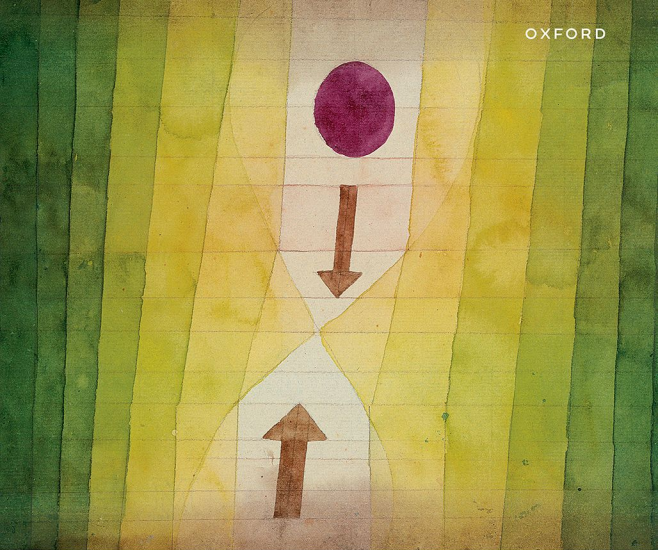


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# Literature and the Senses

Edited by Annette Kern-Stähler  
and Elizabeth Robertson

Oxford Twenty-First Century Approaches to Literature

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# Literature and the Senses

Edited by  
ANNETTE KERN-STÄHLER  
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ELIZABETH ROBERTSON

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*To Axel and Jeffrey*



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# LITERATURE AND THE SENSES: AN INTRODUCTION

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ANNETTE KERN-STÄHLER AND ELIZABETH ROBERTSON

In his narrative poem *Venus and Adonis* (1593), Shakespeare conveys the horror Venus experiences at the sight of the mangled body of her beloved, Adonis, by comparing her to a snail ‘whose tender horns being hit, / Shrinks backward in his shelly cave with pain’ (lines 1033–4).<sup>1</sup> Just as a snail withdraws its delicate horns into its shell in response to sudden painful contact with the world around it, so the goddess, assailed by the image of the beautiful youth gored by the boar, reacts to the ghastly sight by pulling herself back into her inner self in a faint: Venus’s ‘eyes are fled / Into the deep dark cabins of her head’ (lines 1037–8). The poet points to the basic physiological aspects of animal perception even as he marshals the image of the snail to illuminate fundamentally human affects—love and loss produced by the death of a beloved. The snail’s reaction to touch is paradigmatic of all sensory encounters: sense organs, as it were, reach out into the world to gather information, which is then taken into, and processed in, the ineffable dark inner recesses of the mind. In this single literary image, conveying at once the extreme vulnerability and the potent energy of the living being, Shakespeare captures the wonder and mystery of sense experience that is the subject of this volume. The purpose of this book is to show how the unique functions and capabilities of literature are suited to articulating and scrutinizing sense experience and to casting light on its not yet fully understood phenomenology.

<sup>1</sup> William Shakespeare, *Venus and Adonis*, in *Poems*, the Arden Shakespeare, 3rd series (London: Bloomsbury, 2007). In his April 8, 1818, letter to B. R. Haydon, Keats refers to the ‘innumerable compositions and decompositions which take place between the intellect and its thousand materials before it arrives at that trembling delicate and snail-horn perception of Beauty’. *Letters of John Keats*, ed. Robert Gittings (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), 83. See Elizabeth Robertson’s discussion of snail-horn perception in ‘First Encounter: “Snail-Horn Perception” in Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*’, in Helen Hickey et al., eds, *Contemporary Chaucer Across the Centuries* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), 24–41.

In what the anthropologist David Howes has called a ‘sensorial revolution’, the senses have in the past few decades emerged as an object of inquiry in the social sciences and the humanities.<sup>2</sup> Working from the premise that sense perception involves more than neurological processes and is crucially informed by social values and shaped by culture, the field of sensory studies involves the ‘cultural approach to the study of the senses and a sensory approach to the study of culture.’<sup>3</sup> Scholars working in a range of disciplines have been investigating sensory experiences and sensory environments in and across different cultures and historical periods.<sup>4</sup> Sensory studies has recently gained traction among literary scholars, too. While sensory historians and cultural critics tend to turn to literature and the written record in general as ‘the principal medium through which we can access the senses of the past and their meanings,’<sup>5</sup> literary scholars seek to reveal the distinctive means by which literary texts mediate experience of the world. Yet, studies on literature and the senses have so far been restricted to either a specific literary period, a genre, or a single sense.<sup>6</sup>

This is the first volume to investigate literary representations of sense perception across periods. Bringing into conversation scholars of literatures in English specializing in periods from the Middle Ages to the present day, it focuses on the ways in which literary texts engage with, open up, or make uncertain dominant views of the nature of perception. It highlights not only the changing understanding of the senses as articulated in literature written in any given particular historical period,

<sup>2</sup> David Howes, ‘Charting the Sensorial Revolution,’ *Senses & Society* 1, no. 1 (2006), 113–28. See also his *The Sensory Studies Manifesto. Tracking the Sensorial Revolution in the Arts and Human Sciences* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2022).

<sup>3</sup> David Howes, ‘The Expanding Field of Sensory Studies,’ *Sensory Studies* (August 2013), <https://www.sensorystudies.org/sensorial-investigations/the-expanding-field-of-sensory-studies/>, which also gives a useful overview of the field of sensory studies. The term ‘sensory studies’ was coined in 2006 by the editors of the journal *The Senses and Society*, Michael Bull, David Howes, Doug Kahn, and Paul Gilroy, ‘Introducing Sensory Studies,’ *The Senses and Society* 1, no. 1 (2006), 5–7.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, the six-volume *Cultural History of the Senses*, ed. Constance Classen (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014–18); Mark M. Smith, *Sensing the Past: Seeing, Hearing, Smelling, Tasting, and Touching in History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Robert Jütte, *A History of the Senses: From Antiquity to Cyberspace* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005); Chris Woolgar, *The Senses in Late Medieval England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006); Mark Smith, *The Smell of Battle, the Taste of Siege: A Sensory History of the Civil War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>5</sup> Mark M. Smith, ‘Producing Sense, Consuming Sense, Making Sense: Perils and Prospects for Sensory History,’ *Journal of Social History* 40, no. 4 (2007), 841–58 (849).

<sup>6</sup> For example, Annette Kern-Stähler, Beatrix Busse, and Wietse de Boer, eds, *The Five Senses in Medieval and Early Modern England* (Leiden: Brill, 2016); Joe Moshenska, *Feeling Pleasures: The Sense of Touch in Renaissance England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Holly Dugan, *The Ephemeral History of Perfume: Scent and Sense in Early Modern England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), and, more recently, ‘Literature and the Senses,’ *Oxford Research Encyclopedias, Literature*, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190201098.013.1198>; Sara Danius, *The Senses of Modernism: Technology, Perception, and Aesthetics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002); Susan Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

but also the problems and concerns raised by the senses that are common to literature across periods. At the heart of the volume lie the questions of what makes literature particularly suitable to grouping and ordering, explaining, and mediating sensory perception and, conversely, of what makes sensory experience central to so many literary texts.

Literary scholars interested in probing the relationship between literature and the senses frequently turn to the great twentieth-century French phenomenological philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty as a springboard for their considerations. This is in part because the underlying premise of his phenomenology, that sense experience is always situated in a body in time and space, aligns well with literary texts, which themselves are temporally situated and present the world through the lens of the perception of an author, however dispersed authorial subjectivity may be. Merleau-Ponty's compressed description of the phenomenal field, 'Self-Others-things,'<sup>7</sup> conveys what is arguably the essence of literature, which seeks to express a subject's interaction with other beings (the social) within the context of an environment (containing non-human living beings and things).

Literature brings to the reader's attention the phenomenological complexity of this interaction. Encounters between 'Self-Others-things' work across a boundary which is semipermeable like the cell membrane. This membrane has been shown to be not a static line but, rather, a fluid thick space in which multiple transactions take place as substances are either taken in, expelled, or transformed while moving across the membrane. Just as the place where the cell ends and the outer world begins is not easily identifiable, so the place where the self ends and the world of others and things begins is ultimately indiscernible. The permeability of the boundary between self and other has also been the focus of the work of new materialist critics who draw our attention to the role of material (liquid, gas, solid, plasma) through which we encounter, and become entangled with, the non-human world.<sup>8</sup> Literary scholarship influenced by the more recently developed field of object-oriented ontology, which similarly privileges the agency of objects, has considered how the significance of the human subject wanes in the face of a powerful material world.<sup>9</sup>

Literature presents not only the phenomenological complexity of the encounters between self, others, and things but also the material, political, and economic struc-

<sup>7</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes [1962, 1st French edn 1945] (London: Routledge, 2012), 57.

<sup>8</sup> See Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 392–3; Chad Shamura, 'Exploring the Promise of New Materialisms', *Lateral* 6, no. 1 (2017), <https://doi.org/10.25158/L6.1.10>.

<sup>9</sup> Graham Harman, *Object-Oriented Ontology. A New Theory of Everything* (London: Pelican, 2018). For an introduction to object-oriented ontology see Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007). Jeffrey Jerome Cohen engages with object-oriented ontology in his book on lithic matter *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).



tures in which these encounters take place. It draws our attention to the social norms and cultural practices that condition sensory encounters (such as prohibitions that regulate seeing or touching), or the technologies that extend, distort, or alter a sense, e.g. the telescope,<sup>10</sup> or, as Walter Benjamin has illuminated, the mechanical reproduction of art.<sup>11</sup> As a medium that expresses a subject's sensory encounter with the outside world across a culturally, historically, and materially contingent interface, literature helps us understand how human beings have been understanding their relation to the world.

Literature can go one step further than engaging the phenomenology of sensory encounter as described by Merleau-Ponty, however, by bringing the nature of encounter into the consciousness often of the protagonist and certainly of the reader. In some ways, literature is not dissimilar to a sense organ in that it takes us out of ourselves and into the world. Like the Aristotelian common sense, it organizes and synthesizes the input an individual takes in from the world; at the same time, it makes visible the mechanisms through which sense perception takes place and the social norms and interactions within which it does so. As the American poet George Oppen states, 'we awake in the same moment to ourselves and to things.'<sup>12</sup>

Reading literature brings us to a new awareness of the world around us through varying degrees of defamiliarization, including what the political philosopher Jacques Rancière has called the redistribution of 'ordinary forms of sensory experiences.'<sup>13</sup> A literary text may exaggerate one sense in favour of another or, especially in texts that engage disability, present sensory experience that emerges when a sense is absent, impaired, or functions differently. The revelatory power of defamiliarization and disorientation produced by that redistribution is enhanced, as Michael Davidson shows, when a work of art mimics, or is presented from the perspective of, a person with a disability.

Aristotle was the first to suggest that sensation involves awareness not only of the object of perception but also of the self in the act of perception: 'we are aware that we are seeing or hearing.'<sup>14</sup> As Steven Connor has pointed out, literary representations

<sup>10</sup> David Howes, 'Sensation and Transmission', in Michael Bull and Jon P. Mitchell, eds, *Ritual, Performance and the Senses* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015), 153–79 (154).

<sup>11</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction', in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*. With an Introduction by Hannah Arendt [first German edn 1936] (London: Bodley Head, 2015), 211–44.

<sup>12</sup> Providing one of two epigraphs to George Oppen's *The Materials*, this statement is a misquotation from Jacques Maritain, *Creative Intuition in Art and Poetry* (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1954), 9. The correct wording is: 'Now if it is true that creative subjectivity awakens to itself only by simultaneously awakening to Things . . .'. Quoted in *George Oppen: New Collected Poems*, ed. with an introduction and notes by Michael Davidson, preface by Eliot Weinberger (New York: New Directions Publishing, 2002), 362.

<sup>13</sup> Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2009), 30.

<sup>14</sup> Aristotle, *On the Soul*, trans. J. A. Smith, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle. The Revised Oxford Translation*, ed. Jonathan Barnes, 2 vols, vol. 1 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984), 641–92, here at III 2 425b12. See L. A. Kosman, 'Perceiving that We Perceive', *Philosophical Review* 84, no. 4 (Oct. 1975), 499–519 (499).

of the senses allow us to move from the sensory experience as such to ‘the abstracted idea of a “sense”’, for example ‘from tasting a strawberry to having the idea of a faculty of taste’. Literature, Connor explains, can give an ‘apprehensible form to the senses themselves’, explaining them ‘through narrative or metaphorical means’. Literary analysis that is attuned to the senses can elucidate the ways in which literature makes us ‘sensible of a sense’.<sup>15</sup>

The end goal of a literary work, however, is not comprehension but apprehension. In medieval terms, literature produces *sapientia* (knowledge acquired through the senses) but not *scientia* (knowledge acquired through the mind). Michel Serres disputes that language can ever reproduce sensation,<sup>16</sup> but literature can approach sensory experience through its use of a variety of literary means, such as metaphor and metonymy. Ancient rhetoricians such as Quintilian urged authors to produce in their writings what they called *enargeia* (cleanness, vividness; from Greek *argès*, shining light), that is to render something that is absent *prae sensibus* through such vividness that it appears to be indistinguishable from that brought about by the exterior world.<sup>17</sup>

Focusing on embodied experience placed within a social matrix, literature also helps us understand the role sensation plays in social formation. Sensory perception initiates the formation of fundamental social bonds (e.g. love at first sight in medieval romances, such as Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde*). At the same time, as Howes emphasizes, ‘we learn social divisions through our senses’.<sup>18</sup> Culturally and historically produced views of the senses are used to demarcate groups along the lines of race, class, sex, gender, and dis/ability. In the West, the dominant groups have commonly been linked to the esteemed, ‘higher’ senses of sight and hearing, while subordinate groups have been associated with the lower senses of smell, taste, and touch.<sup>19</sup> Literature can, on the one hand, reinforce such associations and, on the other, reveal and critique such hierarchies.

The act of perusing literature often involves sense perception. Poetry especially depends on the reader’s sensory apprehension—for example, of the sounds that are

<sup>15</sup> Steven Connor, ‘Literature, Technology and the Senses’, in David Hillman and Ulrike Maude, eds, *The Cambridge Companion to the Body in Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 177–96 (179–80).

<sup>16</sup> Michel Serres with Bruno Latour, *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*, trans. Roxanne Lapidus (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 132.

<sup>17</sup> Gregor Vogt-Spira, ‘Senses, Imagination, and Literature. Some Epistemological Considerations’, in Stephen G. Nichols, Andreas Kablitz, and Alison Cahoun, eds, *Rethinking the Medieval Senses: Heritage, Fascinations, Frames* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 51–72 (52–5), and Graham Zanker, ‘Enargeia in the Ancient Criticism of Poetry’, *Rheinisches Museum für Philologie* 124 (1981), 297–311 (297).

<sup>18</sup> David Howes, *Sensual Relations: Engaging the Senses in Culture and Social Theory* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), xi.

<sup>19</sup> David Howes, ed., *Empire of the Senses: The Sensual Culture Reader* (Oxford: Berg, 2006), 10. For this hierarchy see further Jütte, *History of the Senses*, 61, and Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015), 12.

produced by a particular rhyme or tonal scheme; prose, too, invokes sensory responses in the reader in its use of cadence. It is worth noting that the senses permeate not only the literary text itself but the mediality and materiality of literature. In earlier periods, literature was predominantly written to be heard and thus required attentive listening on the part of the text's audience. Looking at, touching, smelling, and even tasting a book is part of the experience of reading, as those who have studied affective reading practices have made clear.<sup>20</sup> We encounter the senses in the various material and media components that turn the literary text into the form in which it reaches its readers or audiences: the size and weight of a book or manuscript, its colour, its thickness and weight, its smell, its texture, its topography and typography, the quality of its pages, the ease or awkwardness of handling it, the sounds of pages or manuscript leaves turning, or, in the case of e-books, the haptic and other sensory experiences afforded by digital technologies, or, in dramatic performances of poems or plays, sensory experiences produced and recalled on stage. The senses as encountered in the engagement with literature are thus already at the forefront of the recipient's sensitivity, priming them to move from the bodily experience of the senses to think further about them.

Reflecting on the role the senses play in literature points us towards the larger question of the nature of literary works as works of art themselves, that is as aesthetic objects. Deriving from the Greek term for sense perception, aesthetics, with 'its dual connotation of "pertaining to the senses" and "pertaining to art"', shows how deeply the art of the literary is intertwined with the senses themselves.<sup>21</sup> The chapters in this volume contribute to an understanding of this fundamental entanglement.

Rancière has moved the field of aesthetic theory forward by proposing that a major feature of art is what he calls the distribution of the sensible. He explains: 'This distribution and redistribution of places and identities, this apportioning and reapportioning of spaces and times, of the visible and the invisible, and of noise and speech constitutes what I call the distribution of the sensible.'<sup>22</sup> Aesthetic histories often follow his pattern of setting out Plato and Aristotle and then turning to the development of aesthetics as a field in the long eighteenth century. We have included in this volume essays that suggest a vibrant prehistory to this movement in literature of the medieval period.

## The Structure of Our Volume

The structure of our volume follows Aristotle's fivefold hierarchical model of the senses. The place of each sense in this hierarchy is informed by the distance between

<sup>20</sup> E.g. Mark Amsler, *Affective Literacies. Writing and Multilingualism in the Late Middle Ages* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011).

<sup>21</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 24.

<sup>22</sup> Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, 24–5.

object and perceiver and the belief that the mind and imagination are freer and more commanding when there is distance. The chapters in this book show how literature confirms and confounds this hierarchy. Aristotle distinguishes the five senses by their objects of perception, such as colour or sound, which are organized around the three visible sense organs of eye, ear, and nose, and an inner sense organ for touch and taste situated in the region of the heart.<sup>23</sup> Although we now know that the fivefold schema does not account for the range of human sensation, it is still being used today to conceptualize the senses.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, sensory studies increasingly turn to modalities outside the Aristotelian five—e.g. proprioception (awareness of the position of parts of the body), kinaesthesia (sense of movement), or nociception (sense of pain).

In view of the growing evidence for the interplay between the sensory areas of the brain, sensory modalities are increasingly studied less in isolation than in their interaction. As Fiona Macpherson has shown in her taxonomy of cross-modal perception, sense perception can be the result of many complex combinations of the senses.<sup>25</sup> Yet, as the study of literature and the senses is still in its infancy, our volume is dedicated to uncovering what literature across periods can reveal about the nature and operation of each individual sense before moving on to exploring literature in which multisensorial experiences predominate.

Exploring the senses across literary periods, this collection seeks to break out of the period boundaries within which current discussions of literature and the senses are often contained. Some of the chapters indeed complicate the neat chronologies put in place by a number of scholars on the basis of the prominence of one particular sense over another in a given period.<sup>26</sup> A focus on sensory experiences can reveal the assumptions that underlie period divisions and unsettle traditional cultural-historical narratives. Drawing our attention not only to changes but also to continuities between pre- and post-Cartesian literature challenges period divisions driven

<sup>23</sup> Aristotle, *On the Soul* II 6 418a7–11 424a15. See further T. K. Johansen, *Aristotle on the Sense-Organs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

<sup>24</sup> See Robert Rivelin and Karen Gravelle, *Deciphering the Senses: The Expanding World of Human Perception* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1984), 17; Fiona Macpherson, 'Introduction: Individuating the Senses', in Fiona Macpherson, ed., *The Senses: Classic and Contemporary Philosophical Perspectives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 3–43 (20). For example, the bulk of the influential Berg series 'Sensory Formations' is devoted to the traditional five senses: Michael Bull and Les Back, eds, *The Auditory Culture Reader* (Oxford: Berg, 2003); Constance Classen, ed., *The Book of Touch* (Oxford: Berg, 2005); Jim Drobnick, ed., *The Smell Culture Reader* (Oxford: Berg, 2006); Carolyn Korsmeyer, ed., *The Taste Culture Reader: Experiencing Food and Drink* (Oxford: Berg, 2007); Elizabeth Edwards and Kaushik Bhaumik, eds, *Visual Sense: A Cultural Reader* (Oxford: Berg, 2008), but also includes, for example, David Howes, ed., *The Sixth Sense Reader* (Oxford: Berg, 2009).

<sup>25</sup> Fiona Macpherson, 'Cross-Modal Experiences', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 111, no. 3 (2011), 429–68 (429).

<sup>26</sup> As Mark Jenner has noted, such chronologies are oversimplified: Mark S. R. Jenner, 'Follow Your Nose? Smell, Smelling, and Their Histories', *American Historical Review* 116, no. 2 (2011), 335–51 (esp. 345).

primarily, as James Simpson has shown, by enlightenment thinking.<sup>27</sup> Such a division between pre- and post-Cartesian literature becomes particularly questionable when we consider the decline of dualism in the twentieth century. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, ‘our century has wiped out the dividing line between “body” and “mind”, and sees human life as through and through mental and corporeal.’<sup>28</sup> Under the influence of phenomenology, recent work in the cognitive sciences, too, underlines the role of the body in human cognition.<sup>29</sup> The art historian François Quiviger has suggested, therefore, that ‘we are reconnecting with pre-modern cultures and continuing with modern tools the same path interrupted by several centuries of dominant dualism.’<sup>30</sup> This volume invites the reader to consider literature created before the Cartesian divide alongside literature produced after dualism declined.

By including a considerable number of chapters on the medieval and early modern periods, we redress the imbalance produced especially by a long-standing critical emphasis on the role the sensing individual plays in literature of the long eighteenth century. This period is often characterized by its focus on the senses, as seen, for example, in the florescence of the culture of sensibility, the emergence of aesthetics, and Romanticism’s synaesthetic experiments and distortions.<sup>31</sup> It has even been claimed that the Romantic period was ‘an era uniquely preoccupied with the senses and sensation,’<sup>32</sup> yet emerging work on other periods of literary history—including the contributions to this collection—challenges this perspective, drawing attention to the importance of the senses and sensation in literary writing of all periods.

<sup>27</sup> James Simpson, ‘Trans-Reformation English Literary History’, in Kristen Poole and Owen Williams, eds, *Early Modern Histories of Time. The Periodizations of Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), 88–101.

<sup>28</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs* [first French edn 1960], trans. R. C. McCleary (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 226–7.

<sup>29</sup> Hubert L. Dreyfus, *What Computers Can’t Do. A Critique of Artificial Reason* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972); Andy Clark, ‘Embodied cognitive sciences?’, *Trends in Cognitive Sciences* 3 (1999), 345–51; Shogi Nagataki and Satoru Hirose, ‘Phenomenology and the Third Generation of Cognitive Science: Towards a Cognitive Phenomenology of the Body’, *Human Studies* 30 (Sept. 2007): 219–32.

<sup>30</sup> François Quiviger, ‘Afterword. The multi-sensory image between interdisciplinarity and multimedia’, in *The Multi-Sensory Image from Antiquity to the Renaissance*, ed. Heather Hunter-Crawley and Erica O’Brien (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019), 179–81 (180).

<sup>31</sup> It would be impossible to provide a full bibliography in this space, but some key works include Heather Tilley, *Blindness and Writing: From Wordsworth to Gissing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Edward Larrissy, *The Blind and Blindness in Literature of the Romantic Period* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007); Susan Wolfson, ed., ‘Soundings of Things Done’: *The Poetry & Poetics of Sound in the Romantic Ear and Era*, Romantic Circles (2008), <http://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis>; Emily C. Friedman, *Reading Smell in Eighteenth-Century Fiction* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press with Rowman & Littlefield, 2016); James Noggle, *The Temporality of Taste in Eighteenth-Century British Writing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Denise Gigante, *Taste: A Literary History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005); Jocelyne Kolb, *The Ambiguity of Taste: Freedom and Food in European Romanticism* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995); Kimberly Cox, *Touch, Sexuality, and Hands in British Literature, 1740–1901* (New York: Routledge, 2022).

<sup>32</sup> Noel Jackson, ‘Literature and the Senses’, in David Duff, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of British Romanticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 327–39 (327).

Rancière's understanding of the distribution of the senses in a work of art asks us to redirect aesthetics away from an understanding of the senses in the long eighteenth century as filtered through the individual consciousness towards, instead, the less hierarchized and intentional range of sensible experience that art of all periods affords. The association, whether rightly or wrongly, of the long eighteenth century with the sensible as experienced by the individual (the man or woman of feeling) tends to obscure the broader social and political significance of the distribution of the sensible. The literature of the Middle Ages and the early modern period comes to us without that association and thus offers unmediated perspectives on the representation of the senses.

Medieval literature in particular is often overlooked in literary surveys because of its perceived engagement with a rigid Foucauldian confessional structure and its encoding of an equally rigid social structure based on the three estates of those who work, those who rule, and those who pray. While literature of the period is indeed interested in the edification of the senses (as Richard Newhauser has explained),<sup>33</sup> that very emphasis on regulation simultaneously illuminates the unregulatable play of the senses that inhabits literary works.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, medieval English literature's—especially fourteenth-century Ricardian poetry's—characteristically outward-looking focus, its 'sociality' and 'this worldliness' (as illuminated by critics such as Pamela Gradon, A. C. Spearing, John Burrow, and Paul Strohm), even in literature with an apparently devotional and other-worldly focus, brings the world of the sensible to the foreground.<sup>35</sup> We have therefore sought to redress a previous imbalance by including several chapters that grant sustained attention to the play of the senses in medieval and early modern literature.

## The Five Senses and Beyond

In what follows, we introduce the volume's six clusters of essays. Given the lasting influence of Aristotle's writings on the senses, we begin by sketching briefly Aristotle's views of sight, hearing, smell, taste, and touch. We then survey the major cultural criticism that has been inspired by each sense, followed by an overview of the major trends of recent literary criticism. The introduction to our final cluster ('Multisensoriality'), which explores the interaction between the senses, follows the

<sup>33</sup> Richard Newhauser, 'Introduction: The Sensual Middle Ages,' in Richard G. Newhauser, ed., *A Cultural History of the Senses in the Middle Ages, 500–1450* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 1–22.

<sup>34</sup> See Elizabeth Robertson, *Early English Devotional Prose and the Female Audience* (Nashville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1990).

<sup>35</sup> A. C. Spearing, *The Gawain Poet: A Critical Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970); Pamela Gradon, *Form and Style in Early English Literature* (London: Methuen, 1971); John Burrow, *Ricardian Poetry: Chaucer, Gower, Langland and the 'Gawain' Poet* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1971); Paul Strohm, *Social Chaucer* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989).

same pattern. We intend this review to point the reader to the most prominent ideas, critical contexts, and understandings of the senses that form the background to the essays in this collection.

## Sight

Ever since Plato and Aristotle asserted sight to be the noblest of the senses, the sense of vision, which ‘makes us know...things’, has occupied a privileged position in understandings of the senses.<sup>36</sup> Ancient philosophers differed, however, in the ways they understood the mechanisms of vision. Whereas for Plato, Euclid, and Ptolemy, sight depended upon the eyes projecting rays to the object of perception (which came to be known as the theory of extramission), Aristotle advocated a theory of intromission, proposing that visual perception depended upon emissions (*species*) emanating from the object of perception and striking the eye.<sup>37</sup> Each of these positions was taken up and revised by Arabic writers of the ninth to eleventh centuries, such as Hunain Ibn Ishāq (Joannitius, d.873), Ibn Sīnā (Avicenna, d.1037), and Ibn al-Haytham (Alhazen, d. c.1039), whose work had a profound impact in the Latin West.<sup>38</sup> The medieval philosopher Roger Bacon synthesized the two traditions of visual perception: both intromission and extramission played a part in vision; *species* were believed to be emitted from the eye but those interacted with *species* emitted from objects being viewed. Ockham suggested that a simpler model must exist, paving the way for discoveries concerning the mechanisms by which light hits photoreceptors in the retina, which in turn produce electrical signals sent along the optic nerve to the brain.

Seeing occupies a prominent position in religious thought and practice. Seeing is a primary metaphor for belief, as shown in the common phrase ‘seeing is believing.’<sup>39</sup> Seeing God is one of the major rewards of the saved, as Paul famously writes in his First Letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 13:12): ‘We see now through a glass in a dark manner; but then face to face.’ Visionaries are privileged to see God in this life and sight plays an important role in their accounts of visionary experiences. Like all the

<sup>36</sup> Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, trans. W. D. Ross, in *Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Barnes, vol. 2, 1552–1728, here at I (A)1 980a25.

<sup>37</sup> Aristotle, *Sense and Sensibilia*, trans. J. I. Beare, in *Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Barnes, vol. 1, 693–713, here at 1 438a.

<sup>38</sup> Hunain Ibn Ishāq supported a view of intromission and extramission combined, and Ibn Sīnā argued for the theory of intromission. In his influential treatise on optics, translated into Latin in the twelfth or early thirteenth century under the title *De aspectibus*, Al-Haytham argued that visible objects are seen by the emission of their own light. See David C. Lindberg, *Theories of Vision: From Al-Kindi to Kepler* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978); A. Mark Smith, *From Sight to Light. The Passage from Ancient to Modern Optics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), esp. ch. 6. For an English translation of the first three books of Al-Haytham’s influential treatise *De aspectibus*, see A. Mark Smith, *Alhacen’s Theory of Visual Perception* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 2001).

<sup>39</sup> Barbara Newman, ‘What Did It Mean to Say “I Saw”?’ The Clash between Theory and Practice in Medieval Visionary Culture’, *Speculum* 80 (2005), 1–43; *God and the Goddesses: Vision, Poetry, and Belief in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005).

senses, sight was subject to regulation predominantly in didactic religious writings but also in conduct literature, especially in texts addressed to women.<sup>40</sup>

Due to the privileged position sight has long occupied in the scheme of the senses, it is not surprising that of all the senses sight has until recently received most scholarly attention. Influenced by Marshall McLuhan's *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, which argues that the invention of the printing press heralded the dominance of the eye in modernity at the expense of the other senses, much historical and cultural scholarship has misrepresented the pre-eminence of sight as a modern phenomenon.<sup>41</sup> Pointing to early modern developments, including the invention of technological and scientific instruments that train and empower the eye and foster the science of observation (e.g. the microscope, 1590; the telescope, 1608), such scholarship advanced the idea of a 'great divide' between premodern and modern conceptualizations of the senses, a theory which has more recently been viewed with scepticism.<sup>42</sup> The prominence of sight in modern scholarship rests also upon Michel Foucault's groundbreaking work on the panopticon, which has sparked innovative research in various disciplines on the ways in which sight shapes power relations.<sup>43</sup>

Sight and the idea of the 'trained eye' have long been central to our understanding of how we experience and evaluate works of art. Although a growing number of art historians acknowledge that works of art especially after modernism activate not only sight but also the other senses and call for new methodologies in art history to take into account the 'multi-sensorial body of the viewer', art history and the more recent interdisciplinary field of visual culture studies prioritize the visual component of art and isolate the sense of sight from the experiential continuum.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>40</sup> For regulations of sight in religious writing, see, e.g., Elizabeth Robertson, 'The Rule of the Body: the Feminine Spirituality of the *Ancrene Wisse*', in Sheila Fisher and Janet Halley, eds, *Seeking the Woman in Late Medieval and Renaissance Texts: Essays in Feminist Contextual Criticism* (Knoxville, University of Tennessee Press, 1989), 109–34; for conduct literature regulating women's sight, *The Book of the Knight of la Tour-Landry*, ed. Thomas Wright, rev. edn (New York: Kegan, 1969), 18.

<sup>41</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962).

<sup>42</sup> Smith, *Sensing the Past*, 8–18 and 27–35.

<sup>43</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* [1st French edn 1975] (London: Allen Lane, 1977). See further Monika Fludernik, 'Panopticism: from fantasy to metaphor to reality', *Textual Practice* 31 (2017), 1–26.

<sup>44</sup> Jenni Lauwrens, 'Welcome to the revolution: The sensory turn and art history', *Journal of Art Historiography* 7 (Dec 2012), 1–17 (quotation on 16) <https://arthistoriography.files.wordpress.com/2012/12/lauwrens.pdf>. For critiques of the visual hegemony in art history, which are influenced by Merleau-Ponty's insistence on the corporeal nature of perception, see also Patrizia Di Bello and Gabriel Koureas, 'Other than the visual: art, history and the senses', in *Art, History and the Senses. 1830 to the Present*, ed. Patrizia Di Bello and Gabriel Koureas (Surrey: Ashgate, 2010), 1–18 (1), and Francis Halsall, 'One Sense is Never Enough', *Journal of Visual Art Practice* 3, no. 2 (2004), 103–22. The interdisciplinary field of visual culture studies, which emerged in the 1990s, is interested not only in the subjects, objects, and media of seeing and in the production, circulation, and consumption of images, but also in the visual practices and scopic regimes that inform encounters between the viewer and all manner of visual culture, ranging from painting, sculpture, and architecture to film, advertising, and fashion. For visual culture studies, see further Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).



Representations of sight have been given extensive consideration in literary criticism from Suzanne Conklin Akbari's explanation of the influence of theories of vision on the development of allegory to Peter Brown's book on vision in Chaucer, in which he explains the medieval period's understanding of the relationship between the mind and the eye, and from Kate Flint's work on the Victorian period's fascination with the act of seeing to Karen Jacobs's study of the intersection of new technologies with modernist fiction.<sup>45</sup> Film theorist Laura Mulvey has called attention to the politics of the gaze, citing its predatory and objectifying potential as well as the lack of neutrality in the nature of sight and the selectivity of what is seen. Prompted in large part by her generative essay on 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', many literary scholars have explored the intersections between vision and gender.<sup>46</sup> More recently, literary scholars, informed by the growing field of disability studies, have explored constructions of partial sightedness and blindness in literature.<sup>47</sup>

The four chapters in Part I of our volume investigate how literary works from the Middle Ages to the present engage not only the phenomenology of seeing as it was articulated in contemporary science and philosophy, but also the social and political dimensions of the 'look'. Stephanie Trigg examines the changing and conflicted representations of the sensory and perceptual act of 'looking' in English literary texts from the Middle Ages to the present, with a particular focus on the human face. The essay's conceptual starting point is the ambiguity between acts of perception (looking at something or someone) and acts of appearance (being looked at by others). The face is also at the centre of Zoë Lehmann Imfeld's chapter on seeing the unseen

<sup>45</sup> Suzanne Conklin Akbari, *Seeing Through the Veil: Optical Theory and Medieval Allegory* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2019); Peter Brown, *Chaucer and the Making of Optical Space* (Oxford: Lang, 2007); Karen Jacobs, *The Eye's Mind: Literary Modernism and Visual Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000); Kate Flint, *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>46</sup> Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', *Screen* 16, no. 3 (1975), 6–18. Literary scholarship exploring the intersection between vision and gender includes Emma Campbell and Robert Mills, eds, *Troubled Vision: Gender, Sexuality, and Sight in Medieval Text and Image* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Holly Crocker, *Chaucer's Visions of Manhood* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007); Patricia E. Johnson, 'The Gendered Politics of the Gaze: Henry James and George Eliot', *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 30, no. 1 (1997), 39–54.

<sup>47</sup> For disability studies approaches to vision, see Edward Wheatley, *Stumbling Blocks before the Blind: Medieval Constructions of a Disability* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010); Jonathan Hsy, 'Blind Advocacy: Blind Readers, Disability Theory, and Accessing John Gower', *Accessus: A Journal of Premodern Literature and New Media* 1, no. 1 (2013), 1–38; Beatrix Busse and Annette Kern-Stähler, 'Blery Eyes: Middle English Constructions of Visual Disabilities', in Kern-Stähler, Busse, and de Boer, *The Five Senses in Medieval and Early Modern England*, 69–95; Larrissy, *The Blind and Blindness*; Heather Tilley, *Blindness and Writing: From Wordsworth to Gissing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Maren Tova Linett, 'Blindness and Intimacy', in *Bodies of Modernism: Physical Disability in Transatlantic Modernist Literature* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 55–84; Mark Paterson, 'Blindness, Empathy, and "Feeling Seeing": Literary Accounts of Blind Experience', in *Seeing with the Hands: Blindness, Vision and Touch after Descartes* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 184–206; Georgina Kleege, *Sight Unseen* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

in Victorian ghost stories. Focusing on the literary strategies that articulate ghostly encounters, Lehmann Imfeld demonstrates that it is predominantly on the face of the beholder that the ghost registers.

Exploring the haunting presence of Elisabeth ‘Zaza’ Lacoïn in the literary and theoretical works of Simone de Beauvoir and her close friend Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Sue Zemka turns to French art and literature, including the memoir. Although this volume focuses on literatures in English, the significance of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception for any engagement with the senses warrants attention to his own work and how it was shaped by his circle of friends. Zemka uses Beauvoir’s writing to demonstrate that Merleau-Ponty’s biography is crucial to his philosophy. Probing the significance not just of looking, but of looking with others, the essay tells the story of his tragic love affair with Zaza—an affair that was triangulated with their mutual friend Simone de Beauvoir. At the heart of the essay is a belief that death and its aftermath of grief find expression and consolation in Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of the senses. Our final chapter of Part I turns to the concerns of a practising poet. In her record of her evolving practice as a partially sighted poet, Nuala Watt tracks the liberatory path her poetry took as she became sceptical about the certainty implied in closed-form approaches characteristic of disability-based identity poetics.

## Hearing

In Aristotle’s hierarchy of the senses, hearing is second to sight. Like sight, hearing is a sense that does not require bodily contact between the perceived object and the organ of perception but involves a medium.<sup>48</sup> Sound is a ‘certain movement of air’, produced by ‘the meeting of bodies or of the air with bodies.’<sup>49</sup> For Aristotle, hearing is the sense that ‘contributes most to the growth of intelligence.’<sup>50</sup> Aristotle’s ideas about the sense of hearing remained influential until the seventeenth century, when it formed the basis for the account of hearing in the important anatomical treatise *Mikrokosmographia* (1615) by the English anatomist Helkiah Crooke.<sup>51</sup>

Hearing plays a leading role in religious practice and the access of the devout to divine truth. ‘Shema Israel’ (Listen, Israel) are the first words of the declaration of

<sup>48</sup> Aristotle, *On the Soul* II 7 419a25–29.

<sup>49</sup> Aristotle, *On the Soul* II 8 420b11 and *On Things Heard*, trans. T. Loveday and E. S. Forster, in *Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Barnes, vol. 1, 1229–1236, here at 800a1–2.

<sup>50</sup> Aristotle, *Sense and Sensibilia* 1 437a11.

