressions in pale yellow, silver, and green. […] I should make a picture that was globular; semi-transparent. I should make a picture of curved petals; of shells; of things that were semi-transparent. I should make curved shapes, showing the light through, but not giving a clear outline. Everything would be large and dim; and what was seen would at the same time be heard […]. The sound seems to fall through an elastic, gummy air; which holds it up; which prevents it from being sharp and distinct. (79–80)

For Woolf, the idea of semi-translucency is closely bound up with blurred shapes that absorb and diffuse light without allowing the gaze to draw their clear outlines. Moreover, Woolf's imaginary painting does not merely appeal to the eyes but invites a complex amalgamation of sensuous reactions: 'what was seen would at the same time be heard', and touched, one might add. The sound acquires a material weight and becomes held up by the 'elastic' air, which, as a net[48]

[47] While working on *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf wrote in her diary: 'Dear me, how lovely some parts of *To the Lighthouse* are! Soft & pliable, & I think deep, & never a word wrong for a page at a time' (21 March 1927; *Diary* 3: 132). Note how Woolf uses adjectives related to tangibility to describe her novel.

[48] In *The Nets of Modernism* Maud Ellmann also elaborates on the importance of nets in modernist works, mostly from a psychoanalytic perspective. As she puts it, the writings of Henry James, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Sigmund Freud 'portray the human subject as enmeshed in relations of exchange – sexual, linguistic, financial, pathogenic […]' (1). Maud Ellmann. *The Nets of Modernism: Henry James, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and Sigmund Freud*. Cambridge University Press, 2010. As Merleau-Ponty remarks, Cézanne also used the term 'net' to describe

(Woolf's beloved metaphor), gently envelops the voices, softening but not annihilating their borders.[49]

The qualities Woolf cherished in Post-Impressionist art correspond to the hallmarks of Cézanne's paintings, which, according to Merleau-Ponty, encapsulate the core of sympathetic coexistence. In 'Cézanne's Doubt', the philosopher celebrates Cézanne's works, which in contrast with Impressionist paintings, do not portray their subjects as 'lost in [their] relationships to the atmosphere' but as 'subtly illuminated from within', creating 'an impression of solidity and material substance' (*The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader* 62). According to Merleau-Ponty's reading of Cézanne, the fusion of colours does not blur but rather reinforces the boundaries of the object, which exists in harmonious unity with its surroundings without being incorporated by them. The close intertwining of colour and form in Cézanne was also noticed by Woolf's friend, art critic and painter Roger Fry, the organiser of the Post-Impressionist Exhibitions at Grafton Gallery, London in 1910 and 1912. He observes how in Cézanne's paintings:

> colour has ceased to play a separate rôle from drawing. It is an integral part of plastic expression. He did not attempt to use it with the same brilliant purity and luminosity as some of the Impressionists, and although as compared with them he re-established the unity of the picture surface, he never practiced the opposition of simple masses of local colour. (*Transformations* 218–219)

Fry's rejection of Impressionism foreshadows Merleau-Ponty's argument in 'Cézanne's Doubt', in which the latter praises Cézanne for his 'subtle illumination' of objects, in contrast with their 'reflections' on Impressionist paintings (62). Woolf partially shares Fry's opinion when she critiques Impressionist painting techniques in *Jacob's Room* and *To the Lighthouse*, to which I will turn later.

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his painting technique: '[Cézanne] would explain that the landscape had to be tackled neither too high nor too low, caught alive in a net which would let nothing escape' ('CD' 67).

[49] Some critics have linked this quote to Impressionism. Jack F. Stewart, for instance, has remarked that Woolf's 'verbal painting has the glowing indistinctness of an Impressionist canvas: colors, shapes, sounds, and rhythms merge into a synthesis of sense and emotion' (237). Jack F. Stewart. 'Impressionism in the Early Novels of Virginia Woolf.' *Journal of Modern Literature* vol. 9, no. 2, 1982, pp. 237–266. However, I think that Woolf's insistence on *making* 'curved shapes' suggests a strong artistic agency, which transcends the mere registration of external sensations, attributing central role to the act of artistic choice, a characteristic of Post-Impressionism.

Merleau-Ponty revels in Cézanne's pictures because they constitute the visual representations of his philosophical theory of alterity-in-unity, proposed in *Phenomenology of Perception* (published in the same year as 'Cézanne's Doubt'). In his analysis of Post-Impressionist paintings, Merleau-Ponty suggests a mid-way between clear-cut, hard shapes and the total absence of any distinguishable forms: 'Not to indicate any shape would be to deprive the objects of their identity. To trace just a single outline sacrifices depth – that is, the dimension in which the thing is presented not as spread out before us but as an inexhaustible reality full of reserves.' ('Cézanne's Doubt' 65) Merleau-Ponty's reading of Cézanne's paintings as deep ('not spread out' flatly) and intimating towards a multitude of interpretative possibilities chimes with Woolf's own comments on Cézanne's still lifes.

In April 1918 Woolf had the chance to see the original of Cézanne's *Still Life with Apples* (c. 1878), bought by her friend, the Bloomsbury economist, John Maynard Keynes: 'There are 6 [in reality seven] apples in the Cézanne picture. What can 6 apples *not* be? I began to wonder. Theres [sic] their relationship to each other, & their colour, & their solidity.' (*Diary* 1: 140, emphasis in original) What Woolf finds fascinating in the Cézanne-painting is the union of colours, which instead of blurring the contours of objects, reinforces their solidity, opening the way for various interpretative possibilities. In other words, Woolf and Merleau-Ponty seem to agree that a work of art will leave a profound impact on the viewer only if it presents a world made up of distinct shapes harmoniously relating to but not dissolving into each other. In this way, borders do no longer serve the function of divorcing two irreconcilable elements but rather of indicating their individual existence among, and importantly, with other entities.

Woolf's fascination with Cézanne's apples chimes in several ways with Lawrence's interpretation of the French painter's works. Both writers admire Cézanne's ability to convey the fleshy solidity of the fruit and their sympathetic coexistence with each other and the environment, while also retaining their individuality. Furthermore, they both observe the liveliness and flexibility of the apples that emanate a sense of continuous movement and change, resisting thus the viewer's attempt to fix them with his/her rigid gaze. Lawrence and Woolf also agree on the fact that in order to genuinely engage with Cézanne's apples, one needs to approach them with a form of whole-body vision, 'seeing with your blood

and your bones', as Lawrence puts it, or activating a 'sight of intoxication', as Woolf writes in her comments on Cézanne's *Still Life with Apples*:

> Roger [Fry] very nearly lost his senses. I've never seen such a sight of intoxication. He was like a bee on a sunflower. Imagine snow falling outside, a wind like there is in the Tube, an atmosphere of yellow grains of dust, and us [Virginia, Vanessa and Roger] all gloating upon these apples. […] The longer one looks the larger and heavier and greener and redder they become. (*Letters* 2: 230)

Woolf describes Fry's reaction to the painting as simultaneously senseless (beyond rationality) and deeply rooted in corporeal senses: sight (snow falling), hearing (wind) and even touch (grains of dust). A genuine enjoyment of art transcends mentality, and engages the viewer in a sensuous-sensual bodily delight, a kind of sensory intoxication.

Yet what differentiates Lawrence's and Woolf's opinion on Cézanne is their diverse interpretation of formal qualities. While Lawrence firmly dismisses Bell's 'significant form' in favour of what the former calls 'insignificant form' ('ITP' 205), Woolf recognises the *significance* of form in conveying aesthetic-emotional meaning. In contrast to Lawrence, who equates form with mental abstraction and mere mannerism, for Woolf, shape is inseparable from colour, and the intricate interplay of the two results in the viewer's 'gloating' sensation. The activation of whole-body vision allows the beholder to observe how Cézanne's apples become 'larger and heavier' as their colour intensifies. As Ann Banfield notes, Woolf's artistic taste as well as literary style were heavily influenced by Fry's theoretical writings on Post-Impressionism, especially his ideas on Cézanne's 'use of geometrical forms' (52). For Woolf, colour is not a secondary attribute but the precondition of shape. This sympathetic coexistence of colour and shape confers Cézanne's objects a tactile solidity.

The kind of solidity that triggered Woolf's admiration, nevertheless, is not synonymous with rigidity, and can be better comprehended through Fry's concept of 'plastic form'. As Christopher Reed remarks, the term 'plastic' became central in Fry's critical vocabulary in the early 1910s, immediately after the First Post-Impressionist Exhibition, when he wrote extensively on French paintings and sculptures (123). Although 'plastic' acquired slightly different meanings in Fry's

essays on sculpture and painting, it mainly designated ‘a quality that is the opposite of realism yet that retains an emphasis on three-dimensionality to distinguish it from flat pattern’ (Reed 123). Comparing the Impressionists’ two-dimensional juxtaposition of colours to Matisse’s Post-Impressionist technique, Fry remarks about the latter’s works: ‘[t]he flat surface takes on the whole curvature of the visual hemisphere and objects spring into clear relief’ (qtd. in Banfield 280). The noun ‘relief’ introduces the idea of a statue’s three-dimensionality, an attribute Fry values in modernist art. This statuesque quality, however, is not coterminous with hardness; similarly to Woolf, Fry also draws attention to the dynamic flexibility of the figure’s contours. As such, Woolf’s and Fry’s views seem at odds with Lawrence’s rejection of ‘round’ Greek sculptures in favour of flat Egyptian hieroglyphs, uniformly melting into a kind of primordial darkness. For Woolf, three-dimensionality means the interplay of shape and colour, which forms the basis of our sympathetic coexistence with the world. Colour represents the vital, life-giving element that fills up form, drawing the individual borders of objects with delicacy and care.

In *Jacob’s Room*, Woolf presents the total absence of light and colour as dangerous:

> [T]he wind was rolling the darkness through the streets of Athens, rolling it, one might suppose, with a sort of trampling energy of mood which forbids too close an analysis of the feelings of any single person, or inspection of features. All faces – Greek, Levantine, Turkish, English – would have looked much the same in that darkness. (142)

Darkness, associated with military forces (‘trampling energy’), threatens to erase the individual features of people, those unique attributes that represent the essence of the ‘single person’, what Woolf aptly names the ‘flesh’: ‘But who […] see[s] things thus in skeleton outline, bare of flesh?’ (142) Obscurity strips the body of the living flesh, the soft fabric of life that makes human existence meaningful. As the night wears off and the first colours of the dawn start to return, ‘[run] up the stalks of the grass; [blow] out into tulips and crocuses […] and [fill] the gauze of the air’, things gradually regain their individual shapes, and the rhythm of daily life is resumed (143).

Woolf's musings on the life-giving force of colours are close to Merleau-Ponty's ideas about Cézanne's technique. Merleau-Ponty, drawing on Joachim Gasquet's recollections of Cézanne, explains how the painter 'began to paint all parts of the painting at the same time, using patches of color to surround his original charcoal sketch of the geological skeleton. The picture took on fullness and density; it grew in structure and balance […]' ('CD' 67). For Cézanne and Woolf, therefore, colour represents the 'flesh' of things, the vital element capable of restoring the plastic boundaries of figures without isolating them from their surroundings.

At the same time, as Catherine Malabou reminds us, the word 'plastic' can be etymologically traced back to the Greek *plassein* ('to mould') (8). As an adjective, 'plastic' has a double meaning: malleable (like certain materials, such as clay) and possessing the power to give form (in expressions like 'plastic surgeon' or 'plastic arts') (Malabou 8). As such, plasticity disturbs clear-cut categories of object and subject, active and passive. While the art object is plastic in the sense of being malleable, the artist also possesses plasticity: (s)he has the creative power to give form to shapeless matter. Malleability, however, does not mean complete surrender. As Malabou highlights, '"[p]lastic" […] designates those things that lend themselves to being formed while *resisting* deformation' (9, emphasis in original). This interpretation, she continues, helps to comprehend a further "extension" of 'plasticity' into the field of histology, in which the term 'represents the ability of tissue to re-form after a lesion' (9). Plasticity thus can be understood as a capacity for self-healing: the regaining of initial form after a violent distortion. The plastic object does not wait passively to be shaped by the active hands of its creator, but to quote Merleau-Ponty, it 'gives everything it receives' (*VI* 144). Fry and Woolf might have relied on the ancient Greek meaning of 'plastic' when thinking about Post-Impressionist paintings and sculptures. What both intellectuals valued most in arts was the firmly soft quality of figures, which activated the viewer's tactile-visual response.

'Battered' statues and the possibilities of remembrance

Woolf showed a deep preoccupation with statues throughout her career. Her fascination with sculpted forms in *Jacob's Room* has been remarked on by several critics. Kathleen Wall associates Greek art with Jacob's death (317),

which chimes with Theodore Koulouris's interpretation, which links Greek culture (predominantly literature) with Woolf's 'poetics of loss' (10). Vara Neverow elaborates on the erotic dimension of sculptures, arguing that references to statues in *Jacob's Room* 'are infused with complex nuances of desire' (27), while Kirsty Martin reads sculpted surfaces as suggestions of superficial knowledge (83). Hermione Lee passingly draws a link between Woolf's character-making techniques and the 'modelling of Greek statues' but she does not further elaborate on the topic (74). The following section builds on the above-mentioned scholarly works but it also distances itself from them by focusing on specific features such as malleability and incompleteness, which help to better grasp Woolf's ideas about fellow feeling.

Ancient Greek culture has most often been associated with male superiority in Woolf's works. In her Notes to *Jacob's Room*, Sue Roe equates Greek civilisation with male dominance (170). This view is also supported by Colin Dickey who argues that the figure of the French female photographer, trying to get a snapshot of Jacob while he is being absorbed in the statues of the Parthenon, 'offer[s] a critique of the self-satisfied seriousness of men like Jacob […] who judge[s] [his] mates according to classical statues' (379).[50] Indeed, sculptures in *Jacob's Room* are repeatedly linked to patriarchal order. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator urges us to look at the privileged men, dons and students, who solemnly proceed towards King's College Chapel in Cambridge:

> Look, as they pass into service, how airily the gowns blow out, as though nothing dense and corporeal were within. What sculpted faces, what certainty, authority controlled by piety, although great boots march under the gowns. In what orderly procession they advance. (24)

The sculpted surface of the body is associated with a lack of corporeality: the marching professors and students become grotesque ghosts, whose gowns and

[50] However, Woolf was admittedly fond of Greek literature, which represented a strong bond between her and her beloved brother Thoby. As Hermione Lee has remarked, Thoby introduced Virginia to the world of Greek culture, and the siblings had lively debates on Greek literature. Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf*. Vintage, 1997, p. 147. Furthermore, in her posthumously published memoir, 'Old Bloomsbury' (probably written in 1921–1922), Woolf claimed to hear the birds sing in Greek during one of her mental breakdowns (45). See *Moments of Being*, edited by Jeanne Schulkind, Pimlico, 2002, pp. 43–61. The above examples interrogate Woolf's unequivocal association of Greek culture with patriarchy.

boots proceed without any human volition. Furthermore, what confers this kind of insubstantiality a genuine threatening air is its implicit connectedness to military logic through the use of war vocabulary: 'pass into service', 'boots march', 'orderly procession', 'advance'. In this passage Woolf critiques not only the male-dominated educational system but through analogy with the armed forces, the First World War as well, which transformed young men into mere material containers devoid of life, individual thoughts and feelings.

Woolf often drew a parallel between superficially sketched outlines and ideas of militarism. She dismissed 'frivolous character-drawing' associated with Mrs Durrant's company of upper-class educated men, for whom Jacob represents 'exquisite outlines enclosing vacancy […] and mere scrawls' (136). Woolf rejected 'exquisite outlines' (echoing the earlier quoted 'skeleton outline, bare of flesh') because she linked this specific drawing technique to a form of aggressive appropriation and war logic:

> With […] nonchalance a dozen young men in the prime of life descend with composed faces into the depth of the sea; and there impassively (though with perfect mastery of machinery) suffocate uncomplainingly together. Like blocks of tin soldiers the army covers the cornfield, moves up the hillside, stops, reels this way and that, and falls flat, save that, through field-glasses, it can be seen that one or two pieces still agitate up and down like fragments of broken match-stick. (136)

Soldiers, nonchalantly running up and down the field, become mere marionettes, broken and useless toys in the hands of a ruthless superior force that watches from distance, 'through field-glass', the helpless agony of dying bodies. This passage at once corroborates and interrogates Courtney's and Leonard Woolf's accusation against the novel's puppet-characters. Woolf manipulates the puppet-metaphor carefully: by including Jacob among the 'tin soldiers', she allows for his association with a marionette but she simultaneously withdraws this interpretation by harshly critiquing the puppet-makers. The war transforms human bodies into perfectly working but insentient automata, and erases their individual identity, making mass commodities of them, which are sold by 'character-mongers' (135). The machine-like bodies of soldiers do not only fail to communicate anything about the complexity of the self but they also represent an alien element, totally

incompatible with their natural surroundings. Despite the 'exquisite outlines' and the 'composed faces', 'tin soldiers' are destined to die physically on the battlefield as well as in the individual and collective memory of successive generations.

The interpretation of soldiers as mass productions is also corroborated by the opening sentence of the following paragraph, which explicitly likens the marching of gunmen with business and commerce, ironically questioning the latter's role in bringing progress: 'These actions, together with the incessant commerce of banks, laboratories, chancelleries, and houses of business, are the strokes which oar the world forward, they say' (136).[51] The bodies of dying men, made of metal and resembling machines rather than human flesh, become a form of artificial waste, incompatible with and unassimilated by nature. The soldiers' depiction differs significantly from Woolf's and Fry's interpretation of plasticity: the tin bodies with their rigid borders (echoing Lawrence's 'iron' soldiers in the 'corn-clad hills' in 'With the Guns') are doomed to solitary death, forgotten and thrown away like broken toys. At the same time, through the implicit reference to Hans Christian Andersen's tale, 'The Steadfast Tin Soldier' (1838), Woolf introduces an additional connotation of vulnerability. The material of which the gunmen are made, is not hard enough to protect the soldiers from destruction: just as Andersen's disabled toy soldier melts in the fire, 'young men' in *Jacob's Room* are destined for annihilation.

Ideas of plasticity and statuary images, however, do not only express Woolf's rejection of educational inequality and militarism but they also reveal the inadequacies of modernist (especially Impressionist) portraiture. The artistic struggles of the painter Nick Bramham in *Jacob's Room* are indicative of Woolf's own literary dilemmas. As he tries to capture Fanny Elmer on the canvas, he realises that the exposure of his model to fixed, 'unshaded electric light' will not facilitate his artistic endeavours, as the essence of female beauty lies precisely in its fluctuation. The painter's effort to pin down his model, therefore, is doomed to failure, as restricting the complexity of a human being within rigid frames cannot be considered an artistic success:

[51] Woolf resented a business-like approach to novel writing. In 'Character in Fiction' (1924), she critiqued Arnold Bennett for transforming the act of fiction making into a commercial activity, the main purpose of which is marketability: the Edwardians 'have made tools and established conventions which do their business. But those tools are not our tools, and that business is not our business. For us those conventions are ruin, those tools are death.' (*Essays* 3: 430) Echoing the description of soldiers in *Jacob's Room*, Woolf associated the commodification of human nature with death.

> Now she is dull and thick as bacon; now transparent as a hanging glass. The fixed faces are the dull ones. Here comes Lady Venice displayed like a monument for admiration, but carved in alabaster, to be set on the mantelpiece and never dusted. A dapper brunette complete from head to foot serves only as an illustration to lie upon the drawing-room table. (*JR* 100)

Despite their intended role of making the subject more visible and easily knowable, 'fixed faces' actually create the opposite effect: they dull facial contours, transforming individuals into lifeless and unrecognisable entities, useless figurines 'on the mantelpiece' that serve as mere dust-catcher ornaments.

Nevertheless, capturing the subject in its ceaseless changeability represents another challenge for the artist, and sometimes might even result in unfinished artworks, covered in dust and obliterated. Chasing fleeting momentary impressions, devoid of any materialistic contours might not be enough for creating lasting art and memorable characters. Woolf interrogates Nick's and Fanny's unwavering belief in evanescence by subtly implying how their worldview fails to fulfil a significant role of post-First World War art: the conservation of memory. The narrator's direct exclamation, 'One must remember —', remains incomplete, creating a hole in the text which continues with the contrastive conjunction 'but': 'But Nick perhaps, or Fanny Elmer, believing implicitly in the truth of the moment, fling off, sting the cheek, are gone like sharp hail' (105). Exposing the subject from hat to shoes does not represent a valid form of characterisation for Woolf, but completely stripping models off any material garments is equally flawed, and as Nick's example illustrates, might ultimately lead to creative failure: Fanny's portrait is left in a sketchy state after, in a moment of sudden rage, she definitively abandons the painting studio. Through Nick's unfinished painting, Woolf offers an implicit critique of Impressionism, which by relying entirely on present sensations, fails to care for the tangibility of its subjects.[52] Therefore, neither relying on fleeting impressions nor trying to nail down character represents an adequate base for capturing personality. Instead,

[52] Note how Fanny is later described as 'all sentiment and sensation' (135).

the investigation of Woolf's ideas about statuary in *Jacob's Room* and in her early travel diaries might provide a better understanding of her views on human nature.

From a young age and before writing her first experimental novels, Woolf expressed her delight for Greek statues. In the autumn of 1906, Virginia Stephen travelled to Greece with her siblings Vanessa, Thoby and Adrian, and their friend, Violet Dickinson. They spent some time in Athens and visited the Parthenon, where Virginia was mesmerised by the beauty of Greek marbles:

> We also visited the Acropolis at sunset. And when you speak of 'colour' of the Parthenon you are simply conforming to the exigencies of language; a painter using his craft to speak by, confesses the same limitations. The Temple glows red; the whole west pediment seems kindled, as if for the first time, in the sunset opposite […]. No place seems more lusty and alive than this platform of ancient dead stone. The fat Maidens who bear the weight of the Erechtheum on their heads, stand smiling tranquil ease, for their burden is just meet for their strength. They glory in it; one foot just advanced, their hands, one conceives, loosely curled at their sides. And the warm blue sky flows into all the crevices of the marble; yet they detach themselves, & spring in to the air, with crisp edges, unblunted, & still virile & young. (*A Passionate Apprentice* 323)

The caryatids'[53] description echoes Clara's portrayal in *Jacob's Room*: in both cases the women's bodies do not merely reflect the colours of the environment but they become organic extensions of their natural surroundings. Colour and form, as both Merleau-Ponty and Fry observed about Cézanne's paintings, cease to fulfil distinctive roles in Post-Impressionism; rather colour becomes the precondition of shape, the element that unites object and background while at the same time allowing for the emergence of individual contours. Similarly, the silhouettes of the Erechtheum statues are not blurred by the colours of the setting sun; on the contrary, they begin to take shape and come to life under nature's gentle touch. 'The warm blue sky', flowing into 'the crevices of the marble', is redolent of Cézanne's idea about 'the landscape think[ing] itself' in the subject,

[53] Caryatids are female statues used as pillars to support the roof of a Greek temple. For further information and images see, Rex Warner. *Eternal Greece*. Thames and Hudson, 1953, pp. 54–68.

cited by Merleau-Ponty in ‘Cézanne’s Doubt’ (67) and *Phenomenology of Perception*: ‘I do not lay out in front of [the sky] an idea of blue that would give me its secret. Rather, I abandon myself to it, I plunge into this mystery, and it “thinks itself in me”’ (*PP* 222). The blue hues slowly spread out in the white marble, redrawing the statues’ borders without annihilating their unique hallmarks. Woolf’s careful attention rests on the women’s subtle gestures: the slightly advanced feet and ‘loosely curled’ hands. The female figures thus preserve their individuality, they ‘detach themselves’, and ‘with crisp edges’ ‘spring in to the air’ energetically, recalling Lawrence’s description of Etruscan paintings in which ‘the flowing contour’ allows ‘the body [to] suddenly [leave] off, upon the atmosphere’ (*Sketches* 123–124).

Woolf’s sensual and playful language in her journal entry allows for the reading of the scene as a seduction narrative. She depicts the Parthenon as a ‘lusty’ place, where the ‘fat Maidens’ ‘bear the weight’ of the portico while the ‘blue sky flows’ into their hollows. The scene might be interpreted as an erotic union between caryatids and nature, a fusion that carries the potential of future life but simultaneously subverts reproductive stereotypes. The female statues are not passive and immobile carriers of ‘their burden’ but while solidly holding ‘the weight of the Erechtheum’ on their heads, their energised bodies emanate a sense of freedom and ‘virile’ power. Yet the sculptures’ lively description is imbued with a sense of vulnerability and mortality. The phrase ‘loosely curled hands’ can be read as a euphemism for the actual absence of the caryatids’ arms, destroyed through the centuries. Furthermore, though Woolf does not reflect on it in her diary, she must have been aware of not only the lack of the statues’ upper limbs but also of their nose. The original caryatids, of which Woolf probably took a close view in the Acropolis Museum, are famous for their flat noses, or more precisely, for the rubbed surface on the face, originally occupied by the nose. In *Jacob’s Room*, the goddess ‘holding the roof on her head’ reminds Jacob of Sandra Wentworth Williams, whose memory produces an unexpected effect on the young man: ‘He was extraordinarily moved, and with the battered Greek nose in his head, with Sandra in his head, with all sorts of things in his head, off he started to walk right up to the top of Mount Hymettus […]’ (133).

The caryatid admired by Jacob, however, is not the only ‘battered’ sculpture in the novel. The adjective is also associated with the statue of Ulysses, and through implicit analogy, with Jacob himself. In the British Museum, Fanny

spends long minutes in front of the 'battered Ulysses' in order to refresh her memory of Jacob (150). The 'battered' statue of the Greek traveller represents a source of solace for the woman who secretly hopes that Jacob will eventually return to her. At the same time, the state of vulnerability is not only linked to Jacob but also to Fanny's 'statuesque' 'idea of Jacob', which as her lover's homecoming becomes more and more improbable, starts to 'wear thin', similarly to the woman's deteriorating body that appears old and lifeless (149, 150). The motif of the unfinished statue suggests the female characters' memorialising efforts: similarly to Fanny, Jacob's other lovers also try to capture his memory in a statuesque form, despite having to confront the impossible nature of their endeavour. None of the women manages to bring her artistic activity to perfection: Jacob's statue remains, by the end, 'left in the rough' (130).

However, vulnerability is a two-way phenomenon in Woolf's novel. The fact that Jacob remembers Sandra as 'battered' indicates his perception of the woman as a vulnerable human being, in need of his (male) protection. This reading, nonetheless, might be at odds with Sandra's portrayal throughout the novel. Jacob's last lover, after all, does not seem to be a very fragile woman: she exerts control over her husband and enjoys a great sense of liberty in her marriage. Hence, the adjective 'battered' might rather be attached to Jacob's persona, suggesting his own frailty and insecurity caused by his turbulent emotions for the woman. Reading Jacob's visit to the Acropolis alongside Woolf's diary entry, nevertheless, provides a more complex explanation for Sandra's depiction as a caryatid.

Woolf's erotically charged portrayal of female statues in her travel journals represents an important source of inspiration for the creation of *Jacob's Room*. The link between Sandra and the caryatids can be traced back to a much deeper level than a common physical trait. The promiscuous 'fat Maidens', bearing their 'weight' with a 'tranquil ease' foreshadow the secret erotic encounter between Jacob and Sandra, which not coincidentally, takes place on the Acropolis and results in Sandra's pregnancy. In order to protect him from being 'shocked', Sandra decides not to tell Jacob that he has a son (149). Yet, even though Jacob never finds out the truth, the little boy to whom Sandra gives birth, becomes a flesh-and-blood monument, the live bond between past and future, death and life, ruin and regeneration. The child, called Jimmy, a name derived from Jacob, embodies the solid fragility of the future: a period equally marked by absence

(Jacob's death) and presence, suggested by the baby's emphatic hand-waving in the perambulator (149). Woolf's name choice bears special significance because it simultaneously nods back to the past and anticipates the future. The name Jimmy appears earlier in the novel, when it is explicitly linked to the war: 'And now Jimmy feeds crows in Flanders and Helen visits hospitals' (83). All the reader knows about Jimmy is that he refused to marry a woman called Helen Aitken, and he died on the battlefield (82–83). Interestingly, while Helen's last name appears in the text, Jimmy's remains unrevealed, allowing for the substitution of Flanders for his surname. This linguistic play might be read as a reference to the millions of anonymous soldiers who lost their lives in the First World War, but at the same time it transforms Jimmy into Jacob's alter ego, the latter's surname being Flanders. Sandra's decision to name her baby Jimmy (a 'small boy' variant of Jacob, 149) indicates her wish to preserve her lover's memory, while the narrative anticipates – through the allusion to the soldier Jimmy's death – Jacob's imminent fate. The small baby represents at once a live monument (replacing his father's absent body), and a fragile future hope, an affirmation of life that continues in spite of past losses. The little boy's waving in the perambulator acquires a double function: it can be read as a farewell gesture, an act of laying the past to rest, but also as the hopeful greeting of a new beginning, or to borrow Marina MacKay's phrase, as an example of 'bereaved survivorhood' ('Violence, Art, and War' 467).

Sandra's role of memory preserver, nevertheless, can be traced back to an earlier point in the narrative. Prior to the conception of their son, Sandra and Jacob visit the museum at Olympia, where the woman tries to 'get' Jacob's head 'exactly on a level with the head of the Hermes of Praxiteles', but as the narrator emphasises: 'before she could say a single word he had gone out of the Museum and left her' (127). Indeed, as Adam Parkes observes, Jacob 'defeats Sandra Williams's attempt to fix him, as if he himself were a statue, with her museumgoer's stare' (169). While this is undoubtedly true, I think that Woolf does more than simply critique Sandra's 'egoism', as Parkes suggests (169). Praxiteles's *Hermes and the Infant Dionysus*, the statue with which Sandra associates Jacob, is the figure of the god Hermes holding the baby Dionysus in his left arm. In her attempt to 'get' Jacob's head, Sandra does not simply want to fix the man but she unconsciously wishes to capture a touching but non-existent future image: Jacob with their still unborn son in his arms. The baby Dionysus, a

small version of Jacob thus encapsulates Sandra's effort to safeguard her beloved's memory in the fragile soft flesh of their child (the link between Dionysus and Jacob is repeatedly reinforced in the novel, as I will shortly discuss).