<sup>51</sup> On the endurance of Aristotle’s theory of hearing in seventeenth-century England see Penelope Gouk, ‘Some English Theories of Hearing in the Seventeenth Century: Before and After Descartes’, in Charles Burnett, Michael Fend, and Penelope Gouk, eds, *The Second Sense: Studies in Hearing and Musical Judgement from Antiquity to the Seventeenth Century* (London: Warburg Institute, 1991), 95–113.

the Jewish faith. In the Christian Church, the focus on seeing in the Roman Catholic Church was shifted to aurality as a consequence of the Protestant return to the Word of God as the primary source of salvation. For Luther, the 'ears are the only organs of a Christian.'<sup>52</sup>

As mentioned in Part I on sight, the early modern rise of literacy and print culture, on the one hand, and the emphasis early modern science put on visual observation, on the other, are often offered as explanations for modernity's seeming erosion of the prestige of hearing.<sup>53</sup> Yet, as historians of aurality argue, the sense of hearing did not become less important in the modern era. Pointing to key developments in physiology, which led to a better understanding of the organ of hearing and also of hearing impairments, and to medical innovations such as the stethoscope (1816), they argue that '[h]earing and sound remained critical to the elaboration of modernity.'<sup>54</sup> At the same time, especially in the wake of urbanization and industrialization, unpleasant sound—noise—was increasingly perceived as aggravating. The dominant groups of society demanded quietude, and sound became an index of difference in terms of class and race.<sup>55</sup>

Literary critics have drawn our attention to the ways in which literature conjures up sound and expresses silence.<sup>56</sup> Scholars investigate, for example, how changing sound technologies affect the portrayal of sound and hearing in literature.<sup>57</sup> When studying sound, literary scholars, signalling the intermediality

<sup>52</sup> *Luther's Works*, ed. Helmut Lehmann et al., trans. Jaroslav Pelikan, 79 vols (St Louis: Concordia Press, 1955–2016), vol. 29, 224. See further Arnold Hunt, *The Art of Hearing. English Preachers and their Audiences 1590–1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>53</sup> Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy. The Technologizing of the World* (London: Methuen, 1982), 121.

<sup>54</sup> Smith, *Sensing the Past*, 48. Alain Corbin's study of nineteenth-century France and Bruce Smith's work on the importance of sound in early modern culture are foundational contributions to the importance of hearing for sensory history: Alain Corbin, *Village Bells: Sound and Meaning in the 19th-century French Countryside [Les cloches de la terre: Paysage sonore et culture sensible dans les campagnes au XIXe siècle]*, trans. Martin Thom (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); Bruce R. Smith, *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England: Attending to the O-Factor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999). Patricia Cahill singles out hearing and listening as particular areas of scholarly interest that unsettle assumptions about the dominance of sight: Patricia Cahill, 'Take Five: Renaissance Literature and the Study of the Senses', *Literature Compass* 6, no. 5 (2009), 1014–30 (1014).

<sup>55</sup> Smith, *Sensing the Past*, 49–53. Investigating sound as it occurs in a variety of media, Greg Goodale and Jennifer Lynn Stoeber demonstrate how ideas of race and racist beliefs have depended not only on vision but also on sound. Jennifer Lynn Stoeber, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening* (New York: New York University Press, 2016); Greg Goodale, 'The Race of Sound', in *Sonic Persuasion: Reading Sound in the Recorded Age* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011), 76–105.

<sup>56</sup> E.g. Peter Middleton, *Expanding Authorship: Transformation in American Poetry Since 1950* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2021); Angela Leighton, *Hearing Things: The Work of Sound in Literature* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2018); Vanessa Guignery, ed., *Voices and Silence in the Contemporary Novel in English* (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009).

<sup>57</sup> Edward Allen explores the impact of technologies such as the telephone and radio upon modernist lyric, Jessica Teague evaluates the evolving relationship of American literature and sonic technologies, and Greg Goodale focuses on the anxiety particular sounds convey in twentieth-century literature and

of literature, often find it useful to draw on insights of musicology.<sup>58</sup> Silence, as the ‘positive absence of sound’, and the presence of deafness in literary texts have come to the fore in literary criticism, particularly through the work of scholars in disability studies.<sup>59</sup> They have explored literary constructions of deafness and have shown the ways in which literature that reflects deaf experience defamiliarizes and reawakens our sense of hearing.

In his study of the phenomenology of listening, Jean-Luc Nancy distinguishes between hearing-to-understand and listening, a process that apprehends rather than comprehends meaning. The meaning of sound, he argues, is always just beyond reach, and ‘to listen is to be straining toward a possible meaning.’<sup>60</sup> Analysing how sound both invites meaning and remains elusive in a variety of literary genres and periods, literary scholarship explores the ineffability of the line between noise and meaningful sound that literature both instantiates and resists.

The five chapters in our cluster on hearing examine the ways in which literary works call attention to the apprehension of sound and the complex boundary between the listening subject and the external or internal stimulus that produces sound. Hearing is particularly important for an understanding of literature because literature might have begun as an orally performed event—and indeed many con-

film. Anna Snaith’s edited volume *Sound and Literature* and Sam Halliday’s monograph *Sonic Modernity* consider the ‘energy generated by the sonic’ and the representation of sound in a variety of modern media, offering wide-ranging accounts that attend to technological change. Edward Allen, *Modernist Invention: Media Technology and American Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Jessica Teague, *Sound Recording Technology and American Literature from the Phonograph to the Remix* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Goodale, *Sonic Persuasion*; Anna Snaith, *Sound and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 8; Sam Halliday, *Sonic Modernity: Representing Sound in Literature, Culture and the Arts* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013).

<sup>58</sup> The term ‘intermediality’ refers to ‘the relationships between media and is hence used to describe a huge range of cultural phenomena which involve more than one medium’: Gabriele Rippl, ‘Introduction’, in Rippl, ed., *Handbook of Intermediality: Literature—Image—Sound—Music* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 1–31 (1). For intermedial relations between literature and music, see Werner Wolf, ‘Literature and Music: Theory’, in Rippl, *Handbook of Intermediality*, 459–74; Philipp Schweighauser, ‘Literary Acoustics’, in Rippl, *Handbook of Intermediality*, 475–93; Erik Redling, ‘The Musicalization of Poetry’, in Rippl, *Handbook of Intermediality*, 494–511.

<sup>59</sup> Jonathan Rée, *I See a Voice: Deafness, Language and the Senses. A Philosophical History* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1999), 43 (quotation). See, e.g., Christopher Krentz, *Writing Deafness. The Hearing Line in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), and Christopher Krentz, ed., *A Mighty Change. An Anthology of Deaf American Writing, 1816–1864* (Washington, DC: Gallaudet, 2000); Jonathan Hsy, ‘Symptom and Surface: Disruptive Deafness and Medieval Medical Authority’, *Journal of Bioethical Inquiry* 13, no. 4 (2016), 477–83; Rebecca Sanchez, *Deafening Modernism: Embodied Language and Visual Poetics in American Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 2015); Michael Davidson, ‘Cleavings: Critical Losses in the Politics of Deaf Gain’, in *Invalid Modernism: Disability and the Missing Body of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 167–80; see also Michael Davidson, *Concerto for the Left Hand: Disability and the Defamiliar Body* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 80–115; and Linett, ‘Deafness, Communication, and Knowledge’, in *Bodies of Modernism*, 85–118.

<sup>60</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening [À l’écoute]*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 6.

temporary poets present their work through oral performance. The move to a written text to be read (either in manuscript or print) generated anxiety and analysis about the authority and authenticity of written as opposed to orally performed texts. Simon Jackson's chapter discusses how several early modern writers (Thomas Whythorne, Charles Butler, and Francis Bacon) considered whether or not written signs could accurately reflect the sounds produced by the speaking subject, on the one hand, or the natural world, on the other.

Turning to sounds in Romantic poetry, Stacey McDowell shows how Wordsworth and other poets use architectural space such as cathedrals or echo chambers to explore the reach and limits of the whisperings and echoes their own poetry produces. She also investigates how whisperings and echoes can take the form of an inner self-scrutinizing and accusatory voice, showing how difficult it is to draw a distinction between sounds as an interior or an external phenomenon.

While McDowell draws attention to the impact of hearing one's own voice transmitted back in an echo, Anne-Julia Zwierlein examines literary resonances of the development of new techniques for capturing and transporting sound, such as the telephone and the phonograph. Surveying an array of writers transcending traditional period boundaries, from Edgar Allan Poe and Mary Shelley, Charlotte Brontë and George Eliot to Joseph Conrad and E. M. Forster, she explores the social dimension of sound, demonstrating how literary evocations of the sense of hearing engage gender and class.

Michael Davidson shows how modernist writers foreground silence as an important attribute of poetry through their manipulation of graphic presentation or synaesthetic experiments. He emphasizes the role silence plays for deaf poets, who, reflecting their alternative apprehension of sound through the other senses, redistribute the senses in their work.

Contemporary cognitive psychologists perhaps too easily categorize hearing voices as a pathology. Corinne Saunders shows how representations of subjects who hear voices in medieval literature resist such categorization. She examines accounts of those hearing voices in medieval texts—from romances in which other-worldly voices guide the protagonist to reform their lives to mystical treatises in which visionaries enter into dialogue with God.

## Smell

In classical and medieval understandings of the senses, smell occupies an intermediate position between the long-distance senses of seeing and hearing and the two contact senses of taste and touch.<sup>61</sup> Aristotle explains that the sense of smell is

<sup>61</sup> Aristotle, *Sense and Sensibilia* 5 445a5–18.

like sight and hearing in that it depends on an external medium (water or air); yet, because of the similarity between the nature of flavour and odours, smell is also like taste.<sup>62</sup>

Olfactory experience plays an important role in all major religions, which understand fragrance as an aspect of, and pleasing to, the divine. In the Christian Church, incense was burned from the fourth century onwards to demarcate sacred spaces.<sup>63</sup> Odour also served as a distinguishing marker of good and evil: a sweet fragrance emanated from saints, while a foul stench was a sign of moral corruption; paradise smelled of sweet spices, while hell reeked of sulphur.<sup>64</sup>

Smell is an invasive sense, which reveals the porosity of the boundary between self and other through which we become entangled with the world: to smell is to inhale the air around us and all it contains.<sup>65</sup> The enduring belief that disease was caused by inhaling the corrupt air emanating from putrid matter (miasma theory) led to anxieties about the purity of the atmosphere and osmophobia, which propelled sanitation reforms and deodorization projects, particularly in the Victorian period.<sup>66</sup> The control of odour has become a preoccupation of Western societies,<sup>67</sup> in which 'natural' odours are being replaced by artificial odours.<sup>68</sup> Dominant groups ascribe odours to the 'other' and conceive of themselves as odourless.<sup>69</sup> The fact that odours feed directly into the limbic system, the region of the brain responsible for

<sup>62</sup> Aristotle, *Sense and Sensibilia* 4 442b27–29; 5 443b7–12; 5 445a8–16. Mark A. Johnstone, 'Aristotle on Odour and Smell', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 43 (2012), 143–83 (esp. 143–6).

<sup>63</sup> The use of incense in Christianity has most extensively been discussed by Susan Ashbrook Harvey, *Scenting Salvation: Ancient Christianity and the Olfactory Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

<sup>64</sup> See Constance Classen, 'The Breath of God: Sacred Histories of Scent', in Classen, *The Colour of Angels: Cosmology, Gender and the Aesthetic Imagination* (London: Routledge, 1998), 375–82; Rory Critten and Annette Kern-Stähler, 'Smell in the York Corpus Christi Plays', in Kern-Stähler, Busse, and de Boer, *The Five Senses in Medieval and Early Modern England*, 237–68 (253–5). On hell in the medieval imagination, see most recently Alastair Minnis, *Hellish Imaginations from Augustine to Dante. An Essay in Metaphor and Materiality* (Oxford: Medium Aevum Monographs, 2020).

<sup>65</sup> This principal bodily permeability is, of course, demonstrated by all sense perception; in fact, in the new materialist framework sketched above, all senses could be conceptualized as communicative channels between the human body and its environment.

<sup>66</sup> See Stephen Halliday, *The Great Filth: The War Against Disease in Victorian England* (Stroud: Sutton, 2007); Erin O'Connor, *Raw Material: Producing Pathology in Victorian Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000). In his *Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain* (1842), Edwin Chadwick, the first director of the Board of Health, argued for the removal of noxious smells from dwellings because 'all smell is disease'. Cited in William Tullett, 'Re-Odorization, Disease and Emotion in Mid-Nineteenth Century England', *Historical Journal* 62, no. 3 (2019), 765–88 (765). On earlier sanitation projects, see Jenner, 'Follow Your Nose', 340.

<sup>67</sup> Classen, Howes, and Synnott, *Aroma*, 180. See also Suellen M. Hoy, *Chasing Dirt: The American Pursuit of Cleanliness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

<sup>68</sup> As Classen, Howes, and Synnott put it, artificial smells are 'evocative of things that are not there', such as 'floral-scented perfumes which were never exhaled by a flower' (*Aroma*, 205).

<sup>69</sup> Classen, Howes, and Synnott, *Aroma*, 161.

emotional responses and long-term memory, may contribute to such strong reactions to odour.<sup>70</sup>

Scholars who attempt to reconstruct historical smellscape point to the ephemeral nature of smell.<sup>71</sup> Yet, while we will never know what the past smelled like, the sensory evidence in the textual and visual record allows us to understand the meanings of, and attitudes towards, smell at a particular historical moment.<sup>72</sup> Alain Corbin's landmark study *Le miasme et la jonquille* (1982) first drew attention to the value of historicizing smell, which has since been further demonstrated by scholars working in different disciplines.<sup>73</sup>

An increasing body of literary scholarship has been devoted to tracing the changing meanings of smell in literary works from different historical periods and genres, especially as olfaction intersects with gender, race, class, and religion.<sup>74</sup> Most recently, scholars are also considering the theatrical uses of smell.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>70</sup> See Mikiko Kadohisa, 'Effects of Odor on Emotion, with Implications', *Frontiers in Systems Neuroscience* 7 (2013), DOI:10.3389/fnsys.2013.00066.

<sup>71</sup> For example, Classen, Howes, and Synnott note that 'smells cannot be preserved', and suggest that therefore '[w]e do not know what the past smelled like' (*Aroma*, 204).

<sup>72</sup> See Dugan, *Ephemeral History of Perfume*.

<sup>73</sup> Alain Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odor and the French Social Imagination* [first French edn 1982] (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986). More recent scholarship historicizing smell includes Classen, Howes, and Synnott, *Aroma*; Jonathan Reinartz, *Past Scents: Historical Perspectives on Smell* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2014); Andrew Kettler, *The Smell of Slavery. Olfactory Racism and the Atlantic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

<sup>74</sup> Hans Rindisbacher offered an early foray into the history of olfaction as mediated in literature, exploring a wide range of European and Russian literature from the Romantic period onwards. Hans J. Rindisbacher, *The Smell of Books: A Cultural-Historical Study of Olfactory Perception in Literature* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992). One of the contributors to our volume, Holly Dugan, has paired her attention to the textual record with a consideration of the spaces in which particular scents were prominent in the early modern period: Holly Dugan, *The Ephemeral History of Perfume: Scent and Sense in Early Modern England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011); Katelynn Robinson has recently published a similarly interdisciplinary study on smell in the medieval period: Katelynn Robinson, *The Sense of Smell in the Middle Ages: A Source of Certainty* (London: Routledge, 2019); Emily Friedman posits the particular importance of smell for the novel and its development, placing it in the context of changing practices of hygiene and olfaction: Emily C. Friedman, *Reading Smell in Eighteenth-Century Fiction* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press with Rowman & Littlefield, 2016). Janie Carlisle's *Common Scents* and Catherine Maxwell's *Scents and Sensibility* have made a case for considering Victorian values and status through odour: Janie Carlisle, *Common Scents: Comparative Encounters in High-Victorian Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004); Catherine Maxwell, *Scents and Sensibility: Perfume in Victorian Literary Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017). For intersections of odour and religion in literature, see, e.g., Elizabeth Robertson, 'Apprehending the Divine and the Radical Choice to Believe in Geoffrey Chaucer's *Second Nun's Tale*', *Chaucer Review* 46, nos. 1 and 2, *Studies in Middle English Literature in Honor of C. David Benson* (2011), 111–30.

<sup>75</sup> Medievalists and early modernists are paying increasing attention to theatrical uses of smell. Rory Critten and Annette Kern-Stähler have explored how the sense of smell was engaged in performances of the York Cycle; Hristomir Stanev suggests that smell evokes the materiality of the stage in Jacobean city comedy; and Holly Dugan has uncovered the way scent conveys mortality and abjection in *King Lear*: Critten and Kern-Stähler, 'Smell in the York Corpus Christi Plays'; Hristomir Stanev, 'The City out of Breath: Jacobean City Comedy and the Odors of Restraint', *postmedieval* 3, no. 4 (2012), special issue on 'The Intimate Senses', 423–35; Holly Dugan, 'The Smell of a King: Olfaction in *King Lear*', in

The four contributors to Part III in this volume explore the role of literature in capturing and communicating the elusive yet invasive sense of smell. Holly Dugan and Hsuan Hsu each focus on the role of smell in forming group identities. Dugan explores the representation of the smell of lilies—sweet and festering—in early modern lyric poetry to suggest that this flower captures the emergent discourse of ‘corruptible whiteness.’ Hsu, proceeding from the observation that smell is traditionally relegated to the bottom of the sensory hierarchy, argues that BIPOC speculative fiction authors explore alternative ways in which smell functions to create kin and intimacy, challenging racial capitalism’s olfactory violence.

The social component of smell is also at the heart of Isabel Karremann’s study of the role of smell in the ‘Induction’ to Ben Jonson’s *Bartholomew Fair* (1614). Describing what she calls ‘olfactory cross-mapping,’ in which the smell of the place in which the play is performed is linked to the location staged in the play, Karremann argues that the audience and the performance enter into a shared, culturally mediated ‘smellscape,’ resulting in a ‘site-responsive performance.’ Smelly London is also at the centre of Ursula Kluwick’s comparison between literary texts (Disraeli, Gaskell, and Dickens) and non-literary texts written during the period of sanitary reform between the early 1840s and 1858, a time when the conceptual link between ‘invasive’ olfaction and the fear of disease and contagion was particularly marked. The fear of enmeshment between the perceiving subject and the perceived object exhibited in the Victorian age anticipates the problematic status which Hsu argues the sense of smell retains for Western subjects to this day.

## Taste

For Aristotle, taste is a ‘sort of touch,’ with which it is ranked at the bottom of the sensory hierarchy.<sup>76</sup> Like touch, taste is a contact sense: unlike the higher senses of sight, hearing, and smell, taste and touch do not require an external medium (such as air or water). While the sense organs for taste and touch are located in the region of the heart, the object of perception comes into direct contact with the bodily medium of the tongue (taste) or flesh (touch).<sup>77</sup> Aristotle acknowledges that while the pleasure accompanying the taste of good food aids nutrition, he urges temperance, as overindulgence leads to gluttony.<sup>78</sup>

Simon Smith, ed., *Shakespeare/Sense: Contemporary Readings in Sensory Culture* (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 133–56.

<sup>76</sup> Aristotle, *On the Soul* II 9 421a19.

<sup>77</sup> Aristotle, *On the Soul* II 11 423b17–18. As Korsmeyer points out, the tongue for Aristotle is sometimes the organ of taste, sometimes the medium. Likewise, the skin is the organ or medium of touch: ‘Touch and taste are contact senses, whether the point of contact is understood as an organ or a medium’ (*Making Sense of Taste*, 20).

<sup>78</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W. D. Ross, rev. J. O. Urmson, in *Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Barnes, vol. 2, 1729–1867, here III 10 1118a12–16. Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste*, 23.



Christian writers in particular warned against an indulgence in bodily appetite, which they associated primarily with women, referring to Eve's tasting of the fruit of knowledge. Yet taste was not all bad. After all, tasting the body and blood of Christ in the sacrament of the Eucharist was the most direct way of encountering God. Food practices were central to medieval piety, especially among women, and medieval mystics often described the experience of God in gustatory terms, with the sweetness of God being a common trope.<sup>79</sup>

Recent literary scholarship engages taste in both its literal and figurative meanings: as a physical sensation and as a metaphor for aesthetic judgment. As Mary Carruthers has shown, gustatory experience was transferred already by medieval writers to artistic judgment: sweetness was used to indicate the pleasing effect of a sensation and thus 'used for judgments that we now would call "aesthetic"':<sup>80</sup> Katie Walter and Elizabeth Swann have brought to the fore the ambiguities central to the sense of taste in the medieval and early modern periods respectively: a physical, base sense in need of regulation, on the one hand, and a figure for the attainment of knowledge, spiritual learning, and literary discernment, on the other.<sup>81</sup> In *Taste: A Literary History*, Denise Gigante has explored taste as a trope for aesthetic judgment from Milton to the Romantics.<sup>82</sup> Literary scholars have also investigated the ways in which literature articulates gustatory experience and engages with the function of food for the creation and maintenance of gustatory communities.<sup>83</sup> Early modern scholars in particular have turned to taste on the stage, exploring references to taste in drama and ways in which the gustatory sensations of actors/characters on the stage might be

<sup>79</sup> Caroline Walker-Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1987), 151; R. James Goldstein, "'Dolcezza': Dante and the Cultural Phenomenology of Sweetness', *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society* 132 (2014), 113–43 (113–14).

<sup>80</sup> Mary Carruthers, 'Sweetness', *Speculum* 81, no. 4 (2006), 999–1013 (999).

<sup>81</sup> Katie L. Walter, 'Tasting, Eating and Knowing', in *Middle English Mouths: Late Medieval Medical, Religious and Literary Traditions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 78–114; Elizabeth L. Swann, *Taste and Knowledge in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

<sup>82</sup> Denise Gigante, *Taste: A Literary History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

<sup>83</sup> See, for example, Charlotte Boyce and Joan Fitzpatrick, *A History of Food in Literature From the Fourteenth Century to the Present* (New York: Routledge, 2017); Nicola Humble, *The Literature of Food: An Introduction from 1830 to Present* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020); Aaron Hostetter, *Political Appetites: Food in Medieval English Romance* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2017); Maria Christou, *Eating Otherwise: The Philosophy of Food in Twentieth-Century Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); Allison Carruth, *Global Appetites: American Power and the Literature of Food* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); Jonathan Bishop Highfield, *Food and Foodways in African Narratives: Community, Culture, and Heritage* (New York: Routledge, 2017). See also the survey volumes Gitanjali G. Shahani, ed., *Food and Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Lorna Piatti-Farnell and Donna Lee Brien, eds, *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Food* (New York: Routledge, 2018); J. Michelle Coghlan, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Literature and Food* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

vicariously conveyed to the audience.<sup>84</sup> Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century literary critics have paid increasing attention to the effect of the slave trade and the marketization of sugar and other spices on literature.<sup>85</sup>

The four contributors to Part IV in our volume—Mary Flannery, Jamie Fumo, Simon Smith, and Vanessa Guignery—use the lens of gustatory perception to approach literary works from a variety of periods and genres. The essays by Flannery and Smith highlight the ambivalence of taste and particularly of ‘sweet’ taste, which could guide the sensing person towards both the divine and worldly excess and thus required the audience to exercise moral and aesthetic discernment. While Flannery brings to the fore the interrelations between the physical sense of taste and the idea of good taste in the later Middle Ages in her reading of Chaucer’s *Miller’s Tale*, Smith traces the associations of music and sweetness in Spenser’s *Faerie Queene* and Shakespeare’s *Tempest*. Fumo, turning to the various meanings of bad taste, approaches taste through the lens of its privation, analysing medieval conceptions of the unsavoury as both a deficit in sensation and a category of flavour. Exploring tastelessness in medical and devotional discourse as well as its figurative manifestations in literary writing, the essay reveals how literary techniques of irony, obliquity, and paradox animate constructs of the unsavoury to expose fundamental dissonances within medieval conceptions of taste itself.

The chapters in this part challenge Serres’s claim that language is unable to convey what senses provoke in our bodies and, more specifically, that language allows taste no voice. Guignery in particular argues that literature not only elicits in the reader gustatory sensations but also the affects and emotions to which these sensations are related, such as pleasure, disgust, or deprivation. Focusing on two contemporary novels by Nigerian authors, she suggests that the reader experiences what Merleau-Ponty calls a ‘quasi-sensation’ of taste through the consumption of words.

Recent poets have challenged the notion that the experience of poetry should be guided primarily by the senses of hearing and sight and instead seek to evoke in the audience an experience of the other senses, including taste. In her contribution to

<sup>84</sup> Hillary M. Nunn focuses on the intersections between metaphorical taste and audience members imbibing refreshments, and Farah Karim-Cooper and Lucy Munro explore the particular resonance of taste in performance contexts: Hillary M. Nunn, ‘Playing with Appetite in Early Modern Comedy’, in Katharine A. Craik and Tanya Pollard, eds, *Shakespearean Sensations: Experiencing Literature in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 101–17; Farah Karim-Cooper, ‘Touch and Taste in Shakespeare’s Theatres’, in Karim-Cooper and Tiffany Stern, eds, *Shakespeare’s Theatres and the Effects of Performance* (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2013), 214–36; Lucy Munro, ‘Staging Taste’, in Simon Smith, Jackie Watson, and Amy Kenny, eds, *The Senses in Early Modern England, 1558–1660* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), 19–38.

<sup>85</sup> See, for example, Charlotte Sussman, ‘Women and the Politics of Sugar, 1792’, *Representations* 48 (1994), 48–69; Timothy Morton, *The Poetics of Spice: Romantic Consumerism and the Exotic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); and Alisha R. Walters, ‘The “Sallow Mr. Freely”: Sugar, Appetite, and Unstable Forms of Whiteness in George Eliot’s “Brother Jacob”’, *Victorian Literature and Culture* 50, no. 3 (2022), 431–60.

this volume, the poet Zoë Skoulding explores the relationship between eating and speaking and the taste of language in the performances of her poetry.

## Touch

The status of touch in Aristotelian writing is ambiguous. Aristotle places touch at the bottom of the hierarchy of the senses: it is the sense that is most directly connected to the primordial needs of the body (nutrition) and as such fundamental to all animal life: 'if an animal is to survive, its body must have tactual sensation.'<sup>86</sup> At the same time, Aristotle connects touch with intelligence. As S. H. Rosen explains, for Aristotle '[t]ouch is the differentiation of forms, which is the necessary condition for knowing. Knowing is touching.'<sup>87</sup> This most discriminatory of all senses reaches its highest form of development in humans, who are therefore 'the most intelligent of all animals.'<sup>88</sup>

Touch occupies an unusual place in Aristotle's schema of the senses because unlike most of the other senses, which are clearly linked to an organ, a medium, and a sensible object, touch (like taste) has neither a designated organ nor a single sense object (or what Aristotle calls proper sensible). One might assume that the organ of the sense of touch would be the skin; but Aristotle concludes instead that skin is not the organ of touch but its medium, a distinction that allows Aristotle, according to Daniel Heller-Roazen, to develop his understanding of touch as a highly complex sense, one ultimately closely linked to, and as elusive as, thought itself.<sup>89</sup> Like taste, touch 'is closely related to the heart.'<sup>90</sup> Touch does not have one but multiple proper sensibles, including temperature and pressure, and touch is not localized but may occur all over the body. Aristotle also connects touch with the 'enjoyment of...sexual intercourse.'<sup>91</sup>

The association of touch with pleasure was a source of anxiety, particularly for Christian writers addressing a female audience: while tactile sensations underpinned Christian practices from flagellation to the veneration of relics, religious writings especially of the early periods were intent on articulating regulations against touch.<sup>92</sup> The biblical scenes of Christ prohibiting Mary Magdalene from touching his just risen but not yet ascended body, and later allowing Doubting

<sup>86</sup> Aristotle, *On the Soul* III 12 434b14–15.

<sup>87</sup> S. H. Rosen, "Thought and Touch. A note on Aristotle's *De Anima*", *Phronesis* 6, no. 2 (1961), 127–37.

<sup>88</sup> Aristotle, *On the Soul* II 9 421a22.

<sup>89</sup> See Daniel Heller-Roazen's discussion of skin as a medium, *The Inner Touch: The Archeology of a Sensation* (New York: Zone Books, 2009), 26–7.

<sup>90</sup> Aristotle, *Sense and Sensibilia* 2 439a1–2.

<sup>91</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* III 10 1118a31–32.

<sup>92</sup> For example, in the thirteenth-century guide for anchoresses (female recluses) *Ancrene Wisse*, the writer exhorts the anchoresses to avoid '[h]ondlunge other ei felunge bitweone mon ant ancre' [touching or any feeling between man and anchoress], labelling it as a deed 'se scheomelich' [so shameful]. *Ancrene Wisse*, ed. Robert Hasenfratz (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000), II. 806–7.

Thomas to probe his wounds with his finger, offer paradigmatic examples of the importance of touching (and not touching) in Christian culture.<sup>93</sup>

Prohibitions against touch also permeate other major social discourses, including medicine. For example, legislations of touch have been informed by the changing understandings of the transmission of diseases. Thus, when in the second half of the nineteenth century the miasmatic theory of transmission was replaced by the theory that disease is transmitted through direct physical contact, the Contagious Diseases Acts (1864–9) introduced a range of prohibitions regarding touch; in our own day, the fear of the transmission of COVID-19 has largely eliminated the hand-shake.

Scholarship on touch has ranged in its interest from medical understandings of skin as a bodily surface and a receptor for touch to touch on the stage, and from the politics of touch to the virtual tactility of cyberspace.<sup>94</sup> Due to its central role in human touch, the hand is often singled out in studies of this sense. Scholars have focused on the hand's ability to acquire skill, knowledge, and memory, on the artistic creativity associated with the hand, and on the communicative role of the hand. Elizabeth Harvey has called attention to the early modern focus on the hand's expressive capacities and its crucial role in bridging body and mind, citing John Bulwer's *Chirologia; or, the Naturall Language of the Hand* (1644), which refers to the hand as the 'Spokesman of the Body'.<sup>95</sup>

Literary scholarship has taken up this focus on the touch of the hand. The hand becomes the locus not only for considerations of the complexity of the sensation of touch, but also for the nature of writing and hence of language and agency. As Peter Capuano and Sue Zemka write, '[h]istorically, the hand seems to be one place where humans have negotiated the relation between their language and their material being all along'.<sup>96</sup> The hand not only instantiates the action common to all senses of reaching out into the world; it also becomes the locus for thought about human agency itself. Literary scholarship on touch and the hand ranges in its focus from the function of the hand in literature and on the stage to the ethics of touch, the

<sup>93</sup> See further Elizabeth Robertson, 'Noli Me Tangere: The Enigma of Touch in Middle English Religious Literature and Art for and about Women', in Katie Walter, ed., *Reading Skin in Medieval Literature and Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 29–56; Reimund Bieringer, Karlijn Demasure, and Barbara Baert, eds, *To Touch or Not to Touch? Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Noli me tangere* (Leuven: Peeters, 2013).

<sup>94</sup> See, e.g., Classen, *The Book of Touch*; Elizabeth D. Harvey, ed., *Sensible Flesh: On Touch in Early Modern Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003); Alex MacConochie, *Staging Touch in Shakespeare's England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022).

<sup>95</sup> Elizabeth D. Harvey, 'The Portal of Touch', *The American Historical Review* 116, no. 2 (2011), 385–400 (396).

<sup>96</sup> Peter J. Capuano and Sue Zemka, 'Introduction: Handling Flesh and Metaphor', in Zemka and Capuano, eds, *Victorian Hands: The Manual Turn in Nineteenth-Century Body Studies* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2020), 1–16 (2).

connections between touch and pain, and the wider intersections between touch, disability, and prosthesis.<sup>97</sup>

The four contributors to Part V probe the function of touch and its prohibition in a variety of periods and genres: romance, short story, novel, drama, poetry, diary, and screen treatment. In the first chapter on touch, Hannah Piercy draws attention to the ways in which medieval practices of touch are regulated not only by religious texts but also by complex codes of behaviour found in romance literature. Piercy explores how verse romances illustrate what can be understood as a 'grammar' of touch, in line with Classen's suggestion that social practices of touch are learned just as one might learn a language. Turning to a different medieval genre, Mark Amsler shows how, in the fifteenth-century Digby *Mary Magdalene* play, the semiotics of performance deepens the play's representation of the enigma of touch that so infuses the biography of Mary Magdalene.

Abbie Garrington considers a largely neglected genre of literature, the screen treatment, in her study of *Jacob's Hands* by Aldous Huxley and Christopher Isherwood (1944). Considering the pseudoscientific theorizations of the hand available at Huxley and Isherwood's time, she shows how these writers fixate on the behaviours and capacities of the human hand as a means of considering heredity, agency, modes of sensory perception, and the traumatic consequences of World War I. The traumatic resonances of this war are also the focus of Santanu Das's examination of a range of literary texts produced during and just after World War I, including poems, short stories, novels, and diaries that bring to the fore the particular power of tactile descriptions to convey emotion and affect.

## Multisensoriality

The chapters we have introduced so far consider literary representations or presentations of the experiences of each of the five senses in turn. In this final part, we turn to essays that demonstrate how literature explores the interaction between two or more senses. Of course, most of the essays in Parts I–V also acknowledge the interplay between the senses even as they highlight the effect of one particular sense in literature, but Part VI focuses on the ways in which literature captures and foregrounds the relation between the senses.

The complexity of the interactions between the senses has long been recognized by philosophers and scientists. Aristotle acknowledges this interaction when he

<sup>97</sup> On the tactility of writing, see Classen, 'Fingerprints: Writing about Touch', in Classen, *The Book of Touch*, 1–12 (6–7). On skin as a writing surface, see, e.g., Nicole Nyffenegger and Katrin Rupp, eds, *Writing on Skin in the Age of Chaucer* (Boston: De Gruyter, 2018); Stéphanie Béréiziat-Lang and Michael R. Ott, 'From Tattoo to Stigma: Writing on Body and Skin', in Ricarda Wagner, Christine Neufeld, and Ludger Lieb, eds, *Writing Beyond Pen and Parchment: Inscribed Objects in Medieval European Literature* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), 193–207.

notes that unlike the ‘proper sensibles’ (e.g. sound or colour), which activate only one sense modality, the ‘common sensibles’ (e.g. shape or movement) are perceived by two or more senses, and when he describes one of the functions of the *koinē aisthēsis* (the common sense) as synthesizing single sense perceptions into a perceptual whole.<sup>98</sup>

The terms multisensoriality, intersensoriality, and cross-modal interaction foreground the plurality of the senses and their interaction. Multisensory interactions involve two or more senses which receive ‘roughly simultaneous input’;<sup>99</sup> for example, one might perceive an orange through sight as orange but at the same time through touch as rough and through taste as sweet; furthermore, the shape of the orange as round might be apprehended through either vision or touch or both, while its distinctive smell also helps identify it. Intersensoriality refers specifically to ‘the interrelation and/or transmutation of the senses.’<sup>100</sup> The experimental psychologist Charles Spence and the philosopher Tim Bayne distinguish between two kinds of intersensorial interactions: in cross-modal interactions, ‘the presentation of a stimulus in one sensory modality exerts an influence on a person’s perception of, or ability to respond to, stimuli presented in another sensory modality’: for example, a visual cue might affect the response to an auditory stimulus. Multisensory integration, on the other hand, occurs when the contents of different modalities are integrated, as in the case of the rubber hand illusion: the visual information of seeing a rubber hand being stroked while feeling (but not seeing) one’s own hand being synchronously stroked creates the illusion that the rubber hand is part of one’s own body.<sup>101</sup>

The importance of the interaction between the senses has also been highlighted by the philosopher Michel Serres, who describes the entanglement of the senses with each other and with the world as a knot.<sup>102</sup> Acknowledging the significance of this knot, the cultural anthropologist David Howes argues that we should further explore the varied ways in which senses may compensate, substitute, sublimate, correspond, or evoke the experiences of each other.<sup>103</sup> The idea of sensory

<sup>98</sup> For the common sense: Aristotle, *On the Soul* III 1 425a28–29; and for the common sensibles: *On the Soul* II 6 418a17–19; III 1 425a14–20. *Sense and Sensibilia* 4 442b4–7. See further Stephen C. Levinson and Asifa Majid, ‘Differential Ineffability and the Senses’, *Mind & Language* 29 (2014), 407–27.

<sup>99</sup> Tim Bayne and Charles Spence, ‘Multisensory Perception’, in Mohan Matthen, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Perception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 603–20 (608).

<sup>100</sup> Howes, ‘The Expanding Field of Sensory Studies’. See further Howes, *Sensory Studies Manifesto*, 67–100.

<sup>101</sup> Bayne and Spence, ‘Multisensory Perception’, 608.

<sup>102</sup> Michel Serres, *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies [Les Cinq Sens]*, trans. Margaret Sankey and Peter Cowley (London: Continuum, 2008), 305.

<sup>103</sup> Howes, ‘The Expanding Field of Sensory Studies’. Howes considers ‘synesthesia/intersensoriality’ in all four volumes of his edited compendium *Senses and Sensation: Critical and Primary Sources*, which focus on geography/anthropology (vol. 1), history/sociology (vol. 2), biology, psychology, and neuroscience (vol. 3), and art and design (vol. 4). David Howes, ed., *Senses and Sensation: Critical and Primary Sources*, 4 vols (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018).

substitution—where, for example, someone who is unable to smell may experience sensations akin to smell through the operation of another sense (or senses)—is especially relevant in the context of disability studies.

While the interaction of the senses has been emphasized in the sciences and the social sciences, literary scholars are only just beginning to investigate multisensoriality in literature.<sup>104</sup> Recent scholarship has investigated both neurological synaesthesia, which consists of ‘a dual or multisensory response to stimuli that would produce only a unisensory response for most people’,<sup>105</sup> and synaesthesia as a literary device.<sup>106</sup> This technique refers to the description of one sensory experience in terms of different sensory modalities, as can be seen in Keats’s ‘Ode to a Nightingale’: ‘I cannot see [sight] what flowers are at my feet, / Nor what soft [touch] incense [smell] hangs upon the boughs.’<sup>107</sup>

The chapters that conclude our volume range from the political implications of multisensorial representation to the multisensoriality of the interaction between humans and their environment. In his analysis of the *enargeia* of a medieval representation of a ploughman’s frostbitten, bare hand guiding a plough, Richard Newhauser shows how a multisensorial description can destabilize decades of cultural assumptions about the contentment of the ploughman. Focusing on the images of prayer in a fifteenth-century Carthusian manuscript, Sarah Stanbury explores the multisensoriality of the medieval *banderole*—a piece of text presented to the reader in the form of a scroll issuing forth from the hand of the speaker. She demonstrates how the speech scroll, as a visual sign, conscripts touch, and especially the touch of a hand, to amplify and translate sound.

Exploring multisensoriality through an ecocritical lens, Mirja Lobnik turns to Edwidge Danticat’s *Claire of the Sea Light* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus*. Lobnik argues that both novels explore the entanglement of humans and

<sup>104</sup> Christine Cooper-Rompato has highlighted the multimodal nature of medieval mystical ‘visions’, and Farah Karim-Cooper has explored the multisensory space of the early modern theatre, while Richard Newhauser has drawn attention to the multisensoriality of place in Chaucer’s writings: Christine Cooper-Rompato, ‘Hearing, Seeing, Smelling, Tasting and Touching the Voice: Gender and Multimodal Visions in the *Lives* of Thomas of Cantimpré’, in Hilary Powell and Corinne J. Saunders, *Visions and Voice-Hearing in Medieval and Early Modern Contexts* (Cham: Springer, 2021), 61–90; Karim-Cooper, ‘The Sensory Body in Shakespeare’s Theatres’, in Kern-Stähler, Busse, and de Boer, *The Five Senses in Medieval and Early Modern England*, 269–85 (esp. 269–71); Richard G. Newhauser, ‘The Multisensoriality of Place and the Chaucerian Multisensual’, in Kern-Stähler, Busse, and de Boer, *The Five Senses in Medieval and Early Modern England*, 199–218.

<sup>105</sup> Quotation from Patricia Lynne Duffy, ‘Synesthesia in Literature’, in Julia Simner and Edward M. Hubbard, eds, *The Oxford Handbook of Synesthesia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 647–70 (647). For the effect of neurological synaesthesia on the experience of reading, see Matthew Rubery, ‘The Confessions of a Synesthetic Reader’, *Configurations* 28, no. 3 (2020), 333–58.