Gabrielle McIntire argues that in Woolf 'continuity with anteriority manifests itself as a wish to touch the past through (re)discovering the history of physical and corporeal traces whose enigmatic imprints remain legible into the future' (212). In *Jacob's Room*, Sandra (and her son) represents the embodiment of this 'continuity with anteriority'. The caryatids' ambiguous relationship with time has also been observed by scholars of classical studies: Rex Warner wrote in *Views of Attica and its Surroundings* (1950) that the female statues on the Erechteum, instead of simply evoking historical events, reach 'both forwards and backwards in time' (50). Sandra, the caryatid standing on the remnants of the past, becomes a guardian of memory, while her vigorous body stretches upwards, opening into the endless sky and *bearing* the possibilities of the future.

Statues as 'counter-monuments'

Sculptural surfaces in *Jacob's Room* are intricately linked with ideas of absence and presence, mourning and regeneration, and the possibilities of getting hold of (and holding on to) people. While the grape-picking scene has primarily been influenced by Post-Impressionist aesthetics, it also enters into implicit dialogue with ideas about statuary. As Clara stretches to reach the bundles, she accidentally cuts the stalk of a leaf that, 'spread[ing] like the palm of a hand', draws an invisible circle around Jacob's head, before it drops to the ground. The palm-shaped leaf, as the prolongation of Clara's hand, lightly grazes Jacob's head without definitively settling on or claiming possession of it. Read in conjunction with Merleau-Ponty's concept of flesh, this scene illustrates the principles of tender togetherness:

> For the first time, the body no longer couples itself up with the world, it clasps another body, applying [itself to it] carefully with its whole extension, forming tirelessly with its hands the strange statue which in its turn gives everything it receives; the body is lost outside of the world and its goals, fascinated by the unique occupation of floating in Being with another life […]. (*VI* 144)

‘Applying’ her flesh ‘with its whole extension’ to Jacob’s yearning body, Clara’s gesture creates a fragile yet enduring moment of physical intimacy: the leaf eventually flies past the man’s head but the plant’s brief contact with his body opens up the possibility for mythological interpretations. The vine leaf crown transforms Jacob into the Greek god Dionysus, and as Vara Neverow has observed, Jacob is repeatedly associated with the sculpture of Dionysus in the novel (30). The parallel between Woolf’s protagonist and the god of wine and carnal joys, can partly explain Jacob’s state of unconscious intoxication in Clara’s presence: he ‘is lost outside of the world and its goals’. Yet, while drawing a link to Greek mythology, the narrative simultaneously withdraws from unambiguous interpretations: Jacob’s head, after all, is not decorated with, only lightly touched by vine leaves. Moreover, the text’s linguistic composition warns the reader against the complete blurring of boundaries between hand and leaf: the rhetorical device indicates a relationship of resemblance, not identification. The simile, ‘like the palm of a hand’, interrogates the solid and permanent nature of the tactile gesture, and allows for the reading of the grape-picking episode as Woolf’s critique of a male artistic tradition rooted in hard and possessive grip.

Clara’s implicit association with the figure of the sculptor and her superior position on the top of the ladder subvert cultural stereotypes about the active male artist looking (down) on and capturing the passive female model. At the same time, the grape-picking scene can be interpreted as a double inversion of the Greek myth: rather than Pygmalion touching Galatea imploring her to come to life, in Woolf’s novel the female artist transforms the male into a statue, albeit not a fixed and lifeless one. The original myth, recorded by Ovid in *Metamorphoses*, tells the story of a Cypriot sculptor, Pygmalion, who, being repelled by the debauchery of local women, decides to create the perfect female form with his own hands. He carves a female statue out of ivory and falls in love with his perfect creation, which, with the intervention of Venus, the goddess of beauty and love, comes to life:

> And [Pygmalion] kissed her as she lay, and she seemed warm;
> Again he kissed her and with marveling touch
> Caressed her breast; beneath his touch the flesh
> Grew soft, its ivory hardness vanishing,

And yielded to his hands […]
His lips pressed real lips, and she, his girl,
Felt every kiss, and blushed, and shyly raised
Her eyes to his and saw the world and him. (Book X, 233–4)

The contrast between active and passive, possessor and subordinated is strongly accentuated in the Ovidian myth. From body postures to gestures, everything underlines the male artist's superiority. Almost all active verbs are associated with him: he kisses, caresses, touches the woman, who in turn, yields to his fingers, feels his kisses and shyly raises her eyes to the man leaning over her. Woolf questions the Greek myth not only through gender reversal but also through her refusal to imbue her female "sculptor" with omnipotent artistic powers. In contrast with Pygmalion's hard touch, Clara's hand does not actually reach Jacob's body but her tactile gesture remains in a state of suspension. As such, Clara's outstretched hand suggests a kind of tactile failure: after all, she is unsuccessful in holding on to Jacob. There is a double loss at stake in this scene: Clara loses Jacob to the present (he returns to London) and to the future (he dies in the war). In other words, while Woolf rejects the possessive male touch, she also draws attention to the dangers of refraining from tactile proximity, which hinders the creation of lasting affective bonds.

Though a detailed contextual analysis of the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century re-workings of the Pygmalion-story lies beyond the scopes of this chapter, it is important to mention that Woolf's appropriation of the Ovidian myth was not without precedent. In the 1870s, the Pre-Raphaelite artist Edward Burne-Jones painted two series of pictures inspired by the story of Pygmalion and Galatea. The fourth painting of the second series, entitled *The Soul Attains* (1878), portrays Galatea's coming to life. In contrast with the Ovidian version, Burne-Jones reverses the subjects' bodily position: Pygmalion does not lean over Galatea from above, but he actually kneels at the woman's feet, holding her hands, as though imploring her to return his love.[54] Yet gender reversal is not the only issue at stake in Burne-Jones's art. A pencil study for *The Soul Attains*, held at the New Art Gallery Walsall, reveals Burne-Jones's preoccupation with artistic agency: while Galatea's bodily contours are almost entirely finished, Pygmalion's

[54] I am grateful to Jana Funke for drawing my attention to Burne-Jones's paintings.

silhouette is limited mostly to his head, making the impression that his sketchy outlines are being drawn by Galatea. The blurring of boundaries between active creator and passive model represents a theme that also interested authors of the early twentieth century, such as George Bernard Shaw, whose 1913 play, *Pygmalion*, became internationally renowned. Shaw's work centres around Eliza Doolittle, a young flower girl, whose education is taken over by phonetics professor Henry Higgins. The arrogant Higgins sets out to teach Eliza to speak standard English and to transform her into an upper-class lady. He achieves his aim at the cost of treating the girl like a controllable speech machine. But his success is curtailed at the end when he realises that her Galatea-figure is not a subordinated automaton but an independent, live woman who uses her new language skills to affirm her agency. Shaw's play and Burne-Jones's paintings are embedded in a larger cultural context, which reverses the Ovidian myth, often to the extent of mockery. In the late nineteenth century, for example, the Pygmalion story became widely known from musical burlesques, such as *Galatea, or Pygmalion Re-Versed* (1883), a parody of W. S. Gilbert's 1871 play, *Pygmalion and Galatea*.

While to an extent Woolf continued the tradition of the reversed Pygmalion myth, her treatment of the subject was more complex and nuanced. She "handled" the Ovidian legend with sympathy, reshaping it without completely distorting its original form. In *Jacob's Room*, Woolf did not simply parody Ovid's story but she took inspiration from the broader mythological context. In *Metamorphoses*, the story of Pygmalion and Galatea is narrated by the Greek hero, Orpheus. After losing his wife, Eurydice, Orpheus goes to the Underworld to implore Hades to let Eurydice return to life. Hades agrees with a condition: Orpheus is not allowed to look back at his wife until they reach the human world. Orpheus cannot resist the temptation and when he turns towards his wife, she disappears forever. Woolf borrows the motif of 'double death' from Orpheus and Eurydice's story (Ovid 226). By failing to lay hands on Jacob, Clara loses him twice: he first leaves to London, and later to the trenches, from where he never returns. Through the links to the Ovidian myths, the grape-picking scene becomes an omen foreshadowing Jacob's death. Before he departs to London, the Durrants bid him farewell, inviting him again for the following summer. However, the narrative subtly implies that there will be no other summers: Mr Clutterbuck's double cry – 'Mr Flanders! […] Jacob Flanders!' (52) – remains

unanswered, anticipating Clara's desperate sighs near the end of the novel: '("Jacob! Jacob!" she thought.)' (147).

Clara's definitive understanding of Jacob's death is, not coincidentally, linked to a statue, which despite not being created by a Greek sculptor, represents a Greek hero. Under the excuse of having to 'exercise' her dog, aptly named Troy, Clara accepts her friend, Mr Bowley's invitation for a walk (146). During their stroll in Hyde Park, she evokes Jacob's name four times, before she stops in front of the statue of Achilles, and reads out the inscription beneath the sculpture: '"This statue was erected by the women of England…?"' (147) A horse dashing by hinders Clara in finishing the sentence and causes her to cry out in agony:

> 'Oh, Mr Bowley! Oh!' Gallop – gallop – gallop – a horse galloped past without a rider. The stirrups swung; the pebbles spurted.
> 'Oh, stop! Stop it, Mr Bowley!' she cried, white, trembling, gripping his arm, utterly unconscious, the tears coming.[55] (147)

Clara's desperate cry can be interpreted in multiple ways: the rider's enigmatic absence reminds her of Jacob whose death becomes an unbearable premonition, but her distress might also originate from her self-identification with 'the women of England' who erect statues to dead soldiers. The Achilles-sculpture, cast from captured French guns, was created in the memory of Arthur Duke of Wellington (1769–1852), to celebrate his victories in the Napoleonic Wars (1803–1815) (Roe, Notes to *Jacob's Room* 184). Throughout the novel, the protagonist is repeatedly associated with Wellington: during his trip with Timmy Durrant, a stall-keeper takes Jacob for a 'military gentleman', which makes Jacob 'curse the British army and praise the Duke of Wellington' (64). Later, in a passage immediately preceding Clara's walk in Hyde Park, Bonamy describes Jacob as 'fixed, monolithic – oh, very beautiful! – like a British Admiral' (145).[56]

[55] The motif of the horse without a rider appears earlier in the novel when Mrs Jarvis walks alone on the moors immersed in random impressions: 'when the lark soars […], when there are distant concussions in the air and phantom horsemen galloping, ceasing […]' (21). This passage evokes the atmosphere of a Gothic novel.

[56] Jane Goldman suggests an anti-patriarchal and anti-colonial reading of this passage, arguing that Troy, the dog, 'marks the statue of "Achilles", monument to colonial imperialism' (105). Jane Goldman. '"Che chien est à moi": Virginia Woolf and the Signifying Dog.' *Woolfian Boundaries: Selected Papers from the Sixteenth Annual International Conference on Virginia Woolf*, edited by Anna Burrells at al., Clemson University Press, 2007, pp. 100–107. While this interpretation is

In front of the Achilles-monument Clara comes to terms with her double loss: Jacob's definitive absence and her own failure as an artist, whose touch was not tight enough to keep her beloved safe. As Eurydice in the Ovidian myth, Jacob literally filters through Clara's 'semi-transparent' fingers, which are not able to hinder the crumbling of his bodily outlines. In other words, the grape-picking scene, suggests the importance of bodily connection in the creation of sympathetic hollows. After all, the definition of the Merleau-Pontian hollow entails physical contact: the only way the subject can make sense of his/her own borders is by touching other selves. Hollows do not exist in infinite vacuum but are born in the intimate space between interacting bodies. By refraining from tangible contact in the grape-picking episode, Clara Durrant fails to fulfil the promise of her surname: her hands do not create a solid and en*during* monument. Clara does not inherit her mother's 'iron' nature (135) but retains an elusive, 'gauze'-like quality in the novel (47). Through the artistic "failures" of Nick Bramham and Clara, Woolf draws attention to the importance of firmness in portrait making: while she rejects earlier literary techniques based on the rigid framing of characters, she simultaneously shows the perils of a complete abandonment of tangible matter.

Ultimately, Sandra's memorialising technique comes closest to Woolf's principles of firm softness. After all, Sandra is Jacob's last lover and the only woman he tacitly admits to love when Bonamy reproaches him for being in love: '"You are in love!" [Bonamy] exclaimed. Jacob blushed. The sharpest of knives never cut so deep.' (145) By giving birth to Jacob's son, Sandra literally preserves her lover's memory in the soft and fragile human flesh. Though little Jimmy is equally subjected to mortality as his father (and even carries the potential of a similar death in his name), the baby also embodies the possibility of regeneration: a new life marked by past losses, yet yielding to the shaping hands of the future. At the same time, Jimmy, together with all the little boys in the novel, embody the histological meaning of 'plastic', as explained by Malabou. Babies born during and after the war represent, at least as *Jacob's Room* suggests, a form of (self-)healing: they become the flesh that can be mourned instead of the absent bodies of their fathers, but children also move beyond the past towards a new life. 'Little

undoubtedly convincing and corroborated by Jacob's repeated association with Wellington, Clara's strong emotional reaction in front of the statue underlines a more elegiac-nostalgic reading of the scene.

boys' are constantly associated with forward movement in *Jacob's Room*. During her solitary walk in the park, Fanny observes how '[t]he eyes of all nurses, mothers, and wandering women are a little glazed, absorbed. They gently nod instead of answering when the little boys tug at their skirts, begging them to move on.' (103) 'Nurses, mothers, and wandering women', representing the 'women of England', are frozen in their grief, unable to 'move on' towards a new life that their 'absorbed' eyes cannot discern. Though children do not provide a straightforward way into the future, their life-affirming energy suggests that the 'little boats'[57] they launch on the pond in the park might sail towards hopeful destinations (103).[58]

The emphasis on the tangible, albeit fragile, human flesh bears great importance in the historical context evoked in the novel. As Alice Kelly reminds us, the corpses of soldiers were not returned to Britain from 1916, meaning that families mourned their beloveds without having the possibility of paying homage to physical bodies (79). This represented a significant shock to a nation used to Victorian norms of mourning, or deathbed scenes, which presupposed close physical contact between the dying and family members, the latter recognising the dying's need for 'affection and companionship […] when holding the hand or

[57] It is an interesting coincidence that Hans Christian Andersen's tin soldier, after being thrown out of the window, also travels in a paper boat, before being swallowed by a fish and through various adventures, finally getting home to die with his beloved ballerina by his side. There is no evidence that Woolf had in mind Andersen's tale when writing *Jacob's Room*, but one can detect subtle links between the two stories. Though Andersen's protagonist does not escape death by the end, he is not killed on the battlefield but literally melts in the fire of love. In *Jacob's Room*, the paper boats, made by 'little boys' – who, like Jimmy, are the sons of 'tin soldiers' fighting in the war –, might take the children towards a more hopeful future, which is nevertheless not entirely devoid of threats and death.

[58] This reading does not intend to diminish Woolf's complex ambivalence about child rearing. Though the selected passage from *Jacob's Room* underlines Woolf's temporary belief in the figure of the infant standing for futurity, Woolf also questioned this perspective in many of her writings. In her essay 'Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid' (1940), for example, she likened the act of child-bearing to men's alleged biological instinct for violence and killing, both of which could be 'helped' by 'more honourable activities', such as artistic creativity: 'Is he [the airman dropping bombs] to be blamed for [his] instincts? Could we switch off the maternal instinct at the command of a table full of politicians? Suppose that imperative among the peace terms was: "Child-bearing is to be restricted to a very small class of specially selected women," would we submit? Should we not say, "The maternal instinct is a woman's glory. It was for this that my whole life has been dedicated […]." But if it were necessary […] that child-bearing should be restricted […], women would attempt it. Men would help them. They would give them other openings for their creative power. That too must make part of our fight for freedom. We must help the young Englishmen to root out from themselves the love of medals and decorations. We must create more honourable activities for those who try to conquer in themselves their fighting instinct, their subconscious Hitlerism.' (*Essays* 6: 244) Daniela Caselli, in an article the starting point of which is a passage from *Mrs Dalloway* (Rezia's encounter with a child in the park), refutes childhood's false promise to provide 'unmediated affective access', 'heal[ing] the wound of language and restor[ing] fullness' (251). Instead, Caselli suggests, the figure of the child reminds us that affect is never devoid of a 'perspective', a historical, political, cultural frame that encloses our understanding of childhood (251). Daniela Caselli. 'Kindergarten theory: Childhood, affect, critical thought.' *Feminist Theory*, vol. 11 no. 3, 2010, pp. 241–254.

stroking the hair could be more meaningful than words' (Jalland 27). Evidently, after 1916, relatives of deceased soldiers did not have the possibility of saying farewell to the bodies of their beloved men. This state, which Allyson Booth calls 'corpselessness' in *Postcards from the Trenches* (1996), represented a source of deep anguish among civilians (Booth 21–49). Jacob's acute bodily absence haunts female characters in *Jacob's Room*, from Clara – who is horrified by the galloping horse without a rider – to Mrs Flanders's poignant gesture of holding out her son's empty shoes at the end. As such, the invisibility and intangibility of bodies became pressing issues during and after the war.

Woolf, however, understood transparency in a wider context. She was not only interested in the absence of the deceased but also in the invisibility of disabled soldiers and civilians (people deemed unfit for enrolment, such as women, the elderly, and the physically or mentally impaired), who were marginalised in the official memorialisation ceremonies. As Karen Levenback remarks, 'the elevated and dehumanising acknowledgment [of war death] seems […] to have blurred Woolf's sense of civilian invisibility with a parallel invisibility experienced by ex-servicemen' (30). To a certain degree, Woolf resented the rapid spreading of war monuments after 1919, because they worshipped death (i.e. absent corpses) rather than survival (Levenback 30).

Indeed, *Jacob's Room* contains an implicit critique of official monument making. Robert Reginio suggests that *Jacob's Room* might be read as a 'counter-monument', a concept he defines as 'the desire to memorialize coupled with the need to critique memorial collective gestures' (87). From atop of an omnibus, stopped in traffic, Fanny sees a procession with banners, 'sweeping past Government offices and equestrian statues down Whitehall' (151). While the peace parade approaches Whitehall (to pay homage at the Cenotaph, initially erected in July 1919), the clerks in the Government offices (among them Timothy Durrant) are busy with writing down 'the statistics of rice-fields, […] plotting sedition in back streets, or gathering in the Calcutta bazaars, or mustering their forces in the uplands of Albania, where the hills are sand-coloured, and bones lie unburied' (151). The 'hollow-looking' clerks resemble the statues of 'Pitt and Chatham, Burke and Gladstone [which] looked from side to side with fixed marble eyes' (151). Woolf critiques the empty stare of clerks and statesmen because they betray a total lack of sympathy for the most important issue at stake: the unburied bones of the dead.

In her diary, Woolf described the 1920 peace parade with scepticism and irony:

> There's something calculated & politic & insincere about these peace rejoicings. Moreover they are carried out with no beauty, & not so much spontaneity… Yesterday in London the usual sticky stodgy conglomerations of people, sleepy & torpid as a cluster of drenched bees, were crawling over Trafalgar Square, & rocking about the pavements in the neighbourhood. (*Diary* 1: 292–3)

A few lines down she added: 'It seems to me more & more clear that the only honest people are the artists […]' (293). Woolf resents the rigid artificiality of the marching people, who uncannily recall not only the Cambridge dons and students but also the soldiers in the cornfield. There is no individual agency left in the crowd that Woolf likens to 'a cluster of drenched bees', which can hardly drag themselves on the streets. The vocabulary she uses suggests a sense of heaviness and lack of dynamism, reminding more of the zombie-like 'crowd flow[ing] over London Bridge' in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (published in the same year as *Jacob's Room*) than of a cheerful gathering celebrating Peace Day (Eliot 25).

The representatives of official power, 'calculating' statistics and concerned with commerce and pompous monument making instead of the devastating human loss, are reminiscent of Mrs Durrant's 'smoothly sculpted' company of gentlemen, who define 'character-drawing' as a 'frivolous fireside art', outlines 'enclosing vacancy' (136). Tracing back the phrase 'fireside art' to an earlier passage in the novel, it becomes evident that it refers to the 'unpublished works of women, written by the fireside in pale profusion, dried by the flame, for the blotting-paper's worn to holes and the nib cleft and clotted' (78). This depiction condenses the major objection against women's art, which, inherited from earlier centuries, was still relevant in the modernist period: the (literal) overflowing of sentiments, suggesting at once abundance of feelings and soppiness. *Jacob's Room*, nevertheless, repeatedly pushes against the prejudices formulated by men 'in clubs and Cabinets' (136).

The novel, after all, opens with Betty Flanders writing a letter to Captain Barfoot: 'Slowly welling from the point of her gold nib, pale blue ink dissolved the

full stop; for there her pen stuck; her eyes fixed, and tears slowly filled them' (3). Objects' outlines become blurred in front of Mrs Flanders's eyes as she sees how a 'little yacht was bending like a wax candle in the sun' (3). The opening lines of the novel bear paramount significance because they introduce the central ideas of this chapter: the absence of clear-cut, sharp borders and the semi-soft nature of flesh. The ink merges delicately with Mrs Flanders's tears and the salty sea vapour, dissolving the full stop – the rigid border of the sentence. The 'clefts' and 'clots' the female writer's nib leaves in the paper remind of the 'slight irregularity' of Greek statues 'left in the rough', admired by Jacob on his visit to the Parthenon (130). Mrs Flanders's letter-writing activity acquires a sensuous tactile-visual quality, disrupting the 'smoothness' and monotonous linearity of the government clerks' scribbling. Women's pens do not create mere empty 'scrawls', as Mrs Durrant's male friends believe, but their nibs, dipped in 'pale blue ink', draw the tender silhouettes of vulnerable flesh-and-blood beings, exposing the immense fragility of human life.

Woolf set against the uncompassionate marble stare of admirals and clerks the tearful eyes of mourning female characters, who do not remember the deceased by marching in a parade and laying wreaths to a tomb 'enclosing vacancy' (cenotaph literally means 'empty tomb') but try to preserve their beloveds' memory in 'pale blue ink' and malleable clay. Woolf's interwar novels draw attention to the importance of those 'invisible' figures – among them women and disabled veterans, such as Septimus Warren Smith in *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) – who were cast off to the periphery of official commemoration (Fanny's position as an outsider, not participating in but only looking at the procession from atop of an omnibus might be also telling in this context).

Sympathetic picture taking: the legacy of Julia Margaret Cameron

The motif of the glazed female gaze acquires great importance in Woolf's interwar writings, and is imbued not only with the possibilities of capturing human nature but also with ideas of mourning. Woolf rejected absolute clarity in portrait making, because she associated this technique with a form of violent appropriation, the coercion of the subject within predetermined frames. She numbered visual sharpness among the failures of Edwardian novels, which described the

protagonists and their environment in painstaking details, leaving no room for the reader's imagination to fill in the missing gaps. In *Jacob's Room*, Woolf offered satirical snippets of Edwardian portraits, thus showing their shortcomings. While watching his lover, Florinda, leave on the arm of another man, Jacob is 'drenched' in light 'from head to toe':

> You could see the pattern on his trousers; the old thorns on his stick; his shoe laces; bare hands; and face.
> It was as if a stone were ground to dust; as if white sparks flew from a livid whetstone, which was his spine; as if the switchback railway, having swooped to the depths, fell, fell, fell. This was in his face.
> Whether we know what was in his mind is another question. (81)

The light coming from the street lamp inundates Jacob, revealing with painstaking clarity the smallest details on his attire: the pattern on his trousers and walking stick, his shoelaces, and only at the end his hands and face. But '[i]s life like this? Must novels be like this?', asks Woolf in her essay 'Modern Fiction' (1925), after critiquing the Edwardian novelist, Arnold Bennett, who creates 'figures [that] were to come to life, […] would find themselves dressed down to the last button of their coats in the fashion of the hour' (*Essays* 4: 160). How can 'dressing down' according to the latest fashion tell us anything valuable about an individual? How does our knowledge about Jacob's garments help us to better understand him as a unique human being and not merely an indistinguishable component of the mob? Does his portrait, illuminated with sharp clarity, allow the reader to gain insight into his mind, his thoughts and feelings? The kind of hyper-visibility advocated by Edwardians and ridiculed by Woolf results in mechanical characters, assembled from different pieces that might perfectly fit together but that will never compose a valid and living human being, with whom readers can emotionally connect. By summing up insignificant details such as trousers and shoelaces, the writer throws light on superficial components that render the character a badly sewn patchwork figure, an idea also observed in the linguistic composition of the text: the semi-colons separating Jacob's clothing accessories have a staccato effect, transforming the clause into a conjunction of broken phrases, implicitly reminding the reader of the tin soldiers' 'up and down' 'agitation' in the cornfields.

Woolf firmly dismissed Edwardian characters on the basis of their hyper-visible and finalised nature that left no room for ambiguity and hence created the false illusion of their complete knowability. In her opinion, the problem with the novels of Bennett and his fellow writers does not lie so much in the techniques they used but more in the fact that their fiction is imbued with 'falsity and pretence' and creates a picture that is unfaithful to life (*Essays* 4: 164.). Life does not reside in the perfect fitting of parts but in the 'crevice [where] decay can creep in', 'the draught between the frames of the windows, or a crack in the boards' (158). In other words, 'the stuff of fiction' (164) is born in the hollow, the sympathetic space between two intertwining elements. In Woolf's interpretation, life – which represents the subject of fiction – is infused with vulnerability and perishability, and by extension a work of art should also accommodate 'decay' between its imperfectly matching parts.

Woolf was sceptical of Bennett's character-drawing techniques because she dismissed the idea that a human being can be fully captured. In the same year when *Jacob's Room* was published, she wrote to her fellow writer, Gerald Brenan, that the best a novelist can do is to 'catch a glimpse of a nose, a shoulder, something turning away, always in movement' (*Letters* 2: 598). Yet Woolf prefers this state of fragmentariness: 'Still, it seems better to me to catch this glimpse, than to sit down with Hugh Walpole, [H. G.] Wells, etc. etc. and make large oil paintings of fabulous fleshy monsters complete from top to toe' (598). According to Woolf, a 'battered' nose or a sensually lifted foot offers a more complex and durable insight into the other's being than a minutely detailed close-up, which transforms humans into grotesque, monster-like figures, impenetrable by the viewer's sympathetic eyes.

Instead of magnified images, Woolf seemed to favour snapshots that offered brief glimpses of a human being. Indeed, in *Jacob's Room*, the protagonist is captured in a snapshot made by Madame Lucien Gravé, a French tourist 'perched on a block of marble with her Kodak pointed at his head' (132). The Frenchwoman's "attack" lasts a brief moment, after which 'she jumped down, in spite of her age, her figure, and her tight boots – having, now that her daughter was married, lapsed with a luxurious abandonment, […] into the fleshy grotesque' (132). There is a simultaneous sense of irony and aggression in Madam Gravé's description. Her gestures remind the reader of a soldier waiting in ambush: she is 'perched' in her 'tight boots', 'pointing' her camera, like a gun, at Jacob's head.

At the same time, her body posture can be read as a faint echo of the anonymous eyes watching the 'blocks of tin soldiers' 'through field-glasses', as well as Lawrence's officer in 'With the Guns', who looks at the soldiers through a 'fixed spy-glass'. After Madam Gravé disappears, Jacob bursts out in disappointment: '"It is those damned women," said Jacob, without any trace of bitterness, but rather with sadness and disappointment that what might have been should never be' (132). The narrator's satirical comment, following Jacob's swearing, partially invalidates the protagonist's outburst: '(This violent disillusionment is generally to be expected in young men in the prime of life, sound of mind and limb, who will soon become fathers of families and directors of banks.)' (132–133) But Jacob's reaction should not be dismissed as mere laughing matter. On the contrary, he draws attention to an important shortfall of snapshot photography, which tries to grab its subject with a velocity and force that leave no space and time for affective exploration.

As mentioned earlier, some critics have interpreted the figure of Madame Lucien Gravé as emblematic of a new generation of women, 'represented by cheap prints and disposable Kodaks', whom Woolf contrasts with men longing for a past associated with classical statues (Dickey 379). However, as Woolf's ironical depiction of the French photographer suggests, taking snapshots might not be sufficient for capturing human nature. In its attempt to catch life in the fleeting present moment, the snapshot transforms into a too hurried grasp, which does not allow for the creation of lasting bodily contact.[59] As such, Woolf partially shared Lawrence's distrust of snapshot photography, albeit their reasons differed. While Lawrence discarded 'Kodak-vision' because he associated it with realistic imitation and fixity, Woolf – at least in some of her novels – considered snapshot photography too quick and fleeting in order to meaningfully preserve human character. Though Woolf undoubtedly borrowed from photography, as many critics have noticed, she did not necessarily regard snapshotting as the only or, indeed, most adequate way of capturing humans.[60] Rather, she turned

[59] On 21 December 1922, an anonymous reviewer for the *New Age* expressed his/her dissatisfaction with *Jacob's Room* due to what (s)he described as Woolf's technique of 'snapshotting things with and without meaning', which results in a 'rag-bag of impressions' (Majumdar and McLaurin 108).

[60] For more on Woolf's preference for snapshots, see Colin Dickey's 'Virginia Woolf and Photography'. Maggie Humm has provided a detailed analysis of Woolf's aesthetic engagement with her family photo albums in *Snapshots of Bloomsbury: The Private Lives of Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell*. Rutgers University Press, 2006.

to nineteenth-century photography, especially the pictures of her great-aunt, Julia Margaret Cameron, to explore ideas about sympathetic character-drawing.

While in *Jacob's Room* Woolf already exposed some of the shortcomings of snapshots, photographic techniques acquire a more important role in her later novel, *To the Lighthouse*, whose protagonist, Mrs Ramsay, bears a striking resemblance to Woolf's photographer great-aunt. Julia Margaret Cameron has been considered one of the most important female photographers of the second half of the nineteenth century. She used a technique based on soft focus and long exposure, which allowed for the registration of her models' movements, imbuing her pictures with a sense of life and energy (Brusius 346–7). Although the invention of the collodion (or wet-plate) process in 1851 significantly reduced the length of exposure time, photographic subjects were still subjected to long moments of motionlessness (Hankins and Silverman 166).[61] This represented a significant challenge even for adults, not to mention children, whom Cameron photographed with great delight. She recorded in her memoir-essay, 'Annals of my Glass House' (1874), an occasion in which her photograph had been ruined by a child's sudden burst of laughter:

> I was half-way through a beautiful picture when a splutter of laughter from one of the children lost me that picture, and less ambitious now, I took one child alone, appealing to her feelings and telling her of the waste of poor Mrs Cameron's chemicals and strength if she moved. (Cameron 49)

In the end, Cameron's efforts resulted in victory, and her picture was entitled 'Annie' (1864), on the back of which Cameron wrote 'My first success' (Cameron 49). The images of Woolf's great-aunt encompass a set of contradictions. She scolded her models for not sitting still while at the same time she rejected contemporary doctrines that advocated the importance of sharp clarity in photography. She wrote in her memoir: 'When focusing and coming to something which, to my eye, was very beautiful, I stopped there instead of screwing on the lens to the more definite focus which all other photographers insist upon' (Cameron 51). Cameron did not regard her photographs as mere reproducible images made by a 'machine' but highlighted their uniqueness as art objects. In a

[61] Cameron's models had to sit still for three to seven minutes (Powell 18).

letter to an unknown recipient, she wrote that her photograph of Thomas Carlyle ‘is more like a block of marble out of Michael Angelo’s hands than a work of such a machine as the camera […]’ (Smith and Weaver 66). The fact that Cameron compares her work with that of a sculptor bears significance as it reveals the tactile dimensions of photography.

Indeed, in the late nineteenth century, photography was as much a tactile as a visual art form. The glass plates Cameron used for developing her photographs, had to be handled carefully as they were extremely sensitive to external factors, and even a knock or breathing on the surface could destroy the negative (Powell 17). Manual skills thus played an important role in photography. Furthermore, as the development of negatives took place in ‘semi-darkness’ (Powell 17), the artist’s first contact with the picture was a tactile experience: her fingers palpated the photograph’s texture before her eyes saw the gradually clearing contours of the model. Cameron never regarded her camera as a mere technological device but viewed it as a living entity, an organic extension of her own body: ‘[f]rom the first moment I handled my lens with a tender ardour, and it has become to me as a living thing, with voice and memory and creative vigour’ (48). The camera almost acquires an autonomous existence while being linked to the photographer’s body and facilitating her interaction with her surroundings, like an extra sense organ.[62] Interestingly though, Cameron did not view her camera simply as a prosthetic eye but rather as an organ able to simultaneously register various sense perceptions – sight, sound and touch – all of which contribute to the memorialising of the subject. This interplay of different senses does not lead to clearer outlines and sharper details; but, under Cameron’s eyes and hands, the model transforms into a malleable ‘block of marble’, veiled in semi-obscurity and lacking rigid borders.

Yet as Mirjam Brusius observes, impreciseness was not synonymous with the absence of artistic or technical skill in Cameron’s case, but represented a conscious choice that ‘encourage[d] viewers to interact with the images while also revealing the photographic process’ (342). In a sense, Cameron’s nebulous works offered a sharper and more faithful picture of reality because they did not

[62] In the second half of the nineteenth century concerns around the photographer–camera relationship proliferated, many people giving voice to their worries about the reversal of roles: the camera becomes alive while the photographer transform into a machine. For illustrated examples see Hankins and Silverman, pp. 161–162. While imbuing her ‘lens’ with life, Julia Margaret Cameron did not seem to worry about her body becoming an automaton. On the contrary, she used her camera to enhance her sense perceptions and her connection with the world.

try to conceal the ephemerality of the subject through superfluous material décor. Cameron's aesthetic thus can be described as a form of firmly soft touch that pins down the subject without divesting him/her of free movement. Her photographs succeed in lastingly touching the viewer through their ability to create an effect of, to borrow Mrs Ramsay's term, 'trembling' light. While being aware of her own as well as her guests' mortality, Mrs Ramsay manages to "catch" a moment of genuine intimacy:

> It could not last she knew, but at the moment her eyes were so clear that they seemed to go round the table unveiling each of these people, and their thoughts and their feelings, without effort like a light stealing under water so that its ripples and the reeds in it and the minnows balancing themselves, and the sudden silent trout are all lit up hanging, trembling. So she saw them; she heard them; but whatever they said had also this quality, as if what they said was like the movement of a trout when, at the same time, one can see the ripple and the gravel, something to the right, something to the left; and the whole is held together […]. (116)

Similarly to Cameron's pictures, Mrs Ramsay's vision represents an interplay of contradictions. While she is convinced of the penetrating clarity of her own sight, the narrative draws attention to the inevitable fallibility of her perspective. Her vision suffers a double, even triple distortion. The water acts as a first distortive element, but Mrs Ramsay's perspective is also clouded by the movement of the fish and her own short-sightedness (15). Her mental image moves in and out of focus, refusing to settle on a central point, instead allowing for the simultaneous emergence of subject and surroundings, for- and background, 'something to the right, something to the left'. Through the techniques of soft focus and long exposure, Mrs Ramsay succeeds in glimpsing into her guests' inner world, and though her insights are often fallible, she nevertheless creates moments of sympathy and safety, making those surrounding her feel 'together in a hollow, on an island', temporarily protected by the threatening 'fluidity out there' (106).

At the same time, Mrs Ramsay's efforts to freeze time are not entirely devoid of violence. Her thoughts and gestures often betray an unconscious desire for possessiveness and control over the lives of others. She wishes to preserve her children in eternal youth: 'Oh, but she never wanted James to grow a day

older or Cam either. […] Why […] should they grow up so fast? Why should they go to school?' (64, 65) Mrs Ramsay's gesture of stilling the movements of her children echoes the photographic technique of Julia Margaret Cameron, whom Woolf described, in an essay written in 1926 – as an artist loving her models yet submitting them to almost unbearable physical terror: 'She cared nothing for the miseries of her sitters nor for their rank. The carpenter and the Crown Prince of Prussia alike must sit as still as stones in the attitudes she chose, in the draperies she arranged, for as long as she wishes.' (Woolf, 'Julia Margaret Cameron' 37) Though Mrs Ramsay's and Cameron's memory-preserving activity is rooted in a kind of motherly love (Woolf likens her great-aunt's love for photography to a tigress' concern for her cubs, 37), the underlying violence of their endeavour is strongly articulated. As Mrs Ramsay admits: '[P]eople might say she was tyrannical, domineering, masterful, if they chose; she did not mind' (*TTL* 65).

Similarly to Cameron, Mrs Ramsay transforms her environment into a photographic studio, which she arbitrarily arranges according to her own artistic preferences. This becomes most evident in the dinner party scene, when Mrs Ramsay allocates seats (making sure to place potential marriage subjects next to each other), arranges table decorations, and supervises the serving of the meal. Though she makes a repeated effort to achieve perfection, she constantly faces obstacles: the harmonious composition of the fruit dish is broken by a hand reaching out to take a pear, the peaceful dinner is disturbed by Augustus Carmichael's asking for another plate of soup, and even the seating arrangement turns out to be flawed: Lily does not sit next to Mr Bankes, the perfect husband candidate. And yet, despite all these errors, Mrs Ramsay manages to create a brief moment of sympathy, in which an ordinary gesture, such as looking at the same bowl of fruit, unites people, without blurring the distinctions between them: '[Mrs Ramsay] saw Augustus too feasted his eyes on the same plate of fruit […]. That was his way of looking, different from hers. But looking together united them.' (105–106) As the faces of the guests 'on both sides of the table [are] brought nearer by the candle-light', people are enveloped in a soft, hazy light that offers momentary protection against the threatening darkness 'out there', which, retrospectively, comes to be associated with war and death (106). The motif of the melting candle encapsulates Woolf's ideas about sympathetic union: its light is not strong enough to inundate the whole room, yet it gently illuminates people's faces, while the melting wax embodies the principles of firm softness, at once

guarding against the fluidity of the night and acting as a *memento mori*. As in *Jacob's Room*, *To the Lighthouse* also sets the fragile, semi-soft and semi-luminous matter against the ruthless waste of human life. At the same time, through Mrs Ramsay's ambiguous portrayal, Woolf shows how the act of capturing character is inherently imbued with a sense of oppression.

Woolf was preoccupied with the possibilities of sympathetic coexistence throughout her life, but these questions gained special significance for her in the aftermath of the First World War. In her essay 'On Being Ill', which first appeared in T. S. Eliot's *The Criterion* in 1926, she wondered about the limits of fellow feeling in illness, suggesting that distress and pain are not shareable experiences:

> We do not know our own souls, let alone the souls of others. Human beings do not go hand in hand the whole stretch of the way. There is a virgin forest in each; a snowfield where even the print of birds' feet is unknown. Here we go alone, and like it better so. Always to have sympathy, always to be accompanied, always to be understood would be intolerable. (*Essays* 4: 320–1)

In this passage sympathy itself becomes an ailment, a dangerous infection that dissolves the body's self-protective layers and intrudes into its intimate recesses, almost like a parasite. While in the texts discussed so far Woolf viewed the act of 'catching' others as a prerequisite of sympathy, in 'On Being Ill' she drew attention to its dangers. The verb 'catch', besides referring to the act of taking hold of something or someone, also means to contract a disease or be helplessly affected by a desire/emotion (*OED*).[63] Through this complex linguistic play Woolf subverts categories of active and passive, owner and possessed, suggesting that fellow feeling stretches between the two ends of the scale. 'On Being Ill' highlights the perils of falling into extreme sympathy: excessive openness and softness might lead to contamination, a form of identity loss caused by the other's violent penetration into the subject's body. Total openness and the failure to put up a

[63] *Online Oxford English Dictionary*. www.oed.com. Accessed 10 August 2018. In the eighteenth century medical practitioners often described sympathy as a form of contagious illness that spread not only among the organs inside the same body but also between different human beings. See, for example, the works of the Scottish physician, Robert Whytt (1714–66): *Physiological Essays* (1755) and *Observations on Dropsy of the Brain* (1768).

certain degree of resistance might jeopardise individual boundaries and transform the subject into an indistinguishable component of the mass, an idea linked explicitly to war logic. Woolf associates constant sympathy seekers (and givers) with marching soldiers 'in the army of the upright', while she calls people who temporarily recoil from fellow feeling, 'deserters' (*Essays* 4: 321).[64]

The image of marching soldiers carries negative connotations in Woolf's works because it indicates the loss of individual human values. During the time she was writing 'On Being Ill' and *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf repeatedly returned to questions of individual and communal identity. While recovering from a mental breakdown in July 1926, she recorded in her diary how reading poetry helped her 'bring back a sense of [her] own individuality', and fuelled her desire to 'make a looking glass with shell frame' (*Diary 3*: 103). The motif of the shell-framed mirror encapsulates the essence of sympathy for Woolf, which lies in the modelling of the self's outlines from a firmly soft material. The shell frame protectively embraces the subject's silhouette without isolating it definitively from its surroundings. The shell – an object that many Woolfian characters were fond of, from Jacob to the Ramsay children – has a solid but not impenetrable texture, which at once separates from and connects the animal to the environment. After a long illness, Woolf gave voice to her need for a sense of unity-in-separateness. In the same journal entry, she recorded her reaction on seeing people for the first time following her recovery:

> My instinct at once throws up a screen, which condemns them [random passers-by]: I think them in every way angular, awkward & self assertive. But all this is a great mistake. These screens shut me out. Have no screens, for screens are made out of our own integument; & get at the thing itself, which has nothing whatever in common with a screen. The screen making habit, though, is so universal, that probably it preserves our sanity. If we had not this device for shutting people off from our sympathies, we might, perhaps, dissolve utterly. Separateness would be impossible. But the screens are in the excess; not the sympathy. (*Diary* 3: 104)

[64] Anxiety about excessive sympathy dates back to older times. In the eighteenth century, Scottish moralist Henry Mackenzie (1745–1831) drew attention to the problems inherent in unrestricted sympathetic communion, which can easily become a tool for manipulation, compelling the benevolent subject to perform charity against his/her will. See Csengei p. 38.

The absence of a ‘screen’ has dangerous consequences as it might lead to the disintegration of one’s sense of self, which represents an important precondition of sanity, as Woolf put it. Temporarily ‘shutting off’ people ‘from our sympathies’ is necessary for the preservation of our mental and physical wellbeing. Yet Woolf also draws attention to the drawbacks of humans’ ‘screen making habit’, which risks preventing the subject in reaching out to other bodies. Ultimately, Woolf’s entry finishes on an affirmative note: ‘But the screens are in excess; not the sympathy’. A soft yielding to the other might indeed be dangerous, nevertheless constitutes an artistic possibility embraced by Woolf. The ‘snowfield where even the print of birds’ feet is unknown’ represents a place at one desired and anxiety-inducing, poised between two extreme forms of violence: total restraint from bodily contact and pain-inflicting touch. Woolf’s understanding of intimacy thus is driven by the possibilities of violence, both in the sense of being the recipient of violence and perpetrating it, suggesting how sympathy is not simply a question of form or aesthetics but a matter of life (and death).

Lily Briscoe and the possibilities of solace

The aesthetic and real-life dimensions of sympathy are intricately intertwined in Woolf’s fiction, and represent a central concern of *To the Lighthouse*, whose central character, Lily Briscoe, is an artist. Lily’s artistic activity comprises the basic characteristics of Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of sympathetic coexistence. She wishes to paint a picture which is ‘feathery and evanescent’ on the surface, ‘one colour melting into another like the colours on a butterfly’s wing; but beneath the fabric must be clamped together with bolts of iron’ (186). Lily views her canvas as a ‘hollow’, where art and life, past and present, release and tight hold interweave: ‘And she began to lay on a red, a grey, and she began to model her way into the hollow there. At the same time, she seemed to be sitting beside Mrs Ramsay on the beach.’ (186) Through her experiment with colours and shapes, Lily gradually comprehends that hollows can be created only through a firmly light touch, which cares for the subject’s individual contours without compulsively trying to get hold of him/her. She is able to finish her painting when she finally accepts the fact that Mrs Ramsay cannot be resurrected in her physical reality but her memory can be preserved in the shape of a few purple lines on a white

canvas (58). When Lily understands that clear sight is not synonymous with sharp outlines and minute details, she succeeds in "catching" Mrs Ramsay both on an artistic and affective level:

> It was strange how clearly she saw her, stepping with her usual quickness across the fields among whose folds, purplish and soft, among whose flowers, hyacinths or lilies, she vanished. […] For days after she had heard of her death she had seen her thus, putting her wreath to her forehead and going unquestioningly with her companion, a shadow, across the fields. The sight, the phrase, had its power to console. Wherever she happened to be, painting, […] the vision would come to her, and her eyes, half closing, sought something to base her vision on. (197)

Genuine sympathetic sight, Woolf suggests, happens in a semi-luminous zone, behind the half-closing eyelids of the viewer, where reality, fantasy and memory are intricately woven in the tapestry of love. The purple folds, among which Mrs Ramsay's figure continuously vanishes and re-emerges, remind us of Merleau-Ponty's fold, a term he uses as a synonym for hollow to describe our ever-changing relationship with the world: we are folds 'that [were] made and can be unmade' (*PP* 223). In Lily's imagination, Mrs Ramsay becomes an organic part of nature's rhythm, of the gentle undulation of purple landscape in which her individual contours dissolve, only to reappear a moment later. The hyacinth or lily field transforms into a soft purple fabric in which Mrs Ramsay's figure becomes a fold, at once part of the field's flesh and separate from it. This image shows a striking difference to the soldiers' agonising trembling in *Jacob's Room*. While the hyacinth field accommodates Mrs Ramsay's outlines, allowing her to become part of its lifecycle, the cornfield rejects the flat bodies of 'tin soldiers', whose artificial and rigid contours remain clearly discernible among the yellow corns. Mrs Ramsay's sight as a distant violet fold has an unexpected emotional effect on the mourning Lily, who finally finds a sense of solace and peace. As she sets the adored woman's memory free, letting her partially melt in the flower field, Lily manages to gently lay hands on Mrs Ramsay and bring the painting to completion. Through the implicit comparison between the (flower/crop) field scenes in *Jacob's Room* and *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf critiques Edwardian portrait-making techniques, characterised by artificiality and minute composition,

and she favours instead a character-drawing method closer to Post-Impressionist aesthetics.

Lily's vision of Mrs Ramsay among the violet flowers recalls the painter's later musings on the conditions of fellow feeling. Near the end of the novel, Lily ponders how love cannot be restricted within the confines of a pre-established and fixed form but just as a person can wear many shapes, love also has a polymorphous nature:

> They [Lily and Mr Carmichael] only mumbled at each other on staircases; they looked up at the sky and said it will be fine or it won't be fine. But this was one way of knowing people, she thought: to know the outline, not the detail, to sit in one's garden and look at the slopes of a hill running purple down into the distant heather. She knew him in that way. (211)

Thinking about her relationship with Mr Carmichael, Lily concludes that language does not represent the most adequate means of getting to know others. Although they have barely changed a few words of courtesy, Lily feels deep sympathy for Mr Carmichael, whom she knows not in detail but in outline, 'like the slopes of a hill running down into the distant heather' (211). It is important to note that Lily's interpretation of love, both in the case of Mrs Ramsay and Mr Carmichael, contains an element of dynamism. Mrs Ramsay walks across the field, almost breathing together with the flowers, while Mr Carmichael's figure is associated with the slopes 'running down'. Lily's aesthetics, largely based on Post-Impressionist principles, suggest that trying to coerce a subject into a fixed template fails to account for the polymorphous nature of human beings. This might represent, according to Lily, one of the explanations why people often get Mrs Ramsay "wrong". Every character associates Mrs Ramsay with ideal beauty, which they equate with flawlessness: the perfect matching of minor details. Instead, Lily offers an alternative interpretation:

> Beauty had this penalty – it came too readily, came too completely. It stilled life – froze it. One forgot the little agitations; the flush, the pallor, some queer distortion, some light or shadow, which made the face unrecognisable for a moment and yet added a quality one saw for ever [sic] after. (193)

Lily reacts to Mr Bankes's definition of beauty, who associates Mrs Ramsay's 'astonishing' charm with 'the shape of a woman, peaceful and silent, with downcast eyes', sitting still in her grey dress (192–193). Lily protests against this view of Mrs Ramsay because it transforms the woman into a frozen, untouchable ideal. As an artist, Lily rejects the idea of restricting human nature within the limits of a fixed, clear form. By focusing too heavily on decorative details, one risks missing out on the substance of beauty, which lies in the chiasmic space between light and shadow, flush and pallor, sharpness and distortion. What remains etched in memory is not the clear composition of the face but the blurred outlines of a figure swaying rhythmically in the distant purple field.

Nevertheless, Lily's aesthetics do not suggest a total abandonment of reality in favour of ephemeral impressions. While she criticises Mr Bankes's depiction of Mrs Ramsay, the narrative subtly highlights the partial validity of his views: after all, Mr Bankes is the only character who, despite not fully understanding Mrs Ramsay's portrayal as a purple triangle, shows genuine interest for Lily's art and feelings. For Lily, her artwork does not simply pose an aesthetic problem but is intricately bound up with real-life questions: her attempt at sympathetic union with Mrs Ramsay. Before Mr Bankes steps behind her easel, Lily muses on the difficulties of getting a glimpse into Mrs Ramsay's 'sealed' interior world, which is likened to a tomb holding 'sacred inscriptions' (57). As she recognises the inevitability of Mr Bankes's approach, Lily gets alarmed not only because she fears artistic criticism but also because she feels that her whole inner life, 'the residue of her thirty-three years' has been exposed (58). She calls this experience 'an agony', while at the same time admitting that 'it was immensely exciting' (58). Mr Bankes's gentle enquiring about her work results in a moment of unexpected sympathy: 'This man had shared with her something profoundly intimate. […] [S]he had not suspected that one could walk away down that long gallery not alone any more but arm in arm with somebody' (60). Mr Bankes's scientific gaze, rooted in realism, and Lily's affinity for abstraction intertwine in a common endeavour to grasp Mrs Ramsay.[65]

[65] Despite their different professions, Mr Bankes's (botanist) and Lily's (painter) perspectives have more in common than the characters initially think. Woolf creates a link between their worldviews through flower imagery, a central element in their work. In Lily's vision, Mrs Ramsay crosses the purple field with a wreath of white flowers around her head. Though the narrative does not reveal the name of the flower, the reader suspects that the plant Lily refers to is the asphodel, which is mentioned by Mr Bankes earlier in the novel. While talking to Mrs Ramsay on the phone, Mr

Lily's artistic vision thus is rooted in an amalgamation of closeness and distance, physicality and abstraction, haziness and clarity. Though one can detect fundamental differences between Lily's Post-Impressionist art and Julia Margaret Cameron's photographs, their attempt at capturing human nature shows some essential similarities. Marina Warner's summary of Cameron's photography can be applied to Lily's, and by extension, Woolf's aesthetics:

> The images quiver and dissolve in response to the flickering, evanescent indeterminacy of thought – the way in which images in memory lack definition, especially at the edges, how remembered faces or scenes move in and out of focus with gaps and lesions, how mental picturing possesses uncanny clarity and presence while simultaneously jumping and wobbling and eddying. (217)

Mrs Ramsay simultaneously appears as an uncannily clear presence and wobbling illusion: she is both a still shape with downcast eyes – as Mr Bankes sees her – and a fluid purple shadow vanishing in the hyacinth field, as Lily imagines her. Lily's and Mr Bankes's perspective together constitute the core of Post-Impressionism: the coexistence of firmness and softness, clarity and blurred outlines. These artistic principles transcend not only Edwardian portrait-making techniques but also the painting methods of the Impressionists, the latter being implicitly critiqued by Woolf in *To the Lighthouse*.

Near the beginning of the novel, as Mrs Ramsay walks with Charles Tansley on the beach, she observes Mr Paunceforte, the painter in 'Panama hat and yellow boots', who 'softly, absorbedly' imbues 'the tip of his brush in some

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Bankes imagines how her face is composed by the three dancing Graces, who join hands in 'meadows of asphodel' (34). The interwoven hands of the Graces (symbolising grace, charm, and beauty) resemble the shape of a wreath, gently encircling Mrs Ramsay's head, while at the same time, reminding readers of her imminent death. In Homer's *Odyssey*, the Plain of Asphodel is 'the place in the Underworld where all the dead dwell, leading a shadowy continuance of their former life in the world. The asphodel (whence "daffodil") is a flowering plant of the lily family […]'. *The Oxford Companion to Classical Literature*, edited by M. C. Howatson, 2011, www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199548545.001.0001/acref-9780199548545. Accessed 7 July 2018.

It is probably not a mere coincidence either that the asphodel is part of the lily family, another significant flower in the novel. Besides naming her painter character Lily, Woolf also places Mrs Ramsay's figure in a lily field, where the latter walks 'with her companion, a shadow', an implicit reference to the shadowy existence of the deceased in the Underworld. And the mythological threads do not finish here. *To the Lighthouse* ends with Mr Carmichael, 'the old pagan god', letting 'fall from his great height a wreath of violets and asphodels which, fluttering slowly, lay at length upon the earth' (225). After Mr Carmichael's ritualistic burial gesture, Lily succeeds in bringing her picture to completion, and ultimately, laying the dead to rest.

soft mound of green and pink' (17). With a slight irony in her voice, Mrs Ramsay then adds that '[s]ince Mr Paunceforte had been there […] all the pictures were like that […], green and grey, with lemon-coloured sailing-boats, and pink women on the beach' (17). What Mrs Ramsay seems to be objecting to in Paunceforte's art is too much softness, which transforms his picture into a totally blurred image, indistinguishable from his other works. Mrs Ramsay feels the absence of the artist's individual fingerprint on the canvas. Her critique chimes with Fry's opinion, formulated in 'The Post-Impressionists' (1910):

> Impressionism encouraged an artist to paint a tree as it appeared to him at the moment under particular circumstances. It insisted so much upon the importance of his rendering this exact impression that his work often completely failed to express a tree at all; as transferred to canvas it was just so much shimmer and colour. (82)

Fry identifies as the major shortcoming of the Impressionists the rigid insistence on capturing images in their momentary fleetingness, without modifications. However, according to Fry, this does not lead to more clarity, but on the contrary, to the distortion of the tree, which becomes a random amalgamation of 'shimmer and colour'. In contrast, the tree on Lily's painting is the result of a deliberate artistic choice, preceded by her musings on the geometric composition of her picture: 'Yes, I shall put the tree further in the middle; then I shall avoid that awkward space' (92). Lily's picture, despite being possibly destined to become a mere dust catcher in the attic, represents a unique artistic achievement, unlike Mr Paunceforte's indistinguishable paintings.

Woolf's obsession with statuary and visual arts illuminates her wider concerns with ideas about sympathetic coexistence both on an aesthetic and real-life level. In her fiction and personal writings she emphasised the importance of affective touch in interpersonal as well as artistic encounters. She drew attention to the need for tangible bodily contact in intimacy, while also suggesting the inherent dangers of touch, which is often heavily invested with a sense of oppressive violence. As such, her works oscillate between the desire to pin down the subject and the anxiety of perpetrating violence. Yet, Woolf suggests, the latter represents a risk one must take in order to create intimate hollows, in which

emotional encounters between people as well as between humans and art objects can take place.

In her 1906 travel journey Woolf described one of her most sensuous (and sensual) immersions in art. Her first encounter with the sculpture of Hermes at the Acropolis is depicted as a form of visceral delight. She describes the stone as 'acquiescent to the sculptors [sic] hand: it is almost liquid, of the colours of alabaster, & of the solidity of marble. There is a beautiful polished foot which you may stroke with your own soft flesh.' (*A Passionate Apprentice* 319) The sight of Hermes triggers a strong sense of excitement, experienced in the viewer's body yet transcending corporeal limits: the eyes almost become independent 'creatures', which attach themselves to the statue, freely 'springing' in the hollows of the marble. 'Springing', at the same time, echoes an earlier passage in the diary, in which Woolf described Hermes as having 'a spring in his step' (319). Furthermore, the stone, a combination of softness and hardness, transforms into living material, inviting the spectator's searching gaze and touch. Seeing proves to be insufficient in front of 'such beauty', which can truly be grasped only via tactile perception: the caressing of the marble foot 'with your own soft flesh'. The employment of the same words in the depiction of sculpture and viewer momentarily suspends the borders between the two, allowing for the interpretation of the contemplating subject as the extension of the art object. The marble statue comes to life while the living human subject is "petrified" by the sculpture's ineffable beauty. Woolf drew the figure of the art lover as someone who does not, to borrow Merleau-Ponty's words, 'look at a thing, fixing it in its place' but lets his/her gaze 'wander in the halos of Being' ('Eye and Mind' 126). By portraying corporeality in its firmly soft materiality, Woolf offered an alternative interpretation of the body, which she viewed as malleable matter, yielding to the artist's fingers, without losing its own borders.

By caring for imperfectly curved, three-dimensional forms, Woolf partly questioned Lawrence's celebration of flat, hieroglyphic figures. The author at the centre of the next chapter, Elizabeth Bowen, shares many of Woolf's preoccupations: in her interwar novels Bowen draws attention to the dangers of flattening out a human being by trying to sum up his/her traits, and transforming him/her into a decorous realist painting. Nevertheless, the Second World War (before which Lawrence had died of tuberculosis, and at the beginning of which Woolf decided to end her life) marks, in Bowen's fiction, a partial departure from

her predecessors' concept of sympathy. Bowen, who spent most of her time in London during the war, showed with acute sensibility how violence can shatter the softly luminous hollows of sympathy, leaving behind mere dust and debris.

Elizabeth Bowen: 'that other means of communication'

In a 1941 essay entitled 'Virginia Woolf', Elizabeth Bowen writes: 'When [*Between the Acts*] ends it is, as at the end of [Woolf's] other books, as though a lamp had been switched off at its base, but the current is still waiting along the flex' (*Collected Impressions* 74).[66] Bowen's praise of *Between the Acts* draws attention to an important effect of Woolf's writings: their ability to make the reader (at least some readers) feel an irrational attraction towards the fictional world and its inhabitants, even after the actual reading process has ended and characters have retreated in the shade of the switched-off lamp. In Bowen's opinion, Woolf's characters do not dissolve in complete obscurity but are enveloped in a kind of semi-'luminous halo' that invites the reader's continued affective attention and sympathy (Woolf, *Essays* 4: 160).

The complex coexistence of light and shadow, clarity and obscurity forms the basis of Bowen's appreciation of Woolf's fiction, and also represents a prominent aspect of Bowen's own novels written in the 1930s and 1940s. In her first piece of non-fiction, a 1928 essay entitled 'Modern Lighting', Bowen describes modern light as an element that gently veils the human body through an interplay of luminosity and shadow which approaches the eyes tenderly instead of violently penetrating and blinding them. Even interwar commerce has acknowledged humans' emotional relationship to light, or what Bowen calls, 'this affectability of ours': 'The shops will nurse this fad […] with a certain tenderness. Electric candlesticks are delicate with shields, to turn light back against the paneling. […] [O]rnate pendant bowls toss light up to the ceiling, away from the eyes.' (*People, Places, Things* 27). The gentle luminosity of shaded lamps and electric candlesticks allows the subject to experience a sympathetic immersion in the visible world, which at once yields to the exploring human gaze and withdraws into mystery and unknowingness.

In a later essay, 'Out of a Book' (1946), Bowen ponders the similarities between feeling for fictional characters and real-life people, identifying as the basis of sympathy the blurry, unfixable nature of humans:

[66] Hereafter *CI*.

> [T]he characters who came out of my childish reading to obsess me were the incalculable ones, who always moved in a blur of potentialities. It appeared that nobody who mattered was capable of being explained. […] I can trace in all people whom I have loved a succession from book characters – not from one only, from a fusion of many. 'Millions of strange shadows on you tend.' (*CI* 267)

According to Bowen, human nature resists total illumination, the latter being synonymous with complex, rational knowledge about other minds. Instead, fictional and real subjects alike exist as dynamic beings, caught up in the constantly changing interplay of clarity and haziness, light and shadow. The novelist, in her encounters with characters and real people, is surrounded, to borrow from the Shakespearean allusion, by 'millions of strange shadows', which impede clear sight, allowing thus for a more sensuous form of affective interaction. The sympathetic illumination at the heart of Bowen's writings remains imbued with a degree of shadiness in her later writings too. As she remarks in a 1969 essay, 'New Waves of the Future': 'Without [shadows], light could be meaningless, overpowering! *Could* one inhabit for long a shadowless world?' (*People, Places, Things* 43, emphasis in original) Bowen's rhetorical question implies the perils of 'shadowless' existence, which leads to invisibility and immateriality: the absence of a feeling body capable of leaving imprints in its surrounding environment.