<sup>106</sup> Scholarship exploring synaesthesia as a literary device includes Darryl Chalk, ‘Similar Proof and Senseless Feeling: Synaesthetic Overload in *Cymbeline*’, in Smith, *Shakespeare/Sense*, 245–68, and Holly Earl, ‘Virginia Woolf’s Synesthesia’, *Twentieth-Century Literature* 66, no. 4 (2020), 463–84.

<sup>107</sup> John Keats, ‘Ode to a Nightingale’, *The Poetical Works of John Keats*, ed. H. W. Garrod, 2nd edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1958), 257–60 (ll. 41–2).

their environment through multisensory interactions between humans and plants, revealing the porous and mutually dependent nature of different forms of life and the senses. Continuing the focus on the interactions of human beings with the environment, the final chapter in our collection considers not only multisensoriality but also one of the more recently identified senses—proprioception. Exploring the multisensoriality of the beach and the sea in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) and Charles Simmons's *Salt Water* (1998), Virginia Richter shows how immersion in the sea both destabilizes proprioception and intensifies multisensorial bodily perception, as the sea touches, stimulates, and invades the human body through various material channels.

The essays in this volume demonstrate what makes literature particularly suited to probing the nature and effect of sense experience. Literary texts, as these essays show, reveal aspects of the phenomenology of the senses that are as yet unexplained by other disciplinary approaches. However, to return to Shakespeare's image of the snail with which we opened this introduction, we learn in these essays that literature not only probes, but also importantly preserves the ineffable mysteries of the sensation of living beings.





I

SIGHT



# LOOKING AT FACES

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## Geoffrey Chaucer, Hilary Mantel, and Alexis Wright

STEPHANIE TRIGG

When we think about sight, vision, and perception, the human face is often the first object to come into view. Images of faces dominate many cultures and visual traditions, and the face has long been considered a privileged site for conceptualizing the human. Our faces help us articulate relationships with each other, with the divine, with different forms of cultural and racial alterity, and with other species. We observe faces all the time, assessing them according to changing cultural standards of beauty and normality, and through a series of complex cognitive and perceptual modalities. Even though, in abstract terms, the face is often seen as signifying humanity, individual faces are nevertheless perceived through deeply historicized and culturally specific frameworks. For example, in contemporary culture the face is increasingly the problematic focus of discussion about modern technologies of surveillance, digital mastery, the manipulation of images, and indeed its surgical and cosmetic malleability.

The face in literary tradition is equally variable. While visual images can be stunning in their immediacy, textuality and narrative mediate the face in subtle, indirect ways. Literary texts involve the reader in the process of reading the face according to changing cognitive, perceptual, and rhetorical conventions. Sometimes this is done by taking the reader on a slow tour around that face, as in the rhetorical convention of the blazon, employed so powerfully by Petrarch and his followers. Sometimes narrators make comparisons with other faces, like George Eliot's famous comparison of Dorothea with St Barbara in *Middlemarch*; or they sketch out longer histories and characters that seem to be legible in those faces. Faces often figure as part of an introduction to a character, as in Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, or they are studied at narrative turning points; for example, when Mr Rochester, disguised as a gypsy, reads the face of Charlotte Brontë's Jane Eyre; or when Emma holds her hand

mirror and gazes on the disintegration of her own poisoned face in Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*. Other texts foreground the forms of cognition involved in reading facial features and gestures.<sup>1</sup> The history of face-reading in literature is influenced by various phases of scientific knowledge and artistic influence, from physiognomy and phrenology to evolution and eugenics, through to practices of facial modification, racial and transgender awareness, and the always mutable relationship between text and image.

One approach to this diversity is to focus on the lexical fields that mediate the representation and evocation of sight and vision in literary texts. This chapter explores some of the forms of facial practice we can observe around the simple words 'look' and 'looking,' each in their verbal and nominal senses. Looking is both a gesture and a social practice that establishes hermeneutic and interpersonal relationships between characters, authors, and readers. Because it offers us the choice of a number of perspectives, the idea of the 'look' is more ambiguous—and arguably more flexible—than that of the 'gaze,' a term that is far more stable both in its lexical range and its dominant associations with a particular form of visual attention on the human face, especially the female face.

In this chapter I have chosen three very different authors and texts, distributed unevenly historically, and from different kinds of creative fiction. It is only my first example that has affinities with the traditionally gendered structure of the gaze; but all the texts I have selected for discussion inflect the apparently simple act of 'looking' with varying cognitive and sensual contexts and frameworks, drawing on the semantic, grammatical, and perspectival possibilities of this simple signifier. Together, my texts suggest some of the variations in looking, across several centuries and very different cultural contexts.

In the fourteenth century, Geoffrey Chaucer explores the face of a beloved woman as one that looks, while being looked at. Looking in these texts is mediated by the complex ideology of courtly love. In *Wolf Hall*, Hilary Mantel uses Holbein's portrait of Thomas Cromwell to probe the relationship between private and public images of the self and the mastery of the face in the complex politics of the Tudor court, through the conventions of contemporary historical fiction. And in my final example, from Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book*, an Australian Indigenous woman from a speculative, apocalyptic future meets the gaze of a large black swan. In this instance, looking is transhuman, impersonal, and spiritual.

My examples all mobilize literature's capacity to describe and characterize visual phenomena, while also drawing attention to the phenomenology of the mutual and interactive act of looking. These texts capture the cognitive experience of looking at a face but also imagining a face through words. At the same time, they describe the experience of being looked at, and of having an appearance (that is, 'looking' in a

<sup>1</sup> For some especially rich analysis of the cognitive processes involved in reading faces, see Guillemette Bolens, *The Style of Gestures: Embodiment and Cognition in Literary Narrative* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2012).

particular way) as well as the experience of looking out *through* the face and, in turn, the effect of such looking on the reader, who is by this means positioned as a viewer. Through their complex manipulation of perspective and feeling, literary texts often show us how to ‘look’ at faces, and faces that ‘look’ at us, in a variety of intriguing ways.

## Chaucer and Medieval Love

The emotional practices of medieval romantic love foreground the sensations of sight and vision at every turn. For Andreas Capellanus, love arises from meditating on the sight of the beloved; and in medieval literature, moments of intense looking and gazing at the beloved other are crucial to the growth of amorous feeling and to the formation of subjects as lovers. Narrative time characteristically slows down as looks and glances are savoured and described in detail. This remains a dominant feature of the representation of the erotic gaze in post-medieval literature; it is hard to overestimate the influence of this discursive and ideological pattern.

Chaucer develops a distinctive semantic and conceptual field around erotic images, often in critical dialogue with his European literary sources, and also drawing on medieval philosophical theories of vision.<sup>2</sup> The double senses of ‘look’ and ‘looking’—that is, the act of looking at something; and having a particular appearance—are both well established in Middle English. Literary characters observe the ‘look’ or ‘looks’ of others; while a ‘lokynge’, as a noun form, can refer both to a character’s appearance and also their own gaze, as they look on others. I consider two examples from Chaucer. The first is the celebrated moment in *Troilus and Criseyde* when the young prince Troilus first observes Criseyde in the temple. Troilus has been laughing at his lovesick companions and mocking the power that Love seems to have over their lives. In an act of vengeance, Love then takes his bow and shoots an arrow into Troilus ‘atte fulle’ (*fully* [209]). Then, as the prince casts his eye over the assembled ladies, his eye pierces the crowd, alights on Criseyde, and stays there: ‘And upon cas bifel that thorough a route / His eye percede, and so depe it wente, / Til on Criseyde it smot, and there it stente’ (*And by chance his eye pierced through the crowd and went so deeply until it struck Criseyde, and there it stopped*).<sup>3</sup> The action of Troilus’s eye mimics the action of Cupid’s arrow, landing firmly and

<sup>2</sup> The critical literature here is immense. Several key recent texts are Suzanne Conklin Akbari, *Seeing Through the Veil: Optical Theory and Medieval Allegory* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004); Sarah Stanbury, *The Visual Object of Desire in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008); and Andrew James Johnston, Ethan Knapp, and Margitta Rouse, eds, *The Art of Vision: Ekphrasis in Medieval Literature and Culture* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2015).

<sup>3</sup> All quotations from Chaucer are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), cited by line number (here ll. 271–3).

decisively on Criseyde, just as the arrow had landed on him. And thus, the machinery of love is set in motion.<sup>4</sup>

But while Troilus observes Criseyde, we observe her too, as she nervously takes her place in the public assembly. Criseyde's father has recently abandoned the city, having foretold its fate at the hands of the Greeks currently besieging Troy. This famous passage has been much discussed for what it seems to reveal about Criseyde and her character, and for what the expression on her face seems to say, and whether she is aware of Troilus's gaze:

To Troilus right wonder wel with alle	
Gan for to like hire mevyng and hire chere,	<i>moving expression</i>
Which somdel deignous was, for she let falle	<i>disdainful</i>
Hire look a lite aside in swich manere,	
Ascaunces, 'What, may I nat stonden here?'	<i>As if to say</i>
And after that hir lokyng and she lighte.	
That nevere thoughte hym seen so good a syghte.	<i>He thought he had never seen such a good sight.</i>

This sight has an instantaneous humbling effect on him:

And of hire look in him ther gan to quyken	<i>arise</i>
So gret desir and such affeccioun,	
That in his herte botme gan to stiken	
Of hir his fixe and depe impressioun.	
And though he erst hadde poured vp and down,	<i>at first looked</i>
He was tho glad his hornes in to shrinke;	
Unnethes wiste he how to loke or wynke.	<i>He barely knew open his eyes (288–301)</i>

Chaucer shows us a precise and economical anatomy of looking. In these two stanzas he appeals four times to this act. First, Criseyde lets her 'look', or her glance, fall a little to the side as she shyly directs her gaze away from the crowd. Second, her 'lokyng'—both her glance and her appearance—lightens, as she starts to feel more secure in public. In the second stanza, we see how Troilus takes this vision of Criseyde's 'look' deep into himself, as if reversing the direction of his first arrow-like gaze that pierced through the crowd. And finally, this internal image of Criseyde becomes so powerful, so preoccupying, that Troilus barely knows how or where to 'loke' himself, to keep his eyes open or closed. The man who was previously watching closely all the young men and women in the assembled company can no longer master the direction of his own looking.

<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed analysis of this scene and its constitution as a visual frame for perception, see Linda Tarte Holley, 'Medieval Optics and the Framed Narrative in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*', *The Chaucer Review* 21, no. 1 (1986), 26–44. See also Stephanie Trigg, '“Language in Her Eye”: The Expressive Face of Criseyde/Cressida', in Andrew James Johnston, Russell West-Pavlov, and Elisabeth Kempf, eds, *Love, History and Emotion in Chaucer and Shakespeare: Troilus and Criseyde and Troilus and Cressida* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 94–108.

Chaucerians return again and again to this passage (as I myself have done), fascinated by Chaucer's skilful deployment of narrative perspective and medieval optical theory.

Suzanne Conklin Akbari writes about medieval vision as 'a two-part relationship between seeing subject and the object seen', an encounter that is theorized, as she says, in two different ways:

In extramission theories of optics, the visual ray is thought to emanate from the one who sees and then to encounter the thing that is seen, so that the power of vision can be said to be located in the seeing subject; conversely, in intromission theories of optics, the thing that is seen is thought to emit forms that can be apprehended by the one who sees, so that the power of vision – or, at least, the active component of the act – can be said to be located in the object itself.<sup>5</sup>

When Troilus first sees Criseyde, when his eye is said to 'pierce' the crowd, Chaucer seems to invoke the extramission model: his sight passes through the assembly and lands on Criseyde. But in the second stanza quoted above we observe Troilus seeing Criseyde as his look lands on her. As she looks into the crowd, he takes the image of her appearance into his mind. Yet it is not entirely clear that Chaucer has an intromission model in mind here, partly because he attributes a degree of agency to Criseyde in her manipulation both of her 'look' at lines 290–1 and her 'lokyng' at line 293; and partly because he uses the passive verbal construction—her 'mevyng' and 'hire chere' *began to be pleasing to Troilus* (line 289).

And indeed, Akbari shows that medieval literature sometimes develops a third model, whereby 'the seeing subject is actually defined through the ability to see, rather than through the completed act of sight'.<sup>6</sup> In her reading, Akbari demonstrates how this sight of Criseyde is the first step in the remaking of Troilus as an amorous subject. First, he retreats from the public space, and then in the privacy of his own chamber in a dreamlike state he recalls 'hire look' (364), studies it again, and makes 'a mirour of his mynde' (365) in which he can now recall all his vision of Criseyde and make it available for his own private meditation. This popular image of the internal visionary 'mirror' resonates with medieval practices of affective piety and the internal meditation on religious images.

Elizabeth Robertson uses this passage from *Troilus and Criseyde* to launch her discussion of 'intersubjective or social perception' in medieval literature.<sup>7</sup> She emphasizes the overwhelming act of sensory perception that causes Troilus to 'pull

<sup>5</sup> Suzanne Conklin Akbari, 'Sight Lines: The Mirror of the Mind in Medieval Poetics', in Nancy Margaret Frelick, ed., *The Mirror in Medieval and Early Modern Culture: Specular Reflections* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2016), 117–32 (117).

<sup>6</sup> Akbari, 'Sight Lines', 118.

<sup>7</sup> Elizabeth Robertson, 'First Encounter: "Snail-Horn Perception" in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*', in Helen M. Hickey, Anne McKendry, and Melissa Raine, eds, *Contemporary Chaucer Across the Centuries* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), 24–41 (25).



in his horns' and retreat from further social engagement; and shows how the 'physiological and phenomenological processes by which an animal cognises the world' are complicated by social and contextual factors; in this case, Troilus's consciousness that this way of looking at Criseyde threatens to confound his carefully cultivated public persona. Robertson suggests that Chaucer is working with an Augustinian understanding of the physiology of sight as extramission, but also emphasizes Chaucer's awareness of newer sources being absorbed into Western tradition from Arabic scholarship.<sup>8</sup>

For Robertson this passage reflects the theory of 'perspectivist optics' propounded by Alhazen, a theory already well established in the theories of Robert Grosseteste and Roger Bacon. In the shifting perspectives and gazes of this narrative exchange, as Troilus looks at Criseyde, she herself, as the object of sight, is emitting rays or 'stremes' of vision; but these 'stremes' are also understood as the dwelling place of Love. Chaucer follows Boccaccio closely at this point, when he tells us that Love 'hadde his dwellynge / Withinne the subtil stremes of hire yen' (304–5).

The philosophical complexities in this passage cannot detain us any longer; but I would like to emphasize the ways Chaucer is carefully forming and shaping us, his readers, as knowledgeable reading subjects, able to negotiate the cognitive, sensory, and semantic fields of association around the word 'look'.<sup>9</sup>

In another, somewhat simpler, encounter, Chaucer explores the same interactive idea of looking, while being looked at. In his earlier poem *The Book of the Duchess*, the Man in Black, generally agreed to be a figure for John of Gaunt, in mourning for his first wife, Blanche of Lancaster, delivers a beautiful elegy for the Lady White. Chaucer follows his main source for this passage, Guillaume de Machaut's *Jugement dou Roy de Behaigne*, quite closely. Machaut himself deploys the rhetorical tradition of *descriptio*, outlined influentially by Geoffrey of Vinsauf, whose *Poetria Nova* offers a detailed model for describing a beautiful woman, itemizing, with flights of elaborate imagery, the singular beauty of each of her facial features, moving down her body, though progressively more discreetly, from her golden hair to her 'wonderfully tiny foot' that might 'dance with joy at its smallness'.<sup>10</sup>

The Man in Black is almost the opposite of Troilus. As a young man he is devoted to Love, but it is many years before he sets eyes on the woman he will grow to love. As he describes his lady's superlative beauty, her grace, her countenance, expression, and temperament, he returns many times to describe her eyes and her look. He describes, for example, how he took no other counsel but from her look—the

<sup>8</sup> See also Pekka Kärkkäinen, 'The Senses in Philosophy and Science: Mechanics of the Body or Activity of the Soul?', in Richard G. Newhauser, ed., *A Cultural History of the Senses in the Middle Ages* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 111–32.

<sup>9</sup> For further recent discussion of the relationship between literature, vision, and cognition in the Middle Ages, see Vincent Gillespie, 'The Senses in Literature: The Textures of Perception', in Richard G. Newhauser, ed., *A Cultural History of the Senses*, 153–73.

<sup>10</sup> *Poetria Nova of Geoffrey of Vinsauf*, trans. Margaret F. Nims (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1967), 37.

expression of her face—and his own heart ('I ne tok / No maner counseyl but at hir lok / And at myn herte', 839–41): her eyes saw his own heart so directly he thought it better to serve her without success than to be rewarded in love with another.

Here again, the woman is the object of the amorous gaze, but this does not mean she is simply the passive recipient of that gaze. Lady White looks directly at the lover, penetrating his heart and determining his own behaviour without any words. The next section develops the same idea, but in the broader context of the woman's judicious, ethical, and social gaze. The Knight describes White's eyes, in ethical not physical terms, as '[d]ebonaire, goode, glade and sadde (*serious*)' and then characterizes her 'look':

Therto hir look nas not aside	<i>was not</i>
Ne overthwert, but beset so wel	<i>directed sideways set</i>
Hyt drew and took up everydel	<i>encompassed in every part</i>
Al that on hir gan beholde. (862–5)	

This insistence that White's 'look' is directed properly, not to the side, askance, or askew, recalls the prescriptions for a woman's gaze in medieval conduct literature; women and maidens should 'look straight before them and onto the ground', hold their gaze steady and refrain from looking around too much.<sup>11</sup> Yet White's glance actively 'draws in and takes up' every detail of those who look at her. Like Criseyde, she is being observed in the act of observing others, and so too her gaze is both social and ethical: we cannot look at her without, ourselves, being seen in some way. Indeed, White's look can be read correctly only by the discerning viewer.

Hir eyen semed anoon she wolde	<i>eyes suggested would</i>
Have mercy – fooles wenden soo –	<i>thought</i>
But hyt was never the rather doo.	<i>It was never any sooner done (866–8)</i>

The Knight emphasizes how natural is White's expression, her 'lokyng' is not performed or false in any way:

Hyt nas no countrefeted thyng;	
Hyt was hir owne pure lokyng	
That the goddesse, dame Nature,	
Had mad hem opene by mesure	<i>hem: her eyes</i>
And close; for were she never so glad,	
Hyr lokyng was not foly sprad,	<i>foolishly wide</i>
Ne wildely, thogh that she pleyde;	
But ever, me thocht, hir eyen seyde,	
'Be God, my wrathe ys al foryive!'	<i>forgiven (869–77)</i>

<sup>11</sup> *The Goodman of Paris: A Treatise on Moral and Domestic Economy by a Citizen of Paris, c. 1393*, trans. Eileen Power (1928; repr. Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2006), 38. For further examples, in the context of a discussion of class-based instructional texts for women, see Kim M. Phillips, *Medieval Maidens: Young Women and Gender in England, 1270–1540* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 92.

In another essay I have discussed Chaucer's use, in the final line here, of this 'speaking face' trope. This is possibly the earliest example in English literature where a character's eyes or face seem to speak. This trope has powerful implications for a longer study of historical changes in facial syntax: the way the language of the 'look', in textual descriptions of faces, is characterized in changing social and cultural contexts.<sup>12</sup>

The faces and the 'looks' of both these women, Criseyde and White, are described in the kind of obsessive detail characteristic of erotic poetry, combined with medieval optical theory, and framed by expectations of virtuous beauty in medieval women. Such beauty, though, is framed as deeply social, ethical, and affective in orientation: these women are looked at admiringly, but they also look out at the world and address it directly through their own looking.

### **Hilary Mantel and the Arranged Face of Thomas Cromwell**

Hilary Mantel's Cromwell trilogy (*Wolf Hall*, 2009; *Bring Up the Bodies*, 2012; and *The Mirror and the Light*, 2020) draws on a long tradition of realist historical fiction dramatizing the past: it tells the story of Henry VIII and his first four wives, Katherine of Aragon, Anne Boleyn, Jane Seymour, and Anne of Cleves. The novels are focalized exclusively through a single character, Thomas Cromwell himself. There are some continuities with Chaucer's poems, however, since these works are set in the relatively continuous world of premodern court life, where patterns and models of personal comportment and interaction are closely observed, and where royal politics are closely concerned with personal feelings and sexual relationships. Hilary Mantel's trilogy is full of people looking closely at each other, in ways that often have mortal effect.

Faces are crucial to these novels, in several indicative ways. Because the novels are political in content, they foreground the opposition between private desires and public faces. In ministering to the King's desires, Cromwell must be able to read the faces of Henry, his household, and his courtiers, as he encourages other characters to comply with the King's will. Mantel's narrative often pauses to observe characters observing each other, reading their faces for signs of dissimulation, or disparity between words and feelings. As a senior courtier, Cromwell must control his own face, while attentively reading the faces of others. In an interview with Sarah O'Reilly, Mantel refers to her research into the writings of the Spanish-Imperial Ambassador, Eustache Chapuys: 'He tells us how, when you were talking to Cromwell, he would fasten his eyes on your face, to calculate minutely the effect his

<sup>12</sup> Stephanie Trigg, 'Chaucer's Silent Discourse', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 39 (2017), 31–56. I am engaged in a longer project with Guillemette Bolens, Joe Hughes, and Tyne Sumner that is in part organized around a historical study of this trope.

words were having on you.<sup>13</sup> Chapuys's letters are some of the key sources for the trilogy; and this comment affirms the importance of the mutual look in Cromwell's encounters with others.

Mantel grounds her novels quite carefully in this European intertextual network. On the question of how a courtier should conduct his business, for example, Mantel cites the works of Erasmus, Castiglione, and Machiavelli (Cromwell gives a copy of Castiglione's book *The Courtier* to Henry's illegitimate son, the Duke of Richmond); and this network helps us extrapolate the theories of face-reading through which Cromwell narrates his facial encounters with others. Physical beauty is less important than personality, character, and intent. Anne Boleyn, for example, often presents a face that even Cromwell finds hard to read. Interestingly, for all her interest in courtly literature, Mantel has not appealed to sixteenth-century discourses of physiognomy. There is no attempt in the novel to invoke the language of the humours, or to set up any particular associations with skin colour, shape of eyes, or the frown lines, a special interest of physiognomy. Mantel treads a fine line between showing us Cromwell as immersed in sixteenth-century culture and as a perceiving subject through whose eyes modern readers can visit the past.

The first novel in the series, *Wolf Hall*, features a powerful scene of ekphrasis: the analysis of Cromwell's own 'look' in the portrait painted by Hans Holbein. This is a crucial scene in the development of Cromwell's own sense of himself and his role in the unfolding plot, and the remainder of my discussion of Mantel circles around this moment. In this scene, Cromwell finally views the portrait that Holbein has been painting of him. The event, and the portrait, also form part of the 'summary' of the first novel that Mantel builds into its sequel, *Bring Up the Bodies*; and Mantel directs our memory back to this scene several times. Like the moment in the temple for Troilus, this is a turning point in the novel and Mantel's development of Cromwell and his sense of self. Holbein's portraits of the Tudor court are an important point of reference throughout the trilogy; and, of course, it is Holbein's portrait of Anne of Cleves that Henry will later claim led to false expectations of her beauty. Cromwell's own downfall comes quickly after that in *The Mirror and the Light*.

Cromwell's reaction to his portrait is private and familial, not amorous. But, like Chaucer, Mantel is making words work hard to offer the reader a multidimensional and layered context of intratextual reference and allusion in which to consider and reconsider this portrait.

Relatively early in *Wolf Hall*, Cromwell overhears Cardinal Wolsey's lute player, Mark Smeaton, discussing him with another man. Like many other courtiers, Mark is dismissive of Cromwell's humble origins, and thinks of him as a murderer: 'They

<sup>13</sup> 'Making it New: Sarah O'Reilly talks to Hilary Mantel', in *Wolf Hall* (London: HarperCollins, 2010), back matter, 2–9, at 6.

say he has killed men with his own hands and never told it in confession. But those hard kinds of men, they always weep when they see the hangman.’<sup>14</sup>

This scene will be recalled several times in *Wolf Hall*; after a later encounter between Cromwell and Mark, for example, Cromwell reflects, ‘if Mark reckons I’m a murderer, that’s only because he thinks I look like one’ (199). Shortly after that, Cromwell asks his cook, Thurston, if he looks like a murderer (205); and a few pages later, we read: ‘He would like to ask them, Richard, Rafe, Master Wriothesley call me Risley: do I look like a murderer? There is a boy who says I do’ (225). As a plot device, the encounter with Mark reappears towards the end of *Bring Up the Bodies*, when Cromwell is interrogating Smeaton about his boasting of a sexual intrigue with Anne Boleyn. It is Smeaton, then, who weeps in despair at how easily he has handed himself over to Cromwell, and the turnabout in the relations of power between them is complete. Cromwell plays long games like this with a number of characters, but the seed of doubt sown by Mark has ramifications for Cromwell’s own sense of self too.

When the finished portrait is brought to Cromwell’s house, Cromwell eyes it warily, alone first, feeling ‘shy’ of it, and remembering his brutal father, Walter, when he would say, ‘look me in the face, boy, when you tell me a lie’ (525).

Cromwell starts at the picture’s lower edge, ‘and allows his gaze to creep upwards’. He studies ‘his painted hand’, and finds it uncanny, ‘as if he had been pulled apart, to look at himself in sections, digit by digit’. The skin is ‘smooth as the skin of a courtesan, but the motion he has captured, that folding of the fingers, is as sure as that of a slaughterman’s when he picks up the killing knife’ (525). The description here shows us Cromwell observing the painting in this upward direction, alert to the contradictions between the fine skin on the hand that wears Wolsey’s turquoise ring, with the potential of that hand to cut and kill.

When he raises his eyes to his own face, he finds his own gaze opaque. ‘You cannot trace those thoughts behind his eyes’ (526). Cromwell positions us as if we were readers of his face; and challenges us to read him. This opacity is in many ways a sign of his success as a courtier. Throughout this novel, Cromwell repeatedly recalls the dictum he learned from Erasmus: ‘arrange your face’. ‘Erasmus says that you must do this each morning before you leave your house: “put on a mask, as it were”’ (320). This becomes a kind of personal motto for Cromwell, often when his impulse is to laugh.<sup>15</sup> It is also a lesson he teaches his own household. When he is trying not to laugh about the discomfiture of his rival Stephen Gardiner, his nephew Richard tells him, ‘[a]rrange your face’ (542). And in another scene, Cromwell observes Sir Nicholas Carew unable to conceal a ‘downturn to his mouth’ when Henry forces his

<sup>14</sup> Hilary Mantel, *Wolf Hall* (London: HarperCollins, 2010), 168. All subsequent references are to this edition, cited by page number.

<sup>15</sup> Cromwell must arrange his face when King Henry assumes he will make a profit on the value of a ring he is passing on from the King of France (408).

court to acknowledge his new Queen, after her coronation: he addresses him silently, '[a]rrange your face, Nicholas Carew, your ancient family face' (444).

Just occasionally, in public, the 'arranged' face relaxes. When Mary Boleyn approaches Cromwell seductively, and appears to propose marriage, they briefly compare notes about their families. Mary is separated from her children, and Cromwell's wife has died: 'Their faces soften, perhaps, from their habitual brave distress, and into the conspiracy of the bereft' (138). Of course, the Tudor court is not the only context where people must mask their true feelings, or arrange their faces for political reasons, but the rich network of references to faces and face-reading in this novel is especially noteworthy because the consequences of private-public relationships, in a context of changing political, familial, and religious affiliations, are so dire.

When Cromwell allows his family in to view the portrait, his household is unimpressed, and Helen Barre articulates the problem. "I don't think you look like that," Helen Barre says. "I see that your features are true enough. But that is not the expression on your face." Rafe says, "No, Helen, he saves it for men" (526). Mantel here deftly suggests the different and gendered disjuncture between private and public selves.

Two further viewers are important. Eustache Chapuys is damning:

'Oh no, I fear not,' Eustache says, 'Oh, no, no, no, no, no. Your Protestant painter has missed the mark this time. For one never thinks of you alone, Cremuel, but in company, studying the faces of other people, as if you yourself mean to paint them. You make other men think, not "what does he look like?" but "what do I look like?"' He whisks away, then swings around, as if to catch the likeness in the act of moving. 'Still. Looking at that, one would be loath to cross you. To that extent, I think Hans has achieved his aim.' (526-7)

As an ambassador, Chapuys is trained, like Cromwell, to observe the minutiae and nuance of facial expression; and this passage recalls Mantel's historical research into Chapuys's writing about Cromwell. The Ambassador is especially concerned with the fate of Henry's first wife, Katherine of Aragon, and her daughter Mary. But Chapuys's emphasis on the social quickly turns to introspection, as he characterizes Cromwell's interlocutors starting to speculate about their own facial arrangements. When a powerful face gives so little away, it is destabilizing to those who look on such a face; they feel themselves to be 'seen,' and then start wondering about their own appearance. Face-arranging, in this context, is not just mastering one's own facial expressions, as all courtiers must learn to do: Cromwell's capacity to destabilize others' sense of self is presented as an exceptional and a defining aspect of his political and social power.

Chapuys does not only analyse the portrait: he seeks to activate and animate it, twisting and turning before the painting, as if to catch Cromwell in the act of looking back at him. Chapuys faults the portrait as a likeness, but he certainly reads

Cromwell's expression as intimidating: 'one would be loath to cross you.' Similarly, when asked, Thurston the cook had said, 'if you will forgive me, master, you always look like a man who knows how to cut up a carcass' (206). There seems to be general agreement, then, that Cromwell has a forbidding, menacing appearance, but Holbein's portrait still comes as a surprise.

The key moment in this extended analysis, which also concludes Part Five of *Wolf Hall*, comes when Cromwell's son Gregory returns from Canterbury and looks at the portrait, silently, for a while. Cromwell meditates on how much he loves his son, seeing him 'with a painter's eye: a boy with fine white skin and hazel eyes, a slender angel of the second rank in a fresco dappled with damp, in some hill town far from here' (527). In contrast to his own youthful, painterly beauty, Gregory's assessment of his father's appearance is shocking.

He [Cromwell] turns to the painting. 'I fear Mark was right.'  
 'Who is Mark?'  
 'A silly little boy who runs after George Boleyn. I once heard him say I looked like  
 a murderer.'  
 Gregory says, 'Did you not know?' (527)

The chapter ends with these words. In many ways this is a turning point for the psychological life of Cromwell in *Wolf Hall*. It suggests that, despite Cromwell's careful face arrangements, there is still a 'look' to him that seems to characterize his nature as violent. Yet it is only when he sees himself through the eyes of the painter Holbein, and through the eyes of his son, that he admits the impression his 'look' gives. The all-seeing courtier, with the capacity to make others doubt their own appearance, in this moment suddenly sees himself, not just as a visual image captured by the painter but through a damning verbal similitude: looking like a murderer.

The final piece of this puzzle is the famous portrait itself: that touch of the historical 'real' that promises to anchor Mantel's fiction in physical reality. Three versions of Holbein's portrait of Cromwell survive: the most famous hangs in the Frick Collection in New York, and there are two others, one in the Chichester Constable Collection in Yorkshire, and one in the National Portrait Gallery in London.<sup>16</sup> In *Bring Up the Bodies*, Mantel describes how copies of the painting were being made for Cromwell's friends and admirers. But if the Frick portrait creeps into our minds as we read this passage, so too might the image of Ben Miles or Mark Rylance playing Cromwell for the Royal Shakespeare Company's stage adaptation; or the celebrated BBC version of *Wolf Hall* for television. The BBC cast visited the collection of Tudor portraits in the National Portrait Gallery in London, while Rylance plays

<sup>16</sup> A number of Mantel's reviewers refer to this portrait, but Christopher Hitchens, unusually, uses the language of physiognomy and humoral theory to describe Cromwell as 'a sallow and saturnine fellow calloused by the exercise of worldly power', in 'The Men Who Made England', *The Atlantic*, 1 March 2010, 91–6 (92).

Cromwell sitting for his portrait in the pose painted by Holbein, recalling his hand gestures as well as his facial expression.

But even without these strong visual links to sixteenth-century portraits or contemporary theatre and television, Mantel's trilogy foregrounds literature's capacity to represent the social and cultural dynamics of the look. These novels capture sight lines, the exchange of glances and expressions—both fleeting and more abiding—as characters learn, practise, maintain, or fail at facial mastery, in the intense and pressured environment of the Tudor court. In this context, to look is a deeply politicized act. Mantel, looking back nearly five hundred years, brings these powerful acts of looking into the present with startling immediacy.

### **The Look of the Swan in Alexis Wright, *The Swan Book*: 'These People Keep Looking at Me'**

Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book*, published in 2013, will be less familiar to most readers than my first two examples. This novel is a wide-ranging speculative fiction, framed by the Anthropocene, combining a fable-like quality with the complex politics of post-settlement Indigenous culture in Australia, while also releasing a wondrous form of collective consciousness as a commentary on events. The narrative voice of this text is in turn polyglot, marvellous, casual, and fabulous. The novel is set in Australia, a hundred years from the present, after catastrophic climate change, a sequence of extinction events, and ensuing wars have rendered much of the land and sea uninhabitable. Global refugees search for a place to live, while successive Australian military interventions have marshalled the Indigenous people ('the caretakers', 'the Aboriginal people who were responsible for this land') onto swamp lands in Northern Australia, surrounded by junk and old rusted boats.<sup>17</sup>

In this disruption of time, place, seasons, and traditions, a girl, later named Oblivia, short for Oblivion Ethyl(ene), is raped, and finds refuge in 'the deep underground bowel of a giant eucalyptus tree' (7). She sleeps there for ten years—'like that old Rip Van Winkle fella of the fairytale time' (7)—until she is pulled out of the tree and awakened by the old white woman Bella Donna, a climate refugee from Northern Europe. Bella Donna becomes Oblivia's guardian, while teaching her about the ways of the swans and various stories from different cultural traditions and natural histories. These stories, these shared Indigenous and European forms of knowledge, fill the pages of the novel. Bella Donna claims she owes her own life to a swan; she is nostalgic for the swans from Northern Europe in what is called 'a foreigner's *Dreaming*' (16), a merging of Indigenous and European cultural mem-

<sup>17</sup> Alexis Wright, *The Swan Book* (Artarmon: Giramondo Publishing, 2013), 8. All references are to this edition, cited by page number.



ory and forms of knowledge about the natural world. She tells Oblivia that a swan had saved her own life years ago. When Oblivia is older, she is abducted by the Aboriginal Prime Minister, Warren Finch, to become his wife. Unsurprisingly, this ends in disaster.

*The Swan Book* is threaded through with different forms of cultural knowledge about swans: from the history of white swans and Zeus's rape of Leda, through to Wagner and Tchaikovsky and Australian natural history. It is also grounded in Australian cultural history and narrative, and especially Indigenous story and sense of place. Australian swans are black and, as Jane Gleeson-White comments, '[t]he existence of a black Australian counterpart to Europe's white swan provides Wright with the most fecund of metaphors'.<sup>18</sup> In particular, Wright develops the theme of custodianship, a powerful concept in Indigenous culture that emphasizes the mutual link of care between humans and the natural world—in Oblivia's case, with the swans.

*The Swan Book* offers an eclectic assemblage of fairy tale, fable, and cultural narrative, impelled by mutually constitutive spirits of human, animal, and place. Recovering from trauma, Oblivia does not speak, so conversational discourse in the novel is limited. The world of this novel is sometimes an inner world, focalized through Oblivia or one or two other characters, but the narrative also sometimes presents a kind of collective world view, observing both the natural world, and social, cultural, and political events, from a more distanced perspective. In this context, a look is less about character or personality, less about personal individuation or interpersonal relationships, and more about constituting relationships with the natural world, or with a form of transcendent other.

This is an extremely complex novel, both in its politics and in its narrative mode. I will focus on just a few scenes of 'looking' and their implications for a different model of subjectivity and sociality that is as much about aetiology and the natural world as it is about individuation.

In dramatic contrast to *Wolf Hall*, there is no single guiding point of focalization here. The Prelude that opens the novel, *Ignis Fatuus*, seems to be voiced by Oblivia:

Upstairs in my brain there lives this kind of cut snake virus in its doll's house. Little stars shining over the moonscape garden twinkle endlessly in a crisp sky. The crazy virus just sits there on the couch and keeps a good old *qui vive* out the window for intruders. (1)

And further on, '[t]his is the quest to regain sovereignty over my own brain' (4). As Philip Mead writes, 'the novel begins with this first-person intimate display of a deeply divided mind, including that mind's desperate grip on its quest for self-determination'.<sup>19</sup> The word 'sovereignty' is key here, as a word that references

<sup>18</sup> Jane Gleeson-White, 'Going Viral: *The Swan Book* by Alexis Wright', *Sydney Review of Books* (23 August 2013), <https://sydneyreviewofbooks.com/review/going-viral/> (accessed 8 February 2021).

<sup>19</sup> Philip Mead, 'Unresolved Sovereignty and the Anthropocene Novel: Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book*', *Journal of Australian Studies* 42, no. 4 (2018), 524–38, 528.

Indigenous people's political struggle, as well as what Mead describes as 'the level of the imaginary, one of the most empowering expressions of self-determination.'<sup>20</sup>

Mead describes the 'fugal rhetoric of Wright's representation of mental states', and other commentators offer similar readings: in this novel, selfhood is formed in relation to the land, and other beings, dispersed and diffused across the human/animal divide. This is especially evident in the key scene, early in the novel, where Oblivia seems to be singled out by the swan to be looked at.

On this occasion, the community of people eating fish on the edge of the swamp watch in silence as a single swan, 'the huge bird', flies through the dust of the day for the first time in that part of the country.

Everyone watched a swan's feather float down from the sky and land on her head. Oblivia's skin instantly turned to a darker shade of red-brown. What about her frizzy hair then? Well! There was no change in that. It was always sprayed out in fright. *Ngirriki! Messy! Always looking like tossed winter straw that needed rope to tie it down. She was psychological. Warraku. Mad.* (14)

The swan drops from the sky, flying low across the swamp, 'just slow enough to have a closer look at the girl' (14). This first mention of the 'look', importantly, comes from the bird as viewing subject, but its effect on Oblivia as the object of its gaze is powerful: 'The sight of the swan's cold eye staring straight into hers, made the girl feel exposed, hunted and found, while all those who had suddenly stopped eating fish, watching this big black thing look straight at the only person that nobody had ever bothered having a close look at' (14).

Oblivia is singled out by the swan to be looked at, but it is uncomfortable, as everyone in turn watches her being looked at; and she thinks, '*[w]hat are they thinking about me now? What did the swan have to single me out for and not anyone else standing around? What kind of premonition is this?*' (14–15). Being the object of the gaze, here, is unsought and unwanted: being observed is not a moment of self-realization for Oblivia, not a moment of empowering individuation. Nor is there anything particular about Oblivia's appearance that attracts the swan: she is not framed by the discourses of beauty; and there is nothing distinctive about her appearance. Nor does the question of resemblance play any part here: Oblivia does not *look like* anything or anyone; her character and personality are not foregrounded in this scene. Rather, it is as if this look of the swan has the effect of calling Oblivia into being, just as Bella Donna had 'found' her in the tree and woken her from sleep. This relationship between human and animal bird is primarily ontological: a mutual, if uncomfortable, gaze of curiosity.

As if to reflect this mutuality, the point of focalization then shifts to the swan itself:

<sup>20</sup> Mead, 'Unresolved Sovereignty', 529.

The swan had swung into shock-locked wings when human voices interrupted its nostalgia, but still it kept flying over the dust-covered landscape. This child! The swan could not take its eyes away from the little girl far down on the red earth. The music broke as if the strings had been broken, and the swan fell earthwards through the air for several moments. Maybe, it was in those moments of falling, that the big bird placed itself within the stories of this country, before it restored the rhythm of its flapping wings, and continued on its flight. (18–19)

In this speculative, fabulous aetiology, the swan's fall is both disruptive and creative, at the moment it looks at Oblivia. This remains awkward for the girl. Still unspeaking, she mouths the words, '[t]hese people keep looking at me', to Bella Donna. And yet, over the course of the novel, Oblivia gradually takes on the old woman's custodial role, caring for the swans, and interweaving European tradition and local knowledge. This leads to a form of mutual rescue, and eventually, a kind of apotheosis and transformation for Oblivia. As Susan Sheridan says, '[i]n *The Swan Book* Oblivia's relationship to the swans is a custodianship based on mutual recognition.'<sup>21</sup> For example, as Oblivia starts to feed the swans, learning to live with the fledgling cygnets, '[s]he started to believe that by helping them to survive on the polluted swamp, she might learn how to escape as freely as they had been able to take flight. She wanted to fly. . . . A great space in her mind played with words – *disappearance*, and *invisible*' (69).

This desire for disappearance and invisibility, paired with Oblivia's own muteness, helps us to recognize that the sense of sight in the act of looking is not always directed at the making of the individual self or personality; that there are alternative ways of looking—and being looked at—that engage more closely with the animal or the spirit world than the social human world. This deep relationship between human, animal, and land does not depend on personalized feelings and emotions, or the stages of individuation characteristic of much fiction. Wright's text shows another form of *looking* that is more about the human relationships with the natural world than it is about appearance, resemblance, or the constitution of individual subjectivity, in either a personal or a political setting.

In a further contrast to medieval literature, or modern historical fiction, *The Swan Book* insists we look forward, although as Philip Mead points out, the nature and passage of time in this novel are uncertain and multiple: 'as an Indigenous adaptation of the speculative fiction genre, it remediates the familiar Western mentality of past, present and future. . . . For Wright, writing the future is also writing the unresolved past and present.'<sup>22</sup> *The Swan Book*'s vision of the future encourages us to look differently at the relationship between present and past; between the human world and the natural world; and between Indigenous and settler culture.

<sup>21</sup> Susan Sheridan, 'Feminist Fables and Alexis Wright's Art of the Fabulous in *The Swan Book*', *Hecate* 43, nos. 1 and 2 (2017), 197–214 (200).

<sup>22</sup> Mead, 'Unresolved Sovereignty', 527.

## Conclusion

In many ways, the signifier ‘look’ is a very simple one, even when we consider both its nominal and verbal forms. But the framing contexts, the semantic fields, and the cultural expectations in which looking takes place can vary widely; and this variation can help us flesh out what it means to see, and be seen, in different genres and periods, and in different cultures. The three writers considered in this chapter use this concept to explore different patterns of sight and vision in fiction, with a range of different cultural meanings.

The loving gaze or look in *Troilus and Criseyde* and *The Book of the Duchess* is an ontological turning point for the lovers’ identity: the woman is carefully distinguished from other women and measured according to cultural and rhetorical beauty ideals, while the man is transformed as he gazes on his beloved and subjects himself to her own ‘looking’. In *Wolf Hall*, the communal, familial act of looking at the portrait of Cromwell reveals truths about the main character that shed light on the way he is perceived within the social and political world of the court; and the relations he has with others. Despite his dramatic social elevation from blacksmith’s son to senior courtier, and despite his own facial mastery, he cannot control his own ‘look’. In *The Swan Book*, ideas of appearance, resemblance, and character are displaced by a more fluid model of trans-species recognition, in the exploration of Indigenous custodianship in a speculative fiction that winds past, present, and future together.

The look, in literature, is always heavily mediated; it always refers beyond itself to the sense of sight and the patterns of cognition and apprehension that make it possible for us to ‘see’ by means of language. Cultural expectations, ideological frameworks, and rhetorical conventions—the amorous looks of romantic desire, the ekphrastic reading of portraits and likenesses, or the dramatic encounter with otherness—shape both the way literary characters look at each other and the way we read those looks.

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# VISUALIZING THE UNSEEN IN THE VICTORIAN GHOST STORY

ZOË LEHMANN IMFELD

The Victorians were preoccupied with what Jean-Louis Comolli calls ‘the frenzy of the visible’, and their fascination with visuality and vision has been taken up by many critics working on nineteenth-century literature.<sup>1</sup> Supernatural fiction has been considered a prime location for the expression of Victorian preoccupations with the reliability of sight, as well as with the latest developments in the science of vision (both in technology and in the biology of the eye and mind).<sup>2</sup> While much previous criticism explores the cultural and historical significance of literary representations of vision, this chapter returns to the ‘surface’ of seeing—*what* is seen, *what* is unseen in Victorian ghost stories. Literary fiction is uniquely placed to mediate sensory experiences, translating visual images into the written word. The literary ghost in particular provides opportunities for narrating the experience of seeing what is *not there*: Victorian ghost stories are full of haunted spaces that should be empty, but are not. This chapter explores some of these narratives, examining the ways in which the Victorian ghost story depicts the seen and unseen.

The face recurs as a key point of interest in Victorian tales of ghost sightings, as can be seen in the writings of authors including Mary Elizabeth Braddon (1835–1915) and Arthur Machen (1863–1947). While the ghost is perceived by the eyes of the observer, it is in the face that the horror of ghosts is manifested. On the one hand, it is through the face of the person seeing the ghost that the sight becomes visible to other onlookers, as their expression communicates the shock and horror

<sup>1</sup> Jean-Louis Comolli, ‘Machines of the Visible’, in Teresa de Loretis and Stephen Heath, eds, *The Cinematic Apparatus* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1980), 122. Also quoted in Kate Flint, *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 3.

<sup>2</sup> See Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the 19th Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992); Flint, *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination*.

of seeing the apparition.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, the face of the ghost itself can also serve as the visual locus for the ghost's unnatural or demonic status. This chapter explores the role of the face in mediating the invisible in Victorian ghost stories.

## The Ghost as a Location of Cultural Preoccupations

In the Victorian popular imagination, the sense of sight was a subjective and potentially flawed sense. Even though developments in the technologies of sight, such as the microscope, enabled the observer to see what lies beyond the limitations of human vision, this also foregrounded how restricted unenhanced vision was.<sup>4</sup> Richard Proctor, for instance, noted that the expansion of the 'visible' world due to such technologies served to highlight that the 'defect' of the eye 'renders the eye absolutely useless for special forms of work.'<sup>5</sup> Such technologies threw into sharp relief the eye's susceptibility to fatigue, its limitations of light conditions, and, of course, its inability to preserve or reproduce what it sees. As Walter Scott wrote in 1830, the eye could thus be subject to disturbances, causing it 'to make false representations to the mind', arguing that 'in such cases, men, in the literal sense, really see the empty and false forms.'<sup>6</sup> The Victorian ghost story has often been read in relation to this burgeoning interest in the physiology and technologies of sight: a wealth of scholarship is available on empirical approaches to supernatural sightings, in both fiction and reported accounts.<sup>7</sup> The ambivalence of sight complicates the status of the fictional apparition in Victorian ghost stories. Srdjan Smajić notes that, in such literature, the sense of sight serves as proof of the supernatural event, but it is also considered the most subjective sense: 'The genre prominently manifests the tension between ocularcentric faith and anti-ocularcentric skepticism that

<sup>3</sup> Stephanie Trigg, in Chapter 1 of this volume, provides a compelling account of the face as a culturally and historically significant location, and the role of the text in mediating the act of looking upon the face.

<sup>4</sup> Flint, *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination*, 30. See also Stella Butler, N. H. Brown, and Olivia Nuthall, *The Social History of the Microscope* (Cambridge: Whittle Museum, 1986).

<sup>5</sup> Richard Proctor, 'The Photographic Eyes of Science' [1883], in *Literature and Science in the Nineteenth Century: An Anthology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 86.

<sup>6</sup> Sir Walter Scott, *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft* (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1887 [1830]), 35. It is interesting that, despite their sceptical approach to supernatural phenomena, the anecdotes of apparitions recorded in Scott's *Letters* proved influential models for Victorian supernatural fiction throughout the nineteenth century.

<sup>7</sup> It would be impractical to attempt a bibliography of this scholarship here, but some useful starting points are Srdjan Smajić, *Ghost-Seers, Detectives, and Spiritualists* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010); Catherine Maxwell, *Second Sight: The Visionary Imagination in Late Victorian Literature* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2008); Flint, *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination*; Richard Noakes, 'Spiritualism, Science and the Supernatural in mid-Victorian Britain', in Nicola Bown, Carolyn Burdett, and Pamela Thurschwell, eds, *The Victorian Supernatural* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

defines much of Victorian thinking about vision.<sup>8</sup> While it is true that there is certainly an uneasy relationship between Victorian scientific culture and the figure of the ghost, the ghost story in many ways refuses the challenges to the status of sight as a reliable sense, and instead asserts it as authoritative. The short-story form in particular does not allow for lengthy discussion as to the reliability or cause of a supernatural vision. Witnesses to ghost sightings commonly disregard attempts at rational explanation as inadequate to their visual experience. Victorian ghost stories may engage with broader cultural scepticism of vision, but they often do so in order to challenge this scepticism and assert the eye's powers of perception.<sup>9</sup>

In addition to the empirical status of sight and vision in Victorian Britain, modern criticism has also considered Victorian ghosts as metaphorical hauntings, challenging the traditional view of the apparition as a central or even necessary figure in the ghost story. Julian Wolfreys, for instance, argues that 'spectrality resists conceptualisation and one cannot form a coherent theory of the spectral without that which is spectral having always already exceeded definition.'<sup>10</sup> Such an emphasis means that even 'material' apparitions are read not as ghosts of people, but as hauntings of the social, economic, and cultural conditions that have enabled them to appear. As Kate Flint writes, '[t]o consider visuality in relation to fiction is to address much more than the physical attributes of *what* is represented. . . . It is to explore a whole range of issues of representation and perception.'<sup>11</sup> Expansive readings of this kind are vital to critical understandings of Victorian writing, allowing as they do temporally expanded readings beyond the moment of viewing. To understand the *ideology* of a ghost sighting is to understand the conditions that have made this particular haunting possible. Likewise, in this line of inquiry attention to the haunted character means paying attention to the after-effects of a ghost sighting in social, cultural, and even economic terms. How is the character changed? What resolutions do the sightings afford? Such readings are not only of the ghost but also of the social and cultural conditions that make the experience of such an apparition possible.

While both avenues of scholarship (optical empiricism and cultural ideologies) offer valuable insights into the contexts and functions of Victorian ghost stories, this chapter explores how we might take them further by attending to the *moment* of ghost-seeing itself. What happens at the time the ghostly apparition is seen? How

<sup>8</sup> Smajic, *Ghost-Seers, Detectives, and Spiritualists*, 18.

<sup>9</sup> This is evidenced in the way that sight is often used to give authority to accounts of 'real' encounters with apparitions. Further, such accounts show strong narrative cross-pollination with fictional ghost stories. For a seminal collection of recorded encounters in the Victorian period, see Catherine Crowe, *The Night Side of Nature* (London: T. C. Newby, 1848).

<sup>10</sup> Julian Wolfreys, *Victorian Hauntings: Spectrality, Gothic, the Uncanny and Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2002), x.

<sup>11</sup> Kate Flint, "'Seeing is Believing?': Visuality and Victorian Fiction," in Francis O'Gorman, ed., *A Concise Companion to the Victorian Novel* (Malden, MA, and Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 25–46, 26.



is this sight conveyed to other characters and to the reader? And how do such sights mediate between what is visible and what invisible?

### The Face as a Location of Ghost-Seeing

In two short stories by Sheridan Le Fanu and Mary Elizabeth Braddon, the face of the ghost is identified as the location where the meaning of the ghost sighting is imprinted. Such moments highlight the key strategies employed in ghost stories: they foreground the sighting as an event, they use condensed descriptions to accelerate the pace of this event, and they pay forensic attention to detail. These features secure the sighting as a moment defined by its visual features. These formal capacities lend themselves well to conveying sensory experience and the shock and horror of a ghostly vision in particular.

My first example, Le Fanu's 'Madam Crowl's Ghost' (1851), is an account of a ghost sighting told by a young girl sent to work at the house of the eponymous old lady. Vision is foregrounded from the start, with a focus on eyewitness proof, the girl saying, 'I'm goin' to tell ye noo about what I sid wi' my own een.'<sup>12</sup> Madam Crowl, once a great beauty and widow of Squire Crowl, is suspected of having had a hand in the disappearance of her deceased husband's son from his previous marriage. The young narrator meets Madam Crowl twice: once on her sickbed, and a second time after her death, when the 'ghostly' version of Madam Crowl reveals the location of the long-hidden body of her stepson. These doubled encounters highlight the way in which ghost stories often layer multiple visions upon each other to heighten their effects of horror and to offer new ambiguities of meaning.

Le Fanu's short story exemplifies how looking into the face of the ghost can provide the hinge on which a ghost story turns. Crucially, the first sighting, while Madam Crowl is still alive, is the more horrifying of the two:

There she was, dressed out. You never sid the like in they days. Satin and silk, and scarlet and green, and gold and pint lace; by Jen! 'twas a sight! A big powdered wig, half as high as herself, was a-top o' her head, and, wow! – was ever such wrinkles? – and her old baggy throat all powdered white, and her cheeks rouged, and mouse-skin eyebrows. . . . Lawk! But her nose was crooked and thin, and half the whites o' her eyes was open. She used to stand, dressed as she was, gigglin' and dribblin' before the lookin'-glass. . . . Well, a corpse is a natural thing; but this was the dreadfulest sight I ever sid.<sup>13</sup>

The description is nothing if not like that of a laid-out corpse, all the more uncanny (or unnatural, as the narrator recognizes) because Madam Crowl is *not* a corpse.

<sup>12</sup> Sheridan Le Fanu, *Madam Crowl's Ghost and Other Tales of Mystery*, ed. M. R. James (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1994), 10.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 8–9.

This passage thus establishes Madam Crowl (in her living form) as a figure of horror, and also introduces the notion of madness, with Madam Crowl ‘gigglin’ and ‘dribblin’ before the mirror.<sup>14</sup> The *effect* of this vision is registered on the face of the young girl, who ‘sees’ the grotesque nature of Madam Crowl: ‘I cried hearty, I can tell you, when I got down to the housekeeper’s room. Mrs Wyvern laughed a deal when I told her what happened.’<sup>15</sup> The housekeeper, Mrs Wyvern, does not share the girl’s distress, suggesting that the locus of the horror lies firmly in the *observation* of (the still living) Madam Crowl. The woman is not an apparition, and yet the girl’s response to *what she sees* establishes Madam Crowl as a grotesque and unnatural figure. It is in this way that the Gothic ‘horror’ of the text is established, in the sense that the image elicits the effect of revulsion and fear—the ‘contraction and freezing’ of the faculties described by Ann Radcliffe in her important account of the Gothic.<sup>16</sup> This horror affects both the direct witness of Madam Crowl—the girl—and the reader.

The second sighting is a more central moment in the ghost story, happening as it does after Madam Crowl has died, and also leading directly to the revelation of the hidden body of her stepson. However, I suggest that the narrative effect of this ghost sighting is particularly effective *because* of the previous encounter.

And what sud I see, by Jen! but the likeness o’ the ald beldame, bedizened out in her satins and velvets, on her dead body, simperin’, wi’ her eyes as wide as saucers, and her face like the fiend himself. ’Twas a red light that rose about her in a fuffin low, as if her dress round her feet was blazin’.<sup>17</sup>

This passage is in fact less descriptive than the previous encounter, but it is an image that can be laid like a palimpsest on the description of Madam Crowl’s living face. The presence of the earlier description leaves space in the narrative now to introduce more visually ambiguous and typically supernatural features to the scene. Madam Crowl’s face, already established as that of grotesque make-up over corpse-like skin, can now take on the symbolic likeness of ‘the fiend himself’. This pivotal scene thus sets in motion the denouement of the story:

She was drivin’ on right for me, wi’ her ald shrivelled hands crooked as if she was goin’ to claw me. I could not stir, but she passed me straight by, wi’ a blast o’ cald air, and I sid her, at the wall, in the alcove as my aunt used to call it . . . , and her hands gropin’ in at somethin’ was there. . . . And she turned round to me, like a thing on a pivot, flyrin’ [grinning], and all at once the room was dark.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Note also the trope of the face in the mirror here—Madam Crowl’s face thus has an effect on her as well as on the young girl, here apparently some sort of insanity.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>16</sup> See Ann Radcliffe, ‘On the Supernatural in Poetry’, in *The Italian, or, The Confession of the Black Penitents*, ed. Frederick Garber (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 395–406.

<sup>17</sup> Le Fanu, *Madam Crowl’s Ghost and Other Tales of Mystery*, 11. <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 11–12.

This alcove, of course, is where they will later find the remains of the missing child. The narrative pace is now one of abrupt confrontation, in which horror and the supernatural shift into focus. The reader has been primed by the image of the living, but unnatural, Madam Crowl to now participate fully in the effect of the supernatural scene, indicating the focus on visions that layer past visions on to present ones that I argue is characteristic of Victorian writers' engagement with ghost sightings.

In my second example, Mary Elizabeth Braddon's 'Her Last Appearance' (1877), the face of the actor Barbara is presented through a double vision, as other characters fail to perceive accurately whether she is dead or alive. Her lover, Sir Philip, cannot perceive her transition into death because he is blinded by his obsession with her beauty. The face *as seen* by the infatuated lover obscures the face as it actually is. The story therefore becomes something of a double vision between seeing and not seeing, as the reader is granted access both to how Barbara's face looks to her own perception and to Sir Philip's desiring gaze.

From the beginning, the narration is preoccupied with the surface beauty of Barbara, opening on a scene in which she looks at herself in the mirror:

She was contemplating the beauty which was said to have set the town raving.

What did that tarnished mirror show her? A small pale face, wan and wasted by studious nights and a heavy burden of care, dark shadows about dark eyes. But such eyes! They seemed, in this cold light of day, too black and large and brilliant for the small white face; but at night, in the lamplit theatre, with a patch of rouge under them, and the fire of genius burning in them, they were the most dazzling, soul-ensnaring eyes man had ever seen.<sup>19</sup>

The passage above introduces the notion of a double vision, as it is revealed that the make-up and lights of the stage disguise what the actor (and by this point the reader) knows to be the face of a dying woman. Likewise, it suggests that the sense of vision is being deliberately obscured, the 'dazzling' nature of the eyes blinding the viewer to the visual signs of sickness and approaching death. The story continues with Sir Philip's attempts to woo Barbara (including killing her husband), although Sir Philip remains largely at a distance, as he regularly watches Barbara on stage from a box in the theatre. This leads eventually to her 'final' night on stage, which he watches from the audience, as is his habit. Until this scene, each encounter with Barbara depends on the apparent beauty of her face. Her scoundrel husband is 'caught by her somewhat singular beauty, which was rather that of an old Italian picture than of a rustic Englishwoman.'<sup>20</sup> The theatre manager, too, is beguiled by Barbara's beauty: 'her exceptional beauty struck the managerial eye.'<sup>21</sup> Throughout, the story revolves around a central character whose presence in the text centres upon her visual appearance to other people. Sir Philip's infatuation is almost

<sup>19</sup> Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *The Face in the Glass and Other Gothic Tales* (London: British Library, 2014), 97.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 98.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

exclusively mediated through the act of seeing her: 'He saw, admired, and, ere long, adored the new actress.'<sup>22</sup> The reader, however, knowing as Barbara does that she is dying, is alert also to what Sir Philip does not see. The reader's 'sense of sight' encompasses both what Barbara sees in the mirror and Sir Philip's infatuated gaze.

A theme thus develops in the story in which one perspective obscures another vision, and this is most dramatically portrayed in the moment at which Barbara transitions between life and death. Barbara's final stage role is the title role in *The Duchess of Malfi*, in which the duchess is imprisoned and executed. Sir Philip watches the death scene of the duchess and, as in Le Fanu's story, here Sir Philip experiences two visions: first, one of the living (but dying) Barbara, and then, one of her ghost. Unlike in the girl's visions of Madam Crowl, however, in this story Sir Philip will only recognize these visions for what they were after the event. These sightings engage several temporalities at once, as they become visions of both a living face (to Sir Philip) and a dead or dying one (to the reader). The first moment is Barbara's performance of the Duchess's death scene, which ironically turns out to also be the moment of Barbara's own death:

The play dragged its slow length along to the awful fourth act, with its accumulated horrors – the wild masque of madmen, the tomb-maker, the bell-man, the dirge, the executioners with coffin and cords. Barbara looked pale and shadowy as a spirit, a creature already escaped from earthly bondage, for whom death could have no terrors.<sup>23</sup>

The tragedy, of course, is magnified by this being a scene witnessed by an entire audience who fail to see beyond its performance of a death to perceive Barbara's actual moment of death. Here the immanence of the visual serves to obscure what the eyes actually see. The melodramatic symbols of death, the tomb-maker and the coffin, ironically reinforce the status of the scene as 'unreal', Barbara so convincingly 'looking' pale and shadowy as a spirit. Shortly afterwards Sir Philip sees Barbara for a second time, appearing behind him in his box:

Barbara was standing there, in the dress she had worn in that last scene – the shroud-like drapery which had so painfully reminded him of death. She stretched out her hands to him with a sad, appealing gesture. He leaned eagerly forward, and tried to clasp them in his own, but she withdrew herself from him with a shiver, and stood, shadow-like, in the shadow of the doorway.<sup>24</sup>

In this striking vision, which adheres to Victorian aesthetics of the supernatural, Barbara's face is obscured by both the shroud-like drapery and the shadows. Moreover, the figure is still obscured by the melodramatic visuals of the performed death—Sir Philip still recognizes the 'shroud-like drapery' as a costume. What is seen obscures what *should be* seen. The moment becomes jarring, then, for what is

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 101.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 109.

not seen, as Sir Philip does not recognize in these scenes that Barbara is dead, but only learns of her death from the stage doorkeeper after she fails to emerge. However, this scene also starts to move away from the power the (male) gaze holds over Barbara's appearance, as the ghost recoils from Philip's contact. The text turns towards the overtly supernatural, and with it comes an inability to 'see' the figure in the same terms.

### **'Darkness visible': Visual Descriptions of Nothingness**

In the two readings so far, the 'unseen' describes as much what the observer fails to see, or what the narrative leaves unsaid, as what is absent from the image. The readings that follow reverse this model somewhat, and I focus further on the ghost story's ability to narrate visions of what is not there by making 'nothing' itself visible.

M. R. James's short story 'Count Magnus' (1904) tells the tale of a Mr Wraxall, whose story is pieced together from a diary which he kept while visiting Sweden in order to publish a travel guide. The story is narrated by an editor of Wraxall's papers and journals, who has come across them after Wraxall's death. On arriving in a small rural village with an attached manor house, Wraxall becomes interested in various legends of a count who owned the estate several centuries before, a tyrannical landowner said to have made a 'black pilgrimage', amongst other occult and alchemist activities. Remembered for his extreme and horrific punishments for poaching, Count Magnus is also said to have brought something supernatural back with him from his pilgrimage, which now pursues hunters on what was once Count Magnus's land. This short story is saturated with a constant and ominous supernatural presence, but one that is never actually seen. This is a ghost story without the appearance of a ghost per se. Instead, what is recounted are the effects of a supernatural presence. In these recountings, the presence of this supernatural force is marked by what is no longer visible on its victims.

While the descriptions of the supernatural presence offered by the villagers lack visual detail, Wraxall is provided with a gluttony of symbolic imagery during his visit to the manor house and attached chapel: 'The ceiling was flat, and had been adorned by a seventeenth-century artist with a strange and hideous "Last Judgement", full of lurid flames, falling cities, burning ships, crying souls, and brown and smiling demons.'<sup>25</sup> Likewise, the single image of Count Magnus himself, represented by a portrait hanging in the manor, is visually striking, and Mr Wraxall uses this image of the count's face to interpret his character. In Le Fanu's text,

<sup>25</sup> M. R. James, *Casting the Runes and Other Ghost Stories*, ed. Michael Cox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 45.

Madam Crowl's grotesque face was an indication of her evil character, but here the portrait has an underwhelming effect:

The portrait of this Magnus de la Gardie was one of the best in the house, and Mr Wraxall studied it with no little interest after his day's work. He gives [in his journal] no detailed description of it, but I gather that the face impressed him rather by its power than by its beauty or goodness; in fact, he writes that Count Magnus was an almost phenomenally ugly man.<sup>26</sup>

As with Braddon's description of the staged death in *The Duchess of Malfi*, the richness of the visual imagery serves to obscure rather than illuminate, nurturing Wraxall's failure to 'see' the peril overhanging the village and him. The narrator, an editor of Wraxall's papers, explains, 'to Mr Wraxall, separated from [Count Magnus] by nearly three centuries, the thought that he might have added to his general forcefulness alchemy, and to alchemy something like magic, only made him a more picturesque figure.'<sup>27</sup>

By contrast, the presence that seems to be stalking the surrounding woods is marked by the inability of those who have seen it to describe it. The reader therefore does not know what the ghost itself looks like but encounters the supernatural figure through the effects it has on those who perceive it. Wraxall only comes across one apparent visual representation of the figure, an engraving that he finds on a sarcophagus in the manor's richly decorated chapel. Even this image, however, is obscure:

Among trees, was a man running at full speed, with flying hair and outstretched hands. After him followed a strange form; it would be hard to say whether the artist had intended it for a man, and was unable to give the requisite similitude, or whether it was intentionally made as monstrous as it looked. In view of the skill with which the rest of the drawing was done, Mr Wraxall felt inclined to adopt the latter idea.<sup>28</sup>

The obscurity of the image further reinforces Wraxall's complacent understanding of this figure. The narrator quotes Wraxall's journal directly here, in which he decides that '[t]his, then, which is evidently an allegorical representation of some kind – a fiend pursuing a hunted soul – may be the origin of the story of Count Magnus and his mysterious companion.'<sup>29</sup> The sight of the figure in this case, as with the portrait of Count Magnus, seems to reduce rather than heighten its horror. While Wraxall confines the artistic imagery to the allegorical, however, the physical manifestation of the presence remains a staple of the town's oral history. Wraxall hears from a local villager the story of a man found in the woods after poaching during the night. As the villager tells it,

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 52.

They went to the wood, and they found these men on the edge of the wood. Hans Thorbjorn was standing with his back against a tree, and all the time he was pushing with his hands – pushing something away from him which was not there.... Also Anders Bjornsen was there; but he was dead.<sup>30</sup>

The apparition, then, is present in this scene, fighting against the poacher, but remains unseen. It is there as ‘something’, but at the same time ‘not there’. Moreover, the second man has been rendered literally faceless: ‘He was once a beautiful man, but now his face was not there, because the flesh of it was sucked away off the bones.’<sup>31</sup> Again the face becomes the location for making sense of what is seen (or in this case unseen), and the impression left on the face of the beholder is one of negation—the supernatural figure has left an absence where the man’s face once was.

The absence of a face remains a motif as Wraxall returns home to England, seemingly followed by two ominous figures. The supernatural seems to have turned its attention to Wraxall after he attempts to trespass the boundary between the seen and the unseen. One evening, Wraxall decides to open Count Magnus’s coffin in the mausoleum, still maintaining his complacent view of the Count. As he stands over the coffin, he declares, ‘[y]ou may have been a bit of a rascal in your time, Magnus, ... but for all that I should like to see you.’<sup>32</sup> At this point the coffin begins to open on its own, and Wraxall flees, first the crypt and then Sweden altogether. His journal, however, gives increasingly obsessive accounts of sighting two cloaked figures constantly pursuing him, throughout the journey and once he is home. These sightings are the first in which Wraxall actually sees an apparition, but as might now be expected, his accounts of these sightings are opaque, in contrast to the vivid imagery that so captured his imagination in Sweden. Most notably, it is the face of these figures that Wraxall is repeatedly unable to see. Wraxall’s journal sets the figures in contrast to his fellow passengers on the journey, whom he begins obsessively trying to catalogue:

25. Commercial traveller from Stockholm going to Trollhättan. Black cloak, brown hat.

26. Man in long black cloak, broad-leafed hat, very old-fashioned.

This entry is lined out, and a note added: ‘Perhaps identical with No. 13. Have not yet seen his face.’<sup>33</sup>

From the continuing journal it becomes clear that this ‘man in a long black cloak’ is one of the haunting figures, and that Wraxall never manages to identify his face.

A significant change also occurs in the narration of these figures. Where descriptions of the artwork and symbolic imagery of the manor were vivid and detailed, the sightings of these figures are conveyed with the use of negatives; they are char-

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

acterized by what Wraxall cannot make out: 'He had no time to see their faces, nor did they make any motion that he could discern.'<sup>34</sup> Even the surroundings in which these sightings take place become comparatively obscured, Wraxall looking out of a coach window onto fields and thickets beyond which 'there was little else to be seen.'<sup>35</sup> And yet this sighting has a powerful effect on Wraxall. It is in these repeated sightings of the mysterious figures that Wraxall has become inextricably connected to the supernatural. These visions, opaque as they are, are ones of recognition. Wraxall is not able to reliably describe the figures, nor apparently to secure a fixed visual image of them, and yet he recognizes them as being a constant presence. From the window, Wraxall slumps back in his seat 'in something like desperation. He had seen them before.'<sup>36</sup> An interesting narrative disconnect develops here, in terms of Wraxall's sense of sight and his descriptive abilities. The more intrusive these figures become to his vision, the less he is able to articulate what he sees. His confused attempts to articulate his visions, for instance, lie in stark contrast to his expansive and indulgent descriptions of the artwork at the manor house. His final notes before his death, writes the editor of his journals, 'are too disjointed and ejaculatory to be given here in full, but the substance of them is clear enough.'<sup>37</sup>

### Indescribable Visions Given Form

My readings of 'Madam Crowl's Ghost', 'Her Last Appearance', and 'Count Magnus' allow us to appreciate the narrative strategies that convey the experience of seeing an apparition in Victorian ghost stories. An economy of visual description makes space for the horror of the supernatural to emerge, and this horror is repeatedly characterized by ambiguity as to whether the vision is of someone who is living or dead. My final example shows further the ability of Victorian supernatural fiction to 'make visible' what is otherwise absent and thus to depict a negative image. In Arthur Machen's episodic novella *The Three Impostors* (1895), the short tales presented are self-contained stories, although connected by the frame narrative of the characters who tell them. The frame narrative is already preoccupied with metaphorical seeing, or failing to see, following two amateur detectives, Phillipps and Dyson, who are repeatedly 'blinded' by the stories told to them by the three 'impostors'. Over a series of episodes, the detectives come into contact with several characters, each of whom has a weird tale to tell, and each of whom is trying to elicit help in finding a mysterious bespectacled man. It is only at the conclusion to the novella that these stories are revealed to be fabrications, part of a performance. Phillipps and Dyson are repeatedly seduced by the aesthetics of the embedded

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 56.



narratives, and become increasingly willing to participate in the artifice of the stories that they are told.<sup>38</sup> Some of these stories, or ‘Novels’ as they are titled by Machen, serve to propel the plot, but others, such as the gruesome and seemingly pointless ‘Novel of the Iron Maid’, seem mostly designed to nurture the Gothic aesthetic.

My focus here is on the ‘Novel of the White Powder’, a story told to Phillipps and Dyson by a Miss Leicester, who claims to be recounting her experiences of living with her brother. The siblings live together and, noticing that her brother has become anxious and withdrawn, Miss Leicester sends him to the doctor for a tonic. This tonic comes in the form of a white powder, and within days the brother is transformed from a near hermit to an epicurean ‘lover of pleasure.’ The change becomes so extreme that Miss Leicester begins to worry and, returning to the chemist who made up the powder, discovers that the powder has turned, having sat too long in the jar. Now, it seems, the powder resembles a mixture that had been used hundreds of years ago for demonic rituals. This discovery comes too late to save her brother, however, whose transformation will eventually lead to his complete physical degeneration.

Miss Leicester’s final two sightings of her brother before his total transformation vividly depict this grotesque change. Miss Leicester’s first sighting is when she sees her brother through the window of his bedroom, where he has become increasingly reclusive. The passage is significant as it is at once vividly descriptive, yet also comprised almost entirely of statements that highlight her inability to describe what she is seeing.

I happened to look up at the windows, and instantly there was the rush and swirl of deep cold waters in my ears, my heart leapt up and fell down, down as into a deep hollow, and I was amazed with a dread and terror without form or shape. I stretched out a hand blindly through folds of thick darkness, from the black and shadowy valley, and held myself from falling, while the stones beneath my feet rocked and swayed and tilted, and the sense of solid things seemed to sink away from under me. I had glanced up at the window of my brother’s study, and at that moment the blind was drawn aside, and something that had life stared out into the world. Nay, I cannot say I saw a face or any human likeness; a living thing, two eyes of burning flame glared at me, and they were in the midst of something as formless as my fear, the symbol and presence of all evil and all hideous corruption.<sup>39</sup>

Noticeable here is Miss Leicester’s inability to articulate what she sees. It is *not* a face that she sees, it is something ‘formless.’ The image that confronts her, however, is insistently present—something that ‘has life’ stares out at her. Once again, the space left by what Miss Leicester cannot describe is filled with notions of symbolic evil, ‘hideous corruption.’ Moreover, the *effect* of this vision is also one of negation: the

<sup>38</sup> Arthur Machen discusses the distinction between art and artifice, and particularly our participation in each, in his essay *Hieroglyphics* (London: Grant Richards, 1902).

<sup>39</sup> Arthur Machen, *The Three Impostors or the Transmutations* (London: John Lane, 1895), 167–8.

formlessness of the figure is reflected in Miss Leicester's response, 'a dread and terror without form or shape', and the world around her seems to disappear, replaced by darkness. Moreover, this vision undermines her other senses—her feet lose their sense of the ground beneath her, and her hearing is flooded with indiscernible noise. As if in confirmation of this negation, when she knocks on the bedroom door a voice tells her, 'There is nothing here.' This phrase encapsulates the paradox of her vision—it is both 'here' and 'not here'.

The second sighting in Machen's story is something of a departure from the examples explored so far, in that the description is *more* vivid and physically grotesque. The narrative pattern in which the introduction of an overtly supernatural vision obscures the narrator's ability to articulate what they are seeing, however, continues. In this culminating scene, the family doctor has broken down the bedroom door, and he and Miss Leicester come across what remains of the brother:

There upon the floor was a dark and putrid mass, seething with corruption and hideous rottenness, neither liquid nor solid, but melting and changing before our eyes, and bubbling with unctuous oily bubbles like boiling pitch. And out of the midst of it shone two burning points like eyes, and I saw a writhing and stirring as of limbs, and something moved and lifted up that might have been an arm.<sup>40</sup>

Again the motif of the face is suggested by what seem to be eyes, but these are all the more horrifying in the absence of a face to go with them. The author again makes use of negatives to point out not what Miss Leicester sees, but what the vision is *not*. The mass is 'neither liquid nor solid'; the writhing limbs suggest, but are *not*, a body. The mass is seemingly alive, but it is also putrid and rotten. This vivid moment of supernatural sighting holds in tension narratives of absence and insistent visibility. The sight is grotesque, and yet it is hard to say exactly what it is a sight of. Further, the status of this episode as an embedded narrative serves as a reminder of the layers of vision that can be created within a narrated scene. The visions of her brother experienced by Miss Leicester, for instance, represent something of a double negation in that they are later revealed to be a fabricated story. My analysis of this story, then, demonstrates the capability of literature to mediate the experiences of seeing ghosts and to 'make visible' what is otherwise absent.

### Conclusion: Narrated Visions

The Victorian cultural imagination was interested in vision as located in the eye and in the mind, and the sense of sight became something to interrogate in terms of validity and reliability. In the texts under discussion in this chapter, the narrative strategies engaged in describing the sense of sight relocate the sense of sight in

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 171–2.

terms of its *effects*. While Victorian empirical accounts of ‘ocular disturbances’ argued that the appearance of a supernatural figure disrupts the sense of sight, I have shown instead that it disrupts the ability of the observer to articulate what they have seen in visual terms. Modern scholarship often attends to the reliability of sight in Victorian supernatural fiction; my analysis has demonstrated that paying attention to literary devices such as the persistent use of negatives or layered temporalities used to convey the sensory experience of ghost-seeing helps us understand that the appearance of the supernatural obscures the sense of sight as a *describable experience*. The narrated ghost is a visual image, but over this is laid the vision of what the observer sees (or indeed does not see). It is not so much the reliability of vision that is challenged by the appearance of a ghost but, rather, that attention is drawn to the difficulty of conveying the sensory experience of ghost-seeing in language.

The moment of apparition in a Victorian ghost story is necessarily abrupt and immediate. It is at this moment that the supernatural, conventionally, imposes itself on the otherwise realist setting of the story, becoming suddenly visible as the veil is lifted. The text accomplishes several things at once in this moment: it depicts the apparition as vivid and intrusive; it conjures up a vision that convinces the reader of the horror and awe evoked by the ghost; and it ensures that the apparition itself can carry the weight of its own symbolic meanings.

Turning to the narratological questions raised by the mediation of vision in the ghost stories I have explored, the ghost-story apparition is revealed not as a single sighting, but as layers of visions. These visions accumulate both across different moments within the narrative and across the perspectives of different characters, the narrator, and the reader in what might be called a palimpsest of visions. It is by paying attention to the different layers of this palimpsest that the full meaning of the apparition is revealed. The poignancy of Barbara’s ‘Last Appearance’, for instance, relies on the reader seeing Barbara not only as a beautiful actor, or only as a ghost, but also as a dying woman who remains ‘unseen’ by the characters in the text. Thus there is room in these visions of ghosts to narrate what is not seen, or even to make visible the negative spaces of the scene. Attention to ghost sightings as pivotal moments in these texts reveals the many tensions being held between vision and narrated vision—the seen but ineffable, the unseen but present, seeing an absence of what should be there.

Through their use of distinctive literary devices ghost stories make visible the otherwise invisible. Attention to ghost sightings as pivotal moments in these texts reveals the many tensions between vision and narrated vision, all of which are held in the space between the vision itself, the vision *as seen*, the vision as narrated, and the vision as read.