Indeed, several critics have commented on the incorporeal nature of Bowen's characters by drawing attention to their lack of agency through their transformation into abstract symbols.[67] In their influential study, *Elizabeth Bowen*

[67] Allan Hepburn occupies a different stance in the critical debate on embodiment in Bowen's fiction. He argues that Bowen's obsession with protagonists' bodily nature (or as he puts it, 'palpability') in her 1930s novels, stems from her readings and translations of French realist fiction. Hepburn points out how Bowen disliked English writers' failure to imagine characters' 'palpability', which she associated with authors' tendency to fall in excessive sympathy with their fictional creatures (1055). Instead, Bowen turned to nineteenth-century French literary tradition, especially Gustave Flaubert's and Guy de Maupassant's works, to learn 'objectivity, even cruelty, in rendering characters' (1056). Allan Hepburn. 'French Translations: Elizabeth Bowen and the Idea of Character.' *University of Toronto Quarterly*, vol. 79, no. 4, 2010, pp. 1054–1063. While French writers' influence on Bowen's interwar novels is undeniable, and characters' physicality occupies a significant place in her fiction, this chapter suggests that her commitment to creating flesh-and-blood protagonists is not dichotomous with sympathetic principles; on the contrary, it represents the basic precondition of feeling for and with others.

and the Dissolution of the Novel, Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle have argued that bodily contours in Bowen's novels are dissolved to such a degree that characters cease to exist as human beings and they 'uncannily *become* words and sentences', a characteristic that hints at postmodernism (xvii, emphasis in original). Maud Ellmann has suggested that 'to call [Bowen's characters] "people" is to misrepresent the inhuman logistics of desire in [Bowen's] texts, whereby persons are reduced to place-holders or algebraic variables' (*Elizabeth Bowen: The Shadow Across the Page* 23). Whether linguistic or mathematical signs, Bowen characters seem to lose their bodily connection with the world and each other, and transform into abstractions unperceivable through sensuous perception. For a better understanding of the above-mentioned critical perspectives, it is important to mention that Bennett and Royle examine Bowen's *oeuvre* from a deconstructionist point of view, while Ellmann reads the Anglo-Irish writer's works through psychoanalytic lens. As such, Ellmann's emphasis on the 'inhuman' nature of interpersonal desire and her introduction of the concept of the 'shadowy third' (borrowed from the title of Bowen's 1923 short story 'The Shadowy Third'), as a nonhuman, external force intruding into dyadic, heterosexual relationships, can be partly explained by the psychoanalytic framework of her investigations (23). Ellmann interprets the notion of 'shadow' as a threatening element that invisibly haunts protagonists, violently penetrating their liaisons and corroding humans' corporeal outlines until they become reduced to two-dimensional mathematical symbols.

While acknowledging the validity of Bennett and Royle's, and Ellmann's arguments, my approach diverges from theirs in significant ways. This chapter argues that in Bowen's interwar novels, such as *To the North* (1932) and *The House in Paris* (1935), shadows are necessary for the unfolding of intimacy, which happens between phenomenal bodies, enmeshed in what Merleau-Ponty calls the flesh of the world.[68] The presence of shadows indicates not only that one possesses a corporeal reality but also that, even in close relationships, a certain sense of mystery remains: the object of our perception is never fully knowable. This, on the other hand, does not imply that the other is infinitely unknowable. From a parallel reading of Bowen and Merleau-Ponty emerges a form of sympathy sensitive to the vulnerability and senescence of human bodies,

[68] Hereafter *TTN* and *HP*.

without denying their flesh-and-blood materiality and the embodied nature of interpersonal connections. A phenomenological interpretation does not exclude the ephemerality of bodies (put forward by Bennett and Royle, and Ellmann); on the contrary, by taking into consideration the fleeting quality of human existence, Merleau-Ponty's philosophy and Bowen's fiction elucidate the corporeal dimension of the subject's interactions with the world.

At the same time, while in her interwar novels, Bowen seems to value blurriness, in her fiction written during the years of the Second World War, she complicates ideas about indistinctness. In *The Heat of the Day* (1949) and her wartime short stories, to which I will turn in the last section, Bowen suggests how excessive shadowiness can have dangerous, even fatal consequences not only in the lives of individuals but also in communities. *The Heat of the Day* shows how complete obscurity might lead to treachery and the loosening of interpersonal bonds, while it can also result in a threatening form of dissolution to which people in wartime London are helplessly exposed.

'Deadeningly clear': *The House in Paris* and the limitations of hyper-visibility

Before turning to a reading of Bowen's writings, it is essential to clarify what Bowen meant by bodily *matter*. Materiality, for Bowen, is not synonymous with unchangeable definitiveness and rigidity. On the contrary, as *The House in Paris* suggests, finalised substantiality shuns, rather than nourishes, intimacy. The novel is set in the interwar period, in the Parisian home of Naomi Fisher, where two children, Henrietta and Leopold spend a day together. From the second part, entitled 'The Past', the reader learns the tragic love story of Leopold's parents, Karen Michaelis and Max Ebhart. While being engaged to Naomi (Karen's best friend), Max has an illicit love affair with Karen, which results in Karen's pregnancy and Max's suicide. This tragic end, nevertheless, is preceded by a significant moment that illuminates Bowen's ideas about embodied sympathy. After informing her mother about the unexpected engagement of Naomi and Max, Karen muses on Mrs Michaelis's reaction to the news. Mrs Michaelis tries to identify Max's motivation for wanting to marry Naomi, but as Karen observes, her mother's method of pinning down human personality is heavily invested with a sense of violence and desire for domination:

> [Mrs Michaelis's] well-lit explanations of people were like photographs taken when the camera could not lie; they stunned your imagination by *being* exact. Would those unmysterious views in a railway carriage make you visit a place, even in dreams? You could not fall in love with the subject of an Edwardian camera-portrait, with polished shoulders, coiffure and curved throat. The lake showing every ripple, the wood showing every leaf, or the stately neck with pearls are too deadeningly clear. It is more than colour they lack. Without their indistinctness things do not exist; you cannot desire them. (118, emphasis in original)

Echoing Woolf's famous essay 'Character in Fiction' (1924), Bowen gives voice to her conviction that hyper-visibility does not lead to more accurate knowledge about others. Mrs Michaelis's 'well-lit' explanations, resembling 'Edwardian camera-portrait[s]', might provide a minutely detailed and exact description of people's exterior appearance ('coiffure', 'stately neck with pearls'), but they fundamentally fail to capture human nature, which extends beyond the realm of pure visibility. Mrs Michaelis petrifies people and transforms them into 'deadeningly clear' objects with 'polished shoulders' and 'curved throat[s]', and consequently she ceases to care for the other's feeling body, which, as phenomenologists suggest, cannot be restrained within rigid frames. Through Mrs Michaelis's method of portrayal Bowen warns readers against reading techniques that try to draw characters' facial contours with such realistic precision that they leave no room for 'indistinctness', which represents an essential precondition of 'falling in love'. Mrs Michaelis considers '[b]lurs' and 'wrong shapes, ridgy lights, crater darkness making a face unhuman [sic] as a map of the moon' insignificant artificialities that fail to communicate anything about the subject (118). '[S]he was blind to those accidents that make a face a face […], and float the object, alive, in your desire […]' (118). What she actually fails to apprehend is that these 'accidents' represent precisely the preconditions of sympathetic perception. The irregular lines of light create, to appropriate Woolf's phrase, a 'luminous halo' around the 'crater darkness' without definitively eliminating its shadiness. As both the narrator of *The House in Paris* and Merleau-Ponty highlight, sympathetic coexistence with the other can materialise only if the subject becomes attentive to 'blurs' and 'wrong shapes', which ultimately make

the object of perception a living entity, allowing self and other to 'float' together in 'Being' (Merleau-Ponty, *VI* 144).

Mrs Michaelis dismisses 'modern photography' because she finds it 'exaggerated and woolly', creating 'an overgreat sense of mystery […] leading to artiness' (119). She considers it 'inexcusable' to depict personality as 'mysterious' and thus to deny the clarity of 'character' (119). She discards her daughter's recent photographs taken by some artist friends of Karen, because the pictures' blurred quality, in Mrs Michaelis's opinion, obscures Karen's real nature. Though Karen partially shares her mother's 'anti-romanticism', the former also acknowledges the importance of indistinctness in vision, which opens up the affective dimension of our relationship with the sensible: '[T]he exercise of any sense, sight most, starts up emotion. You cannot debunk everything.' (119) As Merleau-Ponty writes: perception is born 'from the phenomenon of "indeterminacy" [bougè]' (*PP* 51). Interestingly, an earlier translation of *Phenomenology of Perception* uses a photographic analogy to define the working mechanisms of sensing. According to the 1962 English translation, perception comes into existence prior to 'any science […] from the phenomenon of the "blurred" photographic effect' (50).[69] Echoing Woolf's preference for nebulous effects in visual arts, exemplified by Julia Margaret Cameron's soft focused photographs, Bowen also stresses the importance of, what Mrs Michaelis derogatively calls, the 'woolly' quality of images. The double meaning of 'woolly' encapsulates the core of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology: the adjective can refer simultaneously to vagueness and the tactile property of the wool, suggesting what Merleau-Ponty labels in his last work, the chiasmic intertwining of the visible and the tactile.

It is crucial to clarify at this point that by 'mystery' and 'indistinctness', Bowen does not mean complete abstraction or retreat into fleeting immateriality. On the contrary, she emphasises the significance of the body as a living, vulnerable, three-dimensional entity that cannot be 'pressed flat without losing

[69] See Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *Phenomenology of Perception*. Translated by Colin Smith. Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962. The original French reads 'phénomène du <bougè>'. Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *Phénoménologie de la Perception*. Paris, Éditions Gallimard, 1945, p. 62. 'Bougè' is the past participle of the verb 'bouger', meaning 'to move'. Though the original French does not explicitly refer to photography, Colin Smith's translation, '"blurred" photographic effect', might suggest that an image usually becomes blurred if the camera is not stable at the moment of picture taking.

form' (*HP* 119). As Karen concludes: 'What Mrs Michaelis said about Max and his reasons for wanting to marry Naomi would be, no doubt, true – if you pressed him flat like a flower in a book. But he had a thickness you had to recognize […]' (119). In this context, the verb 'press' expresses violence and desires for possessiveness even at the cost of intrusion into the other's body. Through Karen's criticism of her mother's reading methods, Bowen exposes the dangers of restricting people within the fixed boundaries of a realist portrait.

Karen's musings about the nature of character pose an important question: how can we preserve the 'thickness' of humans without completely refraining from touch? Merleau-Ponty's philosophy provides a possible answer. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, he describes sensation as a non-cognitive act, which does not concern the part of my being 'for which I am responsible and upon which I decide – but rather another self that has already sided with the world […]. Between my sensation and myself, there is always the thickness of an *originary acquisition* that prevents my experience from being clear for itself' (224, emphasis in original). According to Merleau-Ponty, our perception of the world, including other human beings, cannot be reduced to a detached visual act, a rational possession of the object of our sensation. Our experience of others is never a flat and unambiguously clear phenomenon but one enveloped in thickness, which instead of separating us from the other, represents the medium in which our encounter can unfold and materialise. The term 'thickness' acquires a greater significance in Merleau-Ponty's later work, such as *The Visible and the Invisible*, where it is associated with the flesh of the world. The flesh, neither matter nor idea but an 'element of Being', represents the 'tissue' between seer and world, which 'sustains and nourishes' their relationship (*VI* 132–133). It is the body's thickness and its organic embeddedness in the flesh that allows us to connect to the sensible, made up of things that are 'not flat […] but beings in depth, inaccessible to a subject that would survey them from above, open to him alone that […] would coexist with them in the same world' (*VI* 136). This kind of coexistence is precisely what Mrs Michaelis's approach to Max lacks. In her attempt to 'press him flat', she fails to care for his 'thickness' and 'depth', and instead she detachedly surveys him 'from above'. The gesture of pressing flat becomes heavily invested with violence, an act that, in its possessive attempts, closes off the hollow between self and other, that sympathetic in-between space where moments of togetherness can unfold.

Mrs Michaelis's reading method remains phenomenologically problematic because it reduces the 'possibility' and 'latency' inherent in the thick, three-dimensional body (*VI* 132–133). Her technique resembles what Merleau-Ponty calls the assembling of 'leaves or layers', which means 'to flatten and to juxtapose, under the reflective gaze, what coexists in the living and upright body' (*VI* 138). However, as Karen remarks, compiling different layers does not lead to the better comprehension of Max's persona, whose matrimonial wish cannot be put down to a clearly defined, unquestionable reason. Through the description of Mrs Michaelis's approach, based on hyper-visibility and cognitive possession, Bowen dismisses the 'well-lit' 'camera-portraits' of the Edwardians. Her criticism resembles Woolf's earlier rejection of Edwardian techniques in *Jacob's Room* and her non-fiction written in the late 1920s. Both writers rebuff Edwardian portraying techniques because these try to make the reader believe that human character is a 'pressed flower', falling out of the book directly into the reader's lap. By presenting humans as flat and reducible to 'well-lit' characteristics, the Edwardians fail in what Woolf called in 'Character in Fiction' the 'business of intimacy' (48).[70]

However, it is important to stress that neither Woolf nor Bowen meant that fictional characters should be described as floating mirages constantly slipping through their creator's, or indeed the reader's fingers. In 'Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown' Woolf highlighted the importance, but at the same time the difficulty of creating a 'solid, living, flesh-and-blood Mrs Brown […] from the gleams and flashes of [the] flying spirit' (*Essay*s 3: 388). In this, Woolf and her younger fellow writer Bowen saw the greatest challenge and one the most fulfilling rewards of modernist fiction. It is probably not a mere coincidence either that Woolf opted for a tactile metaphor when defining the new 'business' of the modernist novelist: the 'catching' of Mrs Brown. In this context, the act of catching is free from associations of violent grasping and rapacious possessiveness, and it rather

[70] Woolf wrote in 'Character in Fiction': 'The writer must get into touch with his reader by putting before him something which he recognises, which therefore stimulates his imagination, and makes him willing to co-operate in the far more difficult business of intimacy. And it is of the highest importance that this common meeting-place should be reached easily, almost instinctively, in the dark, with one's eyes shut.' (*Essays* 3: 48) According to Woolf, the encounter between author, reader and character represents an instinctual and sensuous experience, achieved through a kind of bodily closeness 'in the dark'. Shutting one's eyes, nevertheless, does not mean the total absence of visibility. Instead, it suggests an embodied immersion into the flesh of the world, which leads to an alternative sight: a form of vision that does not scrutinise from above but being already braided into the thickness of the sensible, 'coexists' with the latter in intimate proximity.

evokes an image of delicate handling. At the same time, the verb 'catch' carries connotations of fleetingness and quickness, indicating a form of touch the aim of which is not a tight and coercive hold but rather a light stroke, attentive to the other's boundaries. Character chasing for Woolf and Bowen is not fuelled by a wish for subordination but expresses a desire of laying hands on the other with gentleness, openness and curiosity, while simultaneously accepting the inevitable possibility of hurting and becoming injured in the process: 'Dismally he [the writer] must admit bruises received in the pursuit' (*Essays* 3: 388). In her attempt to gently 'catch' her characters, the writer herself becomes woundable as a result of her openness to her own fictional creatures. In other words, the relationship between author and character is based on mutual vulnerability and reciprocity: the writer envisages the characters but the latter also affect their creator, and indeed the reader. In order to fully participate in the 'business of intimacy', both writer and reader have to learn the art of tender touch, at once firm and light, perseverant and releasing, torn between an irreconcilable desire of holding on to and the painful realisation of its impossibility.

'Characters must materialize': the preconditions of sympathetic character-making

In her essays on creative writing, published predominantly in the aftermath of the Second World War, Bowen often reflects on the possibilities of an embodied rather than purely intellectual approach to fictional characters. In a 1946 essay entitled 'Notes on Writing a Novel', she writes: 'Characters *must materialize* – i.e., must have a palpable physical reality. They must be not only see-able […]; they must be to be felt [sic]. Power to give physical reality is probably a matter of the extent of the novelist's physical sensibility, or susceptibility' (Lee, *The Mulberry Tree* 38, emphasis in original). She employs the same phrase, 'physical reality', in a 1949 letter addressed to a young fellow writer, Enid Williams, to whom Bowen offers professional advice: 'I think your writing still too disembodied. One feels the poetic significance of persons and objects you write about, but not nearly enough their physical reality' (Hepburn, *The Weight of a World* 4). Bowen emphasises that, in order to create valid and memorable characters, the writer must open to the sensible, the world made of tangible-visible flesh, experienced through a 'physical sensibility' irreducible to intellectual skills.

Bowen sees in the novelist's relationship with her characters the perfect illustration of sympathetic principles. In 'A Novelist and His Characters' (1969), she elaborates on the origin of fictional characters, which are neither simply 'made' nor 'found', but 'called into being' out of an 'azure transparency', a 'mist' of forgotten experiences, dreams and imagination 'like a ship coming forward out of a fog at sea' (Hepburn, *Listening In* 183). Bowen's description of the meeting place between writer and character as an 'azure transparency' and misty horizon anticipates one of her later reflections on the nature of character- making, which she explicitly links to the war:

> I once said, in writing about the novel, that at the outset of the story, my characters were rather like persons seated opposite to me in a railway carriage. […] And I envisaged such a carriage or compartment as it used to be, during after-dark travel in the war, when the whole thing was darkened down to a single small blue lamp up in the ceiling. So that when one first entered the carriage and sat down, one saw only opposite one four or five veiled forms, without features, without characteristics. And only as these people moved or expressed themselves, and partly as one's eyes naturally became accustomed to the half dark, did the features and the personality that goes with the features begin to emerge. ('The Technique of the Novel', *The Weight of a World* 17)[71]

The novelist's quest for her characters becomes, for Bowen, a sensuous, corporeal experience that presupposes the writer's interweaving with the Merleau-Pontian sensible, which accommodates the half-visible silhouettes of the characters. Echoing Woolf's 'Character in Fiction', Bowen emphasises the limitations of clear sight in interpersonal relationships, which are rooted in a kind of misty semi-darkness. The pale blue lamplight allows the observer to trace the dim outlines of his/her fellow travellers, which become gradually more familiar not due to a sudden intellectual illumination but through the subject's ability to fold deeper and deeper into the fabric of the visible, until his/her look 'envelops, palpates, espouses the visible things' (Merleau-Ponty, *VI* 133). In other words, the seer is not a detached spectator scrutinising the visible from an external

[71] 'The Technique of the Novel' is a speech Bowen delivered at Harvard University in 1953 (Hepburn, *The Weight of a World* 394).

perspective but his/her tactile-visible gesture is possible due to his/her immersion in the flesh (s)he perceives. Dimness does not create a distance between self and other, but on the contrary, it envelops them in the flesh that, due to its thickness, can never become completely transparent. As 'The Technique of the Novel' shows, the war shapes what it means to affectively approach the other: both real-life people and fictional characters. Many modernists advocated a form of sympathy that was not rooted in clarity – often associated with violent ownership and military logic – but became articulated in semi-obscurity, which allowed for the exploration of the other's blurred contours through the caressing palpitations of the eye. Bowen sets against a hyper-visible and rational mode of enquiry a sensuous, embodied intimacy, which allows a better insight into the mysteries of other minds.

Indeed, Bowen distances herself from a purely rational attitude towards characters. She rejects the possibility of 'inventing' characters because this suggests an intellectual endeavour that does not account for the 'thickness' of humans. The result of trying to 'invent' a human being, Bowen argues, would be '[a] clockwork figure, mechanized, empty of breath', a description that recalls Mrs Michaelis's gesture of pressing Max flat ('A Novelist and His Characters' 182). As such, fictional creatures are not born out of 'the hardest thinking' but of the 'desire of the author that [they] should exist' (183). Instead of the cerebral and goal-oriented word 'invent', Bowen suggests using the verb 'perceive' to describe the process of bringing characters into the world:

> The character begins to come into existence at the moment it is first *perceived* by the author. As he contemplates it, it grows, it intensifies. Physically, it materialises. Both in its inner being and in outward form it takes on for him an urgent, pressing reality. A reality which […] he will convey to, make felt by, others: his readers. (183, emphasis in original)

Perception, in this case, is coterminous with the novelist's 'open susceptibility', another phrase Bowen used earlier to describe the precondition of sympathetic character-making. In 'The Roving Eye' (1952), she depicts the task of character creation as a 'state of open susceptibility', 'involuntary' and 'unconscious', in which the writer does not deliberately look for subjects but lets them 'find' her (*The Mulberry Tree* 63–64). Characters thus come into existence at the

crossroads of internal and external, active creation and passive waiting, imagination and reality. The writer's contemplative gaze is not (only) the manifestation of hard intellectual labour but is imbued with a sense of sensuous longing. Bowen's sea-metaphor indicates a liminal space, an invisible bridge between internal subjectivity and external reality, conscious creation and sensuous contemplation, where fictional characters are not mechanically assembled from an authoritative, vertical perspective but met and greeted by the author. Bowen's sea imagery is further elucidated by Merleau-Ponty's definition of togetherness as 'an intimacy as close as between the sea and the strand' (*VI* 130). The image of the sea and the shore illustrates the principle of sympathy at the centre of this thesis: though water and land are two different elements, their union resembles the tactile-visible proximity between self and other. In the indefinable, misty hollow between shore and sea characters are born and acquire 'physical reality', which, for Bowen, represents the common ground where author, character and reader can form a community, based on togetherness and mutual influence.

Bowen's use of the terms 'perception' and 'open susceptibility' can be better understood by reading it alongside Merleau-Ponty's concept of the 'phenomenal field'. In *Phenomenology of Perception* Merleau-Ponty critiques the way empiricism and intellectualism define human perception. While empiricists hold the view that an object is perceived as the sum of its physical properties, intellectualists claim that the visual field is actually constructed by our cognitive abilities. Merleau-Ponty rejects both approaches because they fail to account for the role of the living body in perception. Empiricists transform the body into a lifeless mechanism, a mere object among other objects; intellectualists, on the other hand, disregard our corporeal existence, substituting it for abstract mental skills. In contrast, phenomenological sensing, according to Merleau-Ponty, is the 'living communication with the world that makes it present to us as the familiar place of our life. The perceived object and the perceiving subject owe their thickness to sensing.' (*PP* 53) Things become phenomenologically meaningful for us because they form part of our phenomenal field. The concept of 'phenomenal field' designates neither a strictly 'inner world' nor 'mental fact', nor an external, objective realm but rather describes our bodily entrenchment in the fabric of the world (*PP* 57). Since we are embodied subjects in the first place, the only way we can engage with the sensible is through our corporeality. As

Merleau-Ponty and Bowen suggest, we can establish a genuine sympathetic connection with the visible only if we renounce our attempts at 'survey[ing] [it] from above' and clutching it violently with our intellectual skills. Instead, our coexistence with the sensible unfolds through a bodily-affective relationship, which takes place in an environment in which self and other are enmeshed.

In her essays, Bowen often gives voice to her suspicion of a merely intellectual relationship between novelist and characters, and instead explores the affective-bodily bond between them. In 'Notes on Writing a Novel', she describes character-making as an act of falling in love. A good novel, according to her, should contain:

> at least one *magnetic* character. At least one character capable of keying the reader up, as though he (the reader) were in the presence of someone he is in love with. […] The character must do to the reader what he has done to the novelist – magnetize towards himself perceptions, sense-impressions, desires. (39, emphasis in original)

In an eponymous essay on one of her favourite writers, Jane Austen, Bowen calls Mr Darcy, the protagonist of *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), a 'magnetic' character because he has not been '"created" in the limited brainbound sense so much as observed fleetingly out of the corner of an eye, recollected uncertainly, speculated upon' (*People, Places, Things* 212). The limitations of sight come again into focus, this time unequivocally linked with rationality. According to Bowen, characters able to awaken readers' sympathy are those created in an instinctive and speculative way, left open to further sensuous exploration and not arbitrarily framed like an Edwardian portrait.[72] As such, Bowen's insistence on the novelist's 'open susceptibility' is in stark contrast with the seemingly omniscient and undoubtedly patronising mode of character reading exemplified by Mrs Michaelis in *The House in Paris*. If the novelist's relationship with her characters is grounded in a rationally unexplainable, intuitive form of attraction, the very same driving force determines readers' feelings for characters. What

[72] Bowen's ideas about sympathetic character-making are close to what literary critic John Bayley called the author's love for his/her characters: 'What I understand by an author's love for his characters is a delight in their independent existence as other people, an attitude towards them which is analogous to our feelings towards those we love in life; and an intense interest in their personalities combined with a sort of detached solicitude, a respect for their freedom' (7–8). John Bayley. *The Characters of Love: A Study in the Literature of Personality*. Constable, 1960.

makes the reader feel 'keyed up' in the presence of Bowen's characters is her complex portrayal of the delicacies of bodily interaction, what Emmeline, the protagonist of *To the North*, calls 'that other means of communication', which transcends the limits of rationality, and exposes the malleability of the human flesh (*TTN* 69).

Furthermore, Bowen does not simply reject but finds the novelist's possessive attitude towards her characters 'distasteful' ('A Novelist and His Characters' 184). Instead of a hierarchical approach in which characters are subjected to their creator's will, Bowen proposes a more sympathetic attitude towards fictional beings, describing them as 'stormy inhabitants' of the writer's 'being' and not her possessions (184). Bowen's metaphor comprises the seemingly oxymoronic nature of author–character rapport: while characters are dwellers of the novelist's 'being', they are not unequivocally subordinated to their creator's will. On the contrary, their 'stormy' independence can be a source of great anguish and restlessness for the author. However, what prevents fictional creatures from 'running riot' is the fact that their existence is limited within the boundaries of the plot, which Bowen defines as 'the author's intention' (184). The word 'intention' is significant because it suggests a rational mental act, thus drawing attention to the complex nature of literary creation. While Bowen depicts the first step of the creative process as a sensuous and unconscious encounter, she also admits that writing fiction requires a great deal of intellectual skills: after the meeting with her characters has taken place, the novelist analyses her creations, 'evaluates them', 'explores them to find out how they would react to this, that or the other circumstance' (184).

However, although cerebral analysis is an inherent part of novel writing, it also represents a phase fraught with the potential of violent encroachment, as the novelist subordinates characters 'to an inhuman pressure – keeping them at the alert, and extracting the utmost from them, forcing them along' (184). When the writer's 'open susceptibility' gives place to the 'inhuman pressure' of the intellect, the line between gentle holding and violent grasping becomes fragile, imbued with the dangers of 'inventing' mechanical and 'flat' figures, a creative method from which Bowen firmly dissociates herself.[73] Yet while *The House in*

[73] Bowen might be implicitly alluding to E. M. Forster's differentiation between 'flat' and 'round' characters in *Aspects of the Novel* (1927). Forster defines 'flat' or 'two-dimensional' characters as 'constructed round a single idea or quality' (75). An example of a 'flat' character would be Mrs Micawber in Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* (1850) (Forster 75). 'Round' characters, on the

Paris and her essays suggest her rejection of hyper-visibility as a method of intellectual grasping of the other, in some of her novels written in the interwar and post-Second-World-War period, she also draws attention to the dangers of complete transparency in self-other ties. If the hyper-visible mode risks reducing the subject to a flat being, the mere sum of its 'deadeningly clear' physical qualities, transparency threatens to annihilate the body altogether, transforming it into an invisible and intangible ghost that hovers uncannily over interpersonal relationships.

'Her face appeared transparent': *To the North* and the perils of invisibility

Bowen's preoccupation with the problem of invisibility and its consequences in human relationships becomes strongly articulated in *To the North*. The novel is set in interwar London, where the young Emmeline Summers leaves with her sister-in-law, Cecilia, following the untimely death of Henry, Cecilia's husband and Emmeline's brother. Emmeline epitomises the modern woman: she manages a travel agency, which she also co-owns, drives a car, and undertakes business trips to foreign countries. Based on this description, the reader might expect to encounter a strong-willed and determined woman; however, this is rarely the case. Through her portrayal of Emmeline, Bowen shows the perils of the complete dissolution of the subject's material borders, which can lead to cruelty in interpersonal connections. Though it is beyond the scopes of this chapter to engage with Bowen's feminist ideas in detail, it is important to briefly touch upon the ways in which reading Bowen in parallel with Merleau-Ponty might challenge existing feminist interpretations of *To the North*, bringing into view an alternative, more sympathetic version of male-female interaction.

Emmeline's life changes dramatically when she encounters Mark Linkwater, a young lawyer, with whom she falls in love. As their clandestine relationship gradually unfolds, they meet regularly in Markie's flat and

other hand, due to their ability to change and act in unexpected ways in various situations, can never be summed up in a sentence, and as such they can awaken in the reader deeper feelings than 'humour and appropriateness' (81). Forster argues that Jane Austen's characters, such as Lady Bertram in *Mansfield Park* (1814), can be viewed as examples of 'round' characters (81–2). See E. M. Forster. *Aspects of the Novel*. 1927. Penguin, 1962. Though Forster's classification is simplistic in many ways, his definition of 'flat' characters resembles Bowen's in the sense that both writers associated flatness with immobility and fixity. As such, 'flat' characters, by being restricted within a predetermined frame, not only lose their own freedom but also curtail the reader's interpretative possibilities.

occasionally in public spaces. From the beginning, Markie's intentions are dubious, often imbued with desires for domination. Indeed, several commentators on *To the North,* mostly from a feminist point of view, have remarked upon the unlikable nature of Markie, who seduces and ruthlessly abandons Emmeline, then suddenly reappears in her life expressing his wish to continue their casual love affair without committing himself. Ellmann has called Markie 'satanic', someone who, together with Bowen's other caddish male characters, such as Eddie in *The Death of the Heart* (1938), represents the 'killer of the heart' ('Elizabeth Bowen: The Missing Corner' 77). As Ellmann has proposed, the lovers' relationship in *To the North* is heavily invested with gender stereotypes.

Phyllis Lassner writes that the reader is 'given no reason to sympathise with Markie', adding that '[i]n the light of his characterisation, even empathy is dissuaded' (62). Furthermore, Geneviève Brassard suggests that despite Bowen's rejection of feminism in her essays, she makes 'narrative interventions that look and sound feminist' (286). Brassard alludes to Bowen's dismissal of Woolf's version of feminism formulated in the latter's non-fictional writings. For Bowen, Woolf's feminist manifestoes represent her least successful writings: 'What must inevitably be called Virginia Woolf's feminism appears most strongly in her doctrinal, non-fiction books; most notably in *A Room of One's Own* and *Three Guineas* – it was a bleak quality, an aggressive streak, which can but irritate […]' ('The Achievement of Virginia Woolf', *CI* 81). Despite Bowen's open rejection of Woolf's feminism, Brassard argues that Bowen's portrayal of 'complex women […], her unfailing eye for and ear for male weakness, and her clinical analysis of women's motivations and actions' actually question her critique of feminism (286). Similarly to previous commentators, Brassard locates Bowen's feminism in her emphasis on 'male weakness', epitomised by Markie, whose 'opportunistic sexual morality "mark[s]" him […] as a typical male of the period who worships female purity but still wants women to be sexually available for his needs' (290). Indeed, Markie's wish to possess Emmeline is partly rooted in his selfishness and male pride, but by dismissing his attitude as merely misogynistic, we would miss out on the complexity and ambiguity of male touch in *To the North*. Bowen might have been a feminist but her version of feminism was definitely far from antagonistic gender models. Instead, she was interested in a form of feminist approach that refused to view female-male relationships in strictly hierarchical terms, and embraced the vulnerability of human flesh as a

basic precondition of intimate coexistence. Bowen's fiction written in the 1930s delineates an alternative feminist sensibility, based on the mutual corporeal fragility of seer and seen, rather than the female body's exploitation by men. In several of her interwar novels, men and women are equally portrayed as both the victims and agents of violent incorporation, a phenomenon she rejects in favour of an interpersonal intimacy founded on affective attention and care for the fragility of human flesh.