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# DESCENT, SPIRIT, HEART, SENSES

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SUE ZEMKA

## A Day at the Museum

Towards the end of the first volume of her memoirs, Simone de Beauvoir recounts a visit she paid in the spring of 1929 to the new galleries of French paintings which had just opened at the Louvre. Monet she didn't like, towards Renoir she was tepid, Manet she admired, and Cézanne she worshipped: 'I thought I saw in his paintings "the descent of the spirit to the heart of the senses"'<sup>1</sup>

Beauvoir was not alone in professing worship for Cézanne. In the 1920s, worshipping Cézanne was a thing to do, a sign of cool. Since early in the century, a general excitement for Cézanne (who died in 1906) percolated in avant-garde art circles of Paris, New York, and London. It crossed the boundaries between fine art and literature and eventually philosophy. Gertrude Stein told Hemingway to take Cézanne as a model and he wisely obeyed. A few years before Beauvoir stood before Cézannes in the Louvre, Hemingway was visiting them in the Musée du Luxembourg; 'I was learning very much from [Cézanne] but I was not articulate enough to explain it to anyone. Besides it was a secret.'<sup>2</sup>

All of this is context, pieces of the milieu swirling around a 21-year-old Simone de Beauvoir and probably outside of her immediate consciousness when she decided that, among impressionists, it was Cézanne she worshipped, Cézanne who won the day over Monet, Manet, and Renoir. There are reasons why Cézanne reigned supreme as the early trendsetter of modernism (to which I will return). What fascinates me is the person who was standing next to Beauvoir in a gallery of the Louvre on that spring day in 1929.

<sup>1</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, trans. James Kirkup (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2005), 309.

<sup>2</sup> Ernest Hemingway, *A Moveable Feast* (London: Vintage, 2000), 13.

Her name was Elisabeth Lacoin, nicknamed ‘Zaza’, Beauvoir’s closest friend. The two met at convent school when they were 10 years old. Both girls were idealistic and precociously intelligent. Zaza did not immediately return Simone’s desire for her friendship, at least not with the same fervour. That came later. The more attractive and high-spirited of the two, Zaza was popular, passionate, and ambitious. But she was also hampered by the social demands and social strictures placed on her by her mother, the pseudonymous ‘Madame Mabilille’ of Beauvoir’s memoirs. As far as Beauvoir was concerned, Madame Lacoin/Mabilille was a despotic embodiment of stultifying French Catholic bourgeois morality. In fact, the plot of *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, if a memoir can be said to have a plot, is the battle for Zaza’s destiny, waged between Madame Mabilille’s overweening control and Zaza’s thirst for the freedom to expand her talents and sphere of action. It wasn’t just her mother that held her back, though. There was also her fervent devotion to her mother. Zaza was loath to go against her will. A love triangle arises between Zaza, Simone, and Madame Mabilille. This makes the title into a double entendre. For while one might reasonably believe that ‘the dutiful daughter’ is Simone de Beauvoir, the author of the memoir, whose formation receives bountiful attention and who similarly suffers under the nemesis of French Catholic mores, the ‘dutiful daughter’ must refer to Zaza as well.

Zaza’s struggle for survival failed. She died suddenly in November 1929. Beauvoir was left with an acute case of survivor’s guilt. This is where *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* ends. Shock, contrition, and grief dilute Beauvoir’s relief at escaping the strictures of her upbringing: ‘for a long time I believed that I had paid for my own freedom with [Zaza’s] death.’<sup>3</sup>

Simone de Beauvoir loved Elisabeth Lacoin and was probably in love with her. We do not have Zaza’s version of things on this, but we have several from Beauvoir. Her diaries, now published, contain numerous entries about her childhood friend. There’s more: *The Inseparables*, a novel about the Beauvoir–Lacoin friendship. Written in 1954, it never saw the light of day in Beauvoir’s lifetime but was published in 2021. There is also *When Things of the Spirit Came First*, a series of inter-linked stories that Beauvoir wrote in the 1930s but didn’t publish until 1979. The last story is about Zaza. Why the repeated retellings of the story? Trauma, grief, anger, ongoing love . . . . Probably all four, a knot of feeling that Beauvoir first tried to untie in fiction, then memoir, then (ultimately) in philosophy, insofar as Zaza’s wasted life was an impetus for Beauvoir’s feminism. There’s a sense of destiny in it all, as if Beauvoir is retroactively planting in her memories of Zaza the seeds of something meant to be, the responsibility for which will be hers to work out in literature. When the 9-year-old Sylvie (i.e. Simone) meets the 9-year-old Andrée (i.e.

<sup>3</sup> Beauvoir, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, 360.

Zaza), she muses prophetically that ‘Andrée was one of those prodigies about whom, later on, books would be written.’<sup>4</sup>

None of this sounds emotionally uncomplicated. And, to make matters worse, there’s a man involved. Remember the scene in *Memoirs* recounting the trip to the Louvre in the spring of 1929? There’s a second voice that can be heard murmuring behind Zaza and Beauvoir, calling Cézanne’s work a ‘descent of the spirit to the heart of the senses’. Beauvoir puts the words in single quotation marks and leaves them unattributed. I want to believe that she is quoting or paraphrasing the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The idea of a ‘descent of the spirit to the heart of the senses’ is entirely consistent with Merleau-Ponty’s ideas about Cézanne and echoes his style of expression. Cézanne figures largely in the philosopher’s writings, and one essay, the influential ‘Cézanne’s Doubt’, is devoted entirely to the painter. True, the idea of a ‘descent of the spirit to the heart of the senses’ could be Beauvoir’s as well—and clearly she does concur—but there would be no need to put single quotation marks around it if it wasn’t said by someone else—if there wasn’t, if only as the later addition of an overcharged memory, someone else there as well.

Merleau-Ponty was a close friend of Beauvoir and a member of her circle. He was also the great love of Zaza Lacoïn’s life, and she possibly of his. He is also a key character in Beauvoir’s *Memoirs*, appearing under the pseudonym ‘Pradelle’, and in her *The Inseparables*, where he is given the name Pascal Blondel. His role in both literary works creates a second triangular relationship that places Zaza’s destiny in the balance—this one between Zaza, Beauvoir, and Merleau-Ponty.

Beauvoir met Merleau-Ponty in the summer of 1927. He asked a friend to introduce them after she beat him for second place in exams for the certificate in general philosophy. (First-place honours had gone to Simone Weil, but Weil was Jewish and thus ‘not a contender for the kind of intellectual friendship two Catholics could share.’)<sup>5</sup> The young Merleau-Ponty was, by all reports, handsome, charming, amiable, and good-humoured. Unlike Beauvoir, he was not troubled by religious doubts, nor by gnawing ethical and psychological anxieties. He wasn’t socially awkward and he wasn’t rebellious. One might have expected them to regard each other with the redolent disdain of teenagers in enemy cliques, but somehow they immediately hit it off. Soon they were meeting frequently—in the Luxembourg Gardens, for walks, in cafes, after lectures at the Sorbonne. Beauvoir found in Merleau-Ponty ‘an easygoing soul’. Things picked up from there. She developed an ardent identification with him that wasn’t sexual, or at least she didn’t experience it as such: ‘I desire[d] to become part of him and to have him take me with him.’<sup>6</sup> They were still teenagers, after all, if just barely.

<sup>4</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Inseparables*, trans. Lauren Elkin (London: Vintage Classics, 2021), 12.

<sup>5</sup> Kate Kirkpatrick, *Becoming Beauvoir: A Life* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), 221.

<sup>6</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *Diary of a Philosophy Student: Vol. 2: 1928–29*, ed. Barbara Klaw, Sylvie Le Bon Beauvoir, Margaret A. Simons, and Marybeth Timmerman (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2019), 105.

Zaza was only an intermittent presence in the early days of the Beauvoir–Merleau-Ponty friendship. For much of that period she was studying in Berlin, where her mother had sent her to get her away from the subversive influences of Parisian friends, including Beauvoir. When Zaza returned to Paris in the winter of 1929, the twosome became a threesome. That spring was packed with walks in parks, afternoons in cafes, and picnics (all in spite of the looming exams). Sometimes Beauvoir, Zaza, and Merleau-Ponty did things alone, sometimes they joined other friends, the self-styled ‘Bois de Boulogne gang.’<sup>7</sup> Before long, Zaza and Merleau-Ponty were in love. Given the periodic intensity of Beauvoir’s feelings for Merleau-Ponty, I expected her to be jealous. The opposite was true. She was elated: ‘they were made for one another; they loved one another. One of my dearest dreams was about to be realized: Zaza’s life would be a happy one!’<sup>8</sup>

For a while, the three were happy together, as for example on a June boat ride in the Bois de Boulogne, which Beauvoir recounted ecstatically:

The incredible wealth of life, oh life, that answers all my dreams! How I love him like this, laughing, full of wit, carefree about joining whatever group hails us. I am also wonderfully close to feeling tenderness for Zaza, what gaiety and freedom! How well we get along, the three of us!<sup>9</sup>

What could be better than this? How devastating then, when it all quickly and tragically unravelled. First there were inexplicable objections to marriage from the families, then troubling hesitations and delays from Merleau-Ponty. This pitched Zaza into accelerating distress, which she conveyed on an almost daily basis to Beauvoir. Finally, Zaza agreed to a one-year separation: Merleau-Ponty would do military service; she would go back to Berlin. It was a grudging compromise. Then, the evening before her departure, Zaza took the rash step of visiting the Merleau-Ponty residence, where she had previously never set foot. One can imagine Merleau-Ponty’s heart-racing surprise as he rushes down the stairs, having heard his unexpected paramour being shown inside. A conversation ensues with Madame Merleau-Ponty; objections are withdrawn; the engagement is ratified; and Zaza asks for a kiss, her first, from her newly betrothed. He ushers her home in a taxi, where the kiss presumably takes place. If this sounds like alarming behaviour for a young, upper-middle-class woman of the day, it was. Zaza was shivering, feverish. In less than a week she was dead. The official explanation was encephalitis. Beauvoir, however, blamed her friend Maurice Merleau-Ponty. The triangle of intimacy united them in guilt as well as love.

Given all this, let’s take a deep breath and return again to the gallery in the Louvre in the spring of ’29, just as love was blooming and before everything went wrong. I can imagine the three of them there, looking at the newly assembled impressionist

<sup>7</sup> Beauvoir, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, 260.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 328.

<sup>9</sup> Beauvoir, *Diary of a Philosophy Student*, 226.





**Figure 3.1** *Madame Cézanne (Hortense Fiquet) in a Red Dress* (1888–90). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; the Mr and Mrs Henry Ittleson Jr Purchase Fund, 1962. Public domain.

paintings. There they are, the three of them, in the sense that memory weaves circles through past events, transposing one event onto another, suffusing Beauvoir's feelings of happiness during a day at the museum with the feelings of grief and anger that came later, after Zaza died the following autumn and suffusing them further with her memories of Merleau-Ponty, who in spite of everything remained a close friend and colleague for the next thirty years.

Let's say, for the sake of imaginative specificity, that when our out-of-time threesome pauses before a Cézanne, they pause before *Madame Cézanne in a Red Dress* (Figure 3.1). A middle-aged woman, the painter's wife, gazes at her husband painting her, and now by the magic of portraiture gazes at us, at the any and all of us who regard the painting over time, including our young French threesome. The triangulated relationships are appropriate to our subject, after all, as are the thoughts of love, isolation, tenderness, and ephemerality that the painting creates in its orbit. Let's say that it's here, before this painting, that the opinion is seeded which later emerges in Beauvoir's memoir as a garland of words circling between them and across the years: a 'descent of the spirit to the heart of the senses.'

Now things are getting more complicated still. For—what cannot be ignored—a fourth person has joined the group: Cézanne himself, the artist who Beauvoir worshipped and Merleau-Ponty returned to time and again in his writings. He is not there in body, like Beauvoir and Zaza, nor in words and spirit, like Merleau-Ponty. Rather, he is there in a material substitution, *Madame Cézanne in a Red Dress*, the canvas he once worked on assiduously and obsessively (because this is the only way Cézanne ever worked), and then jettisoned from his consciousness when he moved on to other paintings, other ‘motifs’ as he called them—and in fact moved on altogether when he died in 1906, having caught a cold ‘sur le motif’. His paintings survive him as unique types of material remnants, with a separate existence and distinct purposes. One purpose, as Merleau-Ponty tells us in his essay ‘Cézanne’s Doubt’, is to capture the eccentricity of his perceptions in such a way that they transform the activities of painting and seeing. This is why Cézanne worked as hard as he did, sometimes spending hours at a time on a single stroke of the brush: it was imperative that the things he saw exist not only in himself, ‘like a stubborn dream or a persistent delirium’, nor that they ‘exist only in space as a colored piece of canvas’; the purpose of his demanding, wrenching labour was to make paintings that could ‘dwell undivided in several minds, with a claim on every possible mind like a perennial acquisition.’<sup>10</sup> By Merleau-Ponty’s estimation, Cézanne had schizothymia, a mental disorder characterized by flat affect and acute introversion, and yet (again according to the philosopher) the fire that drove his exacting labour was a desire to share with others, to impress upon them, his uncommon painter’s vision; to grab them by the eyeballs and make them see.

*Descent, spirit, heart, senses:* for each word, several stories converge on our scene.

*Descent*, because any such act or memory as Beauvoir practises in *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, or of painting such as Cézanne practises in *Madame Cézanne in a Red Dress*, or of philosophizing such as Merleau-Ponty practises in ‘Cézanne’s Doubt’, is an act of diving, of submersion into depths. Truth, Beauvoir writes, is ‘ambiguity, depth (*abîme*), mystery’, and she offers women’s self-writing as an example of one historically fraught search for truth.<sup>11</sup> A descent into truth, reality, self is an experience of darkness and danger, and of compressing one’s will into a line of force towards a desired objective. ‘*Se plonger*’ is one of Merleau-Ponty’s favourite words for mental analysis, or indeed for sensory investigation. Tactility and vision enable us to ‘descend among things.’ Seeing and touching tell us that our surrounding world is a ‘surface of inexhaustible depth.’<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, ‘Cézanne’s Doubt’, in *Sense and Nonsense*, trans. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 9–25 (11).

<sup>11</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovaney-Chevallier (New York: Vintage, 2010), 46.

<sup>12</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, ‘The Intertwining – The Chiasm’, in *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 130–55 (143). In the original, ‘Une superficie d’une profondeur inépuisable’, in *Le Visible et l’invisible* (Paris: Gallimard, 1979), 152.

*Spirit*, because it is the souls or uniquely animated personalities of each of these characters that are brought, outside of time, into this moment of connection around a painting.

*Heart*, because each, as we have seen, is a lover, possessed by love.

*Senses*, because none of this is as immaterial or disembodied as it sounds. Instead, it necessarily proceeds from and partakes of sensory life. The senses are at the heart of Merleau-Ponty's lifelong project as a phenomenological philosopher. They are also important to Beauvoir's work as a novelist, memoirist, and feminist philosopher. In *The Second Sex*, she nods to her agreement with Merleau-Ponty that 'the body is not a *thing*, it is a situation: it is our grasp on the world and the outline for our projects'. (Therefore the body cannot be treated as a concept, let alone a gendered concept.)<sup>13</sup> Sensory fidelity is also at the heart of Cézanne's mission as a painter. As Merleau-Ponty tells us, while it might be with the minds of others that Cézanne wishes to connect, he can only do so through the senses: '[Cézanne] wanted to make *visible* how the world *touches* us'.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, the senses are at the heart of this chapter, which I've undertaken because of a nagging interest in the silent member of our party, Elisabeth 'Zaza' Lacoïn. As I've mentioned, her presence in Beauvoir's literary archives is that of a long-dead friend, a remote memory, and unresolved tragedy, because she died, and died young. On the one hand, then, she's not accessible as a sentient being at all. In fact, she's everything but, which is the universal problem with prolonged grief. On the other hand, this predicament is particularly intriguing when we consider the sense-obsessed Merleau-Ponty, in whose writings Zaza is never named. Like Beauvoir, I find myself feeling vexed by his comportment as a lover. Was his circumspection so thorough that he had to thoroughly exclude Zaza from his corpus? He spent his life in a phenomenological investigation of the senses; he resuscitated for philosophy the marvel of a living body and its web of visual, tactile, and kinaesthetic interactions. I have to ask, even if it's impertinent, where is Zaza in all of this?

### **'Expressing What Exists Is an Endless Task'**

Exploring the question of Zaza's presence takes us back to Cézanne, or rather Merleau-Ponty's Cézanne.<sup>15</sup> The philosopher latched on to the painter as a brother in arms because of their shared obsession with embodied perception. He saw in Cézanne's paintings a recognition of the interdependence of sight and touch. Their realism, if it can be called that, is inherently synaesthetic, built from a seeing that touches and a touching that sees.

<sup>13</sup> Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, 747.

<sup>14</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 'Cézanne's Doubt', 17.

<sup>15</sup> The quotation in the section heading is from Merleau-Ponty, 'Cézanne's Doubt', 17.

In order to appreciate how much Cézanne is in Merleau-Ponty, one has to start with Merleau-Ponty. His student Claude Lefort said that he ‘never ceased meditating upon vision.’<sup>16</sup> A copy of Descartes’s *Optics* was on Merleau-Ponty’s desk when he died. At the same time—and this is hard to understand, all the more so because Merleau-Ponty’s thinking changes over the course of his career—perception, although seeming to give precedence to sight, in its expansive Pontyesque sense implies ‘all of the relations of the subject to the world, and first of all to the sensible.’<sup>17</sup> His early work pushes back against a long entrenched habit of considering each sense separately, which he thought was like saying that the eyes don’t know what the hands are doing, or that we hear in a vacuum from seeing. Influenced by *Gestaltpsychologie*, Merleau-Ponty argued that sensory information is not reducible to one sense or another. The senses conspire in a holism of the body. Lefort emphasizes the difficulty of capturing this experiential knot of a sensory whole in words or ideas; Merleau-Ponty was out ‘to think the unthinkable of metaphysics: the body.’<sup>18</sup> Over the years, the search for a language of the holistic body took him to a new shore, where ‘the body’ gave way to the more diaphanous, less individuated concept of ‘flesh’ (*la chair*). But for now let’s stay with the body, because it’s here that he meets Cézanne and begins the long journey through and past the body.

This body, this thing of weight, with its tangle of senses and deceptive permanence, this body is always there, making things possible or impossible, even when we aren’t thinking about it, which condition is the happy forgetting of being well and feeling ‘normal.’ Kinaesthetic, tactile, visual, and auditory memories are the constant background chatter of life in this body, its white noise. They shape one’s gestures, one’s way of moving through a room or opening a door, of conceiving or casting the surrounding space. He explained it this way to a lay audience in a radio broadcast of 1948: ‘man [*sic*] is not a mind *and* a body, but a mind *with* a body, and can only access the truth of things because his body is embedded in them. All things are only accessible through the body.’<sup>19</sup>

I am a little worried about using the word ‘normal’ above. I mean it idiomatically—the way a person feels (however embodied) when everything is more or less okay, as usual, whatever ‘usual’ means for a person passing through the various stages and possible modifications of their body’s existence. It’s a little hard to gloss over this, however, and it should be noted that disability studies scholars, not to mention feminists, have had problems with Merleau-Ponty’s apparent lack of interest in the different forms a human body can take, the range of differences that come under its heading. In *Black Skins, White Masks*, Fanon (like me, a fan) riffed on Merleau-

<sup>16</sup> Claude Lefort, ‘Maurice Merleau-Ponty’, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (London: Routledge, 2014), xvii.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, xxiii. <sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, xxiii.

<sup>19</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, ‘Exploring the World of Perception: Space’, The French Cultural Hour, French National Radio, 16 October 1948, Institut National de l’Audiovisuel; my translation.

Ponty with a critical twist; reaching across a table for *his* pack of cigarettes (the cigarettes, they're everywhere), his body 'schema' emerges not only within time and space but also under the white man's gaze.<sup>20</sup> Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology does not exclude the shaping power of society on black minds and bodies, but he doesn't take them into account either. He doesn't really consider the societal gaze at all, certainly not hostile gazes—a limitation that is probably due to the fact that he enjoyed a tall, healthy, handsome, white male body and was (so I imagine) languidly comfortable in it. He was known for his grace and his skills on the dance floor—Merleau-Ponty, the dancing French philosopher, a ubiquitous cigarette poised between two fingers. (He would die of a heart attack at the tender age of 53.) Hence his emphasis on 'habit', one's particular style of comportment—an emphasis that suggests a slight discomfort with those who move self-consciously or in a viscous atmosphere of, say, racial tension. To quote another privileged white man, he was at home in his own skin. Beauvoir remembers his fictional doppelgänger Pascal Blondel waiting for her and Zaza in the Luxembourg Gardens:

when he saw us, he climbed onto the railing and walked gingerly over to meet us, like a tightrope walker, his arms out for balance. In each hand he held a bouquet of lily of the valley. He jumped down and handed one to each of us.

Easy to be a philosopher of the normative body when you can move like that, in a world that delights in your antics. Understandable to be frustrated when you're a black psychoanalyst trying to apply the power and insights of the work. Easy for me to feel, along with Beauvoir, a sense of stinging exclusion from the charmed circle of Merleau-Ponty's preferences. 'Mine was only for symmetry. Pascal had never given me flowers.'<sup>21</sup>

It's a white man's world, this world of mid-twentieth-century French *hautes* ideas (as Beauvoir would point out and in the process remake). Cézanne is already in the charmed circle. Merleau-Ponty casts him into an abject distance of various neuroses, but nevertheless recognizes him as a brother in arms as far as higher purpose goes. He wrote the essay on Cézanne in 1945, the same year in which he published his major work, *The Phenomenology of Perception* (and the same year, it must be noted, although we won't have time to meditate on its significance here, that the war ended.) The Cézanne of 'Cézanne's Doubt' shares in the author's desire to return to a wellspring of perceptual experience, which the misled schools of artistic and philosophical knowledge have ignored, misled by the ruse of objectivity. Both the artist and the philosopher are obsessed with starting points, but theirs is a curious kind of starting point that has to be discovered long after the work is underway, like hunters who left their prey back where the hunt began and circle back to look for it.

<sup>20</sup> Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 1986), 110–11.

<sup>21</sup> Beauvoir, *The Inseparables*, 68.

That starting point is the sensate body in its primordial wholeness. It's been parcelled into categories and buried under analysis: '[The] distinctions between touch and sight are unknown in primordial perception. It is only as a result of the science of the human body that we finally learn to distinguish between our senses.'<sup>22</sup> 'Primordial perception' is an Eden of fresh, original vision. With it, one sees as if for the first time, without categories or divisions. '[Cézanne] wanted to depict matter as it takes on form, the birth of order through spontaneous organization.'<sup>23</sup> That's why the search is for the beginning; the source of each artistic breakthrough lies in the prehistory of the painter's sensory perception—that wellspring of shapes and colours—as they are in the process of coalescing into forms. Caught in the act, as it were. And he has to recapture them this way again and again in every painting. 'For Cézanne, it was always the first time.'<sup>24</sup>

For a long time now, this has *not* been a popular way to think. Authenticity, primitivism, and immediacy fell into philosophical disfavour after the end of the Second World War. For one thing, they smack of naivety, as if it's enough to be a high-spirited optimist to outwit the worldly philosophers' insistence that experience is always mediated, not direct. I am thinking here of Adorno, of his sober insistence that perception and its painterly or literary renderings ineluctably take detours through one or another layer of context—historical, material, technological, ideological, psychological—on their way to (or around) the real. To speak baldly: the generation after the war, in the spirit of 'we won't get fooled again,' disavowed the language of primitive authenticity that could still enchant Merleau-Ponty in 1945, right on the cusp of the transition to a more guarded way of speaking. And, to be fair, he does not make 'primitive perception' sound at all easy. There is no quick method for dissolving ossified perceptual habits and recovering a 'primordial' state of sensory immersion. Likewise in all of Merleau-Ponty's work: there is no call to go out and practise oceanic bliss, no advice for unlearning what we have learned about existing as separate entities, alone in the internal universe of our intermeshed emotional, intellectual, and corporeal lives. Instead, he always assiduously tries to undo the dichotomy between the two, mediation and immediacy. Some people recognize this as scrupulousness on his part; others as equivocation.

Carol Armstrong believes this tension and the ineluctable difficulty of 'primordial vision' really was relevant to Cézanne, not just to Merleau-Ponty's vision of him. In fact, the tension itself is something they have in common. Merleau-Ponty calls it Cézanne's 'schizoid' temperament. Armstrong paraphrases: the painter struggles 'to express the physiognomy of the world *and* the unfolding, never-finished process by means of which such "physiognomic perception" occurs.'<sup>25</sup> In

<sup>22</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 'Cézanne's Doubt', 21.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>24</sup> Alex Danchev, *Cézanne: A Life* (London: Profile Books, 2012), 232.

<sup>25</sup> Carol Armstrong, *Cézanne's Gravity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018), 106.

other words, schizoid. But so is Merleau-Ponty, the diagnosing physician, with his drive ‘to recover the raw sensory material of vision in its aborning state’ and ‘to see the world in a fully human, cognitively mature way’. Here is the real root of their kinship. They both want the same or similar things and at some level they both know that what they want is almost impossible. You can’t be simultaneously connected and detached. Well, maybe you can.

As far as sensations go, the takeaway of ‘Cézanne’s Doubt’ is this: sensory experience, on the face of it the most personal and self-involving, self-descending of modalities, is declared to be a pathway out of a fundamental isolation of our being. Unmollified, such isolation is nihilistic, a form of pain. ‘We see things; we agree about them; we are anchored in them; and it is with “nature” as our base that we construct our sciences. Cézanne wanted to paint this primordial world.’<sup>26</sup> This is the crucial affirmation. Looking at a painting by Cézanne, looking perhaps as we imagine our friends doing at *Madame Cézanne in a Red Dress*, we are reminded that at a fundamental level the very act of looking and seeing connects us to the world and to each other. We breathe the same air, apprehend the same forms and colours, and know them all through bodies that are more or less similarly constructed—similar enough that even the purportedly schizothymic Cézanne can offer others something marvellous, his strange but ultimately mind-expanding apprehension of apples, oranges, mountains, and bathers, etc. ‘The painter captures and translates into visible objects what would without him remain walled up in the separate life of each consciousness, the vibration of appearances which is the cradle of things.’<sup>27</sup>

From sensation to connection, and back to isolation, and on to connection again, fleetingly. This pattern in ‘Cézanne’s Doubt’ is in Merleau-Ponty’s overall corpus a *raison d’être*. We can see it as early as *The Phenomenology of Perception*, and also in the late essays he wrote on optics, tactility, and ontology—including the influential essay ‘The Intertwining – The Chiasm’, which he left unfinished. Repeatedly, the exposition moves from an analysis of the senses, primarily sight and touch, to relationship, a wonder in the intricate commonality of sensory existence, coupled to the sobering acknowledgement that sensory experience is fundamentally subjective, because grounded in bodies, which, however alike, are also alone. When they were still at university, Simone de Beauvoir observed her friend’s principled attraction to communal affinity with irritated wonder. Intimacy for her was exclusive, bringing two like souls into a communion sequestered from ‘the common hoard’. When she admitted this, Merleau-Ponty was aghast: ‘how can one live without gathering all mankind into the same wide net of love?’<sup>28</sup>

The late writings make an important adjustment. Merleau-Ponty moves away from the anthropomorphic and reified valences of ‘the body’, replacing it with ‘flesh’, *la chair*. ‘Flesh’, in his neologicistic parlance, is neither material nor conceptual but,

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.                      <sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Beauvoir, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, 329.

rather, an elemental condition of existence; ‘a kinship between the sensing body and sensed things that makes their communication possible.’<sup>29</sup> In Merleau-Ponty’s words, flesh ‘is the coiling over of the visible upon the seeing body, of the tangible upon the touching body.’<sup>30</sup> Or, as Judith Butler writes, ‘the flesh is not my flesh or yours, but neither is it some third thing. It is the name for a relation of proximity and breaking up.’<sup>31</sup> Time and again, Merleau-Ponty likens it to the sensation of holding one’s own hand, wherein one becomes both subject and object to oneself. While ‘flesh’, thus conceived, places limits on what we can know, feel, and imagine, it comes with the same reassurance as the earlier work, albeit now more inclusively: we never need to be alone in what we know, feel, and imagine. Even animals and things, space itself, are constituted by this ‘fleshly’ existence. We move within ‘the flesh of the world.’<sup>32</sup> Re-enter Cézanne, who painted the world as ‘a mass without gaps.’<sup>33</sup>

The last essays are visionary and lyrical. I started this section saying it was necessary first to consider Merleau-Ponty separately from Cézanne. I’ll conclude it by saying that in the philosopher’s work, the two become inextricable. Separate, connected—we are now familiar with the problem. The philosopher continued to explore the idea of ‘flesh’ as a connective tissue that is experienced singularly in ‘Eye and Mind’, his last completed essay. He ‘composed [it] at Le Tholonet in the summer of 1960, in the shadow of Cézanne.’<sup>34</sup>

## To Look Closely at Something Is to Look Closely with Someone

Cézanne and his philosophical ventriloquist Merleau-Ponty seem to be saying that the act of looking intently and consciously is never entirely a solo endeavour. Even when looking is not shared, it wants to be shared; it unconsciously gestures towards another gazer, whether or not one is physically present. I am trying to think through this counter-intuitive claim phenomenologically, by checking it against my own experience. On the one hand, I am locked inside my own eyes. If anything, they isolate me from others and from physical freedom, for how utterly dependent my ability to see is on these globular, jelliform little organs. Only two of them, which is not a great backup supply, given the chances of losing them that arise over a lifetime. This point came home to me a couple of days ago when I had a sudden onset

<sup>29</sup> Ted Toadvine, ‘Maurice Merleau-Ponty’, in Edward N. Zalta, ed., *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2019 Edition), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2019/entries/merleau-ponty/>.

<sup>30</sup> Merleau-Ponty, ‘The Intertwining – The Chiasm’, 146.

<sup>31</sup> Judith Butler, ‘Merleau-Ponty and the Touch of Malebranche’, in Taylor Carman and Mark B. N. Hansen, eds, *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 181–205 (199).

<sup>32</sup> Merleau-Ponty, ‘The Intertwining – The Chiasm’, 144.

<sup>33</sup> Merleau-Ponty, ‘Cézanne’s Doubt’, 19.

<sup>34</sup> Danchev, *Cézanne*, 343.



of floaters—big, blurry, darting ones—and am still on alert for a possible retinal detachment. Which is why I say vision is ‘utterly’ isolating and utterly dependent on the eyeballs; once lost, there is no prosthesis or transplant that can restart the personal cinema of my waking immersion in the world around me. On the other hand, if I hear Cézanne/Merleau-Ponty correctly, they are saying there is an impulse deeply and inextricably, ineluctably hardwired into the act of intentional seeing that references another human seer. ‘Look, see?’ Or ‘did you see that?’ Is there a small voice that always whispers this in the back of the head, sometimes to the friend next to us, other times to no one at all—or rather to the placeholder of a human companion, to his/her/their possibility, friendly or not, now or in the future? Experimentally, I have to say this also rings true for me.

But here is the really strange thing. This insight (interesting word, in context, but we don’t have time to meditate on that)—this insight, claim, heartfelt assertion—is what connects the visual, image-based aesthetics of painting to the readerly, text-based aesthetics of literature.

Maybe it’s enough to note that Rilke’s *Letters on Cézanne*, one of the most important works on the painter, is a book by a poet, comprised of letters to his wife (Clara Rilke-Westhoff). Already the act of looking *at* Cézannes (Rilke went daily to the 1907 exhibit) segues directly into looking *with* another; more specifically, to translating the visual experience of Cézannism into words addressed—in this case, and it’s not insignificant—to a beloved.

For Rilke, the arts of painting and poetry similarly depend on the finely tuned ‘vibrations’ of the artist. ‘Vibrations’, Danchev suggests, is Rilke’s version of Cézannian sensations, Cézanne being the painter he held in highest esteem as an influence,<sup>35</sup> the idea being that the artist, be he painter or poet, must attend very closely to a minutia of sensory perturbations in order to coax into action the alchemy of artistic creation: ‘The [Duino] Elegies show us at this work, the work of the continual conversion of the dear visible and tangible into the invisible vibration and agitation of our nature, which introduces new vibration-numbers into the vibration-spheres of the universe.’<sup>36</sup> ‘Vibration spheres’ sounds fairly mystical, in a Yeatsian sort of way, but is also sounds Bergsonian, Bergson having introduced the idea of temporal duration as something experienced differently, faster or slower, depending on the heart rate of one’s species. Squirrels, with their 300-beats-per-minute hearts, live in a different temporality than humans, with their relatively sluggish hearts. Maybe that’s why, right before this passage, Rilke writes (in a famous phrase) about the ‘bees of the Invisible’ (bees, by the way, have very slow heart rates, but we are now transitioning into the realm of metaphor):

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 337.

<sup>36</sup> Rilke to Witold von Hulewicz, 13 November 1925, quoted in Danchev, *Cézanne*, 337.

our task is to stamp this provisional, perishing earth into ourselves so deeply, so painfully and passionately, that its being may rise again, ‘invisibly,’ is us. *We are the bees of the Invisible.*<sup>37</sup>

There are three things to note here. One, whether with vibrations or sensations, Rilke and Cézanne both give an account of artistic creation based in an animal sensorium and (interestingly) with little interest in the human mind, that is to say, with the artist’s concepts, ideas, or intellectual intentions. Second, this sensory emphasis is entirely in keeping with Western aesthetic notions, and with the connection between sensation and temporality in art. This is the point that connects us back to Bergson, and before him to Winckelmann and Lessing and the whole aesthetic debate on whether and how poetry and the plastic arts deal, and deal differently, with artistic representations of pain; it’s a question of pacing, moving too quickly or too slowly. The third thing to note is that Rilke’s emphases—both his idea and the words he uses to convey it—fall squarely on the sense of sight, even though Rilke is a poet and thus, as we know, primarily interested in words and sounds. From vibrations (all the senses at work here) to invisibility to visibility: the diving and rising of the creative process is metaphorically conceived around vision even when what it’s creating is poetry. Of course it does, insofar as Cézanne’s paintings are an influence. More importantly, of course it does, because Rilke is imagining an artist who raises out of the hidden, invisible agony of their soul a work of art that is new (but not a mere novelty) and immediately recognized as such—something that can be held up, objectified, and (what is unique to an object) apprehended by all in a moment, shared, recognized, handled with the eyes if not the hands, marvelled at—that is, seen.

We began by saying that seeing is an action that invokes sharing even though it is inward and personal. To this we can add a second paradox: seeing invokes simultaneity even when the acts of viewing are spread over time or space. In both regards, seeing imparts a kind of permanence and objectivity to the work of art by imparting to it an object status, whether the work of art under consideration is visual or literary.

I think these paradoxically solitary and sociable valences of sight are what made it so attractive to writers of the late nineteenth, early twentieth centuries. They work like a counterbalance to modern and contemporary art’s emphasis on the artist’s unique individuality and rare, revolutionary temperament (his or her sensations/vibrations). Consider Marcel Proust, dissing Renoir in *Remembrance of Things Past* by comparing him to an unnamed genius: ‘an original painter or an original writer follows the path of the oculist. Their painting or their prose acts on us like a course of treatment which is not always agreeable. When it is over, the practitioner says to

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

us, “Now look”.<sup>38</sup> It’s the same pattern of thought from Merleau-Ponty: the original (read Cézannian) artist has a unique vision that restores a blessed seeing to a generation; sight, the inward sense, is completed by turning away from the line of vision and drawing another person in: ‘Now look’. Artistic creation privileges vision with a love rooted in the literal act of seeing that overflows into the metaphorical. The dive into inner and dangerous depths; the surfacing to share the pearl. The privacy, the almost-solipsism of the embodied senses triangulated by the invitation to share the feast. Dabs of paint or words on a page—for Cézanne, Rilke, Proust, Merleau-Ponty—the sensory intensity of this marking can’t stop until the marvellousness of it all is confirmed by another. What’s literature if not a practice related to painting in this way?

Remember Horace’s dictum: ‘ut pictura poesis?’ Armstrong says that, in his letters on Cézanne, Rilke inverted the formula, making it ‘as painting, so poetry’.<sup>39</sup> I’ve already observed how the letters depend on a human relationship, since Rilke writes the letters to his wife, enacting the interflowing boundaries between painting and writing by enacting interflowing boundaries between himself looking at Cézanne and extending the sensations to Clara. It’s not just human relationship in general that this aesthetic triangulation wants. It’s a wanting that is rooted in the uniquely intense and exclusive relationship of love. If it manages to diffuse and generalize itself after that, it does so as an extension of the overall flow between literal and metaphorical experiences, singular and shared sensations. Clara couldn’t come to the gallery to look at Cézannes with her husband so he put the paintings into words for her, transforming his visits into what would become a literary masterpiece of art criticism. Armstrong calls her ‘a silent partner in the enterprise’.<sup>40</sup> It’s a little bit like our friends Simone and Zaza staring (hypothetically) at the portrait of Madame Cézanne some twenty odd years later. The enshrined experience of the painter looking long and intently at his wife, with however difficult a love, creates a chain reaction. When Simone turns, it’s towards Zaza, whose words are not recorded except as a confirmation of art and love both: ‘Zaza more or less shared all my tastes.’<sup>41</sup>

### Zaza, or Things Currently Out of Reach

Which reminds me, what happened to the story that began this chapter? There we met Zaza, Elisabeth Lacoïn, who died in 1929 but figures in Beauvoir’s writings well into the 1950s. Exploring Merleau-Ponty and Cézanne, and then Cézanne and literature, I seem to have forgotten her. And yet my desire from the start has been to

<sup>38</sup> Marcel Proust, *The Guermantes Way* (Vol. 3 of *Remembrance of Things Past*), trans. C. K. Scott Moncrieff (New York: Modern Library, 1952), 243.

<sup>39</sup> Armstrong, *Cézanne’s Gravity*, 123.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>41</sup> Beauvoir, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, 309.

follow an intuition that she matters, and matters profoundly, to the two survivors who went on to become towering figures in the world of French letters—to Beauvoir and her feminist literary project, and to Merleau-Ponty and his philosophy of the senses.

My hunch is that whatever emotional currents intertwined these three persons in their youth perseveres in the writings of the two survivors—that the suddenness of Zaza's death bequeathed to Beauvoir and Merleau-Ponty the ongoing motivation of a certain emptiness, of unanswerable but heartfelt questions. Remember Rilke: 'Works of art are always the result of one's having been in danger.'<sup>42</sup> And then Beauvoir: 'for a long time I believed that I had paid for my own freedom with [Zaza's] death'. The case for a direct line between Zaza and Beauvoir's work is poignant and clear. For Merleau-Ponty, it is less so.

My training as a literary historian calls such lines of thought biographical fallacies. Ignoring that warning, I follow the lead of my subjects. Beauvoir wouldn't have given it a minute's concern. She often utilized fiction and memoir in philosophy, maintaining that philosophy couldn't be separated from life. It was a tenet of Beauvoir and Sartre both. Hence the four-volume autobiography, the several quasi-autobiographical novels, and the numerous collections of letters and diaries that comprise Beauvoir's oeuvre.

Merleau-Ponty, in contrast, left no autobiographical writings. The student who wishes to know details of his life will soon be disappointed. Everything must be culled from the writings of others, often biased sources, Beauvoir chief among them. Oddly, in spite of his reticence, Merleau-Ponty also maintained a sinewy connection between personal lived experience and the substance of one's intellectual or creative work. In the essay on Cézanne he writes 'it is true both that the life of the author can teach us nothing and that – if we know how to interpret it – we can find everything in it, since it opens onto his work.'<sup>43</sup> (So close has he come to thinking of the painter as his intellectual *doppelgänger*, he doesn't even notice that he has transformed him into an author, whose life 'opens onto his work'.) When Merleau-Ponty insists 'that life becomes ideas and ideas become life', he is primarily concerned with fundamental sensory experience more than juicy bits of biography à la Beauvoir.<sup>44</sup> Even here, though, there is no denying that the subjects in question are consolidations of important events as much as sensory minutiae: 'whether he speaks up or hardly whispers, each one speaks with all that he is, with his "ideas" but also with his obsessions, his secret history.'<sup>45</sup>

If the idea is that when we speak in earnest about things that matter, we speak with our obsessions and secret history, then we might be licensed to divulge a secret that had significant consequences for Merleau-Ponty. He had been born illegitimately,

<sup>42</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *Letters on Cézanne*, trans. Joel Agee (New York: North Point Press, 2002), 4.

<sup>43</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 'Cézanne's Doubt', 24.

<sup>44</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, 119.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

not the son of the artillery captain and Legion of Honour knight whose name he carried but, rather, of another man, name unknown, who had been his mother's lover. The shame attached to this fact was the reason, or at least one reason, why he had not married Zaza. After Beauvoir published *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*, with its fairly scathing portrait of the feckless Pradelle, aka Merleau-Ponty, one of Zaza's sisters wrote to Beauvoir and divulged the true backstory. Catholic French society being what it was, the Lacoins had hired a detective to investigate their potential son-in-law, and the detective uncovered the truth of Merleau-Ponty's birth. Wishing to save face for his mother and sister, he withdrew his suit of marriage on the condition that the Lacoins would not expose his mother's past infidelity. According to Kate Kirkpatrick, Beauvoir's biographer, Zaza was initially kept in the dark, and only brought in on the secret when she became dangerously upset and ill after what seemed to her Merleau-Ponty's inexplicable withdrawal of affection.<sup>46</sup> By the time the Lacoins retracted their objection, it was too late to make a difference for Zaza's health, and she died soon thereafter. (Presumably some version of her last-minute late-night visit to the Merleau-Pontys still took place.) It doesn't sound like the kind of experience from which you easily recover. Merleau-Ponty gives his own testimony to the resounding impact that such a string of causes and effects could have: 'in every life, one's birth and one's past define categories or basic dimensions which do not impose any particular act but can be found in all.'<sup>47</sup>

It should be clear by now that Zaza will not have a voice in this chapter. All attempts to bring her in circle back to the two friends who outlived her and those heady late years of the 1920s. Nevertheless, I often feel her haunting presence there, perhaps in Merleau-Ponty's writings more so than in Beauvoir's, precisely because, unlike her, he never explicitly contends with Zaza's memory.

Once again, trying to approach Zaza, I'm ricocheted back to Merleau-Ponty. Without too much injustice it might be said that his phenomenological project is at its base a mapping of the body as a sensory field of porous boundaries—boundaries between self and other, inside and outside, past and present. The liminal zone of the 'flesh' is his expansive stage for all matter of human and inhuman concerns. Even freedom, 'taken concretely, is always an encounter between the exterior and the interior.'<sup>48</sup> To grasp the underlying liminality of existence is to apprehend the flickering nature of forms before they consolidate into appearances as a real but unpractical truth. What can we call that? Ambiguity? But that sounds pejorative, like it's something to be got over. The philosophical term is 'non-identity', so I will call it that. Non-identity: an epistemological substrate underlying our attempts at more certain/binaristic knowledge. Negative capability is the Real. It is a natural condition,

<sup>46</sup> Kirkpatrick, *Becoming Beauvoir*, 301.

<sup>47</sup> Merleau-Ponty, 'Cézanne's Doubt', 23.

<sup>48</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (London: Routledge, 2012), 481.

just like the sticky, quotidian habits that prefer certainty and boundaries and obscure the Real.

As I was saying about Zaza. I want to believe that she survived in the philosopher as just such a liminal zone, a memory where joy and grief are intermingled, certainly not the only such memory, but perhaps a centralizing one, the one whose plangency and gravity sets it as a reference point for others. Situated in liminality, the memory of Zaza would be generative as well, unresolved and unresolving, seeking re-expressions and modifications to its basic traumatic imprint. Consider the writings in this light. On the one hand, *The Phenomenology of Perception*, the great work of the 1940s, exerts Herculean effort to argue for what sounds like a fairly uncontroversial idea: that a veritable near infinity of sensory experiences contributes to the ongoing somatic/psychological education of our bodies, and this education organizes our orientation in space and our ability to move, act, think, feel, and survive within it. On the other hand, this claim becomes something quite marvelous and terrifying when we count the memory of loving Zaza and grieving her death as one of these sensory experiences. She is among those things once touched, now untouchable. In an aching way, the memory of touching Zaza can be reactivated along the delicate tracery of the philosopher's nervous system whenever he touches something, and whenever he reaches for or remembers something out of reach.

There's a passage in the *Phenomenology* that allows me to follow this thread. It occurs in Part One ('The Body'), chapter three ('The Spatiality of One's Own Body and Motricity'). Merleau-Ponty devoted many pages to recounting clinical studies performed by the neurological psychologists Kurt Goldstein and Adhemar Gelb on Johannes Schneider, a brain-injured veteran of the First World War. Schneider had a long list of vexing symptoms that eluded explanation. Lacking a better diagnosis, his complaints were attributed to 'psychic blindness', or visual agnosia. Merleau-Ponty, in his discussion of the case, tries to navigate a fine line between psychological and philosophical explanation. One perplexing concern is Schneider's inability to conduct abstract motions. That is to say, if Schneider cannot physically reach a door handle, he cannot reproduce the movement of opening a door. He can't mime actions. He can't pretend with his body. Merleau-Ponty takes this up as a means for distinguishing between pathological and 'normal' human functioning:

[The patient has] a primary disturbance of touch . . . This deficiency would ultimately be related to a function deeper than vision, and also deeper than touch (as a sum of given qualities); it would concern the subject's living region, that opening to the world that ensures that objects currently out of reach nevertheless count for the normal subject, that they exist as tactile for him and remain part of his motor universe.<sup>49</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 119.

A fundamental navigation device in Schneider's brain has been disturbed. His inability to perform certain commonplace activity is due a fissure between tactile memory and imagination (i.e. 'abstraction'). In contrast, for the 'normal' person, if a vase on a table or in another room lies outside their reach, it still exists for them. They can remember what it looks like, the way the afternoon light passed through it, its coolness and weight when they hold it, how far their fingers reach around it. They can, if they want (or if instructed by a clinical psychologist) still extend an arm *as if* to grasp it. That Schneider cannot do this signals a shrinking of his world. Robbed of mental images, the orbit in which he lives and moves and finds purpose retracts to a sphere defined by what he can see and touch around him.

While life is presumably happier for the 'normal' subject, we have but to introduce some human content into our clinical experiment and his happiness is quickly alloyed. Remember, the 'normal' subject with the operationally larger world also comes with 'obsessions and secret histories'. If the goal is to understand embodiment as the sensory and kinaesthetic ground of knowledge, there is nothing that can or should bracket off affective objects from functional ones. There is nothing in the above description of the 'normal' subject that excludes dead lovers from those objects which, though 'out of reach... nevertheless count for him' and 'remain part of his motor universe'. There is nothing that says Zaza is not installed in a 'function deeper than touch'.

Basically, then, the passage describes two ways of being a functional human being—a nominally 'normal' one and a pathological one. To the description we are adding affectivity, something outside of Merleau-Ponty's literal field of concern. However, this is not taking great liberties. Remember the '*fort/da*' game played by Freud's nephew little Ernst, from which Freud draws the conclusion that our bodies and their movements are the stage on which we are educated in the management of loss. Recounting a game of fetch played with his 18-month-old grandson, Freud speculates that the child's pleasure in throwing his toy ('*fort*') and getting it back ('*da*') helps him learn how to adjust to the periodic absences of his parents.<sup>50</sup> Seen in this light, the Schneider passage describes two options for how we live with things we cannot touch, including, along the long trajectory of psychic-somatic memory, those whom we once touched but no longer can. One option, that of our 'normal' subject, says that objects and persons out of reach still exist as long as they can be remembered and imagined. The other option, that of our war-damaged patient Schneider, is not so sure, but is ill at ease with his amnesia. The 'normal' subject misses absent objects; the pathological one misses the missing of them. He is closed off, his universe no wider than the circumference of his outstretched arms.

<sup>50</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, ed. James Strachey, Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Vol. XVIII (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 1–64 (15–16).

Meanwhile, the first subject stays open to the world even after the object has gone missing, as if looking for it has persevered in him as a habit of hopeful eyes.

As I was saying, *Zaza*. *Zaza*, imagined in this context, is one among many possible objects currently out of reach, its/her singular importance being that she/it engrafts mourning onto Merleau-Ponty's concept of sensory embodiment. While it's true that he never names her, I am choosing to name her for him in a paraphrase of that concept that acknowledges her love and her death as one of the experiences that led him to philosophize in the way that he did. This is the paraphrase: mourning remains a constituent element in sensory life long after the acute pain suffered from a particular loss or death has dispersed. Mourning, here, can be understood psychoanalytically, as a sublimation of grief into a diffuse but tolerable sorrow (which, unsublimated, would freeze the subject in melancholy). Mourning is the movement of grief, its liquefaction in a sense, so that it flows into things, objects, and surroundings which remain available to our senses—and even to things which are not available to our senses. It ennobles these things with feelings of joy or sorrow, pleasure or pain, feelings that are no longer always or concretely tethered to memories of the person who died. Mourning expands the sensory life to include an otherness that lies outside of reach, sight, and certain knowledge, but continues to be registered in touch nonetheless.

If we listen for it, this reading can be heard in the 1948 radio broadcast on sensible objects. Addressing himself to a lay audience, Merleau-Ponty makes the ideas honed in *Phenomenology of Perception* more approachable. Perhaps for this reason, he places greater emphasis on emotional memory. 'Affective memory' runs through our sensory engagement with things; it contributes to the way we relate to the world and the ways we organize and inhabit our spaces; to the way we think about things and use them. For this reason, 'the things of the world are not simply neutral objects before our contemplation; each symbolizes or recalls a certain mode of conduct... each speaks to our body and to our life'. Things 'haunt our dreams', they are 'clothed in human characteristics', and 'they dwell in us as emblems of behavior we either love or hate'.<sup>51</sup> Things are imbued with memories and memories are sense in things. This is not (or not exactly) to assert, à la psychoanalysis, that things symbolize or cathect unconscious mental material. Merleau-Ponty's 'unconscious material' exists in the body. Affective memory courses through our physical and physiological movement; it organizes us through the way we handle objects, including the object of our body. The phenomenology of the body is a materialist animism.

'Life becomes ideas and ideas become life':<sup>52</sup> in this imagined ongoing exchange, *Zaza* becomes a thing, and eventually, in a sense, becomes flesh again, or at least is remembered in Merleau-Ponty's concept of flesh, which is neither flesh nor a thing

<sup>51</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'Exploring the World of Perception: Sensory Objects'; my translation.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.



but a little of both. Flesh, we'll remember, is the intimate, ever-present, and penetrating otherness of the world. It's an otherness that crosses into me and myself into it. Its *modus operandi* is the mutual encroachment of sensory systems, including—strangely enough, but this where our philosopher takes us—the sensory systems of objects we classify as inert, without senses at all. A *materialist animism*: people and things once held, once touched, are encoded in our senses. They survive somewhere deep inside every touch, in every stroke of the breeze on our skin.

This idea of an ongoing, kinaesthetic dialogue between bodies and world suggests, once again, that within sensory life there is a substrate of permanent ambivalence or non-identity—between self and other, depth and surface, visibility and invisibility, materiality and immateriality, life and death, people and things. This substrate is muted most of the time, non-identity being a difficult realization to endure moment to moment. But the muted version is sufficient for the message, which overturns normative perception and centuries of rationalist faith by whispering, our relation to things is not a distant one. It's a riff on the whisper that Beauvoir heard in her account of visiting the Louvre in the spring of 1929 and seeing in the paintings by Cézanne '*a descent of the spirit to the heart of the senses*'.

#### FURTHER READING

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- De Beauvoir, Simone, *The Inseparables*, trans. Lauren Elkin (London: Vintage Classics, 2021).
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, 'Cézanne's Doubt', in *Sense and Nonsense*, trans. Hubert L. Dreyfus and Patricia Allen Dreyfus (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 9–25.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, 'The Intertwining – The Chiasm', in *The Visible and the Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 130–55.
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# PARTIAL SIGHT, DEPENDENCY, AND OPEN POETIC FORM

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## A Creative Practice

NUALA WATT

From the perspective of a practising poet who is also partially sighted, I aim in this chapter to characterize the poetics of partial sight, a poetics that is expressed on the page as an open rather than a closed form.<sup>1</sup> My discussion treats partial sight not primarily as a physiological fact but, rather, as an iteration of the limitations that are inherent to ‘normal’ human vision. I draw inspiration from the Homeric epics, which acknowledge these limits and show the dependency they bring, whether on the Muse as a repository of sight beyond human capacity or on other factors external to the poet’s conscious self but nonetheless central to poetic composition. The persistent trope of the blind poet, who loses his sight but gains creative vision, highlights links between partial sight and the partial apprehension that both poets and the reader experience as they engage with an emerging poem. The poetics of partial sight foregrounds the partial nature of human perception in a mysterious world and how poetic production necessitates dependency on factors beyond the self for success. Critically and creatively, the chapter charts an evolving awareness of the importance of the orientation towards the world that partial sight allows as a central factor not just in a poetics of disability but in all poetic composition.

In order to characterize the poetics of partial sight, I first place these poetics within theoretical frameworks of identity poetics, disability, and form, and then enact them in four sample poems that I composed. The poems showcase my developing awareness of how partial sight affects poetic form, showing a movement from closed to open form. I then ask whether this movement is sustainable and consider

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Jeffrey Robinson, Hannah Piercy, and the editors of this volume for their helpful comments on a previous version of this chapter.

whether partial sight can be understood as a creative principle productive for the writing of lyric poetry.

My practice begins as a desire to challenge those poetic representations of blindness that cast it less as a valuable creative perspective than as a symbol of anxiety about dependency and consequent lack of agency. In my initial assessment of the relationship between the disability of partial sight and poetic production, I asserted the selfhood of figures with visual impairment as part of a disability-based identity poetics. Such an idea encourages the use of relatively closed forms that stress a speaker's personal vision and identity. However, as my own practice of disability poetics developed, I took more account of the power dynamics that underpin poetic form itself. I shall show that an overly closed-form approach can undermine the aim of producing a poetry dynamically engaged with partial sightedness by replicating poetic practices that have facilitated the use of blindness in poetry as an edifying and consoling spectacle for sighted readers. Such formal choices can also create a sense of certainty that troubles an aesthetic of partial sight. The chapter argues that to confine discussions of partial sight to identity poetics radically restricts our understanding of the poetics of partial sight, dependency, and open forms, leaving these poetics insufficiently imagined.

The sample poems move from demonstrating partial sight as a source of identity to using the combination of partial sight and dependency as a generative principle of poetic exploration. The four poems express this principle through the use of increasingly troubled syntax, variable lineation, and deformation by erasure of pre-existing texts on blindness. Jerome McGann and Lisa Samuels's 1999 essay 'Deformance and Interpretation' provides a model for deformation and demonstrates the ways in which deformation can yield hermeneutic insight into the original.<sup>2</sup> My chapter then proposes that partial sight and dependency are experiences shared by, and relevant to, all writers and readers of poetry. Poetic principles that might apply literally to physiologically partially sighted people belong to a continuum that might include all poets who situate themselves on the threshold between the familiar and the unfamiliar, the known and the unknown, the seen and the unseen. It returns to an earlier understanding of these factors, which sees them not as sources of social anxiety but, rather, as creative catalysts that open the way to new poetic possibilities. In so doing, it aims to challenge understandings not only of poetics but also of the meaning of disability. The final section considers how sustainable such a move to open-form poetics is and whether it can be incorporated into a lyric poetry of disability. A lyric poetry of the disabled self can be seen to be indispensable, given the persistent misrepresentation of disabled people in literature. The self is not only an abstract idea—it is a way of thinking about lived experience.

<sup>2</sup> Jerome McGann and Lisa Samuels, 'Deformance and Interpretation', in Jerome McGann, *Radiant Technology: Literature after the World Wide Web* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), 104–35.

## Partial Sight

Although I see partial sight primarily as a creative perspective, rather than a physiological fact, let me begin with a definition and characterization of partial sight. Sight is measured with reference to two factors. The first is visual acuity or central vision, used to perform tasks such as reading a book. Visual acuity is measured using a Snellen chart. This is a series of rows of letters that gradually decrease in size. After a test of visual acuity, one is given a score depending on how far down the chart one can read.<sup>3</sup> The score consists of two numbers written like this: 6/36. The first number refers to the patient's distance in metres from the chart. The second number refers to how far away a person with standard vision could read the same line. The bigger the second number is, the worse your visual acuity. Severe sight impairment or blindness is reached at 6/60, that is, the subject can read at 6 metres what someone with standard vision could read standing 60 metres away. As the measurement of visual acuity is based upon a ratio, this suggests that sight may always be partial.

The other factor is the visual field. To measure the visual field means to assess the extent of peripheral vision. For example, to have no lower visual field means that you cannot see the ground without lowering your head to look at it. To be registered partially sighted in the United Kingdom, you must have one of the following:

- Very poor visual acuity (up to 6/60), but a full field of vision.
- Moderate visual acuity (up to 6/24), but a reduced field of vision or blurred/cloudy central vision.
- Relatively good visual acuity (up to 6/18), but a very small field of vision.
- A combination of reduced visual acuity (up to 6/60) and some visual field loss.<sup>4</sup>

As these criteria suggest, 'partial sight' is an inexact term. It means that the subject has less sight than somebody with standard vision, but that statement can encompass a broad range of conditions and experiences. There is a large spectrum stretching between standard vision and blindness. Further, it is possible to be legally blind without necessarily being completely blind. Stephen Kuusisto, the poet and memoirist, who is legally blind, describes his vision as follows:

my vision loss is a form of 'legal blindness' – a confusing phrase that means that I can see fractionally, though not enough to truly see. Not enough to drive or operate machinery or read an ordinary book.

So I am blind in a bittersweet way: I see like a person who looks through a kaleidoscope; my impressions of the world are at once beautiful and largely useless.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> RNIB, 'The Criteria for Classification', *Royal National Institute of Blind People* (2021), <http://www.rnib.org.uk/eye-health/registering-your-sight-loss>.

<sup>4</sup> See further RNIB, 'The Criteria for Classification'.

<sup>5</sup> Stephen Kuusisto, *Planet of the Blind: A Memoir* (London: Faber & Faber, 2012), 13.

This passage describing the vision of a legally blind person suggests the porousness and interdependency of the terms ‘sight’ and ‘blindness’. Sight is present in blindness and blindness in sight. The quotation also suggests the centrality of vision to our society—many everyday activities require it and ‘sight’ or ‘blindness’ is measured in relation to one’s ability to perform these tasks without adaptations, as a fully sighted person would. This implies the value placed on independent autonomous action, and the ways in which sight loss complicates this ideal. Sight loss often leads to forms of dependency, whether on fully sighted others or on assistive technology, which ranges from Braille readers and white canes to reading glasses. Total blindness, involving no light perception at all, is relatively rare and affects only 3 per cent of those with visual impairments.<sup>6</sup>

People with standard vision often find the concept of ‘partial sight’ confusing. This is because the large middle of the visual spectrum rarely appears in culture. Sight/blindness is one of the binaries used in Western thought to structure understandings of the body. This leaves very little conceptual space for those who can see, but in an atypical, limited way: the legally (but not necessarily completely) blind, or even those who say they ‘cannot see without their glasses’—what does that mean? One of my aims in my poetry is to trouble this dichotomy, which distorts and oversimplifies many experiences of visual impairment. In my experience, sight and blindness are simultaneous rather than opposite states. Furthermore, one’s social status as ‘blind’ or ‘sighted’ can fluctuate, depending on a variety of factors. These include the visual status of those around you, whether or not you have disclosed your impairment, and whether or not you use assistive technology that has come to symbolize sight impairment, such as a long cane. Thus, my term ‘partial sight’ is intended to destabilize the sight/blindness binary; later in this chapter I will propose that destabilizing the concept of partial sight can have a formal equivalent in the poetry of partial sight. Such poetry is not simply mimetic of the experience but, in keeping with impulses in avant-garde poetry in general, is exploratory and expansive, and takes us into new poetic territories.

### Why Is Homer Blind?

There is a long tradition of associating poetry with blindness. Homer, the supposed author of the earliest Western poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, is traditionally understood to have been blind, but there is no external evidence for this status; indeed, the idea that Homer was blind seems to emerge from the poet himself, who presents a revered poet as blind. In Book VIII of the *Odyssey*, Alcinous, King of the Phaeacians, calls for Demodokos, a blind bard, to be brought in to entertain the company.

<sup>6</sup> RNIB, ‘The Criteria for Classification.’

κηρυξ̄ δ̄ εγγυθεν ηλθεν αγων εριηρον αιιδον  
τον περι μουσ̄ εφιλησε, διδου δ̄ αγαθον τε κακον τε  
οφθαλμων μεν αμερσε, διδου δ̄ ηδειαν αιιδην

(Then the herald approached leading the good minstrel, whom the Muse loved above all other men, and gave him both good and evil; of his sight she deprived him, but gave him the gift of sweet song.)<sup>7</sup>

The idea of the blind poet who is compensated for his sight loss by unusual poetic talent and vision is at least as old as this Homeric epic, and probably older. In this passage, the power of singing songs is presented as compensation for sight loss. The image of such a talented figure presents a challenge to the visually impaired poet, whose poetic perception may not be as strong as Demodokos; in another sense, it is a useful model for those wishing to construct a poetics of partial sight because it shows how a disability can become an asset. The blind poet is given special status because this figure appears within the traditional starting point of Western literature. More importantly, the persistent association between sight loss and poetry suggests that features of sight loss may be connected somehow with poetic creativity.

One of these features may be an increased reliance on sound. Partial sight and blindness render the visual world difficult to interpret. The process of listening therefore becomes more important. Hearing can create an identifiable meaning that sight may not provide. This is true on a practical level—bleeping traffic lights tell you it is safe to cross roads whether or not you can see the green man. My memory appears to be triggered largely by sound—I have always found it easy to learn linguistic structures by rote, whether those structures are declensions or poems. This reliance on aurality also creates an aesthetic attraction to structured sound, and hence to poetry, which is the artistic arrangement of linguistic sound. Thus, partial sight can foster a strong attraction to sound, which over time can become an attraction to the complex sound structures of poetry.

One can argue that partial sight—or at least partial perception—is an intrinsic part of most if not all poetic composition. The poet tentatively exploring the shape of a poem, especially in its early drafts, resembles the partially sighted person tentatively interpreting a mysterious visual world. It is rare, at least in my experience, for a poem to appear fully formed in the author's consciousness. More often the poet has a hazy idea of the poem—a few half-heard phrases, perhaps, with a lot of gaps in between. Constructing—or listening for—a poem is a slow, provisional process of apprehension, rather like interpreting the world through partial sight. The poem, at least for me, only emerges during the slow and bitty process of drafting. This process can take a long time and involve many decisions, some of which contradict each other. Even poems written as closed texts—that is, with a definite

<sup>7</sup> Homer, *Odyssey: Books 1–12*, ed. and trans. A. T. Murray, rev. George E. Dimock, 2nd edn (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), VIII. 62–4 (trans. 277).

authorial agenda in mind that all the poem's features corroborate, and which are deliberately designed to provide closure for author and reader—can take a long time to reach a tentatively 'finished' (i.e. publishable) state and may never be conclusively finished. A published poem may look complete, but the process of composition frequently involves not being able to see the poem in its entirety. In this sense, constructing a poem resembles interpreting the world through partial sight; the world and the text remain open forms in which meaning is provisional. We may think of Homer's blindness that represents the limits of human knowledge in terms of the open form of composition, writing, as Keats said, with 'half-knowledge'.<sup>8</sup>

## Two Views of Dependency

To be dependent means to be reliant on someone or something else for a form of support, whether financial, emotional, practical, biochemical, or semantic. There are many forms of dependency, and we all experience this state during our lives, most obviously in childhood or old age. Nonetheless, the high value that contemporary Western society places on individual autonomy means that dependency is often presented in a negative light. Independence is seen as a sign of moral worth, whereas dependency is associated with helplessness, lack of autonomy, and even laziness. The current UK government is exploiting this negative view by claiming that its campaign to shrink the welfare state will 'reduce dependency on social security'.<sup>9</sup> The implication is that those who find it difficult to work and consequently need help with living costs are morally deficient and simply need to be motivated to work and live independently.

Rhetoric such as this has a negative effect upon the lives of real people, undermining the experiences of people with impairments whose reliance on welfare is necessitated by medical factors that they cannot control. The political association of 'dependency' with a lack of moral integrity indicates that a dependent position, such as is often imposed by partial sight, can be deeply uncomfortable and fraught with social anxiety. It can also create acute socio-economic problems, as described in a United Nations report on extreme poverty in the United Kingdom, drawing attention to the intersections between dependency and poverty, neither of which can be solved by placing the burden of resolution (or motivation) upon the individual.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup> John Keats to George and Tom Keats, 21, 27(?) December 1817, *John Keats: Selected Letters*, ed. Robert Gittings (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 42.

<sup>9</sup> Tony Wilson and Sarah Foster, 'The local impacts of welfare reform: A review of the impacts of welfare changes on people, communities and services', *Learning and Work Institute* (2017), <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/local-impacts-welfare-reform-0>, 10.

<sup>10</sup> Human Rights Council, 'Visit to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland: Report of the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights', *United Nations* (2019), <https://undocs.org/A/HRC/41/39/Add.1>, 16–17.

## Poetry and Dependency: The Muse and Homer's Blind Poet Demodokos

One would expect this negative attitude towards dependency in Western culture to be replicated in that culture's poetry. But, as we have seen, in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* dependency appears as a necessary and positive creative force that facilitates the poet's expanded vision. The author(s) of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* begin(s) by acknowledging the limits of mortal perception. In both poems the speaker foregrounds his dependency on the Muse. He asks her to tell the story of the poem. Although Homer is traditionally credited with these poems, neither foregrounds a personal vision. In the opening line of the *Iliad*, *μῆνιν ἄειδε, θεὰ, Πηληϊάδεω Ἀχιλῆος*, the first verb is an imperative, asking the Muse to 'sing'.<sup>11</sup> There is no mention of the poet. The first four words of the *Odyssey* are *ἄνδρα μοι ἔννεπε, Μοῦσα*, 'Tell me, Muse, of the man'.<sup>12</sup> After that request for the Muse—not the poet—to '[t]ell me' (that is, the poet) the story, there are no more direct references to 'me'. After all, this is the story of Odysseus rather than of the poet, and the opening lines are a summary of his travels. The Greek is even more focused on Odysseus—it begins with *ἄνδρα*, 'man', and squeezes 'me' in, before turning to the Muse and her story. Both epics turn away from the poetic speaker towards events and persons in the world. The poem is a space for listening, not necessarily seeing.

The presence of the Muse in the poem is the poet's acknowledgement of the limits of mortal perception. Without divine help, the poet cannot gain access to all of the knowledge needed for the poem. The status of a poet as always already dependent is suggested by the physiological blindness attributed to the poet in classical figures such as Demodokos and is even further reinforced by the repeated representation of the epic poet as dependent on the Muse. This dependency facilitates expanded vision—with help, the poem can be composed. In the terms of the Homeric epic that expanded vision includes, for example, the portrayal of divinities and their world and the portrayal of the world of nature and peacetime as concentrated in the epic simile.

From the position of contemporary open-form poetics, we might gloss 'the Muse' as those elements of a poem that are 'open' to or outside the author's direct, conscious control. As a poet composing a poem, I often find that there are surprising features, lines, phrases, juxtapositions that I did not imagine before the writing process began. These are often the most interesting elements of the poem. I enjoy reading poetry in traditional forms and have often tried to reproduce these forms. However, when writing a poem with a fixed rhyme scheme or metrical plan, it is possible for the poet to expend so much conscious energy on creating a 'correct'

<sup>11</sup> Homer, *Iliad: Books 1–12*, ed. and trans. A. T. Murray, rev. William F. Wyatt, 2nd edn (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), I. 1 (trans. 13).

<sup>12</sup> Homer, *Odyssey: Books 1–12*, I. 1 (trans. 13).



formal structure that the less conscious, more open and serendipitous elements of the poem are lost. In the past, I often attempted to force a poem into a form rather than letting the form emerge from the poem. I do not wish to suggest that traditional forms always foster such poetic breakdowns or that using non-metrical forms automatically produces a good poem, but breakdown is more likely in a situation where the poet strives to keep total control of the poem. Such difficulties occur because the author thinks of the text as a closed system, all of whose elements can be controlled. The failure that ensues when one attempts to control a poem by confining it within a set structure can highlight the limitations of conscious planning as a means of composition.

By contrast, dependency on 'the Muse', or, in modern terms, openness to the unexpected or unconscious features of poetic composition, may create a text that has value as a linguistic and phonic exploration rather than as a transparent expression of the poet's conscious mind. In this poetic model, the poet's personal vision is secondary to the total vision of the open poem, a dynamic creative process that can create new linguistic patterns and consequently expand our ideas of language, meaning, and the world. Engaging with linguistic and phonic factors outside the self is the only way to access open poetic composition. Dependency on the Muse, or the unconscious features of poetic composition, is therefore essential.

Furthermore, the poet composing any poem, whether open or closed, is dependent on several factors. These include the otherness of language, the otherness of the unconscious, the limits that the body imposes on perception, and events in the outside world. Although mainstream contemporary poetry tends not to embody its dependence on linguistic factors outside the poet's conscious control as the Muse, that dependence in my argument remains central to poetic composition.

This reliance on outside factors mirrors the experience not just of partial sight but also of any type of disability. Since the social and physical environment is often not designed for those living with non-standard bodies, asking for help is a routine feature of life with impairments. The high value that contemporary Western society places on autonomy can make this a difficult process. Homer's acknowledgement of the poet's condition of dependency shapes my initial reaction to his description of Demodokos. The passage describes the herald fetching a chair for the singer, bringing him food and wine, and showing him how to place his hands on the lyre. Clearly Demodokos is dependent on the nameless herald. My initial response to this passage, even as a disabled person who is routinely dependent on others, was anger and puzzlement as to why Demodokos, who apparently has no impairment affecting the use of his limbs, cannot fetch the lyre himself. My reaction is indicative of the importance placed upon independence in contemporary Western society. Even as someone who is often dependent, I have learned to value autonomy and devalue reliance on others. The value that our society places on individual autonomy is one reason why disability, which brings with it dependence on others, is a source of social anxiety.

The significance of Demodokos' reliance on the herald is not immediately clear. It may be a sign of his status in a society built on slavery. It may be an expression of the host-guest relationship that was an important means of social cohesion in Archaic Greece, and that is a prevalent motif in the *Odyssey*. Demodokos' song is a token of the hospitality that King Alcinous extends to Odysseus, his unexpected guest. Demodokos is also a guest of the king, and as such is entitled to food, wine, and any help he requires. In a sense Alcinous and Demodokos are mutually dependent—both must play their respective roles of host and guest. Additionally, the poet's explicit reliance on the herald could indicate an alternative moral code in which dependency is an accepted part of life. Or, further, it may signal the very poetics of dependency that I am discussing. Demodokos' dependence on the herald prefigures his dependence on the Muse. On a cosmic level it suggests the author's positive dependency on language as a creative force that is outside his complete conscious control. This passage has the potential to completely dislodge later negative portrayals of dependency in Western culture by situating dependency at the traditional starting point of that culture. The passage embodies an opposite view of dependency that can lead us to reconsider how we value reliance on factors outside the self: the epic poet's partial sight is not a personal physiological deficit, but a reflection of the limits of all human creative vision. By reimagining dependency, these lines formed in an archaic dialect of a long-dead language help us re-evaluate what disability means and who is included in its discourse. In a sense, without the openness to poetic serendipity that Homer calls the Muse, all poets are disabled, only able to get so far in linguistic experimentation.

Poets can be incapacitated by their inability to express fully a poem that they can only partially perceive. There is almost always a gap between the poem as imagined and the poem as enacted. Only by recognizing their fundamental dependency on language, which the Homeric epics personify as the Muse, can poets hope to fully express a poem. This necessary dependency mirrors the experience of disability, in which dependence on factors external to the self is essential in order to live a full life.

How does the Homeric view of dependency apply to contemporary poetics? A contemporary poet is unlikely to invoke directly the Muses of Greek mythology. But if we think of the Muse in abstract rather than figurative terms, this idea becomes relevant to our modern context. The Muse can be said to embody openness to the unconscious and/or unexpected elements of poetic composition, openness to the independent subjectivities in the world of which the poet speaks, and to those features of the poem that evolve during the writing process and which may create a text that diverges from or outstrips the poet's original conception. Here, the lines between the experiences of partial sight and of writing an open-form poem blur. Mystery, though hopefully not mystification, is a central factor in both contexts. Both experiences require one to embrace a degree of uncertainty. But equally, both situations offer acceptance of mystery and reliance on factors external to the

self as a route to expanded vision. Just as partial sight produces non-standard and surprising perceptions of the visual world, every poet is reliant on language as a volatile medium that can produce unexpected and original patterns of sound and meaning. Openness to the unpredictability of vision and of poems casts dependency, whether on language or on other people, as a necessary part of poetic composition and of life. It also challenges the high value our society places on autonomy and consequently on personal vision. As will become apparent in the remainder of this chapter, it is sometimes difficult, in post-Romantic Western poetry, to distinguish the poet's personal vision or eye from their ego or 'me'. By contrast, I explore a poetic model that values reliance on language over the poet's personal vision; that is open to the power of language to carry the poem in unexpected directions and so expand limited human vision. Language-oriented poetics challenges more mainstream poetic models, in which the author aims for a 'closed text' that will convey their individual vision.

### **Creative Practice: Four Poems**

In the following pages, I will consider four of my poems in order to demonstrate a movement from closed to open form, from psychomimesis to cosmomimesis: 'On Her Partial Blindness', 'The Eye Chart', 'The Relief of Demodokos', and a deformation of 'Blind' by Edwin Morgan. Over the course of these poems and my analysis of them, partial sight becomes less an identity than a generative principle. The concluding section proposes the incorporation of this generative principle into a lyric poetry of disability.

As I said at the beginning of this chapter, my practice as a poet began as a form of identity poetics, which has been defined by James Overboe as 'the validation of one's identity and politics'. Overboe critiques the reliance of identity poetics upon 'the self-reflexive individual', suggesting that the field of disability studies ought to move beyond the celebration of the individual to embrace 'the vitalism of an impersonal life'.<sup>13</sup> Taking up Overboe's challenge, my creative practice as discussed and developed in this chapter moves from an acutely personal assertiveness rooted in identity poetics to a more impersonal aesthetic. I then consider the limits of that aesthetic and ask whether these two approaches can be combined. I further question whether this joint approach might be a useful practice to counteract the problems of misrepresentation that disabled people face, such as the binary representation of sight or blindness, as well as negative views of dependency. My early practice grew out of a conviction that the perspectives of partially sighted people had been insufficiently imagined in literature, as well as underexplored in literary criticism.

<sup>13</sup> James Overboe, 'Affirming an Impersonal Life: A Different Register for Disability Poetics', *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* 3, no. 3 (2009), 241–56 (241).

The introduction to a recent anthology of poetry by disabled writers makes this point in practical terms: ‘There seemed to be a conspicuous absence [of poets with disabilities] in the contemporary UK poetry landscape (and in wider literary discourse). And it wasn’t as if D/deaf and disabled poets weren’t out there; they simply weren’t being thought of, included, invited or considered.’<sup>14</sup> In addition to receiving little attention, disabled poets must navigate the often negative cultural tropes assigned to their conditions. Blindness is often used as a totalizing metaphor for incapacity.<sup>15</sup> Partial sight has limited relevance in this narrative, in which sight/blindness acts as a dichotomy. Visually impaired figures in literature often struggle with a perceived lack of autonomy, as in Milton’s sonnet ‘On His Blindness’, where the speaker considers his talent of writing to be ‘[l]odg’d with me useless’, as I shall explore further below.<sup>16</sup> Alternatively, visually impaired figures can provide a moral epiphany for an abled lyric speaker, as in Edwin Morgan’s poem ‘Blind’, where a visually impaired singer allows us to ‘see such fortitude, / Though she cannot’—to which I will return at the end of this chapter.

The first poem that I will discuss, ‘On Her Partial Blindness’—my response to Milton’s sonnet ‘On His Blindness’—challenges the sight/blindness dichotomy. Here are both poems:

‘On His Blindness’

When I consider how my light is spent  
 E’re half my days in this dark world and wide  
 And that one Talent which is death to hide,  
 Lodg’d with me useless, though my Soul more bent  
 To serve therewith my Maker, and present  
 My true account, least he returning chide,  
 Doth God exact day labour, light deny’d  
 I fondly ask; But patience to prevent  
 That murmur, soon replies, God doth not need  
 Either man’s work or his own gifts, who best  
 Bear his milde yoaik, they serve him best, his State  
 Is Kingly. Thousands at his bidding speed  
 And post o’re Land and Ocean without rest:  
 They also serve who only stand and waite.<sup>17</sup>

‘On Her Partial Blindness’

When I consider how to represent  
 my sixth of working light, my words collide  
 with your fear of dark. Your visions hide

<sup>14</sup> Jane Commene, ‘Introduction’, in Sandra Alland, Khairani Barokka, and Daniel Sluman, eds, *Stairs and Whispers: D/deaf and Disabled Poets Write Back* (Rugby: Nine Arches Press, 2017), 14–18 (14).

<sup>15</sup> Nuala Watt, ‘Partial Sight, Dependency and Open Poetic Form’, PhD Thesis, University of Glasgow, 2015.

<sup>16</sup> John Milton, ‘Sonnet XVI’, in *The Complete Works of John Milton: Volume III. The Shorter Poems*, ed. Ara Kiefer Lewalski and Estelle Haan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 245 (l. 4).

<sup>17</sup> Milton, ‘Sonnet XVI’.

the blindness born with me. You mourned sight sent  
before you into death. Let me invent  
a new account – half- light to place beside  
your grief, the beauty of blind life denied.  
I'd rather exploration than lament  
sight as lost paradise. So my poems need  
to make a sense I'm neither banned nor blessed  
but breathing here. I want to have my state  
revealed so thousands at my bidding read  
as I eat, sleep, kiss, swear, get children dressed.  
I feel and write. I do not stand and wait.