To the North captures the complexity of Bowen's feminist ideas, which transcend classical accounts of gender binaries. While I do not wish to downplay Markie's exploitative behaviour towards Emmeline, it is important to recognise that his emotions cannot be reduced to mere carnal desires imbued with male superiority. After all, he rarely enjoys his lover's docility; on the contrary, he finds her acquiescence viscerally frightening. Bowen's unpublished correspondence also warns against simplistic readings of Markie's persona. In a letter dated 10 September 1932, Alfred E. Coppard, Bowen's fellow writer and friend, commented on *To the North*: 'It seems a pity that Markie had to share [Emmeline's] death, altho [sic] her own tragic end began to menace me long before the end. It loomed as inevitable somehow, altho [sic] I could not believe it would be suicide. […] Markie is amazingly well drawn, a disagreeable & yet blameless figure.' (HRC, Elizabeth Bowen Collection, Box 10, Folder 6) Coppard's letter summarises succinctly the difficulty of pinning down Markie, who is at once a 'disagreeable & yet blameless figure'. Bowen shares Coppard's opinion in her reply on 15 October 1932: 'I agree: it was tough on Markie, having to come in on that death' (HRC, A. E. Coppard Collection, Box 25, Folder 7). Markie might not be entirely 'blameless', and he is surely not agreeable, but as Bowen and Coppard acknowledge, his character cannot be easily categorised.

Undoubtedly, Markie's caddishness represents a central concern of the novel, corroborated in several scenes. His possessive attitude is expressed both verbally and in coercive tactile gestures. During one of Emmeline's visits to his flat, Markie – resenting the fact that his lover refuses to understand the 'moral' of his story about the detrimental effects of female employment – firmly presses 'one hand on the back of her neck to make her sit quiet. For she was inclined to get up and stroll round the room, as elusive in mind as in person.' (*TTN* 176) This passage elucidates the ambiguous nature of touch in *To the North*. While Markie's grip on Emmeline's neck is heavily invested with violence, his gesture is

also rooted in his necessity for a bodily sense of security, which the volatile Emmeline cannot offer him. Indeed, throughout their tumultuous affair, Markie constantly feels threatened by Emmeline's physical elusiveness.

Markie's dreads become strongly articulated in Paris, where he accompanies his lover on a business trip. While waiting in the hotel hall for Emmeline, who has returned to her room to fetch a fresh pair of gloves, Markie muses poignantly on the possibility of her definitive disappearance:

> She might have melted in some corridor of their hotel, her bodily vanishing would […] hardly have been incredible; for he had been oppressed since last night by sensations of having been overshot, of having, in some final soaring flight of her exaltation, been outdistanced: as though a bird whose heart one moment one could feel beating has escaped from the hands. (140)

Markie's desire to hold Emmeline still between his hands is delicately poised between tenderness, an image of care and love, and a sense of oppressiveness. The heart imagery subtly illustrates Markie's ambivalent feelings, at the same time suggesting the dangers of Emmeline's corporeal absence, which hovers hauntingly over their relationship, at times hindering the establishment of intimate contact. When Emmeline suddenly returns to her room, leaving the puzzled Markie behind, the narrative likens her to Eurydice, the Greek nymph who dissolves among the shadows of the Underworld when her husband fails to respect his promise of not looking back at her during their journey out from the Underworld (144).[74] In a somewhat similar fashion, Emmeline, who often seems to inhabit both the real, physical environment and a sort of ghostly, transcendental realm, repeatedly slips through the fingers of Markie, who tries to retain her in the present moment.

Though Markie's attitude towards Emmeline cannot be either denied or absolved, it is important to acknowledge that his often seemingly possessive touch is imbued with a sensation of utter despair caused by his inability to hold (on to) the woman without feeling constantly threatened by her dissolution. As

[74] Bowen's use of the Eurydice-myth is similar to Woolf's implicit reference to Ovid's story in *Jacob's Room*. In both novels, the characters' inability to hold on to the beloved person results in the latter's physical dissolution, and ultimately death. In Woolf's novel Jacob dies on the battlefield, while in *To the North*, Emmeline loses her life in a car accident.

such, the novel outlines a model of touch rooted in both female and male vulnerabilities, complicating existing feminist readings focusing exclusively on women's subordination, and instead working towards a more collaborative or dialogical feminism. The relationship between Emmeline and Markie reveals the lovers' mutual fragility, caused partly by their inability to preserve their own bodily contours, while simultaneously reaching out to the other.

To the North thus repeatedly reminds us of the inherent perils of characters' failure of self-materialisation. Too much transparency and volatility threaten to annihilate the subject and inhibit interpersonal contact, as Emmeline's portrayal suggests. From the beginning of the novel, Emmeline is described as having a 'transparent skin', which is a recurrent motif in the book, and becomes emblematic of the fundamental difference between her and Markie's interpretation of love (42). During their flight to Paris, Markie contemplates Emmeline's translucency: 'Close in the strong light and distant in roaring silence her face appeared transparent; watching the thoughts come up like shadows behind it he thought of the Scottish queen's ill-fated delicate throat, down which, says a chronicler, red wine was seen to run as she drank.' (135) 'Strong light' and translucency do not contribute towards a clearer understanding of Emmeline's being, on the contrary, her thoughts remain 'shadows' for Markie, while the parallel between her and the 'ill-fated' Scottish queen foreshadows the novel's tragic end. Emmeline's transparency is harmful because it is associated with extensive openness and subordination, which represent a serious threat to her corporeal integrity. In her interaction with Markie, her bodily reality often evaporates, leaving no space for the unfurling of intimacy. While Emmeline's translucency frequently serves the purpose of arousing Markie's carnal desire, at times imbued with gentleness and care, volatility proves to be inadequate for creating lasting bonds. Instead of providing a better insight into the other's being, limpidity dissolves the materiality of the viewed subject, rendering it untouchable. Hence, while both invisibility and hyper-visibility (as discussed in relation to *The House in Paris*) act as blocking forces in interpersonal relationships, *To the North* seems to favour a state of semi-transparency.

Emmeline's semi-transparency coincides with the solidification of her corporeal outlines and the affirmation of her autonomy. When, during a quarrel, Markie, 'tightening his grip on her elbows', accuses her of not thinking and failing to have 'common sense', she reacts with unexpected firmness:

> [S]top, Markie, you're hurting me rather […] A shadow of more than incomprehension, of distaste, even of boredom crossed Emmeline's face which, always transparent to feeling, now seemed, pale and clear in the lamplight, more than half transparent materially. She said: 'You are like an insurance company,' and did not explain why. (181–182)

Emmeline's 'always transparent' face acquires a new quality, at once 'pale' and 'clear', opaque and limpid, volatile and solid. Her complexion becomes 'more than half transparent materially', suggesting that while she continues to reveal her innermost being to her lover, she also starts to show resistance by hardening her bodily contours. Resistance, in this context, does not necessarily mean hostility but rather the precondition of self-preservation, and by extension, of intimate touch. By conserving her own borders, Emmeline momentarily withstands her lover's verbal and physical intrusion, and asserts her own agency.

Moments of self-materialisation, however, prove to be fragile and transitory. As the love affair inevitably approaches its end, Emmeline becomes increasingly alienated from her body. After a sudden breakup with Markie, she ceases to exist as a living body in the Merleau-Pontian sense. She loses connection not only with her lover but also with her immediate surroundings. She walks the once familiar London streets like a ghost haunted by 'the whirr' of her unanswered calls to Markie (*TTN* 223). Her body starts to slowly disintegrate metaphorically: the typist in the travel agency observes how Emmeline 'look[s] all to bits' (222), while the narrator comments on Emmeline's crumbling sense of self: 'Walking the streets blindly she did not know that she thought, till a knuckle grazed on the wall, a shout as she stepped off into the traffic recalled her from depths whose darkness she had not measured' (223). She becomes unable to identify experiences and sense perceptions as belonging to *her*: 'The bleeding knuckle, the angry face of a man shouting down from a lorry were like bright light flashed in her eyes […]' (223). Emmeline feels her own body parts as separate entities, objects detached from herself: it is not *her* knuckles that get hurt but *a* and later *the* knuckle, whose bleeding she views with unconscious and distant disinterestedness. Emmeline's blind movements differ strikingly from the Egyptians' sensuous 'fumbling' in the dark, celebrated by Lawrence in *Women in Love*. While, according to Lawrence, the Egyptians experienced their 'existence

surging in the darkness of the world', Emmeline loses not only sight of but also touch with her environment (Lawrence, 'Art and Morality' 165). She ceases to be a perceiving subject, who, intertwined with the flesh of the world, 'feels that [s]he is the sensible itself coming to itself and that in return the sensible is in [her] eyes as it were [her] double or an extension of [her] own flesh' (*VI* 114). The 'sensible' can be no longer located in the eyes of the woman, who 'walk[s] the streets blindly' and fails to attach meaning to the 'bright light flashed in her eyes'. The world no longer represents the extension of her flesh but transforms into a chaotic whirl, in which her own corporeality comes under an increasing threat of annihilation.

Emmeline's disembodied state culminates in the last chapter of the novel, when her inability to return to her own body results in her and Markie's tragic death. Literal death, nevertheless, is preceded by the gradual disintegration of the feeling body, which transforms into insentient automaton. The final scene of *To the North* illuminates Merleau-Ponty's criticism of empirical sciences that reduce the sensing body to a mere mechanism, devoid of affectivity and movement. As he puts it in *Phenomenology of Perception*: in empiricist accounts, the 'living body […] ceased to be my body, that is, the visible expression of a concrete Ego, in order to become one object among all others' (56). Prior to literal death, Emmeline's body first becomes a lifeless object in a mechanical environment in which she loses her capacity to establish a phenomenological relationship with the world. Near the end of the novel, Cecilia, without consulting with Emmeline, invites Markie for dinner in the St John's Wood home of the sisters-in-law. Emmeline, who has not been in touch with Markie for weeks, objects to the invitation but finally decides to attend the dinner. After the dinner Emmeline offers to drive Markie to the station from where he can take a train to Baldock. However, instead of going to King's Cross, Emmeline heads directly to the north.

During their journey, Markie's desires rekindle and he tries to win her back by persuading her to accompany him to his flat. But Emmeline, as Markie soon realises, has already ceased to be a living body. The narrative subtly suggests the metamorphosis of woman into machine: her fingers are hard and cold and her agency lost, as her limbs become the mechanical prolongations of the car. Her frozen hands form an uncanny union with the steering wheel, and her silver slippers cause the speedometer to creep up without any human will involved

(236). She loses sense of her own faculties and Markie's presence beside her: 'She was lost to her own identity, a confining husk' (242). Her impenetrable husk prevents her from connecting to the living world as her sense perceptions gradually shut down: her skin is unable to register touch, and her pupils, which earlier could at least detect some flashes of light, are now only filled with 'night' (240). Emmeline's insentient body becomes one with the accelerating machine which she can no longer control, causing the imminent accident in which the lovers lose their lives.

The couple's last drive transforms into a kind of reversed Orpheus-myth. While in the original Greek story Orpheus leads his wife, Eurydice, out from the Underworld towards the land of the living, in Bowen's novel Emmeline and Markie travel in the opposite direction. In contrast with the Parisian hotel scene, in which Markie dreadfully realises Emmeline's ability to metamorphose into a ghostlike Eurydice, the final episode reveals a different facet of the Eurydician existence. During the lovers' last ride Emmeline is not so much portrayed as a transparent and fleeting entity but more as a hard and opaque object, a prolongation of the machine that contains her. She loses not only her self-transparency (which as I have shown, functions as a precondition of interpersonal proximity), but also the softness of her flesh, an attribute that would permit the yielding of her body to her surroundings. As her body temperature starts to drop under the 'chilly fingers' of 'the North', her limbs simultaneously tighten until they become completely impenetrable by Markie's pleading caress (236). When Markie understands that the woman sitting beside him is nothing more than an empty 'husk', enveloped in the coldness of the night and closed in her rigidity, he renounces trying to bring her back to the realm of the living. Instead, he succumbs to Emmeline's half-conscious guidance that leads them steadily towards death. The final scene of the novel thus illuminates the core of Bowen's idea about corporeal intimacy which happens between feeling, semi-transparent and firmly soft bodies that caress the other with their eyes and, in turn, let themselves be stroked by the other's palpitating gaze.

At the same time, the end of *To the North* intimates a theme that will acquire a crucial importance in Bowen's later wartime fiction: the dangers of dissolving in obscurity. As already anticipated by her blind walking after her breakup with Markie, in the last chapter Emmeline is literally engulfed and annihilated by the dark and cold night. As such, *To the North* flags up the perils

of a complete absence of sight, which can lead to violence and ultimately death. Instead, the novel suggests that the presence of a certain kind of luminosity is important not only for retaining one's bodily integrity but also for understanding other minds. The state of soft luminosity, which implies both a form of misty light and the tactile nature of the visible, becomes emphatic in *The House in Paris* too, especially in Mrs Michaelis's changing attitude towards character reading.

While at the beginning Mrs Michaelis has no doubt about her ability to interpret human personality accurately, later events make her reconsider her previous stance. When Karen returns from an illicit date with Max, she finds the seemingly illegible traces of her mother's message on the telephone pad. Though the first page has been torn off, Karen manages to reconstruct the semi-invisible writing by following the form of the letters engraved on the paper: 'The blank pad was scored with curves where writing had dug through; the sheets were thin, her mother's pencil emphatic. Karen stared at it; then, bringing the pad nearer to light, she took the pencil and traced her mother's dinted writing.' (171) The original message, written with clear black ink, would have violently confronted Karen with her lie of having spent the weekend with a friend, while she actually met Max in Hythe. Mrs Michaelis chooses not to directly accuse her daughter of having lied, but instead, the mother destroys the message, probably being unaware of the barely visible traces left by her pen on the second page of the pad.

Karen's lie shocks Mrs Michaelis on a double level: first, it makes her acknowledge the fact that she does not know her own daughter well enough, but at the same time she also understands the fallibility of her earlier definition of character as an entity reducible to clearly legible physical traits. This realisation impedes Mrs Michaelis in directly unveiling Karen's secret by leaving out the original message with its unambiguous black letters on the white paper. Instead, the mother unconsciously opts for a more sympathetic mode of communication: the second page represents the semi-soft surface that accommodates in its flesh the dents drawn by the nib, at once preserving and blurring the shape of the letters, the reading of which requires Karen's joint effort of sight ('bringing the pad nearer to light') and touch ('she took the pencil and traced […] [the] writing'). Mrs Michaelis's writing with semi-transparent ink can be read as a special form of *écriture féminine.* As Marian Eide suggests in regard to James Joyce's fiction (read through the lens of Hélène Cixous's feminist criticism):

> Writing with blue or black ink that contrasts starkly with the white page, the writer emphasizes the distinction between the imposition of inscription and the blank, existent page. Writing with milk employs nuanced alterations, shadings of difference that at the same time emphasize connection and similarity by virtue of the comparable colors of ink and page. (22)

Writing with milk, a fluid associated with the female body, represents a more sympathetic means of communication than the traditional blue or black ink because the former exists in a harmonious relationship with the page: while the milk is a different substance, its white colour allows for its seamless union with the paper. Yet in contrast with Cixous's emphasis on the fluidity of milk, Bowen highlights the rough quality of letters that are almost engraved onto the page. Karen is able to decipher her mother's message only when she follows the letters with a pencil that becomes the extension of her finger. Looking from a distance is not enough for understanding Mrs Michaelis's lines: Karen has to literally touch the shapes her mother's hand has left on the paper. Nevertheless, the writing does not completely transform into a Braille-language either, as the message's readability remains dependent on the presence of light (Karen takes the pad under the lamp).

Bowen's distrust of blue or black ink acquires special importance in her interwar novels, and can be linked to her association of traditional black ink with violence and military logic. Though *To the North* does not explicitly address the topic of the First World War, the reader can find at least one implicit reference in the novel, which draws attention to the need for a different, more sympathetic means of communication than the 'dark' language of the war. In the second half of the novel, the narrator remarks: 'Across the mind's surface – on which a world's apprehension, strain at home and in Europe, were gravely written – the sense of a spoilt summer, so much prettiness wasted, darkly spread like spilt ink' (175). After the dehumanising consequences of the war, which remain 'gravely written' on the minds of people, language itself becomes 'strained', reminiscent of a painful bruise that spreads 'like spilt ink'. Jessica Gildersleeve interprets the 'strain' of the 'world's apprehension' as an allusion to the possibility of another war, and she views Emmeline's volatility as 'symptomatic of the aftermath of war': Bowen's protagonist 'represents the wounding, or the woundedness, of her generation' (16). Indeed, the narrative draws attention to Emmeline's status as

the representative of a generation painfully scarred by the war when describing her as the 'step-child of her uneasy century' (*TTN* 61). *To the North* shows how the emphatic pen of the war has brutally left its marks in the fragile human flesh until the 'spilt ink' has completely covered and dissolved the sensing body.

If we accept Gildersleeve's explanation that Emmeline's vagueness can be partly put down to the destructive effects of the war, the motif of transparency becomes imbued with a deeper sense. The spreading ink devours the surface of the human body, annihilating it to the extent of invisibility. Even though *To the North* contains only a few references to the war, the novel's preoccupation with the fragility of interpersonal intimacy and the threats of transparent existence can be, at least partly, traced back to the dominating atmosphere of the interwar years, a period caught between the mourning of the past and the anxious anticipation of an unknown future. This future, which became present reality with the outbreak of the Second World War, made Bowen think further about invisibility and affective belonging in her short stories and *The Heat of the Day*, texts written during the years of the Blitz.

The 'cracked' reflector: love and intimacy in wartime

During the Second World War, Bowen had the opportunity to gain first-hand knowledge of the ways in which darkness can erase individual shapes. As an Air Raid Protection warden, she spent many nights walking and observing the deserted streets of London. Lara Feigel describes in detail the cityscape Bowen witnessed during her solitary walks: 'The buses and cars in the street were almost invisible except for a tiny point of light at each side. Lenses on traffic lights were permanently covered by a black metal plate pierced by a single cross. Passing human figures had been reduced to shadows.' (18) After the blackout, London becomes a haunted city, devoid of any trace of life, and importantly, of materiality: vehicles are 'almost invisible', the traffic lights show no colours, and humans transform into fleeting shadows, reminiscent of ghosts rather than flesh-and-blood subjects. This dreary landscape is at times illuminated by the moonlight, which instead of gently enveloping things, and redrawing their erased silhouettes, brutally exposes them to the searching gaze of potential German bombers. The pale beam of Lawrence's acetylene lamp in the Etruscan caves, and 'the softer light of spring mixed with moonlight gliding gently' in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*

(145), transform into blinding brightness in some of Bowen's war stories, in which luminosity becomes associated with the violent gaze of the war.[75]

Bowen's 1944 short story, 'Mysterious Kôr', opens with the uncanny description of London in the moonlight: 'Full moonlight drenched the city and searched it; there was not a niche left to stand in. The effect was remorseless: London looked like the moon's capital – shallow, cratered, extinct. […] The futility of the black-out became laughable […]' (728). Yet the possibility of bombing is not the greatest peril Londoners face: 'The Germans no longer came by full moon. Something more immaterial seemed to threaten, and to be keeping people at home' (728). The danger appears as a magnified force due to its immaterial nature: people are exposed to unknown threats without being able to identify their origin. Nothing seems to escape the cruel gaze of the moon that leaves not a single niche in which humans could sympathetically reach out to the other. Even people who share the same space, show a complete indifference to each other as they melt in the night: 'The wardens turned their faces, mauve in the moonlight, towards the Frenchmen with no expression at all. […] [A] trickle of people […] disappeared quickly, in an abashed way, or as though dissolved in the street by some white acid […]' (729). The moonlight literally erases humans' outlines, brutally corroding their existence like 'white acid'.[76] In the absence of a niche, all that is left behind is a union not of feeling bodies but of abstract shadows: 'blotted into one shadow', Arthur (a soldier on leave) and his lover Pepita 'proceeded towards the park' (729). Having no place of their own where to spend the night together, the couple finds a faint solace in the abstract union of their 'synchronized' shadows (729). Though there are no signs of a concrete air raid, the description of the moon's searching and corroding gaze carries echoes of militarism, thinning the borders between combatant and civilian experience.

[75] While in Woolf's high modernist novels it was still possible to view the searching gaze of the airplane as a form of sympathetic seeing, for Bowen such an explanation becomes untenable. Paul Saint-Amour, for example, has suggested that by appropriating the aeroplane's perspective, the narrator of *Mrs Dalloway* creates a moment of sympathy in which people and non-human entities become intricately intertwined: 'Affiliated with the airplane's mobility and capacity for penetrating overview', the narrator 'is capable of tracing the filaments of feeling, information and fellow-suffering across the metropolis to connect Clarissa with Septimus' (116). Paul Saint-Amour. *Tense Future: Modernism, Total War, Encyclopedic Form*. Oxford University Press, 2015.

[76] The motif of the acid appears in Bowen's other wartime stories too. In 'The Demon Lover' (1941), Mrs Drover fails to recall her past lover's face: 'She remembered – but with one white burning blank as where acid has dropped on a photograph: *under no conditions* could she remember his face' (*The Collected Stories* 665, emphasis in original).

London, the ‘shallow’ and ‘extinct’ ‘capital’ of the moon, acquires an uncanny similarity to the battlefields.

The war’s ability to transform people into ghostly shadows haunted Bowen’s war writings, among them her major novel, *The Heat of the Day*, in which corporeal transparency becomes associated with lack of individuality and undignified death.[77] In the autumn of 1940, the streets of London became the nameless graveyards of many people whose identities could no longer be determined and whose passing away was only marked by their absence ‘from the routine which had been life’ (92):

> [N]ot knowing who the dead were you could not know which might be the staircase somebody for the first time was not mounting this morning, or at which street corner the newsvendor missed a face, or which trains and buses in the homegoing rush were this evening lighter by at least one passenger.
>
> These unknown dead reproached those left living not by their own death, which might any night be shared, but by their unknownness, which could not be mended now. Who had the right to mourn them, not having cared that they had lived? So among the crowds still eating, drinking, working, travelling, halting, there began to be an instinctive movement to break down indifference while there was still time. The wall between the living and the living became less solid as the wall between the living and the dead thinned. In that September transparency people became transparent, only to be located by the just darker flicker of their hearts. (*HD* 92)

Translucency becomes synonymous with anonymity, unlocatedness and the corrosion of facial imprints that ensure the individual value of human subjects. The real horror of the war, according to Bowen, does not consist only in the vast numbers of dead people, but in their ‘unknowness’ and unnoticed absence, their complete dissolution, which transforms even the mourning process into a futile if not impossible endeavour. This innermost dread of material disintegration haunts the protagonist of the novel, Stella Rodney.

[77] Hereafter *HD*.

Stella, a woman in her early forties, lives in London during the Blitz, where she divides her time between work and meetings with her lover, Robert Kelway. Stella's love for Robert is put to test when a mysterious man called Harrison informs her that Robert is a Nazi spy. Following the announcement, he suggests she leave Robert and take up Harrison himself as lover. After hearing the alleged news, Stella's life is torn between her tormenting doubts about Robert's identity and her worries for her son, Roderick, a soldier enlisted in the British Army. When she expects her son's visit, Stella contemplates the fragility of the human self. Every time she 'confront[s] the soldier in battle-dress', she is overwhelmed by 'the fear that the Army was out to obliterate Roderick. In the course of a process, a being processed, she could do nothing to stop, her son might possibly disappear. […] She dreaded dissolution inside his life, dissolution never to be repaired' (49). The vocabulary Bowen employs to render Stella's motherly fears echoes the general anguish and tense atmosphere during the Blitz. What connects dead civilians and soldiers is the constant threat of becoming invisible and bodiless creatures, without any recognisable, and importantly, memorable features. As Neil Corcoran succinctly puts it, *The Heat of the Day* is concerned with the ways in which 'identities in peril' can be preserved amidst the obliterating forces of the war (170).

Several commentators of *The Heat of the Day* have written on humans' fleetingness and the fragility of interpersonal relationships. Bennett and Royle have introduced the concept of 'sheer kink' to indicate the dissolving materiality of the narrative texture, which becomes an ephemeral space where 'narratives and narratees' never 'coincide with themselves', and in which identity is veiled in vagueness (88). Vike Plock, in her close reading of the role of the necktie in *The Heat of the Day*, suggests that in wartime London, where 'human associations form rapidly and intimacy becomes discountable, all sorts of ties […] might easily become oppressive or burdensome and finally will have "to go"' (156). Undoubtedly, *The Heat of the Day* destabilises subjectivity and loosens interpersonal bonds in various ways. However, drawing attention to the precariousness of relationships does not necessarily imply the complete disappearance of affective ties. Painfully aware of the frailty of human flesh, Bowen's wartime novel also highlights the possibilities of intercorporeal intimacy, a form of affective communi(cati)on that takes place between vulnerable bodies, subjected to destructive forces, yet able to create brief moments of proximity. As

Bowen writes in 'The Poetic Element of Fiction', an essay published in 1950 (a retrospective reflection on the literature produced during the war years):

> We cannot really accept, even in our most introverted individualism, the idea of a one-man world, of the solitary consciousness reflecting everything else. And that really, the fact that it concerns itself with two people, with three, with an unnumbered cast of persons, placed in a pattern relating to one another and acting upon one another, does constitute the hold and the future promise of the story […]. (*Listening In* 160)

In a review of Desmond Hawkins's *Lighter than Day* (1940), Bowen uses a similar vocabulary when describing the prerequisites of a good novel, which has 'to respect the human pattern, a pattern largely made of attachments' (*The Weight of a World* 103). Ultimately, human bonds represent the foundation of a fictional story, the 'pattern' that holds the elements of the narrative together. Attachments between humans, and between people and the larger world acquire in *The Heat of the Day* a material, physical reality, which in its ephemerality is still capable, even if only temporarily, of holding bodies together.[78]

Affective bonds, Bowen's wartime fiction suggests, can be forged between flesh-and-blood bodies that care for the other's individual features. In her postscript to her collection of short stories, *The Demon Lover & Other Stories* (1945), Bowen writes how during the war, 'individual destiny became an obsession in every heart. You cannot depersonalize persons. Every writer during this time was aware of the personal cry of the individual' (*The Mulberry Tree* 97). Paying attention to individual traits, however, is not coterminous with obtaining unambiguous, clear knowledge about the other. Similarly to her novels written in the 1930s, in *The Heat of the Day* Bowen stresses the importance of feeling for the blurred features and distortions of the body, which create a semi-transparent

[78] This particular aspect of Bowen's fiction was noticed and commented on by several of her fellow writers. In a letter dated 24 February 1949, Elizabeth Taylor expressed her fascination with *The Heat of the Day* because its characters 'are all real and *physically* real. When they lift a hand, or laugh, it is a real thing that is done. No thin bits, nothing dull.' (105, emphasis in original) Quoted in N. H. Reeve, editor. *Elizabeth Taylor: A Centenary Celebration*. Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012. Taylor's remark represents the most valuable praise Bowen could have possibly received, as it summarises succinctly the latter's major aesthetic principle: '[c]haracters *must materialize*'.

veil around the subject, who at once yields to the stroking eyes of the viewer but at the same time retains his/her own corporeal outlines and resists intellectual appropriation. The need for indistinctness in interpersonal contact, to allude to my earlier reading of *The House in Paris*, remains a central concern in Bowen's post-Second-World-War novel, which at the same time draws attention to the inherent dangers of excessive obscurity. In other words, *The Heat of the Day* shows how blurriness can simultaneously represent a threat to human relationships and be conducive to intimacy.

Recalling her first encounter with Robert, Stella remarks: 'At the first glance they saw in each other's faces a flash of promise, a background of mystery' (95). The pair's first meeting, 'in a bar or club', is enveloped in the roaring sounds and trembling lights of the war sweeping through the streets of London (95). Military conflict often erodes individual features and challenges sympathetic communication but as *The Heat of the Day* suggests, the war can also endow human relationships with a sense of uncertainty necessary for the unfolding of intimacy. Stella and Robert abandon themselves to the first signs of attraction while around them '[t]he barrage banged, coughed, retched; in here the lights in the mirror rocked. […] With the shock of detonation, still to be heard […]; bottles danced on glass; a distortion ran through the view' (96). Their love is born in a hazy environment, among fragile objects and equally vulnerable human beings, where their view of each other is constantly distorted by the wobbling light. The depiction of the war-shaken milieu resembles Bowen's later comment in which she likened *The Heat of the Day* to 'the convulsive shaking of a kaleidoscope, a kaleidoscope also of which the inside reflector was cracked' (qtd. in Ellmann, *The Shadow* 146). The lovers find an inexplicable excitement in the semi-luminous, rocking space in which their attempts at speech are cut short by the 'drumming' noise of the falling bombs (96). Yet the 'convulsive shaking' and broken light also anticipate the precariousness of the protagonists' bond, which, by the end of the novel, fails to remain intact in the face of violent external forces and personal treacheries. The mysterious half-light in the bar, embraced by both Stella and Robert, remains an organic part of the lovers' relationship. At a later moment, Stella ponders Robert's face, a surface on which pallor and shadow intricately intertwine to create an unfamiliarly familiar effect:

> The effect of his being in uniform was that the claylike khaki threw his features into transparent relief […]. The most curious of the qualities he should have, candescence, was at the moment less from his eyes being turned away – their flame-thin blueness was missing. The prolonging of the refusal to look at her became more of an avowal than any look; the fact, for him, of there being nothing more to be said set his mouth in a stone line which itself spoke. (98)

Stella's musings comprise an interesting amalgamation of the visual and the tactile. She names as Robert's most salient characteristic the 'candescence' of his face, yet she is unable to identify the exact source of this luminosity. While earlier she believed that candescence originates from his flaming blue eyes, Robert's averted eyes in the restaurant undermine her presupposition.