The second poem is a transformation of the first. I would not say that it is a 'deformation' as it remains within the formal parameters set by its source text. It relies on Milton's text for its meaning and also for formal elements. Both are Petrarchan sonnets. 'On Her Partial Blindness' keeps the end rhymes but alters the words, so as to challenge the meaning of the original. Whereas Milton's lyric speaker struggles with his perceived lack of autonomy before being counselled to accept it, the lyric speaker in 'On Her Partial Blindness' considers the difficulty of navigating previous portrayals of blindness, especially Milton's, before asserting the validity of her own perspective. Both poems centre on a clearly defined self. Whilst Milton's speaker asserts his helplessness, the existence of the poem undercuts this narrative. The profusion of first-person verbs in the sestet of 'On Her Partial Blindness' is a declaration of autonomy. To some extent the creative process follows Hélène Cixous's dictum in 'The Laugh of the Medusa' that 'Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement'.<sup>18</sup> However, while the content presents a different view of visual impairment, the use of the sonnet form asserts a mastery of received forms and a right to exist in traditional poetic canons. While the lyric speaker in my poem has a different perspective, the parameters of the closed text, in which a poetic speaker creates a coherent vision, are left undisturbed. To see why this may be a problem we can look at Rae Armantrout's description of the 'closed text' in 'Feminist Poetics and the Meaning of Clarity'. It is '[a] univocal, more or less plain-spoken, short narrative, often culminating in a sort of epiphany. Such a form must convey an impression of closure and wholeness no matter what it says.'<sup>19</sup> The question arises—is it satisfying for a partially sighted speaker to use poetic models that suggest coherent vision?

The next poem I discuss is my 'The Eye Chart'. Here I abandon canonical poetic form and replace it with an imitation of form from a non-poetic domain, one specifically designed to measure sight.

<sup>18</sup> Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', trans. Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs* 1, no. 4 (1976), 875–93 (875).

<sup>19</sup> Rae Armantrout, 'Feminist Poetics and the Meaning of Clarity', in *Collected Prose* (San Diego: Singing Horse Press, 2007), 38–48 (39).

# T HE EYE CHART

I scowl towards his voice. He says the map  
marks how far vision goes. If I could creep  
up close I'd learn the journey. His technique  
restricts me to a chair so he can track  
how far I travel down the chart alone  
before I pause. I grope in the third line—  
my limit the next shape I recognize —  
then stop. No way. I still believe my eyes  
can hold a solar system, catch all lights,  
deliver to the doctor alphabets  
as small as atoms. But this world is smudge.  
I'm huddled at the bottom of the page,  
trying to hide my dark. Wherever I am,  
I've bypassed every symbol I can name  
and stumble at my vision's borders  
where letters are illegible as stars.



Odysseus' unexpected arrival. This poem continues a movement away from psychomimesis—the representation of a conscious self—towards cosmomimesis—the representation of the world external to the self.<sup>20</sup> While there is a first-person speaker—'I pester for a voice'—their efforts to find the bard's subjectivity are of limited relevance. The first words are a compound, 'eye-silence', placed in the midst of white space. This poem makes an effort to represent the gradual apprehension typical both of partial sight and of poetic composition, through the use of white space, 'shatt/ered' sentences/clauses, variable lineation, and some long lines, especially the final line. Greek words—translated as 'the slave' and 'the Muse'—defamiliarize the text for most anglophone readers. Both represent means by which Demodokos can access poetry. As he moves across the hall assisted by the slave, he is 'like a song-formed beast', shedding selfhood under the influence of a poem. Though the first-person speaker tries to establish Demodokos' subjectivity, they speak only twice in short sentences that are overwhelmed by the poem's movement towards cosmomimesis. The poem features fragments of story from the *Odyssey*, such as the sirens' island. When Demodokos does act it is to 'borrow the hands of the slave. / Lowering yourself to the floor for the length of the saga.' The poem ends with the poet's self-abnegation in favour of 'the saga', for which he is a vector.

The final poem I discuss is a deformation of Edwin Morgan's poem 'Blind' from his 2002 collection *Cathures*. My deformation erases all the formal and syntactic structures that support and ratify the canon of traditional poetry, which reflect traditional binary thinking about blindness and the way that a sighted person can moralize and aestheticize the experience of the partially sighted. Here is the original poem, together with my deformation:

'Deformation' (Edwin Morgan)

Blind

Almost unconscionably sweet  
 Is that voice in the city street.  
 Her fingers skim the leaves of braille.  
 She sings as if she could not fail  
 To activate each sullen mind  
 And make the country of the blind  
 Unroll among the traffic fumes  
 With its white stick and lonely rooms.  
 Even if she had had no words,  
     Unsentimental as a bird's  
 Her song would rise in spirals through  
 The dust and gloom to make it true

<sup>20</sup> Allen Grossman with Mark Halliday, *The Sighted Singer: Two Works On Poetry for Writers and Readers* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 346.



That when we see such fortitude,  
 Though she cannot, the day is good.<sup>21</sup>

‘The Blind Poem’

A con.  
 is that city.  
 Leaves  
 as if she could  
 teach tactile  
 And of the fumes  
 can lonely.  
 No  
 sentient words,  
 Same old spirals  
 loom. Stand it.  
 We  
 cannot. The day is.

The original poem is a short lyric in rhyming iambic tetrameter couplets. A sighted speaker draws inspiration from a blind woman singing. The poem features images and tropes associated with blindness including the ‘white stick’ and ‘the country of the blind’. The poem is firmly rooted in a tradition where disabled figures provide an epiphany for an abled speaker and/or readers.<sup>22</sup> ‘We see’ the woman’s ‘fortitude’. The caesura in the final line, marked by a comma, contrasts the woman’s inability to see with the uplifting effect that the sight of her has on the sighted audience. To counteract this narrative, I used the technique of deformation as described in McGann and Samuels’s essay ‘Deformance and Interpretation’. The authors ask, ‘how do we release or expose the poem’s possibilities of meaning?’<sup>23</sup> Deformation aims to expose alternative meanings in a text by altering its layout and content.

My deformation of Morgan dispenses with the songlike rhythm of the iambic tetrameter couplets, which convey a sense of certainty. One example is the rhyme of ‘fortitude’ and ‘good’. Rather than creating an edifying spectacle for readers, it encourages them to construct a more open text with multiple possible meanings. This is epitomized by the extensive use of white space, short sentences, jagged enjambment, and disruptive syntax. The text is intended to mirror the process by which a partially sighted person may construe their environment. It draws on the idea of partial sight as a creative principle.

In spite of this, I wished to suggest a reading through my choices of what words to use, which to create, and which to discard. From ‘Almost unconscionably sweet’

<sup>21</sup> Edwin Morgan, ‘Blind’, in *Cathures* (Manchester: Carcanet, 2002), 52.

<sup>22</sup> Sandra Alland, ‘Nothing About Us Without Us, No One Left Behind’, in Alland, Barokka, and Sluman, *Stairs and Whispers*, 28–35 (30–1).

<sup>23</sup> McGann and Samuels, ‘Deformance and Interpretation’, 108.

(a description of the woman's singing voice) I constructed 'A con. / is that city'. I wanted to question the idea of 'the country of the blind', which Morgan evokes. Further, I wished 'no / sentient words' to suggest that some portrayals of blindness in literature have distorted the experiences of people with visual impairments. In contrast to Morgan's poem, where 'we' are a sighted audience seeing the singer, I see 'we' in the deformation as partially sighted people objecting to such portrayals. 'The day is' removes the word 'good', suggesting that the day is a day like any other and the value judgment by Morgan's speaker is a projection. Thus, even in an ostensibly more open text, decisions have been made to suggest particular readings. There are some closed elements even here, though I am not sure how evident they would be to a reader other than me. The deformation is a different version of the transformative process employed in 'On Her Partial Blindness', though it takes more account of partial sight as a formal principle.

### Coda: Partial Retraction

Since I began working on this topic, the United Nations has published a report on 'grave or systematic violations of the rights of persons with disabilities' by the UK government.<sup>24</sup> In this context I feel it is valid to reconsider and qualify the arguments above. This chapter moves from a psychomimetic identity poetics that arguably undercuts a poetics of partial sight through its assertion of a coherent vision and use of relatively closed form to a more open-form approach that decentres the self in favour of the volatility of language. Arguably the latter approach makes better use of partial sight as a generative principle in poetry. But here are some caveats.

First, is it really possible to write an open-form poem? The decision to do so is made by a self, even if it is a self who chooses not to centre their own perspective. This decentring can be done through disrupted lineation, automatic writing, unusual syntax, and other defamiliarizing elements. Whatever techniques are used to move beyond the conscious self, this movement can be only partially successful. This is not to deny the value of aiming for cosmomimesis, but to highlight the limitations of this approach.

Secondly, I believe that identity poetics is an important part of disabled people's movement towards equality. If we consider poetry as a vast conversation that reflects and influences society, the presence of disabled lyric speakers is essential. Their relative absence has facilitated facile portrayals such as that in 'Blind'—portrayals that have a negative effect on real partially sighted people. The lives of

<sup>24</sup> Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 'Inquiry concerning the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland carried out by the Committee under article 6 of the Optional Protocol to the Convention', *United Nations* (2016), <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/1310721?ln=en>, 20.

disabled people have been insufficiently imagined in literature. So long as this imaginative failure continues, the profound inequalities that disabled people face will go unchallenged and perhaps even unnoticed by the majority of the population. Writing in *Stairs and Whispers: D/Deaf and Disabled Writers Write Back*, Jane Commane of Nine Arches Press declares:

What was clear from the outset was that the editors were determined that this would be an anthology by and for D/deaf and disabled poets, which centred their voices . . . . This is especially vital in our contemporary situation where we are witnessing the systematic dehumanisation of disabled people by the state in the UK and beyond.<sup>25</sup>

One could argue that a desire to move beyond the self in poetry is partially based on an assumption that the self is of limited relevance and may even be a hindrance in accessing new patterns of thought and language. I would suggest that, for many disabled people, that assumption is a luxury we do not have. The self is inescapably relevant to the literature of groups whose selfhood is distorted and devalued by the societal structures that shape their lives. If this results in a psychomimetic poetry that is nearer to the closed end of the closed/open scale, is that necessarily a problem?

It may be that the approach used in 'On Her Partial Blindness' is valid as part of a varied disability poetics. This poem adds the voice of a congenitally disabled woman to the conversation that is lyric poetry. The use of the same sonnet form as the source text asserts the equality of such marginalized voices. I can perform with fluency in traditional forms. I can use this form to subvert earlier portrayals of blindness. But as we have seen, there are more formally sensitive ways to construct a poetics of partial sight. These ways rely more on the volatility and serendipity of language than on the subjectivity of a lyric speaker. They treat partial sight as a creative principle rather than a physiological deficit and thus move it away from identity poetics. Keats described this type of partial sight:

& at once it struck me what quality went to form a man of Achievement, especially in Literature & which Shakespeare possessed so enormously – I mean *Negative Capability*, that is, when Man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after facts or reason – Coleridge for instance would let go by a fine isolated verisimilitude caught from the Penetralium of mystery, from being incapable of remaining content with half-knowledge.<sup>26</sup>

Is it possible to combine this 'half-knowledge', which functions within all poetic composition, with a lyric subjectivity informed by disability? I think that it is important to highlight the relevance of partial sight to all poetic composition, but it is also important to craft a formally satisfying disability poetics that challenges the misrepresentation of visually impaired people's lives in literature and shows partial sight as a feature of complex experience worthy of poetic exploration.

<sup>25</sup> Commane, 'Introduction', 14–15.

<sup>26</sup> John Keats to George and Tom Keats, 21, 27(?) December 1817, *John Keats: Selected Letters*, 41–2.

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II

HEARING



## ‘A LOWDE VOYS CLEPYNG’

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### Voice-Hearing, Revelation, and Imagination

CORINNE SAUNDERS

Lying in bed, Margery Kempe hears ‘wyth hir bodily eryl a lowde voys clepyng’ [with her bodily ears a loud voice calling].<sup>1</sup> When she wakes, God speaks to her directly, ‘Dowtyr [daughter]’ (4386). The immediacy and intimacy of the divine voice shape the dramatic quality of *The Book of Margery Kempe*, as they do the *Revelations of Divine Love* of Julian of Norwich. The experience of hearing the voice of God has long roots, reaching back into the Old Testament. It finds parallels in classical narratives of encounters with the gods, while its darker side is seen in accounts of demonic intrusion and possession. Voice-hearing, positive and negative, arising from within and beyond the psyche, plays a unique and powerful role in the medieval thought-world, opening onto psychological, emotional, and spiritual aspects of being, and comprising both subject and imaginative mode.

In contemporary popular imagination voice-hearing is most often seen as symptomatic of psychosis, and in particular of schizophrenia; it is often associated with personality disorder and violent behaviour. The common medical term, ‘auditory verbal hallucinations’, is suggestive, implying that voice-hearing experiences mark pathological conditions requiring medical intervention; their content and emotional impact are rarely explored. Recent studies, however, indicate that between 5 and 15 per cent of the ‘healthy’ population have at some stage of their lives heard voices, and that, while often distressing, such experiences may be benign or

<sup>1</sup> *The Book of Margery Kempe*, ed. Barry Windeatt (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004), l. 4381. All references to the *Book* are to this edition, cited by line number. Kempe was born c.1373; the *Book* is dated c.1436–8. The unique manuscript, a copy written by a Norfolk scribe named ‘Salthows’, dates to c.1450.



positive.<sup>2</sup> Particularly common is the experience of hearing the voices of loved ones after death, while more positive perspectives are also found in contemporary accounts of evangelical Christian religious experience.<sup>3</sup> Non-Western religions are more receptive than secular Western society to manifestations of the spirit world: Islam and various African and Asian traditions include belief in spirits, demons, and possession.<sup>4</sup> The limitations of an exclusively medical approach have been highlighted by activist groups such as the international Hearing Voices Movement, while the major collaborative project ‘Hearing the Voice’, funded by the Wellcome Trust and based at Durham University, adopted the interdisciplinary approach of the medical humanities to engage with the range and complexity of experience, including by taking a long cultural perspective.<sup>5</sup>

The past offers new models and frameworks for thinking, contextualizing, and challenging deeply held cultural assumptions about hearing voices and extending conclusions drawn by contemporary biomedical researchers. The premodern, pre-Cartesian thought-world is of particular interest because it both foregrounds the connections between mind, body, and emotion and assumes the possibilities of supernatural and spiritual experience. Medicine, natural philosophy, and theology intersect to produce sophisticated models for understanding which weave together physiological, psychological, and spiritual ideas. Voice-hearing plays crucial roles in both secular and religious writing: it is repeatedly transformative and revelatory, working in and on the mind. In the three Middle English romances discussed here, *Sir Isumbras*, *Amis and Amiloun*, and *Sir Orfeo*, though in very different ways, voice-hearing functions as a catalyst for the protagonist’s penitential quest. Chaucer takes up the theme of transformation of the self in his psychologically complex and medically alert narratives, which depict voice-hearing as one element of the image-making that characterizes the workings of the individual psyche. For mystical writers too such multisensory image-making is crucial: voice-hearing is an integral

<sup>2</sup> Charles Fernyhough, *The Voices Within: The History and Science of How We Talk to Ourselves* (London: Profile Books and Wellcome Collection, 2017), 130. See also Simon McCarthy-Jones, *Hearing Voices: The Histories, Causes and Meanings of Auditory Verbal Hallucinations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 170–88.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, T. M. Luhrmann, *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God* (New York: Vintage Books/Random House, 2012), and Christopher C. H. Cook, *Hearing Voices, Demonic and Divine: Scientific and Theological Perspectives* (London: Routledge, 2019) and *Christians Hearing Voices: Affirming Experience and Finding Meaning* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> See Cook, *Hearing Voices*, 24–5 and 32.

<sup>5</sup> See *Hearing the Voice*, <http://hearingthevoice.org/>. Research for this chapter is funded by the *Hearing the Voice* project (2012–21, Wellcome Strategic Award WT098455 and Wellcome Collaborative Award WT108720) and a Wellcome Development Award to Durham University’s Institute for Medical Humanities (209513/Z/17/Z). Further on interdisciplinary approaches, see Angela Woods, Nev Jones, Marco Bernini, et al., ‘Interdisciplinary Approaches to the Phenomenology of Auditory Verbal Hallucinations’, *Schizophrenia Bulletin* 40 (2014), suppl. 4, S246–54.

and often the primary aspect of revelation, as the works of Julian of Norwich and Margery Kempe exemplify in different ways. Both secular and religious writers display complex techniques in rendering voice-hearing experience, and often reflect sophisticated intellectual engagement with psychological and sensory issues. In romance, voices are manifest in dreams and visitations, often connected with moments of extreme feeling; in mystical writing those moments are experienced as vision, but also as conversations with the divine. Across genres, voice-hearing raises questions concerning the shaping and interrelations of sense perceptions and the relationship between exterior and interior, self and other, in particular the otherness of the supernatural and the traumatic experience occasioned by it.

### Medieval Models: Hearing, Sensing, and Image-Making

Medieval secular and religious writing depends on ideas that are rooted in classical thought but also shaped by a Christian worldview.<sup>6</sup> The *De anima* and *De sensu* of Aristotle (384–322 BCE), both translated into Latin (c.1260–80), laid the foundations for understandings of the senses, including hearing—understandings that were closely connected to ideas of thought and imagination. While Aristotle identified the heart as the centre and origin of the senses, as well as of cognitive faculties and memory, he understood individual senses to be situated in different places. Aristotle’s model of sound and hearing was upheld across the Middle Ages: sound is struck air; voice is ‘the sound produced by a creature possessing a soul’ and requires respiration; hearing occurs when the air inside the ear is moved.<sup>7</sup> Aural perceptions, like other sensory perceptions, were imprinted on the relevant sense organ, the ear.<sup>8</sup>

Alexandrian medicine, developed by Galen (129–c.216 CE), retained much of Aristotle’s understanding of the senses but placed the brain as the site of cognition and sensory perception. Hearing was one aspect of an integrated model of the senses, whose workings were occasioned by the movements of the bodily spirits,

<sup>6</sup> On medieval models of mind, body, and affect, see also my essays ‘Voices and Visions: Mind, Body and Affect in Medieval Writing’, in Anne Whitehead and Angela Woods, eds, *The Edinburgh Companion to the Critical Medical Humanities* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 411–27 (412–14); ‘Mind, Breath, and Voice in Chaucer’s Romance Writing’, in Stephanie M. Hilger, ed., *New Directions in Literature and Medicine Studies* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 119–41 (121–6); and ‘Thinking Fantasies: Visions and Voices in Medieval English Secular Writing’, in Hilary Powell and Corinne Saunders, eds, *Visions and Voice-Hearing in Medieval and Early Modern Contexts* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 91–116 (92–5). I am grateful to the editors for permission to draw on this work.

<sup>7</sup> Aristotle, *On the Soul, Parva Naturalia, On Breath*, trans. W. S. Hett (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1957), II.viii, 419b; and see Thomas Kjeller Johansen, *The Powers of Aristotle’s Soul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 167.

<sup>8</sup> Gad Freudenthal, *Aristotle’s Theory of Material Substance: Heat and Pneuma, Form and Soul* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 55.

the instruments of the soul.<sup>9</sup> According to the influential model elaborated by the tenth-century Persian philosopher-physician Avicenna (Ibn Sina), the life force or *pneuma* was modified in the heart into the vital spirit or drive, which in turn enabled in the liver the natural spirit and in the brain the animal spirit.<sup>10</sup> From the vital spirits arose the emotions; from the animal spirits the senses and ‘common sense’, imagination, cognition, memory, and understanding. Avicenna develops this theory in his influential treatise on the rational soul, *De anima*, translated into Latin in the twelfth century. He identifies five cells or ventricles of the brain, each connected with a particular faculty. Sense perceptions are envisaged as carried from sense organs via sensory nerves to the brain: thus, nerves from the ears carry sound perceptions.<sup>11</sup> They are processed with other sense perceptions by the faculty of *sensus communis*, inner senses, situated at the front of the brain with that of *imaginatio*, a temporary memory. Multisensory perceptions then passed to the two middle cells, the faculties of *imaginativa*, which combined forms in creative ways, and *estimativa*, which made cognitive assessments; and finally to the cell *memorialis*, the storehouse of *imagines* or memory-pictures, at the back.<sup>12</sup> These thought-images, then, carried with them not only visual but aural and other sensory qualities.

Early twelfth-century Latin translations of Arabic and Greek medical texts, originating from the schools of Salerno and Toledo, disseminated Galenic and Arabic physiology to the Christian West, and provided the basis of Western medical theory.<sup>13</sup> By the later fourteenth century, such psychological and physiological theory was widely disseminated, rendered accessible through encyclopaedic works such as Bartholomaeus Anglicus’s *De proprietatibus rerum*, translated into English by John Trevisa. Trevisa makes the role of animal spirits explicit in his explanation of hearing:

Heringe is maad in þis manere. Tweye synewis comeþ out of þe innere partie of þe brayn and beþ istiked in þe gristilbon of þe eeres, by þe whiche sinewes þe spirit *animalis* is ibrou3t to þe forseid gristilbones, to þe whiche gristilbones þe vtir aiere is i-ioyned and some schap and liknes of soun. And aier þat is smiten smyteþ þis gristilbones. And þerinne buþ spiritis þat takeþ a liknes by þe propirtes of þe aier þat is

<sup>9</sup> See further Armelle Debru, ‘Physiology’, in R. J. Hankinson, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Galen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 263–82.

<sup>10</sup> See Avicenna, *The Canon of Medicine* (al-Qānūn fī’l-ṭibb), adapted by Laleh Bakhtiar from translations by O. Cameron Gruner and Mazar H. Shah, 5 vols (Chicago: Great Books of the Islamic World, 1999–2014), Fen [Part/Lecture] 1, Doctrina 7.1.489.

<sup>11</sup> Avicenna, *De anima* I.5, 42.1–3.

<sup>12</sup> Avicenna, *Avicenna’s Psychology*, trans. F. Rahman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), ch. 3, ‘Internal senses’, 31. See the summary in Jacqueline Tasioulas, ‘“Dying of Imagination” in the First Fragment of the *Canterbury Tales*’, *Medium Ævum* 82 (2013), 212–35 (216–17); and further Ruth Harvey, *The Inward Wits: Psychological Theory in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (London: Warburg Institute, University of London, 1975), 43–64.

<sup>13</sup> C. M. Woolgar, *The Senses in Late Medieval England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), offers an overview (18–19) and a more detailed consideration of sound and hearing in late medieval culture (63–83).

þerinne smytinge þe senewis. And so þe spirit takeþ a liknes and turneþ to his selle fantastik and presentib þat liknes to þe soule.<sup>14</sup>

[Hearing is made in this manner. Two sinews come out of the inner part of the brain and are stuck in the cartilage of the ears, by the which sinews the spirit *animalis* is brought to the foresaid cartilage, to the which cartilage the outer air is joined and some shape and likeness of sound. And air that is struck strikes these cartilages. And therein are spirits that take a form by the properties of the air that is therein smiting the sinews. And so the spirit takes a form and turns to the cell of the imagination and presents that form to the soul.]

Sounds will be put together with other sense impressions within the ‘*sensus comunis* þe comyn witte [common sense]’ (III.21, 121). The model draws directly on Aristotelian physiology (‘as Constantinus seiþ and Aristotiles’, III.18, 113).

The multisensory quality of thought-images was essential to ideas of voice-hearing and visionary experience. Avicenna envisages prophecy as a ‘natural phenomenon’ rooted in this multisensory quality: ‘In those very few individuals with the highest level of insight – which Avicenna identifies with prophets – their insight so abounds that it overflows and deluges their compositive imaginations in the form of visions and voices’; they perceive ‘the divine universal order.’<sup>15</sup> The creative capacity of the imagination allows voices to speak in dreams, thoughts, and imaginings. In a world that assumed the possibility of the supernatural, the idea of spiritual influences on the brain was also eminently credible. Thought-images or *phantasmata*, which might take the form of voices, could be produced by the imprint of the divine or demonic on the susceptible imagination, as well as through sensory processes or the workings of memory. Theologians from Augustine onwards discussed the ability of the devil to influence the psyche—though Gilbertus Anglicus and Bartholomaeus Anglicus also suggested that belief in demons might result from disturbances of the brain.<sup>16</sup> The model of the inner senses allowed for the concept of an inner ear as well as an inner eye, and thus provided a physiological framework for voice-hearing.

## Romance Voices

Medieval romance writing takes up the possibility of supernatural intervention to explore powerful exterior forces and their workings in and on the mind.<sup>17</sup> Such

<sup>14</sup> Bartholomaeus Anglicus, *De rerum proprietatibus* [1601] (Frankfurt: Minerva, 1964), III; *On the Properties of Things: John Trevisa’s Translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus, De Proprietatibus Rerum*, ed. M. C. Seymour et al., 3 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), vol. I, III.18, 113–14.

<sup>15</sup> Jon McGinnis, *Avicenna* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 147–8; see *Avicenna’s De Anima (Arabic Text): Being the Psychological Part of Kitāb al-Shifā’*, ed. Fazlur Rahman (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), ch. 6, 35–6.

<sup>16</sup> Simon Kemp, *Medieval Psychology* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), 98.

<sup>17</sup> On romance treatments of visions and voices, see further Saunders, ‘Thinking Fantasies’, 92–110.

experiences are often multisensory rather than limited to voice-hearing, involving some form of material or felt presence or entry into a three-dimensional dream world. While frequently connected with the divine, as they are for the eponymous heroes of two of the three works discussed here, *Sir Isumbras* and *Amis and Amiloun*, voice-hearing experiences are also troubling and disruptive, catalysing tests and dilemmas of seemingly impossible kinds. As a third work, *Sir Orfeo*, demonstrates in its depiction of the psychic invasion of Heurodis (Eurydice), such experiences can also derive from more sinister, demonic or otherworldly, supernatural forces. This romance models the ways that voice-hearing has the power to unbalance the mind—a pattern that resonates with current understandings of traumatic experience. Chaucer's romance narratives too emphasize the affective force of external forces on mind and body, while they also take up medieval psychological models to elaborate the interior processes of thought, where voice is repeatedly made explicit.

In the early fourteenth-century romance *Sir Isumbras*, an exterior voice heard by the protagonist is the catalyst for a narrative of loss, penance, and miracle.<sup>18</sup> *Isumbras* is characterized as possessing both wealth and knightly virtues, but also as being sinful: 'Into his herte a pryde was browghte / That of God yafe he ryghte nowghte' [Into his heart a pride was brought / so that he cared nothing for God].<sup>19</sup> The portrayal of pride as an external force entering the heart is indicative of this romance's focus on individual responses to exterior influences. *Isumbras*'s conversion is occasioned by 'a stevenne' [voice] sent by Jesus, who 'wolde no lengur abyde [endure]' his suffering (41–2). He hears 'a fowle [bird] syngre hym by' (47), which offers him the choice of suffering in youth or age, and stimulates his redemptive quest. 'Stevenne' may signify voice or sound generally, but may also be used in relation to birdsong, angelic voices, and voices of prayer or instruction, all connotations evoked here.<sup>20</sup> The voice incites sorrow, 'carefull herte and sykyngre [sighing] sore' (55), 'pleye' turned to 'peyne' (78), but the ensuing narrative focuses on steadfastness rather than self-pity, and the virtues identified in *Isumbras* at the start, pity and generosity, are now configured penitentially. His lands destroyed and children taken, *Isumbras* calls on the Lord '[w]ith so lowde a stevenn' (222), only to see his wife abducted by a heathen king, and his youngest son and remaining gold taken. Wholly unmade, he refashions his identity in battle against the Saracens and takes on a life as pilgrim. The 'stevenne' of the start is reworked in *Isumbras*'s fully multisensory vision on reaching Jerusalem, of 'an angell bryghte' (524) who brings him bread and wine, offering God's forgiveness and blessing. The context of 'abowte

<sup>18</sup> For a seminal study of penitential romance, see Andrea Hopkins, *The Sinful Knights: A Study of Middle English Penitential Romance* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990).

<sup>19</sup> *Sir Isumbras*, in *Six Middle English Romances*, ed. Maldwyn Mills (London: Dent, 1973), 125–47 (ll. 37–8). References are to this edition, cited by line number. The work exists in nine manuscripts, more than any other Middle English romance. It has no known source but is related to the legend of St Eustace.

<sup>20</sup> *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. *steven(e)* n.(1).

hygh mydnyghte' (523) seems to align the experience with that of a dream, yet this is a waking vision, manifest in physical miracle, its materiality balancing that of the bird. It is not coincidental that the denouement brings the miraculous into broad daylight, when, reunited with his queen, Isumbras takes on a great battle against the heathens and sees his lost children return to fight alongside him, brought back by the noble animals who have nurtured them. The Christ-sent 'stevenne' of the bird is rewritten in miracle, redemption, and conversion.

These patterns are repeated, but in more problematic ways, in the late thirteenth-century *Amis and Amiloun*. The dramatic movement of the narrative relies on voice-hearing and vision, both dreaming and waking. Friendship is tested to its limits when, after Amis's affair with the Duke's daughter has been discovered, Amiloun takes Amis's place in a trial by single combat, so that the battle is not founded on a false oath of innocence. Amiloun hears 'a voice fram heven adoun [down from heaven] / That no man herd bot he', warning him that he will become 'fouler mesel [leper]' than any other if he fights in place of Amis.<sup>21</sup> That the voice is heard only by Amiloun places it as occasioned through the workings of the inner senses, rather than as public miracle of the kind suggested by the bird's 'stevenne' in *Sir Isumbras*. Yet when, three years later, the 'wordes . . . so gret and grille [terrible]' (1274–5) are fulfilled, the voice is reimagined as having a physical manifestation: 'Also that angel hadde him told, / Fouler messel thar nas non hold [no one would be considered a fouler leper] / In world than was he' (1543–5). The voice of divine judgment is set against the promise to help the friend 'in wrong and right' (149).

Both voice-hearing and vision play a critical role in the denouement, in a startling reworking of the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac. For three nights while Amis 'in slepe [sleep] thought as he lay', an angel 'stode biforn his bed ful right', to reveal that the blood of his children will cure his friend (2187, 2189); Amiloun is similarly 'warned': 'Methought tonight in mi sweven [dream] / That an angel com [came] fram heven' (2210, 2227–8). The repetition of 'thought' suggests the intersection of interior and exterior in a mutual experience of voice-hearing, as if spiritual presences enter the imaginations of both Amis and Amiloun. Amis's dilemma is recounted in detail, his 'gret rewethe [pity]' (2276) for his children and Amiloun's horror set against Amis's awareness of his brother's sacrifice. The scene reverses that in which Amiloun chooses to ignore the divine voice to protect his friend. In following the divine voice, Amis will protect his friend but destroy that which he loves, his own flesh and blood. The narrative is resolved in miracle as the children are restored '[w]ithout wemme [blemish] and wound' (2407)—but it is the

<sup>21</sup> *Amis and Amiloun*, in *Of Love and Chivalry: An Anthology of Middle English Romance*, ed. Jennifer Fellows (London: J. M. Dent, 1993), 73–145 (ll. 1250–1, 1259). Subsequent references are to this edition, cited by line number. The story exists in numerous versions, including an eleventh-century Latin verse epistle and a *chanson de geste* of c. 1200. The Middle English expands a version of the Anglo-Norman *Amys e Amillyoun* (c. 1200) and exists in four manuscript versions.

affective play of divine voices on the psyches of the friends that animates the story's impossible dilemmas.

Most complex is the eerie intrusion of the supernatural in the early fourteenth-century romance of *Sir Orfeo*, a reworking of the Orpheus and Eurydice story, where the otherworld of faery replaces the kingdom of the dead. Heurodis wakes from her sleep beneath an 'ympe-tree [grafted tree]' to recount a strange invasion of her psyche by the King of Faery, summoning her to and showing her his land.<sup>22</sup> The encounter is described as if occurring in waking reality, yet the narrative makes clear that it takes place in sleep. Heurodis participates in a multisensory vision in which she sees, hears, and rides with faery company. For a modern reader, the episode is resonant of inner voice-hearing that blurs into hallucinatory experience, suggesting full-blown psychosis of the kind connected with dissociative disorder. The violent 'raptus' of the psyche is reflected in Heurodis's response as she wakes in madness:

Ac* as sone as she gan awake,	*But	
She crid and lothly bere* gan make;	*noise	
She froted* hir honden* and hir feet	*rubbed	*hands
And crached* hir visage* – it bled wete.	*scratched	*face
Hir riche robe hie all to-rett*	*tore	
And was reveysed* out of hir wit. (53–8)	*driven	

The passage makes explicit the loss of the 'wits' or inner senses, and the disorder of the psyche is so great that Heurodis must be constrained in her bed. Yet the narrative moves away from this emphasis on voice-hearing as psychological disruption, to body forth voices as otherworldly forces and resist the idea of madness.<sup>23</sup> The invisible power of the otherworld is manifest to all as, despite the guard of a thousand armed knights, Heurodis is 'oway y-twight, / With fairy forth y-nome' [snatched away, taken by fairy forces, 168–9], and in the liminal space of the forest to which Orfeo flees in his grief, he catches sight of the shadowy faery hunt. Mysteriously, these figures seem also to be those frozen in the preternaturally bright otherworld, 'folk that were thider y-brought [had been brought there] / And thought dede and nare nought [were not]' (365–6), taken in violent death or, like Heurodis, as they slept at noontime, 'with fairy thider y-come' (380). The narrative thus returns to the possibility of psychic intervention that effects a state somewhere between death and life, lived out in another, parallel space, neither heaven nor hell. Ultimately, Heurodis's body is regained, remade through Orfeo's virtuous love and the marvellous voice of

<sup>22</sup> *Sir Orfeo*, in *Middle English Verse Romances*, ed. Donald B. Sands [1966] (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1986), 185–200 (l. 46). Subsequent references are to this edition, cited by line number. The work exists in three manuscripts, including the Auchinleck manuscript.

<sup>23</sup> A. C. Spearing offers a contrasting reading, in which he compares Heurodis's symptoms as manifesting the onset of schizophrenic experience, the quality of which is evoked by her presence in 'an alien realm that exists alongside the world of normality': see 'Sir Orfeo: Madness and Gender', in Ad Putter and Jane Gilbert, eds, *The Spirit of Medieval Popular Romance* (Harlow: Longman, 2000), 258–72 (261–2).

his harping with its authority over even the King of Faery. But it is the depiction of voice-hearing that becomes all-consuming vision, the uncanny disappearance of Heurodis, and the graphic depiction of the undead that we retain. This narrative speaks as much to fears of madness, possession, and sudden death as to the promise of grace and redemption. Here, as in *Sir Isumbras* and *Amis and Amiloun*, voice-hearing experience is the catalyst for a structure that parallels the penitential quest, and the encounter with the supernatural is central to the workings of grace, but this supernatural is profoundly menacing, its intrusive power reaching into and overturning the faculties of the mind.

These romance emphases on the workings of supernatural voices on the psyche are taken up and refracted in Chaucer's writings, while Chaucer also engages with physiological and psychological theory concerning the multisensory quality of thought images and their capacity to figure as inner voices. Voice becomes a creative mode, most obviously in the dramatic play of voices that shapes the *Canterbury Tales*, but also in the multivocality of the dream visions, and the intersections between the voices of the mind and the forces of destiny in *Troilus and Criseyde*. It is most often voice that characterizes supernatural intervention. Thus the *Physician's Tale*, for example, presents the possibility of demonic influence on the senses and imagination in terms that suggest speech. The fiend runs into Appius's 'herte' to urge him onto rape: 'And taughte hym sodeynly [suddenly] that he by slyghte [deceit] / The mayden to his purpos wynne myghte'.<sup>24</sup> The passage recalls discussion by theologians from Augustine onwards of the ability of the devil to enter the senses and imagination, influencing individual choices and acts.<sup>25</sup> While this intervention is private and interior, that of the *Man of Law's Tale* is public and exterior. On being required by the king to swear on a Bible, Custance's accuser is violently struck down and '[a] voys [voice] was herd in general audience' declaring Custance's innocence of murder (II.673). That the voice is heard by all marks its public status as 'miracle' (683). As with *Sir Isumbras* and *Amis and Amiloun*, the landscape of an active Christian supernatural brings the tale closer to hagiography, establishing the pattern of providential intervention and the testing of virtue.

Chaucer's earliest work, *The Book of the Duchess*, interweaves the theme of exterior influences on the mind with an emphasis on interior processes of thought in which voice plays a prominent part. The narrator's processes of thought are carefully depicted: 'sorwful ymagynacioun / Ys alway hooly in [his] mynde' [sorrowful imagining / is always wholly in his mind, 14–15]. Image-pictures held in the memory are repeatedly revisited, creating 'fantasies' in the head and causing melancholy. In the 'romaunce' (48) he takes up to counter insomnia, the voices of both humans

<sup>24</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), VI.130, 130–2. All subsequent references to Chaucer's writings are to this edition, cited by line number.

<sup>25</sup> See Simon Kemp, *Medieval Psychology* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), 98.



and gods are central: the narrator reads of Morpheus, summoned by Juno in response to Alcyone's prayer to inhabit her husband Ceyx's dead body and recount to her his drowning, urging her recovery from grief. The narrator's prayer to the god of sleep leads in turn to his own dream vision, which takes the form of a dialogue with the mysterious Man in Black. As well as being structured by the exchange of voices, the dream suggests the experience of voice-hearing. Like the narrator's, the Man in Black's grief at the loss of his beloved causes the disorder of his thought, dominating his imaginative processes. His extended complaint is balanced by his inner dialogue, the account of which is strikingly congruent with contemporary theories in cognitive psychology of the workings of inner speech:<sup>26</sup>

he spak noght,  
 But argued with his owne thoght,  
 And in hys wyt disputed faste  
 Why and how hys lyf myght laste;  
 Hym thoughte hys sorwes were so smerte\* \*painful  
 And lay so colde upon hys herte. (503–8)

Cognitive psychologists have suggested that disruption in the processes of inner speech may be key to voice-hearing, creating the effect of voices in the mind no longer within an individual's control. The Man in Black is depicted as experiencing vividly this kind of all-consuming inner dialogue and image-making: like the Dreamer at the start, he is lost in his 'sorwful ymagynacioun', absorbed by uncontrolled voices and visual images. As interior dialogue is replaced by the exterior dialogue with the Dreamer, the Man in Black's processes of imagination become ordered once again: he recreates through the images retrieved from memory a picture of Blanche, his lost duchess. The conscious process of multisensory image-making reanimates not only Blanche's form but also her voice within the imagination: 'I sawgh hyr daunce so comlily [gracefully], / Carole and synge so swetely, / Laughe and pleye so womanly' (848–50). The activity of recollection leads the Man in Black to articulate her death and in doing so to move beyond what might be seen as a traumatized, dissociative state of profound withdrawal, to contain the disruptive images and voices of grief.<sup>27</sup>

In *Troilus and Criseyde* Chaucer again engages with contemporary psychological theory to explore how sensory perception works on the brain to create thought-images stored in the memory and revisited in the imagination. After Criseyde's departure for the Greek camp, Troilus's 'remembraunce' is triggered when he rides

<sup>26</sup> See further the work of Charles Fernyhough, including 'The Dialogic Mind: A Dialogic Approach to the Higher Mental Functions', *New Ideas in Psychology* 14 (1996), 47–62, and 'Alien Voices and Inner Dialogue: Towards a Developmental Account of Auditory Verbal Hallucinations', *New Ideas in Psychology* 22 (2004), 49–68.