The above-quoted passage also corroborates Stella's former thoughts on how uniforms make individual facial features invisible, yet the phrase 'transparent relief', due to its oxymoronic nature, complicates this idea. If a relief is transparent, it is visually non-perceptible. But if we interpret sight in the Merleau-Pontian sense, as an act involving tactile properties, we might gain a better insight into Stella's feelings. Robert's face, resembling a relief, cannot indeed be *seen*, in the conventional sense of the word, but its outlines yield to the eye's caressing palpitations. In a similar vein, his mouth, a fixed and mute 'stone line', appears for Stella as a moving and speaking entity, because she perceives it phenomenologically, and not merely through detached vision. This embodied perception, involving the interplay of senses, allows Stella to experience an intimate proximity with Robert, a feeling that originates less from epistemological certainty than from a kind of emotional, even sensual attention to the delicate details of the other's corporeal existence: those tiny changes in colour, light and shape that, by poising between finalised knowledge and endlessly unknown, inhibit the violent appropriation of the perceived. As Stella concludes: 'To miss from his eyes, mouth, forehead the knowable unguarded play of his nature was for her, for the first time, to be made feel its force. In the unfamiliar the familiar persisted like a ghost […]' (98). Stella finds delight in the unfamiliar mystery of Robert's face, in which she can still spot some ghostly signs of familiarity.

At the same time, the narrative warns against an overvaluation of blurred vision and the unknown aspects of human personality. Robert's eyes (looking

away and devoid of their usual blue light), his silent mouth (closed in an impenetrable 'stone line'), and the unstable, 'ghostly' nature of what Stella has previously thought of as one of his familiar features, can be read as implicit allusions to his secret identity as a spy, a mystery that will haunt and ultimately end the lovers' liaison. A complete absence of clear sight, *The Heat of the Day* suggests, might easily become a threatening force that imperils, rather than nourishes, human relationships. A lack of knowledge about others transforms people into spies of the private mind, who try to desperately intrude into the hidden recesses of each other's existence in a novel in which, as Corcoran argues, the border between spies and non-spies becomes immensely fragile (179–183). Engaging in acts of voyeurism, nevertheless, does not result in more accurate knowledge or closer intimacy but rather leads to lonely distress, as in the case of Stella, who is unable to directly confront Robert after learning about his secret identity; or in the case of Robert, who does not dare to tell her the facts, or indeed to admit to himself that she does not know the truth as he sometimes believes she does: 'I [Robert] thought, yes, silence *is* better: why risk some silly unmeaning battle between two consciences? […] There were other times when I was less certain you knew. But I did not know you did not know till you asked me.' (271, emphasis in original) The repetition of the negative forms of 'know' emphasises the detrimental effects of the lovers' failure to engage in open dialogue, and to dissipate the obscurity surrounding their individual lives, a darkness that will haunt, and eventually end their relationship.

The ambiguity and complexity of clear vision acquires special significance towards the end of the novel, this time, during the last encounter between Stella and Robert. Surrounded by the darkness of the night in Stella's flat, Robert finally admits that he has worked for the Germans. The only source of 'infernal' red light comes from the electric fire which Robert turns off, as though he is only able to communicate with Stella in complete obscurity, in an 'unseeable' room that 'might now have been any room of any size' (267). He eliminates any visible traces of familiarity, of their past intimacy in his attempt to explain his reasons for having lied. While at the beginning of their affair, Robert's semi-obscure face aroused a feeling of tenderness and love in Stella, after his avowal, she becomes disorientated in the oppressive darkness, which 'blot[s] out' both speaker and listener, rendering the forging of emotional bonds impossible (269). Stella suddenly experiences a moment of amnesia as she finds herself unable to recall

those unfamiliarly familiar signs of Robert's face, with which she fell in love years before: 'there occurred in the listener one of those arrestations of memory which made it impossible to conceive not only what the look on the face might now be but what the face had been, *as* a face, ever' (269, emphasis in original). The absence of light affects not only Stella's momentary sense perceptions but somehow penetrates the past to erase the memory of that shadowy face on which her caressing eyes used to dwell lovingly.

Stella temporarily experiences the disintegration of the world around her: the once familiar shapes and sights seem to lose their physical reality. Robert transforms into a disembodied entity whose presence becomes almost non-existent, until he starts to move across the room, making Stella remember that he actually possesses corporeal substantiality: 'the sounds of physical movement came as a shock, reminding her that he after all was a presence here in the room – feet, their naked soles […] could be heard walking with a hallucinated precision towards the window' (269). But even after being made aware of Robert's bodily presence, Stella continues to experience her lover as a hallucination. She tries to reduce her unease by asking him to come nearer her so that she can gain tactile certainty about his bodily contours by letting him take her 'tensile fingers' in his cold hands (272). Stella never understands rationally, or indeed accepts Robert's explanations, and she even begins to doubt, or at least reappraise, the role of mystery in sympathetic communication. In the suffocating darkness of her flat, she comprehends with hindsight the necessity for a sort of clarity, a partial transparency, in interpersonal relationships.

Yet, though Robert's lie leaves lasting scars in the vulnerable flesh of the lovers, the novel also suggests that there are ways in which their wounded bodies can still engage in brief moments of tactile intimacy: 'They were in each other's arms. If there were any step in the street of sleeping houses, it was impossible it should now be heard by the two blotted out.' (277–278) Their love is on the verge of being 'blotted out' by the 'step in the street', belonging probably to Harrison, waiting in ambush to catch Robert. But at the same time, the state of being 'blotted out' – resonating with the phrase 'black(ed) out' – permits Stella and Robert to temporarily forget about the threats of the external world and gain solace in each other's bodily reality, before Robert's sudden death destroys the last, fragile remnants of their love story.

In the blotted-out, blacked-out minutes preceding Robert's death, the lovers' bodies intertwine in a gesture of tenderness that transcends any rational understanding, a space-time where accusations and unanswered questions lose their significance. Both are aware of being the victims as well as the perpetrators of historical and personal distortions, which cannot be cleared or mended anymore. As Robert concludes: 'We should have to understand each other all over again, and it's too late now' (267). Since no time has been left for rational comprehension, the couple instinctively engages in a sensuous-tactile intimacy, a form of proximity devoid of words and thoughts, which confer a new meaning to the distortions of the past.

The novel's ability to embrace contortions, even if often hesitatingly, represents a quality that many of Bowen's contemporary readers appreciated. In a letter addressed to Bowen, the crime writer Agatha Christie writes:

> Like "Death of the Heart" [sic] and "The House in Paris", it [probably *The Heat of the Day*] made a wonderful impact on one – I shall be able to read it many times and enjoy it each time – it gives me a feeling like swimming in deep sea, very calm, if I look down I see things below water – tips of rocks, seaweed, fish – all transformed into something else – and yet, perhaps, more <u>them selves</u> [sic] because distorted into a different dimension – which perhaps is truer reality – […]. (HRC, Elizabeth Bowen Collection, Box 10, Folder 6)[79]

Christie likens the reading of Bowen's works to a peaceful swimming experience in a calm sea, which allows the gaze to investigate and delight in the seabed without achieving an absolutely clear and unambiguous view. Looking down onto the sea bottom, the exploring swimmer does not see clear-cut and solid outlines but the underwater flora and fauna transform 'into something else' under his/her inquisitive look. Bowen's narrative achievement in *The Heat of the Day* lies, according to Christie, in the former's ability to reveal the irregularities of the visible, which simultaneously modify reality and create a different, 'truer reality'. The swimmer's gaze does not take possession of the visible but envelops it in a kind of semi-transparency that allows for the unfolding of a sympathetic

[79] The letter was written on 2nd March, the year being unspecified.

interaction between seer and seen. The form of sympathy at the heart of Christie's commentary is attentive to the irregularities of the visible, which – by representing an alternative version of reality – are capable of becoming 'more them selves'.

Reading Christie's letter in parallel with Merleau-Ponty's essays on arts throws further light on Bowen's ideas about semi-transparency. In 'Eye and Mind' Merleau-Ponty elaborates on the visual-tactile qualities of water, which permit the unfolding of sympathetic sight:

> When through the water's thickness I see the tiled bottom of the pool, I do not see it *despite* the water and the reflections; I see it through them and because of them. If there were no distortions, no ripples of sunlight, if it were without that flesh that I saw the geometry of the tiles; then I would cease to see it as it is and where it is – which is to say, beyond any identical, specific place. (142, emphasis in original)

The water does not represent a separating layer between seer and seen but its semi-transparent thickness creates the conditions necessary for phenomenological perception. The waving motion of the water and the ripples of light permit the perceiver's corporeal immersion into the flesh of the visible, which allows for the complex sensuous experience of a 'truer reality'. The half-transparent and semi-soft qualities of the element yield to the observer's tactile gaze to reveal an unfamiliarly familiar world, made of the same flesh yet resisting total unity and appropriation. The importance of seeing *through* and *with* the object of vision, rather than seeing *it*, is also stressed in another passage of Merleau-Ponty's essay, in which he contemplates, through the example of the Lascaux cave paintings, the viewer's relationship to the art object:

> Things have an internal equivalent in me; they arouse in me a carnal formula of their presence. […] The animals painted on the walls of Lascaux are not there in the same way as are the fissures and limestone formations. Nor are they *elsewhere*. Pushed forward here, held back there, supported by the wall's mass they use so adroitly, they radiate about the wall without ever breaking their elusive moorings. […] For I do not look at it [painting] as one looks at a thing, fixing it in its place. My gaze wanders

> within it as in the halos of Being. Rather than seeing it, I see according to, or with it. ('EM' 126, emphasis in original)

Since we are made of the same flesh as the world, the sensible is not something outside of us but part of the same system and thus an integral particle of our being, reminding us, in turn, that we constitute an organic extension of the same prehistoric body. The animals painted on the wall of the cave do not dissolve into the primal canvas of nature, but in their very difference, form a soft-hued prolongation of the rock. They at once belong to the stone and resist melting into it. This indeterminacy of the artwork, of being simultaneously 'there' and eluding precise location, establishes the conditions of phenomenological (binocular) vision: the viewer becomes unable to 'fix' the object 'in its place' (as Mrs Michaelis does with Max in *The House in Paris*), and instead lets his/her gaze interlace with the flesh of which both seer and seen form an organic part, thus adjusting his/her perspective so as to see *with* the sensible rather than look *at* it from above. For Merleau-Ponty and Bowen, this kind of vision represents the basis of sympathetic coexistence, in which the subject does not close off a part of the world by 'appropriat[ing] what he sees [but] he merely approaches it by looking, [and] he opens onto the world' (Merleau-Ponty, 'EM' 124).

Through her persistent focus on the simultaneous necessity for and danger of pinning down bodily matter, Bowen often creates a viscerally unsettling atmosphere in her fiction written in the 1930s and 1940s. Her literary methods challenge us as readers to reappraise our own concepts of corporeality, and our understanding of what it means to affectively perceive other bodies. Tactile-visual encounters between humans reveal the complex, problematic nature of intimacy, which often refuses any critical attempt to confine it within predetermined frames. Affective proximity, as Bowen and Merleau-Ponty suggest, unfold in hollows, those half-luminous, semi-soft spaces in which borders are not hermetically sealed but infinitely open, allowing the subject to touch/see and be touched/seen, while at the same time protecting his/her corporeal autonomy. At the same time, in her wartime writings, Bowen shows the difficulties of feeling for barely visible, blurred shadows, which in their resistance to clear light, risk being divested of their fleshy nature. Lawrence's cosmic darkness and Woolf's 'gently gliding' moonlight start to wear thin in Bowen's 1940s fiction, which reveals the inadequacies of sympathy based on either total obscurity or haziness.

Ian McEwan: the anxious modernist

Empathy, as discussed in the introduction of this thesis, represents an important term in McEwan's vocabulary, mainly because he associates it with human(e) values. Fellow feeling, according to McEwan, is a function located in the brain, which helps humans to project themselves, through imagination, in the minds of other people. In a *Guardian* article published shortly after the 9/11 terror attacks in the United States, McEwan attributed the hijackers' actions to their inability to enter their victims' minds:

> Imagining what it is like to be someone other than yourself is at the core of our humanity. It is the essence of compassion, and it is the beginning of morality. The hijackers used fanatical certainty, misplaced religious faith, and dehumanising hatred to purge themselves of the human instinct for empathy. Among their crimes was a failure of imagination. ('Only Love and Oblivion', 15 September 2001)

Temporarily inhabiting the other's mind, McEwan deems, allows one to experience the other person's inner world, which, in turn leads to the empathetic person's inability to commit violence. In other words, our ability to imaginatively access other minds makes us compassionate humans and caring citizens. If reading fiction can indeed hone our empathetic skills, as McEwan suggests, then literature has real-life benefits and values that have been seriously underestimated.[80]

McEwan's efforts to prove the value of literature can be placed in a wider cultural context. Among several other thinkers, such as sociobiologist E. O. Wilson, scientist Richard Dawkins, and cognitive psychologist and linguist Steven Pinker, McEwan considers himself a representative of the so-called 'third culture' (Salisbury, 'Narration and neurology' 893–896). David Amigoni notes that 'third culture' is a term used by the publisher and writer John Brockman, who borrowed

[80] For a detailed discussion of the problematic nature of such claims see Salisbury's 'Narration and neurology'.

it from C. P. Snow's lecture 'The Two Cultures: A Second Look' (1963) (157). The title of Snow's lecture refers to a debate that took place between himself and literary critic F. R. Leavis. In 1959 Snow, a British scientist and novelist, claimed that 'literary intellectuals' should no longer occupy a privileged place in culture, but this role should rather be taken over by scientists who are capable of describing reality in a way that literary critics are not. As Stefan Collini puts it in his introduction to *The Two Cultures*, Snow rejected 'a set of largely backward-looking or pessimistic attitudes associated with Modernist literature' in favour of 'more optimistic and "modernising" commitments associated with natural science' (xliii). In 1962, Leavis responded vehemently to Snow's lecture, rejecting the former's claims with hostility, and claiming that only literature can provide adequate answers to the question 'What do […] men live by?' (56) Recently, the Snow–Leavis debate has been resurrected in an attempt to reassert the value of disciplines falling under the umbrella term 'humanities'. Collini writes in *What are Universities For?*: 'In contemporary public discussion of universities, it invariably proves more difficult to characterize the nature of teaching and research in the humanities, and thus to explain their value, than it does to give such an account of the scientific, medical, and technological disciplines' (61). As sciences have started to gain more privilege, many academics working in the humanities have felt the need to make a case for the (public) value of their subjects.[81]

In 'The Two Cultures: A Second Look' Snow argued that there is a space between science and humanities, where representatives of both parties can have a fruitful and intellectually stimulating dialogue. However, as Amigoni observes, Brockman uses the phrase in a somewhat different sense: his aim is not to fill in the gap between science and humanities but to build a bridge between scientists and the wider public (156). The aim of third-culture scientists and 'empirical thinkers', Brockman highlights on his website *Edge*, is to replace the 'traditional intellectual' and make 'visible the deeper meaning of our lives' (n.p.). Brockman enumerates among the traditional, or what he elsewhere calls the 'literary' intellectuals, thinkers such as 'Freud, Marx and modernis[ts]', claiming that 'a 1950s education in the above-mentioned authors' works 'is not a sufficient qualification for a thinking person in the 1990s' (n.p.). As Salisbury observes, it

[81] Other prominent examples of academic books "defending" the humanities, include: *The Public Value of the Humanities*, edited by Jonathan Bate, Bloomsbury Academic, 2011; Helen Small. *The Value of the Humanities*. Oxford University Press, 2013.

becomes evident that Brockman dismisses 'what might broadly be determined as the antihumanism of various "social constructivist" accounts of knowledge' ('Narration and neurology' 894). 'Freud, Marx and modernis[ts]' fail to address the problems and questions that a twenty-first-century intellectual public faces, because their outdated pursuits remain 'the marginal disputes of a quarrelsome mandarin class', looking down on the masses from an ivory tower (n.p.). This 'mandarin class' is characterised by the excessive use of a 'swelling spiral of commentary' in which 'the real world gets lost' (n.p.). There is no space here to discuss the problematic and flawed nature of Brockman's statements. A few questions that arise in the mind of a critic trained in 'Freud, Marx and modernism' might be: Who counts as an 'intellectual'? If third-culture thinkers are 'tolerant' and open-minded, why do they discard any subject or critical framework that fall outside of empirical modes of enquiry (n.p.)? The aim of this chapter is not to answer these questions, but they are important to help us better understand McEwan's position in third-culture debates.

McEwan, who appears on Brockman's list of third-culture thinkers, shares, to an extent, the latter's rejection of 'Freud, Marx and modernism'. More precisely, he agrees with Brockman's emphasis on the significance of the 'real world', a view that McEwan also attributes to the protagonist of *Saturday* (2005), the neurosurgeon Henry Perowne.[82] McEwan's obsession with the 'real world' might explain his interest in neuroscience, or at least with neuroscientific theories that locate (inter)subjectivity in brain matter. In 'Literature, Science, and Human Nature' (quoted in the introduction of this thesis), he identifies the value of art and literature in their ability to reveal 'our common nature' despite our wide-ranging differences: 'It would not be possible to read and enjoy literature from a time remote from our own, unless we shared some common emotional ground, some deep reservoir of assumptions, with the writer' (11). The existence of a 'deep reservoir of assumptions' is the consequence of our shared genetic inheritance, which allows us to connect to the distant and different other. However, as Salisbury suggests, what differentiates McEwan from third-culture scientists is

[82] At some point in *Saturday*, Henry recalls one of his quarrels with his daughter Daisy, when influenced by her poststructuralist education at Oxford, she tried to convince her father that madness 'was a social construct', an attempt of the wealthy to suppress the poor. Henry dismisses definitively Daisy's stance, based on Foucault's works: their argument 'ended with Henry, in a rhetorical coup, offering her a tour of a psychiatric wing. Resolutely, she accepted, and then the matter was forgotten' (92). Salisbury also mentions this scene in 'Narration and Neurology' p. 891.

that despite rejecting poststructuralism, he does not promote a purely scientific mode of reading; rather he 'suggests a very broadly scientifically subtended, explicitly humanist, account of an evolved species commonality' that represents the basis of literature's ability to create bridges between people ('Narration and neurology' 896).

McEwan's real contribution to the debate on the value of humanities, this chapter suggests, lies not in his journalistic claims but in his fiction, which often transcends, or even contradicts his authorial statements.[83] Just as in Lawrence's case, my aim is not to resolve these contradictions but to show how fellow feeling works inside the fictional realm of the novels. Even if we accept that fellow feeling is evolutionarily coded in the brain, as McEwan believes, what the modernist texts analysed so far, as well as McEwan's own novels show, is that a purely biological explanation remains insufficient for revealing how two flesh-and-blood humans relate to each other in a particular historical, cultural, and emotional context.

The body, as understood throughout this thesis, means a sensing, breathing and moving entity, which exists in close interaction with the social and cultural environment it inhabits. Phenomenology offers an alternative interpretation of fellow feeling, one that intersects on several levels with ideas of sympathy in the fiction of my chosen modernist writers. Merleau-Ponty rejected the hypothesis that empathy occurs in an isolated and abstract mind, and proposed in *Phenomenology of Perception* that intersubjectivity takes place between interacting bodies embedded in a socio-cultural environment. Shaun Gallagher succinctly summarises the essence of phenomenology: '[I]t seems wrong to claim that the mental life of others is essentially inaccessible, just as it seems wrong to claim that everything is open to view' (187). In other words, the possibilities of feeling for and with others lie in a zone of semi-transparency, to borrow Woolf's often-used phrase, where gaining clear knowledge about the other remains an unachievable endeavour but this does not imply the impossibility of forging emotional bonds.

Viewing fellow feeling as a half-visible realm is productive because it allows for the physical-tangible presence of the object of empathy while at the same time retaining some aspects of its abstraction, which resist unambiguous interpretation. This is the way many modernist authors, such as Lawrence, Woolf

[83] David James has also noticed this contradiction (*Modernist Futures* 137).

and Bowen understood the hazy nature of fellow feeling, and this is also close to McEwan's ideas of intersubjectivity in *Saturday*. In what follows, I will switch to the term 'sympathy' precisely because I want to suggest that McEwan – though he does not use the word 'sympathy', or when he does, he usually employs it in the sense of pity or compassion – has been significantly influenced by modernist ideas of sympathy. Furthermore, using the word 'sympathy' also allows the reader to differentiate between McEwan's representation of fellow feeling in his fictional works and his journalistic assertions about empathy. The affinities between McEwan's and modernists' ideas about sympathy is not always the result of the former's conscious borrowing from his predecessors' works, but rather the texts, especially *Atonement* (2001), seem to be working beyond their author. In doing so, McEwan's novels provide an understanding of corporeality that intersects with phenomenological thinking, and compels us to reconsider what it means to exist not only in but also with the world.

Indeed, as Patricia Waugh remarks, though McEwan is often 'accused of science envy, the emphasis in [his] fiction is also phenomenological' ('The Naturalistic Turn' 25). McEwan's implicit phenomenology can be grasped in his engagement with literary modernism: in that chiasmic space where the contemporary novel meets its modernist predecessor. Through this cross-period meeting, the contemporary novel learns to reappraise not only the modernist *corpus* but also the concept of embodied sympathy and its implications in the twenty-first century. In entering into dialogue with modernist aesthetics, McEwan's novels transcend scientific explanations of fellow feeling, and present a complex view of the body, as something delicately poised between biological matter and abstract mind, rationality and sensuousness.

Atonement and the tracing of modernist *tesserae*

In *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973), literary critic Harold Bloom quotes a passage from the American poet, Wallace Stevens's letter to Richard Eberhart:

> I sympathize with your denial of any influence on my part. This sort of thing always jars me because, in my own ease, I am not conscious of having been influenced by anyone and have purposely held off from reading highly mannered people like Eliot and Pound so that I should not absorb anything, even unconsciously. But there is a kind of critic who spends his time dissecting for echoes, imitations, influences, as if no one was ever simply himself but is always compounded of a lot of other people. (qtd. in Bloom 7)

Even though the writer wants to consciously distance himself from the past, as in Stevens's case, or admits having relied on tradition though in a somewhat corrective manner, as McEwan emphasises in his interviews, the literary past is never entirely dismissible, but remains a haunting presence in the texture of the new work. My intention is not to become the type of critic discarded by Stevens: one that 'spends [her] time [arbitrarily] dissecting for echoes, imitations, influences'. Instead, I want to show how 'echoes' are not merely scholars' obsessions but lively presences in the fabric of the new text, which can help readers to reappraise not only the literary past but also its sympathetic, though at times reluctant host, the contemporary novel. In other words, I will not 'dissect' but rather assemble or more precisely reassemble the pieces of modernism in the structure of the contemporary novel, to show how the investigation of these modernist fragments can help us reconsider what it means to feel sympathy in the literature of the twenty-first century.

Why is Stevens so anxious about being caught out by critics? Why does he dread using, 'even unconsciously' any allusions to the works of other poets? A possible answer might be found in his fear of being considered a *faux*, an artist lacking original insights, who must fall back on his literary ancestors to find inspiration. Stevens is anxious about losing his identity, that part of his existence that makes him unique and distinguishable from others, and which, in turn,

constitutes his individual artistic value, an idea that echoes Romantic views of selfhood and art. He interprets originality, at least in the above-mentioned letter, as the 'denial of any influence', conscious or unconscious. In other words, appropriating another poet's words, images and style unconsciously is not an excuse for Stevens. Artistic appropriation, however, is perhaps a more complex problem, which I do not intend to theoretically redefine in this chapter, but on which I want to throw fresh light by examining the ways in which *Atonement* engages with modernist legacies.

The differentiation between conscious and unconscious appropriation is not an easy task in McEwan's case. He admits his debt to modernism but at the same time he tends to view this literary period as somewhat obsolete, mannered and self-centred.[84] In the second part of *Atonement*, by introducing the figures of literary critic Cyril Connolly, and Elizabeth Bowen, McEwan critiques high modernism for its excessive use of stylistic devices, such as the interplay of 'light and shade' (313), and modernist writers' failure to create a plot, which Connolly calls the 'backbone' of the story (320).[85] McEwan's novel thus could be read as an example of what Bloom calls the *clinamen*. In *The Anxiety of Influence*, Bloom distinguishes between six phases or 'ratios' of engaging with literary tradition: *clinamen* (or 'poetic misreading'), *tessera*, *kenosis*, *daemonization*, *askesis*, and *apophrades* (14). In McEwan's case the first two phases seem the most relevant. Bloom defines the *clinamen* as a conscious misreading of 'the precursor poem', which implies that the latter 'went accurately up to a certain point, but then should have swerved, precisely in the direction that the new poem moves' (14). McEwan's journalistic assertions about modernism and his appropriation of Connolly's and Bowen's voice in the second part of *Atonement* (to which I will shortly turn) seem to underline the interpretation of the novel as a *clinamen*, which intends to offer a corrective to modernism's putative shortcomings. However, the first section of *Atonement* questions such a straightforward interpretation, rather allowing for the reading of the novel as a *tessera*. Bloom defines the *tessera* as

[84] In an interview he claims that he relied on the works of Virginia Woolf, Elizabeth Bowen and Rosamond Lehmann when writing the first part of *Atonement*, but immediately afterwards he describes the aforementioned writers' fiction as 'slightly mannered', 'a little formal', and 'a tiny bit archaic' (*Bookworm* n.p.).

[85] Connolly thinks that Briony's novella relies too heavily on high modernist aesthetics, characterised by 'random impressions' and a 'static quality' (313), which fail to provide a sense of 'development' (312) that, according to Connolly, a reader in the 1940s would expect.

> completion and antithesis; I take the word not from mosaic-making, where it is still used, but from the ancient mystery cults, where it meant a token of a recognition, a fragment of a small pot which with the other fragments would re-constitute the vessel. A poet antithetically "completes" his precursor, by so reading the parent-poem as to retain its terms but to mean them in another sense, as though the precursor had failed to go far enough. (14)

He takes the concept from Jacques Lacan's *Discours de Rome* (1953), in which the latter writes that 'the Word, even when almost completely worn out, retains its value as a *tessera*' (Bloom 67). Lacan's translator, Anthony Wilden remarks that this 'allusion is to the function of the *tessera* as a token of recognition, or "password". The *tessera* was employed in the early mystery religions where fitting together again the two halves of a broken piece of pottery was used as a means of recognition by the initiates' (Bloom 67). The *tessera*, a piece of pottery, usually of the shape of a triangle or other geometrical form acts as a token that confers a new meaning to the work of art it originally belonged to.[86] In Bloom's analysis of poetic influence, the term *tessera* refers to the new work, whose aim is to 'complete' its 'precursor', thus also revealing the latter's imperfections. Although I borrow Bloom's concept in my further analysis of *Atonement*, I use it in a slightly different sense. In my reading of McEwan's novel, the 'precursor[s]', in this case the modernist – primarily Woolf's – works, represent the *tesserae*, which placed in the texture of the contemporary novel, act as tokens that cast fresh light on both old and new artwork, without necessarily establishing a hierarchical order between the two. As such, the first section of *Atonement* works beyond its author, unwinding the subtleties and complexities of the contemporary novel's sympathetic yet fragile coexistence with its modernist predecessor. In other words, the first part of *Atonement* illustrates how feelings of sympathy – as we have seen in Lawrence, Woolf and Bowen – often operate beyond the realm of rational control, and are driven by a form of unconscious, sensuous longing for the other: living entities and art alike.

Several critics have commented on McEwan's engagement with the modernist tradition. Laura Marcus argues that McEwan's later novels, such as

[86] *Online Oxford English Dictionary*. www.oed.com. Accessed 4 December 2018.

Atonement and *Saturday*, establish a 'dialogue with the structures of modernist fiction' (85). For Marcus dialogue means the simultaneous acknowledgment of a 'debt' and 'the necessary and inevitable distance' between the contemporary novelist and his modernist predecessors (85). David James uses the same term when describing the twenty-first-century novel's complicated relationship to modernist fiction, suggesting that transitions between literary periods should be 'understood *as* dialogues with, rather than departures' from the past (*The Legacies of Modernism* 6, emphasis in original). As both Marcus and James highlight, contemporary novelists do not aim at eradicating modernist legacies but as James puts it elsewhere, they redefine the modernist novel 'as a medium for connecting interiority and accountability, braiding the description of characters' innermost reflections into the fabric of worldly situations' (*Modernist Futures* 9). McEwan himself corroborates the interpretation of *Atonement* as a dialogical exchange with the past, claiming in an interview that his aim was to 'enter into *conversation* with modernism' (*Bookworm* n.p., my emphasis). He envisages this 'conversation' as a discussion with the past, embedded in an 'emotional situation', by which he means the love story between Robbie and Cecilia, and Briony's attempts at atonement (*Bookworm* n.p.). But the dialogue *Atonement* establishes with modernism already represents an emotional gesture, an act of sympathetic reaching out to the past.

McEwan's 'working definition of the modernist novel', to appropriate James's words, can be grasped in the first section of *Atonement*, in the scene redrafted from *Two Figures by the Fountain* (*Modernist Futures* 9). In the mentioned episode, Cecilia carries a precious Meissen vase with wild flowers to the garden fountain, where following an unfortunate incident, the vase is broken. Briony's decision to write about this particular scene in her later novella bears great importance because it throws fresh light on her, and by extension McEwan's, attitude towards modernist poetics.[87]

[87] Peter Boxall comments on the importance of the vase, albeit from a different perspective. He argues that Briony's decision to replace the original Ming vase – following Connolly's suggestion – with a Meissen one that belonged to Uncle Clem, proves that Briony, the novelist, actually invented the fountain scene (as well as the rest of the novel) not before but after receiving Connolly's letter (70). Brian Finney also highlights the wider implications of the vase's breakage, but he does not link them to the role that modernist poetics play in McEwan's novel: '[T]he fracturing and eventual destruction [of the vase] imagistically anticipate those of the family and pre-War society to which both the vase and family belong' (77). Brian Finney. 'Briony's Stand Against Oblivion: The Making of Fiction in Ian McEwan's *Atonement.*' *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 27, no. 3, 2004, pp. 68–82.

Several critics have read the first section of *Atonement* as a pastiche. Alistair Cormack proposes that upon their return to the fountain scene, readers realise the pastiche-like quality of the text: 'what we read in good faith in the first section as a Woolf-like modernism […] we must now regard as an imitation by an absent author-demiurge (McEwan) of one character's own modernist reconstruction of the event […]' (75). In contrast with Cormack, what I suggest, through the analysis of the vase, is a reading of the scene as a palimpsest rather than pastiche, an idea implicitly corroborated by McEwan himself. When asked about the genesis of *Atonement*, McEwan identified the 'germ' of the novel in the first paragraph he had written 'about a girl with some wild flowers in her hand, coming into a rather elegant room, aware of a young man gardening outside' (*Bookworm* n.p.). This scene, which later became the second chapter of Part One, represents the foundation of the novel, whose fictional author, Briony, is – according to McEwan – an amalgamation of Elizabeth Bowen, Virginia Woolf, and Rosamond Lehmann (*Bookworm* n.p.).

Richard Robinson notices that *Atonement* can be interpreted as a 'modernist palimpsest that has undergone continual erasure', until, after several drafts, it hardly resembles its original sources (475). The problem with this reading is that it pays too much attention to the new writing, which deletes or at least muddles the old script to such an extent that the latter becomes unrecognisable. As Robinson concludes his analysis of modernist influences in *Atonement*: '[w]e can remodel our sense of *Atonement* democratically containing competing poetics and underline that modernism is subordinated (rather than dominant) in the text' (491). Robinson's statement presupposes the existence of an irreconcilable contradiction, which is somewhat problematic because it suggests that self and other, or contemporary and modernist writing, cannot engage in a simultaneous coexistence but one must necessarily appropriate the other. My interpretation of palimpsest, relying on the *Oxford English Dictionary* entry, differs from Robinson's in that it focuses on the interaction between "old" and "new", rather than advocating one over the other. While the primary meaning of palimpsest is a parchment on which the older text has been erased and overwritten by a new one, the dictionary offers a further explanation: 'In extended use: a thing likened to such a writing surface, esp. in having been reused or

altered while still retaining traces of its earlier form; a multilayered record'.[88] As Sophie Ratcliffe argues in her analysis of Shakespearean allusions in the works of Robert Browning, W. H. Auden, and Samuel Beckett, '[a]cts of allusion alert us to the way in which one may move towards a new world, while still feeling for the past' (3). Before turning to a detailed analysis of *Atonement*'s sympathetic reaching back to modernism, however, it is important to examine McEwan's critique of high modernism's shortcomings, as put forward in Connolly's letter to Briony and McEwan's journalistic assertions.

'Fussy and oppressive': modernism's imperfections

In the first section of the novel, while taking the vase to the fountain, Cecilia recalls that the object belonged to Uncle Clem, her father's brother, an officer who received it as a present for having saved a small town, next to Verdun, in the First World War. The porcelain arrived to the Tallis family a few weeks after Uncle Clem's re-burial and despite being the most precious object in the household, it was continuously in use, as Cecilia's father refused to 'imprison it behind a glass case' (22, 24). The vessel represents a perfect example of *chinoiserie*, the imitation of Chinese and other oriental artistic traditions in Europe, which began in the seventeenth century and went through a revival in the first decades of the twentieth century.[89] Cecilia notes how her mother, Emily, dislikes the vase because '[i]ts little painted Chinese figures [which] gathered formally in a garden around the table, with ornate plants and implausible birds, seemed fussy and oppressive' (24). The vessel's description is reminiscent of modernist, in particular Woolf's fiction on a double level: first, the scene on the porcelain can be read as a very faint echo of *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves* (in both novels characters gather rather formally around a dinner table, and both are peppered with oriental flowers, and birds),[90] while at the same time the Chinese decoration

[88] *Online Oxford English Dictionary*. www.oed.com. Accessed 4 December 2018.
[89] For a detailed study of Chinese influence on literary modernism see *British Modernism and Chinoiserie*, edited by Anne Witchard, Edinburgh University Press, 2015.
[90] In *To the Lighthouse* the Ramsay family and their guests, while in *The Waves* the six friends gather together for dinner. Birds and flowers play important roles in both novels: in *To the Lighthouse* Jasper's favourite activity is shooting birds, and Mrs Ramsay and Cam are often

reminds us of the first section of Briony's/McEwan's novel: Cecilia fusses over the aesthetic arrangement of some wild flowers picked for a family dinner while she observes the courting ritual of two swallows over the fountain. What is more, Emily's critique of the vase acquires further meanings if read in parallel with Connolly's and Bowen's ideas about high modernism, two literary figures of central importance in McEwan's novel.

After several months of having sent her novella, *Two Figures By a Fountain*, to the literary magazine *Horizon*, the eighteen-year-old Briony receives a response from Connolly, the magazine's editor, in which he explains his reasons for being unable to publish her story. Based on his own judgment as well as on Bowen's comments, which are 'mulched into' (314) his letter, Connolly captures the main problem with Briony's prose in its tendency to imitate high modernist literary techniques, especially those of 'Mrs Woolf' (312). Emily's dislike for the 'fussy and oppressive' Chinese figures on the porcelain can be linked to Connolly's criticism of high modernist aesthetics. In his 1938 work, *Enemies of Promise*, a hybrid of literary criticism and autobiography, the real Connolly distinguishes between two literary styles dominant in the 1920s and 1930s: the Mandarin and the vernacular. He enumerates among the characteristics of the Mandarin style/'dialect' the use of long and syntactically convoluted sentences, allusions, and metaphors (31), adding to this list the egocentrism of Mandarin writers, who 'were all inmates of the Ivory Tower', and favoured 'extreme individualism' (42). Connolly singles out Woolf as the writer who had 'the worst defect of the Mandarin style, the ability to spin cocoons of language out of nothing' (60). All these accusations are levelled against the solipsism endorsed by high modernists, who, according to Connolly, use language in a self-indulgent way, to examine the workings of the private mind, even at the risk of shutting out other minds. Emily's dismissal of the Chinese décor might be read as a subtle allusion to McEwan's rejection of Woolf, the most prominent Mandarin writer in Connolly's account. At the same time, Connolly's use of the term 'Mandarin' resonates with Brockman's dismissal of the 'quarrelsome mandarin class' associated with 'Freud, Marx, and modernists'.

compared to birds: '[Cam] was off like a bird, bullet, or arrow, impelled by what desire, shot by whom, at what directed, who could say?' (60–61). Oriental flowers in *To the Lighthouse* include the jacmanna (Lily contemplates their bright violet colour – 23), while in *The Waves* Rhoda's activity of rocking petals in a basin becomes a recurrent motif. Bernard imagines a visit at his future wife's house, where '[t]he pattern on the plates is of Oriental long-tailed birds' (59).

According to *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* the word 'mandarin' meant a public official of a high rank in the Chinese Empire, but the term was also used to denote an influential person in literary circles, especially an older and traditionalist member.[91] Connolly's and Brockman's employment of the concept suggests a view of modernism as self-centred and isolated, entangled in aesthetic and intellectual questions that have no connection to, or indeed no effect on the 'real' world.

McEwan, nevertheless, fails to attend to the complexity of the real Connolly's and Bowen's attitude towards high modernism. Connolly's dismissal of the Mandarin style and his preference for vernacular literary works – characterised by the use of colloquial/journalistic language and interest in social matters – is far from being straightforward. Connolly actually sees the future of literature in the successful interweaving of the Mandarin and vernacular 'dialects', and importantly, he finds certain aspects of the Mandarin style praiseworthy. For instance, he appreciates Woolf's *The Waves* because instead of focusing on a single character's inner world, the novel fuses the consciousness of the six protagonists and thus 'comes nearest to stating the mystery of life' (Connolly 61). In a similar vein, the real Bowen – herself a regular contributor to *Horizon* and friend of Connolly – had a more complex opinion about high modernism than McEwan attributes to her in *Atonement*. After the publication of *The Heat of the Day*, her famous Second World War novel, Bowen claimed in an interview that turning to 'exterior rather than interior crisis' is a form of reassurance for the post-war novelist, as '[t]hese days one feels rather a revulsion against psychological intricacies for their own sakes' (Hepburn, *Weight of a World* 12). Though this comment marks her departure from high modernist aesthetics, Bowen preserved a special fondness for Woolf's fiction, which continued after the latter's death. In the same year that *The Heat of the Day* was published in Britain, Bowen wrote a review of Bernard Blackstone's book entitled *Virginia Woolf* (1949). Bowen summarised the main merits of Blackstone's monograph: 'He disposes of the charge that Virginia Woolf's art was the product of an aerial remoteness from the human norm; […] and he places her, essentially, a creature of her environment and her time' ('The Achievement of Virginia Woolf', *CI* 78). Bowen considers this

[91] Merriam-Webster's Dictionary, *Merriam-Webster.* www.merriamwebster.com/dictionary/filibuster. Accessed 20 December 2018.

last characteristic Woolf's principal achievement, which also demonstrates that, as Blackstone remarked, Woolf was not 'purely aesthetic' but preoccupied with the historical realities of her time (*CI* 79). Nevertheless, what made Woolf (at least her fiction written in the 1920s) different from many late modernists, including Bowen, was the former's tendency to 'purify' the moment by filtering it through the sieve of time:

> From the past her art could retrieve the moment, make it again the present, but a present to be lived without any pain. Her novels […] are full of moments which exactly this process has purified, crystallized, placed in time's light but completely outside time. (Bowen, 'Virginia Woolf', *CI* 76)

Bowen's comment about Woolf's 'crystallizing' method is echoed in Connolly's letter to Briony: 'The crystalline present moment [explicitly associated with 'Mrs Woolf'] is of course a worthy subject in itself, especially for poetry; it allows a writer to show his gifts, delve into mysteries of perception, […] permit the vagaries and unpredictability of the private self to be explored […]' (*Atonement* 312). Nonetheless, McEwan's Connolly continues, this kind of writing can easily become artificial 'when there is no sense of forward movement' (312). McEwan thus partly relies on the real-life Connolly's and Bowen's statements about high modernist poetics when composing Connolly's rejection letter but at the same time the fictional editor of *Horizon,* and by extension McEwan himself, fail to capture the complexity of late modernism's relationship with the literary productions of the 1920s.[92] In a similar vein, McEwan's own authorial comments about high modernism, at least partially, lose their validity in the textual realm of *Atonement*. As mentioned before, in his interviews he distances himself from his modernist predecessors, such as Woolf, Bowen and Rosamond Lehmann, whose prose he generally describes as mannered and highly aestheticised (*Bookworm* n.p.). Yet, despite McEwan's own slightly condescending claims, the first part of the novel, more precisely Uncle Clem's broken vase, can be read as a sympathetic though fragile memorial to modernist fiction.

[92] By late modernism I mean the literature written roughly in the 1930s, as suggested by Tyrus Miller in *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts between the World Wars* (1999).

Modernism's broken fragments and the possibilities of mending

In the first part of *Atonement*, Cecilia's gesture of mending the broken vase by gluing the triangular-shaped shards can be read as a 'means of recognition' for the modernist novel. The fountain scene occupies a special role in the novel, among other reasons, because it represents the only episode in which the main artist figure is not Briony, the writer, but Cecilia, the "designer". For Cecilia, the arrangement of flowers in the vase represents an existential question, which causes her great turmoil, and which ultimately contributes to her seemingly stubborn decision to get hold of the porcelain when Robbie offers to fill it with water: 'She had no time, and certainly no inclination, to explain that plunging vase and flowers into the water would help with the natural look she wanted in the arrangement' (29). Cecilia's experience echoes Lily's torments in the first section of *To the Lighthouse*, when the latter tries to explain to Mr Bankes her artistic choice of painting Mrs Ramsay as a purple triangle. McEwan's and Woolf's heroine share many characteristics. Both are haunted by an uncanny inner voice reinforcing that '[w]omen can't paint, women can't write' (*TTL* 54), and both try to solidify their identity as artists/intellectuals in a historical and cultural context dominated by men.

Though she misunderstands Robbie's gestures, Cecilia feels mocked by the man, among other reasons, for her having received a poor degree at Cambridge, 'not that they actually awarded degrees to women anyway' (27). Cecilia's degree, or the lack of it, echoes Woolf's indignation about gender inequality discussed in *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and her essays, written in the same period when the first part of *Atonement* takes place. The figure of the marginalised female artist creates a subtle link between McEwan's and Woolf's works, at the same time casting fresh light on their ideas of sympathetic memorialising. For Cecilia, just as for Lily Briscoe, aesthetic questions interlace with attempts at preserving the memory of the dead. In the final part of *To the Lighthouse*, Lily understands that paying tribute to a dead beloved can take many shapes, such as a purple shadow walking across a lily/hyacinth field. Though Cecilia did not actually know her dead uncle, she reaches a similar conclusion when contemplating how a non-conventional arrangement of the rose-bay willow-herbs and irises (both having a purplish colour, just as the lilies/hyacinths in *To*

the Lighthouse) can honour Uncle Clem's memory.[93] Cecilia's gesture betrays a preference for abstract beauty: 'It made no sense, she knew, arranging flowers before the water was in – but there it was; she couldn't resist moving them around, and not everything people did could be in a correct, logical order […]' (23). This thought could equally be formulated by Lily, who considers moving the tree in her painting to obtain a better geometric symmetry, a harmony of forms and colours that transcends a realistic, 'logical order', associated with male dominance.

At the same time, Cecilia's memorialising act recalls female characters in *Jacob's Room*, whose creative efforts remain largely unrecognised by the patriarchal society. *Jacob's Room*, as discussed in my Woolf chapter, advocates a form of remembering that is attentive to the fragilities and imperfections of the flesh, a term used in the Merleau-Pontian sense to incorporate both living and non-living entities (in this case the art object). Woolf's 'battered' statues in *Jacob's Room* find an echo in the broken vase in *Atonement*. After rescuing the triangular porcelain pieces from the bottom of the fountain, Cecilia tries to conceal the damage by gluing the vessel. The result of her mending efforts becomes *Atonement*'s own 'battered' monument to modernist fiction: '[The vase] had baked all afternoon on a table by the south-facing window in the library, and now three fine meandering lines in the glaze, converging like rivers in an atlas, were all that showed. No one would ever know.' (43) The river-like cracks in the vase – recalling Uncle Clem's heroic crossing of a flume with the vessel in his hands, and anticipating Briony's later definition of modern consciousness 'as a river through time' (281) (echoing William James's concept of 'stream of consciousness', later introduced in literary studies by May Sinclair)[94]– act as mementos of the First World War, as well as of the literary tradition heavily influenced by the war. McEwan's novel's dialogical exchange with modernism can be delicately captured in the image of the repaired Meissen vase: after the mending act, the porcelain becomes a whole artistic composition, yet the meandering lines fail to completely merge into the glaze, thus reminding of the half-visible presence of the past. The repaired vase acquires new artistic meaning

[93] At the same time, the novel as a whole, especially the first section, represents Briony's own memorial to Cecilia and Robbie. As Briony admits in the epilogue, by reuniting her sister and Robbie, she wanted not only to atone for her crime, but also to preserve the lovers in the fictional realm of her novel.

[94] May Sinclair used the term 'stream-of-consciousness' to describe Dorothy Richardson's 1915 novel, *Pilgrimage*. May Sinclair. 'The Novels of Dorothy Richardson.' *Egoist*, 5, 1918, pp. 57–59.

through the re-embedding of the modernist *tesserae*, which act as tokens or 'passwords' that help us reappraise both past and present.

The lines, however, do not represent total ruptures with modernist aesthetics. Dominic Head warns us against an interpretation of literary history as something focusing exclusively on change and difference: 'The perennial problem with literary history is that it emphasises change, drawing chronological lines in the sand that may be preliminary signposts, merely, requiring complication and enrichment […]' (41).[95] The cracks in the porcelain suggest *Atonement*'s refusal to present literary history as linear succession: as Cecilia remarks, 'not everything people did could be in a correct, logical order' (23). In her book on sympathetic reading, Ratcliffe also notes how the act of 'remembering' the literary past resembles the difficulty of feeling for others: '[w]hile the echoes of Shakespeare [in the works of Browning, Auden, and Beckett] are similar, they are never quite the same and, in this way, allusions allow us to see the ideals and the fractured actualities of feeling and understanding' (3). 'The fractured actualities' of fellow feeling acquire importance not only on aesthetic level but also in characters' relationship with each other. Indeed, in *Atonement* feeling sympathy for the literary past becomes analogous to how one might feel for other human beings. The broken and partially repaired vase seems to anticipate Briony's realisation as a nurse caring for injured soldiers: 'From this new and intimate perspective, she learned a simple, obvious thing she had always known, and everyone knew: that a person is, among all else, a material thing, easily torn, not easily mended' (304). Unlike the vase, however, which – at least at this point of the narrative – seems to be partially mendable, many soldiers Briony meets during her time in the hospital turn out to be beyond recovery. And yet, although the torn flesh of the soldiers is doomed to decay, through Briony's encounter with Luc Cornet the novel opens up a brief moment of sympathetic coexistence that makes the young nurse realise the fallibility of her previous conceptions of sympathy on multiple levels: as writer, nurse and human being.

[95] The same quotation is used in James's introduction to *The Legacies of Modernism*, p. 3.

Flexible '[back]bones': sympathy and the broken body

During her training as a nurse in the 1940s London, Briony's ideas of sympathy undergo a radical change. Her description of the hospital regime becomes an uncanny echo of ideas of militarism critiqued in the works of Lawrence, Woolf, and Bowen. Briony learns that in the hospital individual identity has no value: nurses are strictly forbidden to use their first names, and their uniforms as well as their monotonous daily routine under Sister Drummond's supervision, 'erode identity', emptying the personal contents of the mind: 'There could be no resistance as [the ward sister] filled their vacated minds [with her authoritative commands]' (276). Briony's realisation is analogous to what Adam Piette calls the 'hollow[ing] out' of the mind in wartime fiction. In his close reading of a passage from Bowen's *The Heat of the Day*, Piette argues: 'Uncertain of itself, emptied and hollowed out by the relentless privations and daily tasks of the war, […] the mind at war became an empty theatre […]' (4). Briony submits herself to the military regime, partly as a form of atonement for her past crime, and studies the nursing handbook with diligence before bedtime, to make sure that she does not miss any 'points of etiquette' (272). However, as her encounter with a dying French soldier demonstrates, following a predetermined ethical code might not always be enough for, or at times can even hinder, the forging of sympathetic bonds.

When Briony is sent to keep company to Luc, a seriously injured French soldier, she interprets the command as a punishment for her showing signs of tiredness. She tries to protest that her French is not good enough but then reluctantly succumbs. Her first contact with Luc is tactile: as she holds his hands she feels their coldness and greasiness. When the soldier asks for her name, she answers dutifully: 'Tallis' (306). In a state of delirium, Luc begins to talk about his life in France as though Briony were part of it: he believes that she is his fiancé and asks her whether she liked the croissants made in his father's bakery. At the beginning Briony is adamant that 'it wasn't right to lead him on' and refuses to participate in his fictional narrative (307). However, when Luc asks her to loosen his head bandage, she finally understands the seriousness of his injury: 'The side of Luc's head was missing. […] Below the jagged line of bone was a spongy crimson mess of brain, several inches across […]' (308). Brutally confronted with

the fragility of human flesh, Briony decides to abandon the moral codes to which she has previously submitted herself. She does this on a double level. First, she renounces her new literary credo of remaining faithful to reality, which she views as a form of respect for the alterity of other minds – a stance she adopts after realising the serious consequences of her past inability to distinguish between reality and imagination. As she gently holds Luc's hand, she agrees to become at once the co-author, character and reader of his delirious story, almost helping him to move the imaginary pen that his weakening fingers can hardly hold. Luc's narrative is a mere 'unintelligible scrap' (309) without any symmetric design and order, qualities of great importance to Briony, yet this broken and incoherent language represents a space where the conventions of storytelling can be momentarily suspended to give way to a form of sympathy based on a careful attention to the vulnerabilities of individual bodies.

Salisbury notices that Briony's exposure to the 'illegitimate openings into the flesh' in the hospital, immediately followed by her receiving of Connolly's letter – in which he advises her to build a 'backbone' of the story – results in her rejection of modernism's subjectivity and makes her turn to the material aspects of human character as well as storytelling ('Narration and neurology' 888). What Briony understands, after her interaction with Luc, and Connolly's response, is that not only her narrative but also she as a human being needs a 'backbone'. She starts to view her attraction to what the fictional Connolly and McEwan consider modernist hallmarks of interiority, as a lack of courage, an attempt at 'drown[ing] her guilt in a stream – three streams! – of consciousness. The evasions of her little novel were exactly those of her life' (320). Briony's conclusion chimes with McEwan's, who claimed that through *Atonement* he wished to reveal modernism's 'dereliction of duty in relation to what I later have Cyril Connolly call the backbone of the plot' (*Bookworm* n.p.; also qtd. in Salisbury 'Narration and neurology' 885). As Connolly puts it in the novel, modernist literary techniques, such as stream of consciousness, 'permit the vagaries and unpredictability of the private self to be explored', which represents 'a worthy subject' but without a 'forward movement', 'an underlying pull of simple narrative', it becomes difficult, if not impossible, to hold 'the reader's attention' (312).

Briony's encounter with Luc, nevertheless, has further implications than her realisation of the necessity for a 'backbone'. The novel suggests that having a 'backbone' is not synonymous with rigidity, or does not imply the necessity to

submit to unchangeable moral codes.[96] As soon as Briony understands the seriousness of Luc's injury, she discards her preconceptions about writing and nursing alike. Any line of demarcation between truth and lie becomes meaningless in the face of death. As a final act of sympathy, Briony decides to abandon any rules, and she not only attends to the dying soldier's fragile body, but her own body becomes soft and malleable in the attempt of offering consolation and easing his agony. When in his delirious dreams he asks her whether she loves him, Briony does not hesitate for long: '"Yes." No other reply was possible. Besides, for that moment, she did.' (309) After committing her childhood crime of falsely accusing Cecilia's lover, Robbie, of having raped the sisters' cousin, Briony becomes obsessed with telling, or more precisely writing the truth. Yet when she meets Luc, she comprehends that being a writer, or indeed a nurse with a 'backbone' is not synonymous with rigidly holding on to reality or the nursing handbook. Instead, the novel suggests, possessing a 'backbone' means to preserve a sense of flexibility that allows one to open towards the other, and pay attention to the vulnerability of other bodies in the present moment and under the given circumstances, which might go beyond any pre-established codes, professional or otherwise. By sympathetically reaching out to the dying man, Briony not only succeeds in offering Luc solace and a brief moment of peace before death, but she also regains her own sense of identity, erased in the hospital regime: '"It's Briony," she said, so only he would hear. […] "It's not Tallis. You should call me Briony […]".' (310) In the moment preceding Luc's death, she whispers in his ears her first name, a forbidden act according to the nursing etiquette.

The questions *Atonement* poses about interpersonal and inter-textual sympathy are intricately intertwined with the ways in which modernist authors viewed and wrote about fellow feeling. Yet an analysis of the survival of modernist

[96] The idea of the flexible backbone might be linked to T. S. Eliot's definition of tradition in his well-known essay 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919): '[Tradition] involves, in the first place, the historical sense, which we may call nearly indispensable to anyone who would continue to be a poet beyond his twenty-fifth year; and the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence; the historical sense compels a man to write not merely with his own generation in his bones, but with a feeling that the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer and within it the whole of the literature of his own country has a simultaneous existence and composes a simultaneous order.' Eliot's interpretation of literary influence seems to contradict Wallace Stevens's, as explained in his letter to Eberhart. Eliot thinks that in order to make good poetry, the poet must write with past generations 'in his bones'; in other words, he must be malleable and flexible enough to accommodate the past while simultaneously transcending it and creating something new. See T. S. Eliot. *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*. 1920. Methuen & Co., 1929, p. 49.

ideas about sympathy in *Atonement* would remain incomplete without mentioning at least one important way in which McEwan's representation of fellow feeling diverges from the modernists', especially Woolf's fiction. After all, as Marcus argues, a dialogical relationship with the past implies not only common grounds but also a 'necessary and inevitable distance' (85). This divergence can be best grasped in Briony's realisation about the immense fragility of human flesh: 'that a person is, among all else, a material thing, easily torn, not easily mended' (304). In *Atonement* the corporeal vulnerability of human subjects is often presented as a definitive and irreversible state, which culminates in the impossibility of being mended. While Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* ends with Lily's artistic (re)creation of Mrs Ramsay, an attempt which, as I have argued in my Woolf chapter, is at least partially successful in transforming Mrs Ramsay's memory in a palpable and visible presence, *Atonement* refuses to offer a similar consolation. Luc's broken body, just as Robbie's and Cecilia's flesh torn by the brutal forces of the war (as we learn from the epilogue) are beyond any hope of cure. What is more, as we find out from Briony's discussion with her sister in Part Three, Cecilia's efforts of mending Uncle Clem's vase turn out to be futile: during the Second World War, Betty, the Tallis' servant drops the porcelain, which is shattered to smithereens. When Cecilia learns about the fate of the vase, the first question she asks her sister is whether their parents have kept any pieces (333). We never actually find out the answer to Cecilia's question, as Briony herself does not know it. The novel nevertheless might offer an affirmative response. Luc, Cecilia and Robbie cannot be brought back to life (at least if we accept the validity of Briony's authorial claims in the epilogue), the vase is broken beyond repair, and the old Briony, suffering from dementia, is on the verge of oblivion. Yet even if we never find out with certainty whether the Tallis family kept any fragments of the vase, the novel as a whole becomes a preserver of splinters. These pieces of modernist *tesserae*, delicately embedded in the fabric of *Atonement*, do not represent unambiguous 'passwords' or keys in the sense of offering any clear-cut solutions to the decoding of the narrative. Instead, the triangular-shaped shards of modernism act as tiny tokens of sympathy which guide the reader, without falsely promising that (s)he will never get lost in the dense and convoluted texture of the novel.

McEwan's next novel, *Saturday*, takes the idea of the sympathetically malleable body to a further level by revealing the inadequacies of the objective medical gaze that tries to reduce the human subject to a biological computer.

Henry Perowne, the neurosurgeon protagonist of the novel, is convinced that the key to understanding personality lies in brain matter. However, the novel's portrayal of Henry's complex and often problematic relationship with his fellow beings interrogates the protagonist's views, and softens, even if only partially, the firmness of his preconceptions about sympathetic coexistence.

Cognitive and embodied theories of fellow feeling

Saturday corroborates but also complicates McEwan's obsession with the 'real world' and his insistence on literature's ability to create shared affective experiences. Before turning to an analysis of the novel, nevertheless, it is important to offer a brief overview of some cognitive models of fellow feeling, a theory that has significantly influenced McEwan's views. Though McEwan does not deny the existence of 'our exotic differences', his insistence on our common traits suggests that differences are important only insofar they are superseded by empathetic identification ('Literature, Science, and Human Nature' 19). Nevertheless, as Dutch psychologist Douwe Draaisma suggests in his response to McEwan's 2002 Van der Leeuw Lecture (an earlier version of 'Literature, Science, and Human Nature'), our ability to understand and enjoy literature does not necessarily originate from our identification with characters possessing the same emotions as we. On the contrary, as Draaisma puts it, if we presume that emotions are not universal, the "role" we attribute to literature might undergo some change: '[The novelist] would report on a world that we do not know at first hand, but that we do want to get acquainted with. Through him we would get to know diversity, change, variation, with feelings and thoughts and motives we do not know ourselves and yet turn out to exist.' (Draaisma, 'The annoying resistance of facts', Van der Leeuw Lecture, 2002, HRC, Ian McEwan Archive, Box 28, Folder 3, p. 11) Therefore, McEwan's insistence on 'our common nature' poses some problems because it presupposes that identification is a necessary precondition of fellow feeling, a view that dates back to at least Adam Smith's moral philosophy but has been recently embraced by cognitive science, in two interrelated areas: simulation theory and theory-theory.[97] Simulation theory

[97] Sophie Ratcliffe suggests that the liberal humanist approach of Nussbaum and Booth is partly rooted in Adam Smith's interpretation of sympathy as an imaginary transposition into the other's mind (13). Ratcliffe refers to Smith's *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739–1740). She later argues

suggests that we understand others as a result of 'put[ting] ourselves in their shoes' (Carroll, *A Philosophy of Mass Art* 344–345). On the other hand, advocates of theory-theory claim that we comprehend others' inner states due to our general knowledge about the operation of the mind, which we apply to other (human) minds (Carroll 342–344). McEwan, at least in his non-fictional writings, seems to be influenced by both approaches.

Imagination represents a basic prerequisite of 'putting ourselves in the other's shoes'. Indeed, McEwan places a heavy weight on the word 'imagination' which he equates with (what he calls) empathy. In an unpublished talk given at the Wellcome Trust in 2008, McEwan offers a simplistic definition of empathy as '[t]hat act of imagination, […] central to the novel, [which] is the commonplace of our everyday, […] the essence of human nature' ('Talk on Consciousness', 2 October 2008, HRC, Ian McEwan Archive, Box 28, Folder 4, p. 4). He then adds that when empathy is hindered, as in cases of neurological disease or brain damage, the 'consequences are tragic' ('Talk on Consciousness' 4). He corroborates this statement in a public lecture given in Cambridge in 2011:

> Unless we are hampered by Aspergers [sic] or other mental conditions, we carry through these readings [of other minds] with automatic ease – which is not to say we are always correct in our conclusions. Awareness of the mind of others may well be at the root of our moral codes; a failure in that awareness may even lie at the root of what we call evil. ('Graham Storey Lecture', 7 March 2011, HRC, Ian McEwan Archive, Box 28, Folder 1, p. 18)

This is not only a narrow but also an ethically problematic definition of mindreading. Do people, who fail mindreading tests due to a neurological condition, lack morality? And if they are unable to live by 'moral codes', which as McEwan suggests are founded on awareness of other minds, should they be considered 'evil' or even hazardous? Some of McEwan's novels, such as *Enduring Love* (1997) and *Saturday*, seem to offer a partially affirmative answer. In both novels, the characters suffering from neurological diseases and psychiatric conditions – De Clérambault's syndrome and Huntington's disease –

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that Smith's model as well as liberal humanist theories of literature can be further illuminated by simulation and theory-theory (44).

are portrayed as dangerous individuals, who threaten the wellbeing of their fellow-citizens.

McEwan's definition of empathy as 'an act of imagination' is problematic for other reasons too. Imagination is usually considered a cognitive faculty: 'the power or capacity to form internal images or ideas of objects and situations not actually present to the senses'.[98] As the dictionary entry suggests, imagination is an abstract mental capacity that substitutes for bodily sense perceptions. Thus, paradoxically, putting oneself in the other's shoes implies that empathy happens between two Cartesian minds; in other words, the shoes – and one might find an uncanny echo of *Jacob's Room* here – remain empty of a tangible body. As such, considering imagination as the precondition of empathy implies the priority of a cognitive act, which triggers feelings and leads to adequate (pro-social) behaviour. Indeed, Suzanne Keen remarks how theories of empathy tend to unwittingly emphasise either the cognitive or emotional aspect of fellow feeling (27). Such interpretations do not only risk separating the realms of cognition and emotion, which as some neuroscientists have recently argued represents a flawed view, but they are also problematic in terms of respecting the other's difference.[99] Approaches such as simulation and theory-theory suggest that we no longer visualise the other's inner experience as belonging to an entity separate from us but we attempt to take possession of his/her thoughts and feelings and fit them into our own pre-conceived mental paradigms. In other words, we are involved more in a process of (slightly coercive) identification than differentiation. Both simulation and theory-theory represent forms of incorporation, but they operate in opposite directions: in the former case we penetrate the other and put ourselves in his/her shoes, while the latter scenario implies that we take the other's cognitive database and run it through our own mental computer. As Shaun Gallagher and Dan Zahavi suggest: 'If I project the results of my own simulation on to the other, I understand only myself in that other situation, but I don't necessarily understand the other' (177). Consequently, both theories imply that

[98] *Online Oxford English Dictionary*. www.oed.com. Accessed 10 December 2018.

[99] In *Descartes' Error* Antonio Damasio argues that 'feeling [is] an integral component of the machinery of reason'. Antonio Damasio. *Descartes' Error*: *Emotion, Reason and the Human Brain*. Picador, 1994, p. xii. Joseph LeDoux also suggests that the realms of emotion and cognition interact in complex ways, emotions often being able to squeeze out 'nonemotional events' (like thoughts) from out consciousness. Joseph LeDoux, *The Emotional Brain*. Phoenix, 1998, p. 19.

we cease to regard the other as other and in fact try to understand our own hypothetical behaviour in his/her situation.

Advocates of theory-theory, such as Daniel C. Dennett – a cognitive scientist often cited by McEwan – claim that we are able to understand other humans because our mind is an optimally working computer, which:

> treat[s] the object whose behavior is to be predicted as a rational agent; then [it] figure[s] out what beliefs that agent ought to have, given its place in the world and its purpose. Then [it] figure[s] out what desires it ought to have, on the same considerations, and finally [it] predict[s] that this rational agent will act to further its goals in the light of its beliefs. (*The Intentional Stance* 17)

Dennett's hypothesis-making computer model raises several unsettling questions. Are mental phenomena purely rational? What determines the beliefs and desires humans 'ought to have'? Is human behaviour always driven by a well-defined 'purpose'? Do 'rational agents' act only to 'further [their] goals'? There is something worrying in this view of empathy, which transforms humans into machines running 'multiple drafts' and selecting the optimal version that better fits the universal template. In other words, human subjectivity becomes an abstraction, a pile of data processed by a computer (*Consciousness Explained* 101–138). One of the main problems with this interpretation is that it unwittingly falls back on Cartesian dualism, a theory it sought to challenge in the first place. Describing the self as a computer program carries the danger of ignoring the importance of the body in the constitution of subjectivity, and by extension in the forging of empathy. As Evan Thompson argues, '[o]ne's consciousness of oneself as a bodily subject presupposes a certain empathetic understanding of self and other' (382–383). Put another way, the mind is not an isolated machine making predictions about other (independently existing) minds, but is born out of its (bodily) interaction with other entities. This is a lesson that Henry Perowne, the protagonist of *Saturday*, will learn (though never fully embrace) through his phenomenological interactions with his fellow beings, especially his children, Daisy and Theo.

‘[You] can only guess’: *Saturday* and the limitations of the medical gaze

Saturday opens with the figure of Perowne standing at the bedroom window of his Fitzrovia house. Perowne, who describes himself as a ‘coarse, unredeemable materialist’ (134), watches, with the ‘remote possessiveness of a god’ (13) and the insensitivity of a ‘marble statue’ (5), two figures crossing the square:

> In the lifeless cold, they pass through the night, hot little biological engines with bipedal skills suited to any terrain, endowed with innumerable branching neural networks sunk deep in a knob of bone casing, buried fibres, warm filaments with their invisible glow of consciousness […]. (13)

Henry’s biological ‘summary’ of the people in the street and his belief that the mind cannot be separated from the biological matter of the body, but ‘the mind is what the brain, mere matter, performs’, suggest an omniscient and authoritative perspective (67). This is further corroborated by his confidence in his own vision, which – ‘always good – seems to have sharpened’ (4). The reader’s first impression of Perowne is not necessarily a pleasant one: he seems an unlikable, narrow-minded and arrogant character. Thomas Jones goes as far as to call the protagonist of *Saturday* a monomaniac, ‘who can’t look at a fish without thinking about its nervous system’ (19). However, while at times augmenting Henry’s negative traits, the narrative simultaneously resists easy categorisations. The first pages of the novel already suggest the fallibility of clear sight and interrogate the presentation of the human body as mere solid matter. Henry is not like the insensitive statue of a distant god but a human being made of soft flesh, vulnerable to even such minor external factors as coldness. Henry’s fragility, at the same time, does not manifest only on a tactile (shivering) but also on a visual level. While at the beginning he has no doubts about the sharpness of his gaze, his omniscience turns out to be an illusion, scattered in the moment when he starts to speculate about the burning plane streaking across the sky. He fabricates various scenarios regarding the cause of the fire but in the end, all his hypotheses prove to be erroneous, as he later finds out from the twenty-four-hour news. The clarity and reliability of his perspective is questioned by the appearance of the plane, which, as Peter Boxall argues, ‘breaks the spell of

sharpened vision, leaving Perowne feeling disorientated and unsure what he is looking at' (155).

Perowne might feel uncertain about the real nature of the scene he is looking at, but he does not seem to have many doubts about what constitutes the essence of human character. He firmly believes that the core of personality is determined by 'which sperm finds which egg' (25). When he visits his mother suffering from Alzheimer's disease, he involuntarily starts to analyse the chemical processes in her brain (162), and he puts down his daughter Daisy's sensitivity to her pregnancy (218). Yet the novel is far from endorsing Perowne's god-like perspective. Instead, the omniscient and objective medical gaze and touch are continuously interrogated and replaced by, or at least complemented with a different mode of interpersonal communication, rooted in affective physical intimacy between vulnerable bodies. While Perowne tries to literally or metaphorically penetrate the skull of his mother, daughter, and Baxter in order to better understand them, he will have to realise that the brain, 'the one kilogram or so of cells' does not, after all, represent a straightforward window onto human subjectivity (254). Through his interaction with his family, Henry partially reappraises his former understanding of intimacy, and starts to doubt his omnipotent medical skills.

When Daisy arrives home after a six-month absence, Henry finds it difficult to conceal his turbulent emotions. While embracing her, he sees her as a little girl: he feels 'the child's body […] as he almost lifts her clear off the floor, the smoothness of muscle under the clothes, the springiness he can feel in her joints, the sexless kisses' (182). At the same time, the father knows that the frail body he holds is not that of a child in need of protection, but his daughter has become 'an independent young woman' whose 'life is a mystery to him now' (182–183). He starts to look for biological signs, such as the surface of her nails, which would provide clues about her hidden inner world. Despite his repeated efforts, Henry remains unsuccessful in finding out Daisy's thoughts and feelings. His medical scrutiny proves to be equally useless as his attempts at verbal communication, which end in their quarrel about the Iraq war.

Henry's torments caused by his failure to find out his daughter's state of mind culminate in the scene when Daisy suddenly starts to cry. He first registers Daisy's sobs in his own body, which comes as a shock precisely because it does not give him enough time for medical assumption-making: 'Only then is he aware,

from tremors in her form huddled up against his own and a flush of body warmth, that she's crying. She pushes her face into his upper arm.' (203–204) Daisy's schooling 'in the accurate description of feelings' proves to be insufficient, and when linguistic possibilities wear out, intimacy is established through tactile corporeal gestures: the daughter's tremors transform into 'pins and needles moving along [the father's] upper arm' (204). This colloquial phrase, translated into medical language, means that Henry's upper arm gets numbed as a result of external pressure. Interestingly though, the narrative, otherwise peppered with medical jargon, in this case reverts to everyday language. Similarly to the nursing etiquette in *Atonement*, which failed to provide advice on how to reach out sympathetically to a dying soldier, Perowne's medical knowledge seems insufficient in offering consolation. The sensation Henry feels in his body cannot be simply explained in medical terms, and for the first time he himself does not try to find biological answers. His numbness is poised between tangible bodily matter and abstract emotion, the wish to gain an insight into the other's mind and the poignant realisation of its impossibility: 'You stare at a head, a lushness of hair, and can only guess' (205). The novel thus turns the over-medicalised mentality and language against the protagonist, reinforcing the fallibility of his detached perspective and returning sympathy to its place of origin: the vulnerable, soft flesh, irreducible to bio-chemical formulae.

Henry's acknowledgement of the limitations of sight in providing accurate knowledge becomes evident as he contemplates his daughter's half-concealed face: 'He looks down at her fondly, at what little he can see of her face. Not even the first traces of ageing or experience around the corner of her visible eye, only clean taut skin, faintly purple, like the peripheries of a bruise.' (204) From his vantage point, Henry can only glimpse a small portion of Daisy's face, and while the purple shadows under her eyes fail to add anything to his understanding of the situation, they nevertheless create a moment of tenderness between father and daughter. At the same time, the purple lines are reminiscent of the bruise on Henry's chest, the painful result of his earlier confrontation with Baxter. The bruise-motif, at once physical injury and metaphor, produces a tension between literal and figurative meaning, physical and psychological realm. Daisy's skin is not violet due to an external blow, yet the simile anticipates her later physical exposure to Baxter's violence. In turn, Henry's chest is literally bruised but the narrative unsettles a simplistic reading of his injury and instead balances on the

borderline between bodily and emotional dimensions. The double nature of the bruise becomes evident in an earlier scene, when after their futile row about the Iraq war, Henry 'feels a tightness above his heart. Or is it the bruise on his sternum?' (188). There is a significant linguistic play at stake here: the narrative mocks the sentimental connotations of the word 'heart,' as the primary locus of feelings (especially taken into account that these are the thoughts of a brain surgeon), but at the same time reinforces the non-rational aspect of emotions, by associating them with the heart rather than the brain. Perowne himself seems to become aware of this duality as he immediately corrects his first statement by looking for a biological explanation ('[o]r is it the bruise on his sternum?').

Henry's thoughts, triggered by his failure to understand Daisy, remind the reader of Lily Briscoe's musings in Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*. In a crucial scene of the novel, Lily gets close to despair when she realises that her perceptions of Mrs Ramsay will always remain in a 'half-way' state to truth (*TTL* 57). As Lily sits on the floor, 'with her arms round Mrs Ramsay's knees, close as she could get', literally pressing her body against the adored woman's legs, she imagines

> how in the chambers of the mind and heart […] were stood, like the treasures in the tombs of kings, tablets bearing sacred inscriptions, which if one could spell them out would teach one everything, but they would never be offered openly, never made public. What art was there, known to love or cunning, by which one pressed through into those secret chambers? […] Could the body achieve it, or the mind, subtly mingling in the intricate passages of the brain? or the heart? […] for it was not knowledge but unity that she desired, not inscriptions on tablets, nothing that could be written in any language known to men, but intimacy itself, which is knowledge […]. (57)

Lily is torn apart between heart and brain, unable to place intimacy within either. She tries to achieve 'unity' through tactile proximity but the harder she presses her hands to Mrs Ramsay's knees, the more she realises the impossibility of her endeavour. The body turns out to be insufficient, but so is the mind, which Lily, at least in this passage, equates with the brain. The groping hands cannot reach the tablets and the mind fails to decipher the 'sacred inscriptions'. Lily's agony erupts in a painful mute cry: 'Nothing happened. Nothing! Nothing! as she leant

her head against Mrs Ramsay's knees' (57). However, the scene does not end on a note of utter hopelessness: 'And yet, she knew knowledge and wisdom were stored in Mrs Ramsay's heart' (57). Though the inscriptions remain illegible and rationally incomprehensible, the novel suggests that there are possibilities of forging affective ties. As discussed in my chapter on Woolf, Lily achieves the most complex knowledge of Mrs Ramsay in the last section of the novel, when, while completing her unfinished painting, she understands that a more gentle hold might bring the beloved person closer. When she ceases to tightly grip Mrs Ramsay's body, Lily finally manages to read the enigmatic language on the tablets. To her great surprise, nevertheless, the secret does not reveal itself as a coherent narrative but rather as a purple shadow retaining Mrs Ramsay's corporeal borders while simultaneously merging into the violet folds of the hyacinth/lily field.

Returning to Lily's musing on the impenetrability of the heart's and mind's 'secret chambers', it is important to look at characters' body postures: Lily sits on the floor at Mrs Ramsay's feet, embracing and pressing her head to the latter's knees. As a consequence, Lily's view of Mrs Ramsay is extremely restricted, and certainly, Lily's vantage point does not allow her to see Mrs Ramsay's face. In *Saturday*, the corporeal architecture differs slightly: Henry and Daisy are sitting next to each other, with Daisy's freshly published poetry book open on Henry's lap. As Daisy starts to cry, she buries her face in her father's upper arm, which registers the rhythmic tremors of her body. These details might seem superfluous, but taken into account the novel's constant preoccupation with how bodies connect to each other, spatial clues merit further scrutiny. The way Daisy pushes her head into Henry's arm, restricts his visual field to a small portion of her face: the 'faintly purple' skin under one of her eyes. This dim violet shadow comes to represent a stronger bond than any language, scientific or otherwise, could possibly create, causing Henry's bruise to literally throb. Clear sight remains unachievable for both Lily Briscoe and Henry, yet this does not act as an impediment in the forging of emotional ties. Indeed, Woolf's painter and McEwan's doctor arrive at a similar conclusion: an abstract violet shape might, in some cases, prove to be a more solid emotional connector than – to remain faithful to Lily's and Henry's archeological metaphor – (brain) digging.[100]

[100] While walking towards the hospital to operate on Baxter, Perowne recalls a neurosurgery symposium he attended in Rome, where, the delegates were offered a private tour in the Domus

The inseparable nature of the physical-biological and emotional vulnerability of the body acquires further significance in another scene of the novel, when Henry attends his son Theo's private concert, dedicated specifically to his father. As Henry enters the dark hall, his eyes can only discern some vague outlines moving on the stage, and the light projecting 'an elongated purple disc across the floor', complemented by 'an orange exit sign' (169). He literally gropes his way across the hall when the first sounds of Theo's guitar break the silence. The father suddenly realises that his son and his musician friends have been aware of his presence long before he could identify their vague silhouettes on the stage.

The narrative describes Perowne's vision as distorted and partial. Similarly to his interaction with Daisy, when he feels a pain in his chest, Theo's music intensifies his physical ache, as 'the bassline thump[s] into his sternum and [he] puts his hand to the sore spot' (170). Medical language filters in the thoughts of Perowne, who uses the biological expression 'sternum' to pin down the exact locus of his pain. At the same time, while he tries to restrict his sensations within a well-defined anatomical frame, the narrative simultaneously deconstructs material borders, as, for a brief moment, Henry breaks free of his self-imposed biological ties: 'Something is swelling, or lightening in him as Theo's notes rise, and on the second turnaround lift into a higher register and begin to soar' (170). The music softens rigid corporeal borders, allowing the body to acquire different shapes. Henry feels 'touched', and as in many previous examples, the border between emotional and bodily realms becomes blurred (170). As Boxall puts it, Theo's music provides Henry the possibility to step out of the constraints of his pragmatic 'bound' being, and experience a complex sense of freedom, 'when boundaries between himself and others, between himself and his son, himself and his mother, fade away, freeing him from his own mind, his own brain' (160). As such, Perowne is far from being an insensitive 'marble statue', as he refers to himself in the opening scene of the novel; rather he is malleable flesh, equally shaped by art and human beings.

Aurea. The mayor of Rome – to please his guests – compared the underground palace to a skull of brick that hides 'the mind of ancient Rome' (243). Thinking back to the mayor's remark, Henry questions whether penetrating the skull reveals the mind, and not simply the brain. According to Laura Salisbury, McEwan's use of archeological metaphors can be read as an allusion to Freud's definition of the mind as consisting of different layers that resemble topographical strata. As such, McEwan's reference to the Domus Aurea might suggest that 'getting into the mind […] requires a different, perhaps a more linguistic kind of digging than a craniotomy can offer' ('Translating Neuroscience' 94).

Indeed, the boundaries between biological matter and abstract emotion are not fixed but retain a malleable nature, allowing for the opening of what Salisbury calls those 'in-between spaces and times' where brain matter becomes meaningful as long as it functions inside a phenomenal body capable of reaching out to the world: 'Despite the thread of biological reductionism […] through its phenomenological attention to mind's complexity and drift, *Saturday* remains interested in a self that transcends the neurological by showing how brains, as they emerge into subjective selves, are enmeshed in history, in society, in culture' ('Translating Neuroscience' 104). Reading McEwan's fiction in parallel with a modernist understanding of fellow feeling shows how attachments are forged between body-subjects that exist and interact in a specific historical, social and cultural moment, often burdened with vulnerability, loss, and a deep sense of despair caused by our inability to *see* what lies behind a 'lushness of hair'. As *Atonement* and *Saturday* suggest, feeling for the other – a human being or literary tradition – is never devoid of complications, unanswered questions and at times even hostility (as McEwan's anti-modernist claims show), but this is a journey one must be willing to take in order to become part of a fragmented and blurred, yet fulfilling sympathetic community.

A '[lack] of conclusion': sympathetic criticism?

> Her only gift was knowing people almost by instinct, she thought, walking on. If you put her in a room with some one, up went her back like a cat's; or she purred. […] [O]n the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived, Peter survived, lived in each other, she being part of people she had never met; being laid out like a mist, but it spread ever so far, her life, herself. (Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* 9–10)

During her walk in London, Clarissa Dalloway contemplates the nature of knowing other people. She believes in the existence of a bodily-instinctual form of sympathy, which allows for the creation of interpersonal bonds that transcend the limits of cognitive knowledge. At the same time, feeling for others is not an automatic reflex triggered by an impulse, but an 'almost' instinctual corporeal response to the world, in which the perceiver is already rooted. Woolf suggests that one needs to possess a kind of cat-knowledge, a sixth sense, consisting of and simultaneously going beyond the mere sum of the other five senses. This type of sympathy does not lead to clear understanding; on the contrary, it thickens the 'mist' between people. The spreading mistiness, does not impede interpersonal proximity but rather facilitates it by enveloping Clarissa, Peter and the 'people she had never met' in a semi-luminous halo.

I started this thesis with another quotation by Woolf, in which Rhoda, similarly to Clarissa, muses on the importance of vagueness in sympathetic encounters. Rhoda contemplates how 'this mystery' that surrounds people creates the possibility of fellow feeling by transforming not only the object of sympathy but also the sympathiser herself into semi-transparent and softly yielding flesh. Indeed, as this study argued, haziness and mystery are essential qualities of intimacy. The works of Lawrence, Woolf, Bowen, and McEwan show that feeling for and with others is not always coterminous with acquiring complete, rational knowledge about their minds. On the contrary, giving space to gaps, ambiguities and vagaries can at times allow for a more complex understanding of our fellow beings.

As discussed in Chapter One, D. H. Lawrence was deeply sceptical of, at times even hostile to rationality and unambiguous knowledge. In his novels

written during the First World War, and his later essays and studies he advocated a form of intimacy rooted in what he called ‘blood-consciousness’, the sensuous and sensual nature of the body. Lawrence viewed cognition and sight (the latter being linked to rationality and mechanical existence) as forces corrupting the feeling body that represents the basis of humans’ interaction with the world. He celebrated the primordial darkness associated with certain ancient civilisations, such as the Etruscans and Egyptians, as the most authentic way of relating to others, in contrast with the illuminated and ocularcentric style of the Greeks and Romans. However, while Lawrence accused the Greeks and Romans of committing violence by elevating (clear) sight above other sense perceptions, his own works are also imbued with traces of aggression, not only on a thematic but also on a formal level, evident in his biased and fragmentary presentation of Cézanne’s and the Etruscan cave painters’ artistic merits.

As I argued in Chapter Two, Woolf shared Lawrence’s distrust of clear vision but at the same time she complicated his ideas, especially his lionisation of primordial darkness and his rejection of shadows as mere mental abstractions. In her fiction and essays written in the 1920s Woolf suggested that sympathy is based on the interaction of semi-transparent and firmly soft bodies that yield to each other without losing their individual boundaries. Woolf imbued shadows (as seen in *To the Lighthouse*) with a sense of sensuousness and lyricism, conferring them at once a physical-embodied presence and an abstract fluidity. By reading Woolf’s works in parallel with different art forms, from ancient Greek statuary to Victorian photography and Post-Impressionist aesthetics, I suggested that intimacy is rooted in a form of hazy vision and gentle touch which do not aim at possessing the object of perception but rather approach the other with gentleness and curiosity, leaving space for hollows and uncertainties.

As proposed in Chapter Three, Elizabeth Bowen was preoccupied with similar ideas as Woolf. Bowen’s fiction written in the interwar period, such as *To the North* and *The House in Paris*, shows her interest in a kind of sympathy rooted in haziness. In *The House in Paris* she rejected modes of characterisation based on hyper-visibility, which she associated with violence and desire for subordination. She preferred half-visibility as the zone of sympathetic encounters, not only between characters themselves but also between the author and her fictional creatures. As Bowen suggested in her essays, a writer does not create her characters ‘in the limited brainbound sense’ of the word but she rather

‘observ[es] [them] fleetingly out of the corner of an eye’. Nevertheless, in her wartime fiction Bowen seemed to distance herself from Woolf. In *The Heat of the Day* Bowen became suspicious of vagueness that is associated with treachery and the questioning of trust, leading ultimately to the dissolution of interpersonal ties.

Chapter Four was mainly interested in the legacies of modernist sympathy in the contemporary novel, with special focus on Ian McEwan’s novels: *Atonement*, and to a lesser extent *Saturday*. This chapter proposed that McEwan’s engagement with modernist legacies is at times problematic, or at least not devoid of contradictions. Nevertheless, despite his slightly derogatory journalistic assertions about high modernism, McEwan’s novels establish a sympathetic relationship with modernism, especially Woolf’s works. As such, Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse* can be read, following Harold Bloom’s terminology, as a *tessera* sympathetically embedded in but not indistinguishably melted into the texture of *Atonement*. Similarly to the broken and mended Meissen vase, the signs of rupture with the past remain faintly visible in the matter of the contemporary novel. By questioning the omniscient objective gaze and often preferring half-visibility to unambiguous clarity, *Saturday* also shares some of my modernist authors’ views on fellow feeling, which becomes evident in the portrayal of interpersonal relationships in the novel.

Read through the lens of Merleau-Pontian phenomenology, the works examined in this thesis show that intimacy occurs between feeling, vulnerable, and importantly, imperfect bodies that are unable to gain a clear view of other bodies and minds. Yet rational understanding might not represent the only way of getting to know people. As Woolf suggests, there might be other routes to fellow feeling. Indeed, Woolf showed a keen interest in the existence of ‘some secret sense’ across her career. Near the end of *To the Lighthouse* Lily Briscoe muses on the (im)possibility of getting complete access to Mrs Ramsay’s mind:

> One wanted fifty pairs of eyes to see with, she reflected. Fifty pairs of eyes were not enough to get round that one woman with, she thought. Among them, must be one that was stone blind to her beauty. One wanted most some secret sense, fine as air, with which to steal through keyholes and surround her where she sat knitting, talking […]; which took to itself and

> treasured up like the air which held the smoke of the steamer, her thoughts, her imaginations, her desires. (214)

Even 'fifty pairs of eyes' turn out to be insufficient to 'get round' Mrs Ramsay. Clear sight, which tries to fix and cognitively possess its object, is unable to provide an adequate base for fellow feeling. Instead, what one needs, is a kind of delicate sense, 'fine as air', which gently surrounds the other's 'treasured up' thoughts and feelings. This 'secret sense', Woolf suggests, allows for the unfurling of a form of intimacy grounded in the sensuous and sensual interaction of bodies, or as she puts it in 'How Should One Read a Book' (1925): 'an understanding with the senses, not with the intellect, in a state of intoxication' (*Essays* 4: 396). In this essay, as the title indicates, Woolf reflects on the ways in which one can become a sympathetic reader and critic. Though she does not deny the importance of criticising, she believes that these intellectual skills should be activated only after a first, sensuous-affective reading has taken place. What is more, for Woolf, the line between reading and writing becomes thin: 'To read a book well, one should read it as if one were writing it. Begin not by sitting on the bench among the judges but by standing in the dock with the criminal. Be his fellow worker, become his accomplice' (390). Woolf does not propose that readers should suspend their 'judging' attitude but she advocates an alternative kind of criticism, characterised by proximity rather than ironical distance, and careful attention rather than quarrelling spirit or a desire to dismantle a literary work by merely exposing its hidden meanings.

Woolf's call for sympathetic reading has been recently embraced by many literary critics. In *The Limits of Critique* (2015), Rita Felski proposes a reading method that differs from critique, or at least a version of it, defined as 'includ[ing] […] a spirit of sceptical questioning or outright condemnation, […] the claim to be engaged in some kind of radical intellectual and/or political work, and the assumption that whatever is *not* critical must therefore be *un*critical' (2, emphasis in original). In her earlier study, *Uses of Literature* (2008), Felski sets out to offer a 'neo-phenomenological' reading of literature, which 'blends phenomenological and historical perspectives' (18). As Felski acknowledges, her terminology has been influenced by Steven Connor's concept of 'cultural phenomenology'. Connor offers the following definition of 'cultural phenomenology':

> Cultural phenomenology would aim to enlarge, diversify and particularise the study of culture. Instead of readings of abstract structures, functions and dynamics, it would be interested in substances, habits, organs, rituals, obsessions, pathologies, processes and patterns of feelings. Such interests would be at once philosophical and poetic, explanatory and exploratory, analytic and evocative. Above all, whatever interpreting and explication cultural phenomenology managed to pull off would be achieved by the manner in which it got amid a given subject or problem, not by degree to which it got on top of it. (18)

Felski and Connor suggest that a phenomenological reading of literature can lead to a different form of literary criticism, interested in the wide-ranging processes of embodied experience: substances, habits, rituals, and importantly 'patterns of feelings', without ignoring the historical context in which literary works are inherently embedded. A phenomenological framework allows for a sympathetic perspective the aim of which is not to possess or 'g[e]t on top of' the object of investigation from a detached viewpoint but to explore it from bodily proximity, 'amid a given subject or problem'. In other words, phenomenological literary criticism does not set out to unmask or demystify literary works. The role of the critic, as Woolf suggests, is not to condemn the text, by revealing its suspicious intentions, but rather to 'stand' with it 'in the dock'. If we learn to become the writer's 'fellow worker' rather than judge, we might gain a new intimate experience of reading. As Derek Attridge argues in his analysis of Samuel Beckett's *The Unnamable* (1953), this kind of reading is grounded in 'the reader's painful, pleasurable experience' rather than in purely 'mental exercise' (21).

Emotional proximity therefore is a necessary precondition of phenomenological literary criticism. As critics, we do not only trace logical links and lacunae in texts but we also explore 'patterns of feelings', in which we are inextricably caught up. Perhaps if we were able to establish a more bodily relationship with the objects of our critical work, we would be in a better position to address what Sophie Ratcliffe calls 'the trouble with feeling now', which she identifies in our lack of bodily-affective contact with art objects. Ratcliffe argues that a historical methodology might not always be enough for our understanding of art. Though she does deny the importance of historicism, and indeed uses it extensively in her article, Ratcliffe offers an alternative way of attending to art

works (in this case a Victorian statue and its poetic representation): a method based on a sensuous encounter with art, taking place in the present moment of feeling rather than a distant historical past ('The Trouble with Feeling Now' 24). What unites Felski's, Connor's, Ratcliffe's, and Woolf's argument is their emphasis on emotional bodily proximity imbued with historical perspective. The combination of these methodologies results in a phenomenological investigation that grounds reading in intimate closeness rather than ironic distance, softness rather than hardness, and haziness rather than all-illuminating clarity.

As suggested in my close reading of Woolf's 'Street Haunting' in the introduction, the texts examined in this thesis are imbued with a perhaps-quality, a sense of vagueness that lies at the heart of sympathetic feeling and reading in modernism, and to an extent in contemporary fiction. In *The World of Perception* Merleau-Ponty characterises 'modern thought' as 'unfinished and ambiguous' (106). According to the philosopher, modern artists 'seek to add to the enigmas which already surround them' rather than wanting to decode the secrets (107). Merleau-Ponty illustrates his argument through the example of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (1908), in which, as the phenomenologist proposes, the reader can never be sure whether the narrator 'really loves Albertine' (107). Proust's ambiguous way of presenting love suggests, for Merleau-Ponty, that 'the modern heart is intermittent and does not even succeed in knowing itself' (108). The modern work of art, as well as the world in which the former is embedded, are 'unfinished' and '[lack] a conclusion' (108). Consequently, 'human existence can never abstract from itself in order to gain access to the naked truth' (108). Well before the publication of Merleau-Ponty's work, Woolf had already drawn attention to humans' inability to possess 'the naked truth': when coming to terms with the futility of her attempt to get full access to Mrs Ramsay's mind, Lily contemplates how 'one's perceptions' are destined to remain 'half-way to truth' (*TTL* 57). But as Merleau-Ponty and the authors at the centre of this thesis suggest, this half-truth, the mist 'laid out' between people, and the inability of reaching unambiguous clarity represent the essential ingredients of sympathetic coexistence. By accepting our limitations in knowing others, human beings and works of art, we might become more open-minded and caring sympathisers, and perhaps literary critics. But in order for this to happen, we have to return to the feeling and vulnerable body, at once delicately intertwined in and ruthlessly exposed to the forces of a world beyond our control.

What we need is, to borrow Woolf's words, is a kind of cat-understanding, a sensuous-sensual approach to the object of perception. This form of knowledge will never lead to unambiguous rational comprehension but might allow for the unfurling of bodily intimacy. As Woolf puts it in *Jacob's Room*: 'It is no use trying to sum people up. One must follow hints, not exactly what is said, nor yet entirely what is done. […] Kind old ladies assure us that cats are often the best judges of character. A cat will always go to a good man, […] but Mrs Whitehorn, Jacob's landlady, loathed cats.' (135) Woolf intimates the impossibility of pinning down Jacob's character, of telling whether he is a 'good man'. Yet even in the absence of a cat (Mrs Whitehorn 'loathed cats'), the reader is left to 'follow hints,' those subtle bodily gestures which, suspended between speech and action, make possible the forging of sympathetic ties. Instead of a concluding statement, the phenomenological intertwining of Lawrence's, Woolf's, Bowen's and McEwan's works suggest how a hazier 'manner of our seeing' can facilitate an 'other means of communication' that creates a 'widening circle' of sympathy, impossible to seal off definitively. After all, as long as the world lacks a conclusion, the most one can do is 'to stare at a lushness of hair, and […] guess'.

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