<sup>27</sup> Numerous critics have discussed the psychological growth of the Man in Black: see, for example, Judith Ferster's extended analysis, 'Discourse as Solution', *Chaucer on Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 75–93.

past the places associated with his love; while he remembers his first sight of her, his memories are particularly characterized by her voice: her laugh, her words, her 'vois melodious' (V.562, 577). He has the 'proces', the course of events, 'lik a storie' in his memory (V.583–5), and the thought-images that compose the narrative are not just visual but aural: he hears her singing, 'so cleere / That in my soule yet me thynketh ich here / The blisful sown [sound]' (V.578–80). He is wholly absorbed by the processes of memory, his 'herte thoughte' so constantly on Criseyde, 'so faste ymagenynge' (V.453–4) that he cannot be distracted. Rereading her letters, he 'refigur[es]' 'hire shap [shape], hire wommanhede, / Withinne his herte' (V.473–4). He sees in his mind's eye himself emaciated and pale and hears in his mind's ear the comments of onlookers, 'men seyden soft' (V.619), on his transformed, melancholy state. Memory works not only through visual images but also through sounds retrieved from its storehouse, recreated in the imagination, heard by the inner ear, in ways that can be intrusive and all-consuming, voices and visions bodied forth in the mind as a result of extreme feeling. The cognitive model, like that of the *Book of the Duchess*, chimes with twenty-first-century ideas of voice-hearing as originating in traumatic experience.<sup>28</sup> Across Chaucer's works, interior and exterior forces intersect to shape the multisensory image-making that is key to the workings of the mental faculties. Voices manifest in dreams and visitations are complicated by their psychological grounding, and the imagination is shown to have the potential to shape not only visual images but also voices of the mind.

### Visionary Voices

By its very nature, the writing of spiritual revelation engages more extensively with visionary experience in the broadest sense, including hearing voices, both divine and demonic. But here too sensory and cognitive processes and the imagination have critical parts to play. Placing secular and sacred works alongside each other demonstrates their participation in a thought-world that relies on the same physiological and psychological frameworks. This is exemplified by Chaucer's near contemporary Julian of Norwich and by Margery Kempe a generation later. Hearing voices is central to the lived experience of revelation, and defines the individual, affective relationship with the divine. In writing that experience, both Julian and Margery, like secular writers, probe the nature of interior and exterior sensory processes, the workings of imagination and memory, and the challenges of interpreting the voices they hear.

<sup>28</sup> See further Eleanor Longden, Anna Madill, and Mitch G. Waterman, 'Dissociation, Trauma, and the Role of Lived Experience: Toward a New Conceptualization of Voice Hearing', *Psychological Bulletin* 138 (2012), 28–76.

Julian of Norwich's *Revelations of Divine Love* recounts sixteen 'sheweings or revelations', experienced in her extreme illness in 1373 at the age of about 30.<sup>29</sup> The narrative reflects an intense engagement with the embodied nature of experience, the connections between senses, affect, and cognition, and distinctions between types of sensory perception. Some visions, such as that of the crucified Christ, are experienced through the 'bodily sight' (10, 45); others occur within the mind, as when Julian's 'understondyng' is 'led downe into the see-grounde [bottom of the sea]' to comprehend the reach of God's protection (10, 45). The *Revelations* also use the concept of the inner, spiritual senses, in particular the 'ghostly' or spiritual eye, as in Julian's vision of Mary, seen 'ghostly in bodily likeness' (4, 33). Different types of vision can combine: 'All this was shewid [showed] by thre partes: that is to sey [say], be bodily sight, and be word formyd in my understanding, and be gostly sight' (9, 44). Here sight begins to blur with hearing, 'be word'. Visions may be vividly multisensory, as in the sixteenth revelation, when Julian feels the devil taking her by the throat, waking to the stench of fire and brimstone. While for her the fire is 'bodily' (66, 137), those with her do not perceive it. The description suggests a model of the inner senses as activated by the supernatural to imprint the imagination.

Voice plays a central role in visionary experience. Julian's own voice, both immediate and reflective, is described in physical terms, '[a]nd I said, "Benedicite Domine!" This I said, for reverence in my meneing, with a mighty voice' (4, 33). Repeatedly, it is the divine voice speaking to Julian that provides comfort and meaning, and structures the narrative: 'Our Lord Jesus oftentymes seyde, "I it am, I it am. I it am that is heyst [highest]. I it am that thou lovist"'—words that Julian returns to across the book (26, 71; cf. 72, 147; 83, 161). The book circles around the interpretation of 'this blissid word . . . , "Lo, how I lovid the"' (24, 68). This 'swete word' is repeatedly the cue for visionary experience, as when Julian is shown Mary at the Passion (25, 69), while 'this nakid word "synne"' (27, 72) too prompts a central reflection of the book. The exchange is dynamic: the *Revelations* are also conversation, 'our good Lord answerid to al the question and doubts that I myte makyn [could make], sayeing ful comfortably' (31, 77; cf. 64, 132).<sup>30</sup> Julian is precise about sensory distinctions: in the first vision of the universe as 'a littil thing', she 'lokid thereupon with eye of [her] understondyng and thowte [thought], "What may this be?"' She does not see but hears the answer spoken, "[i]t is all that is made" (5, 35).

<sup>29</sup> Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, ed. Barry Windeatt (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), The Long Text, ch. 1, 1. All subsequent references to Julian's *Revelations* will be to this edition, the Longer Text (unless otherwise stated), cited by chapter and page number. Julian was born c.1342. The Shorter Text, perhaps written soon after 1373, survives in one manuscript; the Longer Text, written c.20 years later, in three post-Reformation manuscripts. For further reading, see Liz Herbert McAvoy, ed., *A Companion to Julian of Norwich* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008).

<sup>30</sup> On the homeliness and intimacy of divine speech in the *Revelations*, see Darragh Greene, 'Writing and Reading the Word: Patterns of Divine Speech in Julian of Norwich's *A Revelation of Love*', in Powell and Saunders, eds, *Visions and Voice-Hearing*, 175–98.

She conveys the impression of direct speech, ‘our good Lord seid’ (14, 52), and is explicit about hearing the Lord’s voice within her mind, ‘[t]han had I a profir [idea] in my reason, as it had be frendly seyde to me’ (19, 60), distinguishing such experience from her own thoughts. Distinctions are subtle. Revelation may also be comparable to hearing instructive words: ‘And al this shewid [showed] he ful blisfully, meneing [meaning] thus: “Se, I am God”’ (11, 48; cf. 82, 160). Voices can be heard in the soul rather than the mind, ‘[t]han he, without voice and openyng of lippis [lips], formys [forms] in my soule these wordes’ (13, 50). All these experiences figure in the modern phenomenology of voice-hearing, where voices can be interior or exterior, but can also occur as thought insertions or as aspects of felt presence.<sup>31</sup>

A crucial aspect of Julian’s journey of faith is the process of believing that the ‘sheweings’ are not madness. It is the Lord’s voice that offers the clearest confirmation, ‘seyand [saying] these wordes full mytyly [mightily] and full mekely [powerfully], “Witt [Know] it now wele [well], it was no raving that thou saw this day”’ (70, 144). Yet voice can be misleading: at the end of the Short Text, Julian compares rejection of what is false to recognizing and resisting ‘a wikkyd [wicked] spiritte that schewed hym [appeared] in liknes of a goode angelle’ (25, 23). Although the image is visual, it is the spirit’s voice that disturbs, ‘fyrst he travayles [afflicts] and tempestes [harasses] and trubles [troubles] the person that he spekes with’: this is an intrusive experience of voice-hearing. The difficulty of belief is evoked through the vision of two people chattering earnestly yet inaudibly (perhaps ‘a parody of properly devout recitation of prayer’, n. L.69/3, 273), intended ‘to stirre [her] to dispeir’ (69, 142). These descriptions resonate with contemporary accounts by voice-hearers of the often distressing and intrusive, sometimes plural experiences of auditory hallucinations, including of hearing a plethora of voices that may not be comprehensible.<sup>32</sup> For Julian, God’s power is also evident in this terrifying obscurity of the mind.

Hearing the voice of the Lord, as well as seeing, is essential to understanding, yet by its divine nature this voice is also ineffable: ‘The nombre [number] of the words passyth [exceeds] my witte and al my understondyng and al my mights. . . . And therefore the words be not declaryd here’ (26, 71). Only after twenty years does Julian comprehend the meaning of the visions enough to write the long text of the *Revelations*. Her book too, then, is one of imagination in its literal sense—image-making and sense-making, as she retrieves multisensory thought-images from the storehouse of memory, contemplates and interprets them, hearing and comprehending new insights. As she meditates on the showings, she hears the voice of God speaking the interpretation: ‘“It is sothe [truth] that synne is cause of all this peyne [pain], but al shal be wele, and al shal be

<sup>31</sup> On felt presence, see, for example, J. Allan Cheyne and Todd A. Girard, ‘The Nature and Varieties of Felt Presence Experiences: A Reply to Nielsen’, *Consciousness and Cognition* 16 (2007), 984–91.

<sup>32</sup> See further, for example, Marius Romme et al., eds, *Living with Voices: 50 Stories of Recovery* (Ross-on-Wye: PCCS, 2009).

wele, and all manner thing shal be wele” (27, 73). ‘Sheweings’ are also listenings and conversations. Through their imaginative force and through reflection and dialogue they open onto deep spiritual understanding: ‘And xv yer [years] after, and more, I was answerid in gostly understanding, seyand thus: . . . “Wete [Know] it wele: love was his mening”’ (86, 164).

The power of the inner eye and ear is also acutely evident in *The Book of Margery Kempe* (written c.1436–8), though this work writes mystical vision in less intellectual and more extreme terms. Current scholarship on Kempe is largely historicist, focused especially on her active role on the public stage.<sup>33</sup> Yet the *Book* is most of all an account of spiritual life, to which both voices and visions are essential. It steps in and out of the established tradition of female spiritual revelation, instancing a range of holy women. Though Kempe’s book differs dramatically from Julian’s more intellectual, reflective narrative, it too conveys the multisensory quality of vision, suggests the crucial role of voice in such experience, and differentiates between different kinds of voice-hearing. Again, cognitive processing and distinctions are crucial, as is the work of memory as the *Book* revisits Kempe’s experiences many years later.

Kempe’s first visionary experience recalls the ‘raptus’ of Heurodis in its extreme and invasive quality. Like Julian’s experience, it originates in illness, the madness following the birth of her first child (a state that might now be diagnosed as post-partum psychosis).<sup>34</sup> As demons clutch and shout threats at her, she is restored by the Lord, in the likeness of a ‘most bewtyvows [beauteous], and most amyable’ man, seated by her bedside and speaking directly to her: “Dowtyr, why hast thow forsakyn me, and I forsok nevr the?” (228, 232). The experience occurs in response to an extreme traumatic state, but also establishes the structural model of deeply personal, rational conversations with Christ alongside multisensory experiences of revelation. This multisensory quality is more prominent in Kempe’s *Book* than in the devotional works that inform it and finds a closer parallel in Julian’s *Revelations*. Seeing with the ‘gostli’ eye for Kempe means entering into a three-dimensional spiritual world, where she participates in central episodes related to Christ’s life. The *Book* depicts a range of sensory spiritual experiences. Sounds have powerful valences, from the melody ‘so swete that it passyd [surpassed] alle the melodye that evyr myght be herd in this world’, which moves her to high devotion (329–30), to the music ‘so hedows [hideous] . . . that sche mygth [could] not ber [bear] it’ (1242), and the ‘sowndys and melodiis’ [sounds and melodies] that overwhelm others’ voices (2868). Such experiences recall but also differ from Richard Rolle’s description

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, John H. Arnold and Katherine J. Lewis, eds, *A Companion to the Book of Margery Kempe* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2004).

<sup>34</sup> On Kempe’s illness, see Richard Lawes, ‘The Madness of Margery Kempe’, in Marion Glasscoe, ed., *The Medieval Mystical Tradition: England, Ireland, and Wales. Exeter Symposium VI: Papers Read at Charney Manor, July 1999* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1999), 147–67; on the limits of psychopathological diagnoses, see Alison Torn, ‘Madness and Mysticism: Can a Mediaeval Narrative Inform our Understanding of Psychosis?’, *History and Philosophy of Psychology* 13 (2011), 1–14.

of hearing a heavenly melody and his repeated use of such imagery to convey celestial joys.<sup>35</sup> Whereas Rolle hears music as his soul reaches in prayer to heaven and his meditation becomes a song, Kempe's experience is unsought and purely affective. By contrast to Rolle's 'vozem...interiorem',<sup>36</sup> a series of 'divers tokenys [tokens] in hir bodily heryng' signal to Kempe the presence of the Holy Ghost: the noise of bellows, the voice of a dove, the song of a robin, all followed by 'gret grace' (2965–72). Sounds are complemented by other kinds of sensory revelation, of the kind that evoked suspicion in contemplative writers such as Walter Hilton: 'gret comfortys' both 'gostly' and 'bodily'—sweet smells, sounds, and melodies, delicate and comforting white specks tokening angels (2863–89), the flame of love burning in Kempe's breast. In Kempe's *Book*, Julian's conception of full knowledge of the Lord, 'hym verily seand and fulsumly feland, hym gostly heryng, and hym delectably smellyng, and hym swetely swelowyng' [truly seeing him and abundantly feeling, spiritually hearing him, and delectably smelling him, and sweetly swallowing him; *Revelations*, 43, 98], is materially rendered, in ways that can also be intrusive, disjunctive, and disruptive. Such tokens are balanced by the invasive sounds that possess Kempe, the sobs, shrieks, and cries that colour her distinctive voice.

Yet, as in the *Revelations*, the voice of the Lord remains pre-eminent. Kempe, like Julian, is not unquestioning about the origins of the voice she hears, which she assesses in terms of its edifying affects: 'And sche stably [firmly] and stedfastly belevyd [believed] that it was God that spak [spoke] in hir sowle and non evyl spiryt, for in hys speche sche had most strength and most comfort and most encre-syng [increasing] of vertu, blissyd be God!' (7238–41). She seeks Julian's counsel in November 1413 on whether there is 'any deceyte' in the 'ful many holy spechys and dalyawns [conversations] that owyr Lord spak to hir sowle' and her 'many wondirful revelacyons' (1339–42). Such revelations are dangerous, Julian responds: they may reflect 'nowt the mevyng [moving] of a good spyryte, but rathar of an evyl spyrit' (1349–50) and must be judged by whether they move the soul to love, chastity, and compassion, advice recalling the conclusion of Julian's Short Text.

Kempe, Windeatt suggests, insists on 'valuing her voices in terms of their likeness to human speech'; such familiarity is an aspect of the 'homeliness' of her experience.<sup>37</sup> The *Book* also, however, develops distinctions between kinds of voice-hearing experience. The primary emphasis is on the 'wonderful spechys and dalyawns [conversations] which owr Lord spak and dalyid [communed] to hyr sowle' (52–3). Hearing the Lord's voice is both spontaneous and requires active

<sup>35</sup> Richard Rolle, *The 'Incendium Amoris' of Richard Rolle of Hampole*, ed. Margaret Deanesly (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1915), ch. 15, 189–90, and *The Fire of Love*, trans. Clifton Wolters (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), 93. References to *Incendium Amoris* are to chapters and page numbers of the text and translation.

<sup>36</sup> Rolle, *Incendium Amoris*, ch. 34, 243; *The Fire of Love*, 152.

<sup>37</sup> Barry Windeatt, 'Sounds Like God: The Elephant in *The Book of Margery Kempe*', in Powell and Saunders, eds, *Visions and Voice-Hearing*, 199–220 (212–13).

participation and examination. The soul must be receptive: it is ‘in silens’ (2922) and ‘in gret rest of sowle a gret whyle’ that she has ‘hy [high] contemplacyon day be day, and many holy spech and dalyawns [conversations] of owyr Lord Jhesu Cryst bothe afornoon and aftyrnoon’ (924–6). Kempe seems to probe the nature of her experience as well as its origins in describing to the English friar she meets at Assisi ‘how owyr [our] Lord dalyed [communed] to hir sowle in a maner of spekyng’ (2577–8), a comparison suggesting a soundless voice of the kind described by contemporary voice-hearers and depicted by Julian (*Revelations*, 13, 50). The *Book* clearly distinguishes between interior and exterior voices: lying in bed, Kempe hears ‘wyth hir bodily erys a lowde voys clepyng: “Margery”’; awakened by the voice, she hears God speaking directly to her, ‘Dowtyr’ (4381, 4386). Like Julian, she also hears negative voices: the devil ‘bad hir in hir mende’ [commanded her in her mind, 4869–70] to choose which man she will prostitute herself with, a description that suggests the experience of intrusive thoughts. Kempe’s prayer provokes the return of ‘hir good awngel [angel]’ (4887) and of the Lord’s voice.

While hearing the divine voice is typical of revelation, Kempe plays an unusually active, speaking role in her spiritual experiences, which are strikingly dialogic. As well as with the Lord, she recounts conversations with the Virgin, and other saints—Peter, Paul, Mary Magdalene, Katherine, Margaret (7245–7). The Lord’s voice also functions as a familiar aspect of Kempe’s mind, offering a dialogic commentary on her life, an experience of the kind described by some contemporary voice-hearers. He offers assurances of well-being, interpretative frames for events, and practical advice of all kinds. As Windeatt shows, this is also a demanding and critical voice, reminding Kempe of His will and dominance.<sup>38</sup> Despite Kempe’s emphasis on wonder, comfort, and bliss, this Lord requires extreme suffering and humiliation, and both threatens and exacts punishment. It is the more crucial, then, that Kempe continues to respond. The conversational mode present from the start becomes more prominent, in contrast to multisensory vision, later in the narrative.

Kempe’s voices too may be understood in terms of inner speech, the conversation with the self typical of individual reflection on inner experience and so acutely depicted in Chaucer’s *Book of the Duchess*. Fernyhough suggests that voice-hearing may result when condensed inner speech is temporarily re-expanded. In its condensed form, Kempe’s internal dialogue is a state of ‘being with’ God; in its expanded form, it becomes a conversation with God: God speaks as an interlocutor, and she speaks back.<sup>39</sup> The concept of inner dialogue offers a new perspective on the sensory, cognitive, and imaginative processes of prayer, and aligns with a model

<sup>38</sup> Windeatt, ‘Sounds Like God’, 199, 203.

<sup>39</sup> Charles Fernyhough, *The Voices Within*, and see Saunders and Fernyhough, ‘Reading Margery Kempe’s Inner Voices’, *postmedieval* 8, no. 2 (2017), 209–17.

according to which affective experience or meditation opens up the inner ear, allowing God to speak and Kempe to answer him. Yet ineffability also remains a central theme of the *Book*. Words are always at a remove from experience. Grace is 'so hevenly, so hy [high] aboven hyr reson and hyr bodyly wyttys . . . that sche myth nevyr expressyn it wyth her word lych [like] as sche felt it in hyr sowle' (62–4); her experiences are 'secretys of hir sowle' (1064). Like Julian's *Revelations*, Kempe's *Book* can only ever attempt to articulate and categorize the mental and bodily processes of spiritual experience. In doing so, it captures both the strangeness and the texture of revelation; it evokes and explores the lived experience of conversations with the divine, but also the anxieties and tensions, the uneasy, radical quality of those conversations.

Both Julian and Margery, then, engage with and extend the models of voice-hearing found within Middle English popular romance and deployed by Chaucer. All these writings take up and animate in different ways the concept of the inner senses, the multisensory quality of images, the possibility of the supernatural imprint on the imagination, the intersection of imagining and sense-making in cognition, and the crucial role of memory in constructing, reconstructing, and interpreting inner experience. Imaginative fiction provides powerful insights into the ways in which mental paradigms, concepts of thinking and feeling, could be creatively shaped to explore embodied being in the world. In popular romance, voices heard in dreams and visitations mark critical narrative moments, intruding into and shaping the thoughts and feelings of protagonists. Encounters with the supernatural can also be traumatic, generating profound affect, conversion, and conflict. Chaucer takes up and extends romance motifs through the use of precise physiological and psychological detail, exploring the processes of the imagination, the intersections of affect and cognition, and the shaping of these by the mysterious forces outside the self, but also by the disruptions of extreme feeling.

Whereas in romance narratives the play of interior and exterior forces is most acutely rendered in the landscape of dream, in mystical writing it finds its way into the waking world. Here, supernatural visitants, both angelic and demonic, recur, but also the individual imagination is led into visionary worlds, sometimes, again, through traumatic experience, but also through contemplation of the divine. And here the divine voice is heard most clearly, not only as a bodily voice calling, but as an inner voice, imparting the secrets of the soul. Revelation remains situated, however, in the processes of sensory experience, image-making, and recollection, the articulation of which is crucial to writing the inner life; listening to the divine voice is attending to both its quality and its meaning. In different ways, medieval writers think voices and visions, and it is in thinking them that their narratives come into being. Imagination and revelation interweave to shape these always compelling thought-worlds.



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# ATTENDING TO SOUND IN EARLY MODERN LITERATURE

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## Whythorne, Butler, and Bacon

SIMON JACKSON

In his phenomenological study *Listening* (2002, trans. 2007), Jean-Luc Nancy makes a distinction between the act of hearing as comprehension and what he describes as the more inquisitive act of attentive listening:

If ‘to hear’ is to understand the sense... to listen is to be straining toward a possible meaning, and consequently one that is not immediately accessible. When we listen to someone who is giving a speech we want to understand, or else we listen to what can arise from silence.... To be listening is always to be on the edge of meaning.<sup>1</sup>

For Nancy, our relationship to the world through our sense of sound is bound up in intimate and complex ways with ideas of understanding. Where hearing suggests for Nancy an assumed grasp of the matter in hand (‘Yes, I hear you’), to listen attentively adopts a more searching and curious stance, reaching out towards that which is ‘not immediately accessible’, poised on what Nancy calls ‘the edge of meaning’. In Nancy’s terms, attentive acts of listening carry with them a sense of examining the hidden and (as yet, perhaps) only partially understood.

Nancy’s study of the nature of attentive listening in this way associates the sense of sound (and the ‘sense’ we derive from sound) with the complex negotiations that take place between a subject and their surrounding environment, discovering in sonic experience a kind of sounding out of knowledge of the world around us. Though the historical practice of ‘sounding out’ unseen depths with a plumb line is etymologically distinct from the resonant sonority of *sonus*, the homophonic slippage between the two concepts reverberates with sound’s potential to reveal that

<sup>1</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 6–7.

which is hidden from sight, made manifest in our modern understanding of the ways in which bats navigate using echolocation as they fly in the dark and our modern techniques of ultrasound.<sup>2</sup> Such soundings test the waters, and help to provide some coordinates for understanding the ways in which modern conceptions of attentive listening comprehend the relationship between subjects and their environments.

The nature of that encounter with the world through sound confounds any simple conception of the relationship between subject and object. For Stephen Handel, this can be understood as a clear distinction between the senses of sound and sight: 'Listening is centripetal; it pulls you into the world. Looking is centrifugal; it separates you from the world.' The stark binarism of Handel's formulation, which struggles to recognize the more subtle interactions and intermediations between the senses that characterize sensory experience, nevertheless captures something of the complex negotiations between sound, the self, and its environment, and articulates something of the way in which different forms of sensory experience offer alternative modes of perceiving the world. Bruce Smith develops these ideas further:

Visualised objects stay 'out there'; heard sounds penetrate the body of the listener. They are out there and in here at the same time. This experience suggests that, from the listener's standpoint, there are two quite distinct ways of attending to sound: one that focuses on the *thereness* of sound, on the sound-producer; and one that focuses on the *hereness* of sound, on the physiological and psychological effects of sound on the listener. Both dimensions are present all the time, and we can readily shift focus from one to the other.<sup>3</sup>

Through sound's ability to penetrate boundaries, and through the directed attention of a porous and open listener who may direct their attention at any given moment outwards or inwards, paying heed to the nature of sonic experience radically reconstitutes our sense of listening subjects and their relationship to their acoustic environments.

Like Smith, whose observations on the nature of sensory experience are directed towards the development of what he calls a 'historical phenomenology' of early modern literature and a 'cultural poetics of listening' that takes into account the 'subjective experience of sound', this chapter contends that these ideas about sonic experience are by no means uniquely modern perspectives. In their distinctive ways, each of the three writers considered here—Thomas Whythorne, Charles Butler, and Francis Bacon—are fascinated by the ways in which the mediations of sonic experience challenge any notion of a simple conception of the listening

<sup>2</sup> *OED*, Sound v.1 ['To make or emit a sound'] comes from a Latin root, *sonus*; whereas v.2 ['To sink in, penetrate, pierce' and 'To employ the line and lead...in order to ascertain the depth of the sea'] appears to descend from the Scandinavian root '*sund*', an inlet or strait of water.

<sup>3</sup> Bruce R. Smith, *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England: Attending to the O-Factor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 7.

subject and its relationship to the environment that subject inhabits. These writers are intrigued by the notion of attentive listening as, in Nancy's terms, a 'straining toward a possible meaning, and consequently one that is not immediately accessible'. In these texts, these early modern writers turn their attention to sound as a way of thinking about what it means to be situated on what Nancy calls the 'edge of meaning'. In the various attempts by each of these early modern writers to transcribe or to describe on the literary page the distinctive forms of knowing derived from sonic experience, their texts explore the more contingent, situated forms of 'meaning' that result from acts of attentive listening.

For the musician and autobiographer Thomas Whythorne, the literary page is conceived and imagined in profoundly sonic terms, as the attempt to write his life and to reveal something of his private interiority turns into a kind of sounding of the self. For this purpose he devised a new orthography, a kind of phonetic spelling system intended to reflect more closely the sounds of speech. Whythorne's 'book of songs and sonetts', an autobiographical account of his life structured around the lyrics he wrote and sometimes set to music, thus combines an attempt to reach beyond that which is most immediately accessible, to 'lay open vnto yow the most part of all my pryvatt affayres, and secrets accomplyshed' with a literary medium that attempts to 'wryte [words] as wee do speak them'.<sup>4</sup> And yet, as we will see, as if to demonstrate the fundamental difficulties of saying anything concrete and fixed about and in sonic terms, he struggled even when confronted with the question of pronouncing his own name, leaving the question unresolved, hanging in the air, as if his own identity resists any attempt to move from sonic contingency to a fixed concrete resolution.

Where Whythorne's sonically inflected text turns inwards to an examination of the self, another musician interested in systematizing English orthographic conventions turned his attention instead outwards to the sounds of his environment. Like Whythorne, the music theorist and beekeeper Charles Butler attempted to systematize English orthography, motivated by a similar desire for a more direct connection between the textual signs of language and the sounds of speech. Yet for Butler the challenge of recording sound as text on the silent page exceeded questions about human speech. Butler turned his attention to the sounds of nature, attempting to transcribe and interpret the sounds made by his bees piping in his 'bee madrigal' *Melissomelos*. The result is an extraordinary work combining attentive acts of listening to nature with musical transcription, all further interpreted in words and music composed by Butler; it proposes, through attention to sonic phenomena, a framework

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Whythorne, *The Autobiography of Thomas Whythorne*, ed. James M. Osborn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), 3, 6. In transcribing from Osborn's original spelling edition, I have reproduced the 'pricks' under Whythorne's vowels (to indicate length) with underlining where they appear. Whythorne's text begins, notably, with more conventional orthographic conventions: only when he has explained the new system in the opening pages does he transition to his idiosyncratic phonetic spelling.

for interpreting and understanding the relationship between the listening human subject and the natural world.

Butler leads us beyond questions of orthography and transcribing sounds on the page to think about what it means to pay attention to the phenomenon of sound more generally. In the work of Francis Bacon, we find a complement to Butler's attentive acts of listening to nature. Through empirical investigation, Bacon attempted to understand the nature of sensory experience itself, including the nature of acoustics and sound production, and the records of his empirical experiments were posthumously published in *Sylva sylvarum* (1627). Bacon's empirical listening experiments would also be echoed in his utopian fiction *New Atlantis* (also published posthumously, appended to *Sylva sylvarum*). There, among the many technological achievements of his utopian Bensalem, we read of the 'sound-houses' in which the Bensalemite scientists carry out their own experiments with acoustic phenomena and achieve their own sonic miracles, imaginatively pushing at the boundary between the fact of experimental record and the speculative world of fiction. Bacon's 'sound-houses' are conceived on the sonic 'edge of meaning', poised here at a boundary between literary and empirical speculation. In thinking about the nature of sound in this way, Bacon's writings think about the sense of hearing as a way of negotiating, mediating, and at times destabilizing our sense of the interface between the self and the environment in which that self is situated and of which it is a part.

### **Sounding the Self: Thomas Whythorne's 'New Orthographe'**

'Hearing can register interiority without violating it,' writes Walter Ong; 'I can rap a box to find out whether it is empty or full or a wall to find out whether it is hollow or solid inside. Or I can ring a coin to learn whether it is silver or lead.'<sup>5</sup> And just as the sonic seems able to reveal the secret interiority of exterior objects to us, it also seems to be able to reveal something of our own interiority as subjects. For Jean-Luc Nancy, the listening subject is marked by its extraordinary openness:

To listen is to enter that spatiality by which, *at the same time*, I am penetrated, for it opens up in me as well as around me, and from me as well as toward me: it opens me inside as well as outside, and it is through such double, quadruple, or sextuple opening that a 'self' can take place.<sup>6</sup>

The notion of 'personhood' itself reverberates with this sonic potential: as Don Ihde has noted, the term develops from the *persona*, the masks of classical theatre; but it

<sup>5</sup> Walter Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, rev. edn (London: Routledge, 2002), 69–70.

<sup>6</sup> Nancy, *Listening*, 6.

also resonates punningly with the sounding of ‘*per-sona*’, personhood constituted ‘through sound’.<sup>7</sup>

In these terms, it is revealing to pay attention to the conjunction of sound and self in the autobiographical writings of the Elizabethan composer Thomas Whythorne. ‘I haue byn changed from tyme to tyme, by tyme,’ he writes in the introduction to one of the earliest sustained examples of autobiography in English: as he attempts to narrate his life on the written page, to describe this shifting sense of selfhood, one of the most distinctive features of Whythorne’s manuscript is the way in which it reaches for a literary mode that confronts the interface of the aural and the textual. As he declares on its title page, Whythorne’s manuscript not only records his ‘songs and sonetts’ and tells his life’s story, it also attempts to systematize and improve English spelling:

A book of songs and sonetts  
with longe discourses sett with  
them, of the chylds lyfe, togyther  
with A yoong mans lyfe, and  
entring into the old mans lyfe.  
devysed and written with  
A new Orthografye  
by Thomas Whythorne, gent.<sup>8</sup>

Early in the text, Whythorne describes the principles behind his ‘new Orthografye’. Appropriately, considering his career as a musician, it is *sound* in particular that prompts his orthographic innovation.

The foundational principle of Whythorne’s ‘new Orthografye’ is to bring sound and spelling together: ‘I will wryte wurdz as they be sownded in speech.’<sup>9</sup> In making such an attempt, Whythorne is by no means alone, nor the first: indeed, he cites as one of his models John Hart’s *An Orthographie* (London, 1596), which likewise argued that the reform of writing needed, in particular, to pay better attention to the sounds of words: more conventional spelling systems were ‘vnfit and wrong shapen for the proportion of the voice’, writes Hart.<sup>10</sup> Distinguishing his system from Hart’s, however, Whythorne explains that while Hart ‘doth invent new letters of carectz of his own devyse, and leaveth owt certayn letters which have byn auintiently vsed and may be well vsed still (as I do think) I do not, nor wilnot follow his order in that sort.’<sup>11</sup> Whythorne’s system supplements the conventional graphemes of the Roman alphabet with a couple of archaic letters—the yogh for the soft ‘g’, and the thorn for voiced ‘th’—and he also marks long vowels with a ‘prick’ beneath the letter.

<sup>7</sup> Don Ihde, *Listening and Voice: Phenomenologies of Sound*, 2nd edn (New York: State University of New York Press, 2007), 14.

<sup>8</sup> Whythorne, *Autobiography*, 1.

<sup>9</sup> Whythorne, *Autobiography*, 6.

<sup>10</sup> Cited by Alan Stewart, *The Oxford History of Life-Writing*, vol. II (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 80.

<sup>11</sup> Whythorne, *Autobiography*, 5.

Whythorne's orthographical experiment should therefore be understood within the context of a wider early modern interest in exploring and systematizing the way in which words should appear on the page, prompted significantly by the wider technological revolutions of the word sparked by the development of the printing press in this period. Whythorne was interested in the way in which the printing press could help disseminate his work widely and quickly: he was one of the first English musicians to turn to print to publish his music (to 'mak my self to be known of many in þe shortest tyme þat miht bee', he tells us in his autobiography), and it has been suggested that his carefully prepared presentation manuscript was itself intended for print publication.<sup>12</sup> Whythorne's new orthography betrays a fascination with the possibilities presented by the mechanical reproduction of text—the prospect of standardizing spelling convention offered by the technological development of the printing press and the commodification and commercialization of the printed text. Yet his text also signals anxiety about the changes wrought upon the literary page by this new technology. 'If by chaunce I do overslyp or speak to brode in any thing that I do wryte vnto yow now, I pray yow remember . . . A man cannot always speak in prynt,' Whythorne writes in his introduction.<sup>13</sup> His modern editor, James M. Osborne, glosses this as a proverbial statement, 'speaking in a precise and perfect way and manner', but Whythorne's language also betrays his concerns about the way in which the nuances of the speaking voice may become lost on the textual and especially printed page.<sup>14</sup> His new, phonetically based orthography, then, may be seen as an attempt to retain something of the residual orality of language on the page, to hold on to some sense of imagining the act of reading as an attempt to listen to the author's voice speaking from the page.

What should the word on the page tell us when we look at it? Should English script declare something of its hybrid etymological origins at the expense of phonetic clarity? That is, should the word on the page tell its own life story through its spelling? Whythorne's orthography disavows this logic, rejecting a spelling based on an etymological logic of origins, arguing that 'such wurdas as wee do take owt of other langwages . . . when wee do take and vse them as English words, we shuld wryte them as wee do speak them'.<sup>15</sup> But that does not prevent Whythorne's new orthography from telling, through attention to the sounds of words, different kinds of histories in his act of life-writing: 'Rather than flattening English to a single pronunciation, his standardized spelling system is able instead to convey the variations of dialect', notes Alan Stewart; 'among his poems is a mock "Testimoniall" voiced by a poor servant woman, Sibbel Sluis, that captures her rural Gloucestershire accent, rendering "far" as "var", "Soon" as "zoon", and "serve" as "zarv"'.<sup>16</sup> While Whythorne's success in this regard is, modern linguistic scholars agree, at best partial, behind his

<sup>12</sup> Whythorne, *Autobiography*, 173.

<sup>13</sup> Whythorne, *Autobiography*, 3.

<sup>14</sup> Whythorne, *Autobiography*, 3.

<sup>15</sup> Whythorne, *Autobiography*, 6.

<sup>16</sup> Stewart, *Oxford History of Life-Writing*, 79; citing Whythorne, *Autobiography*, 167–70.

attempt to ‘wryte wurd as they be sownded in speech’ lies a system that attempts to evoke, through sound, a new kind of story: something that can tell, through its relationship to the sonic register, something of the origins and life history not of the words themselves, but of their speaker/writer.<sup>17</sup>

In this manner, as Elizabeth Heale has noted, ‘even the technical process of writing is carefully and idiosyncratically fashioned.’<sup>18</sup> Though his system is intended to ‘standardize’ writing, by bringing sound to bear on written text, Whythorne is proposing a system of writing language that at the same time participates in the idiosyncratic expression of the individual self, despite the pressures wrought upon that ‘authorial voice’ by the mass reproduction of printed texts. It is through this distinctive register—a kind of self-sounding, blending life-writing with sound-writing—that Whythorne attempts to transcribe and communicate something of his identity through his manuscript. ‘Time and again,’ writes Andy Mousley,

throughout the autobiography, Whythorne uses words and phrases that express his desire to *make himself known* and *to be known*: ‘I...do now lay open vnto yow the most part of all my pryvatt affayres’; ‘þis forsaid sonett I þus wrot bekwaz...’; ‘Now must I tell yow of an oþer matter...’; ‘Heer to explan and to mak plain vnto yow my meaning...’<sup>19</sup>

Whythorne’s phonetic orthography becomes, in his manuscript, a significant tool in the technology of writing the self as he attempts to ‘mak my self to be known of many in þe shortest tym þat miht bee’.

The phonetic basis of Whythorne’s spelling system also brings to the reader’s attention other sonic aspects of the text that might otherwise be glanced over. This is, the title page insists, a ‘book of songs and sonetts’, its title alluding to Richard Totell’s popular 1557 anthology of Tudor lyrics. The ‘longe discoorses’ concerning Whythorne’s life are intended to act as glosses to his own songs and lyric poems. Several of these poems survive in musical settings in Whythorne’s two published books of music—his first such publication, *Songes of Three, Fower and Five Voyces* (London, 1571), can claim its own innovative status as the first musical work of its kind to be printed in England. These songs are, Whythorne writes in the preface to his 1571 printed book of songs, ‘deuizd vpon common chaunces, and out of worldly wurks.’<sup>20</sup> ‘There is no turning away in Whythorne’s poetry from the practical con-

<sup>17</sup> Rupert E. Palmer, Jr, *Thomas Whythorne’s Speech: The Phonology of a Sixteenth-Century Native of Somerset in London* (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1969); see also W. Nelson Francis, ‘Review: *Thomas Whythorne’s Speech*’, *Language* 51, no. 3 (1975), 746–8.

<sup>18</sup> Elizabeth Heale, ‘Thomas Whithorne and First-Person Life-Writing in the Sixteenth Century’, in Mike Pincombe and Cathy Shrank, eds, *The Oxford Handbook of Tudor Literature: 1485–1603* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 606–21 (620).

<sup>19</sup> Andy Mousley, ‘Early Modern Autobiography, History and Human Testimony: *The Autobiography of Thomas Whythorne*’, *Textual Practice* 23, no. 2 (2009), 267–87 (281).

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Whythorne, ‘Preface’, in *Songes of Three, Fower and Five Voyces* [Tenor] (London: John Day, 1571).



cerns of the moment,' writes David Shore: by embedding his 'songs and sonetts' within the narrative of his life, this manuscript insists upon contextualizing these poems within the historical circumstances of their original composition.<sup>21</sup> This is a conception of lyric that lies close to its origins in the song, as evanescent 'ayre': lyric as event, revealing the historical contingency of sound that fades as soon as it is uttered, the visual artefact of the page recording as best it can the traces of the sounded moment.<sup>22</sup>

By listening to his words, by paying attention to sound and exploring how to improve the way we communicate that sound through the silent medium of the textual page, Whythorne the musician found a means to express more fully his multifaceted sense of self; in Nancy's terms, listening disclosed the possibility of 'opening up' the self more fully: 'it opens me inside as well as outside, and it is through such double, quadruple, or sextuple opening that a "self" can take place.' Ultimately, in fact, it is this multiplicity that Whythorne learns from his attempt to write his sound-self in the most literal of terms: how should I spell my own name? he asks. Should it be 'Why-thorne' or 'Whyt-horn'? His answer: 'I will make yow my iudge.'<sup>23</sup> The text that had claimed to reproduce sound faithfully on the page, and through which he had attempted to write his self in ink, seems to stumble on a key question of Whythorne's own identity and personhood. But it also admits the possibility of a model of selfhood that is, as Nancy suggests, open and multiple. '[I]t does not matter which it is, "thorn, or horn"', Alan Stewart writes, summarizing Whythorne's argument: 'whoever is "prikt or gored" by it "shall fynde that thei be rather to[o] sharp then otherwyze"'.<sup>24</sup> For Whythorne, attention to sound opens up the self without dissecting it, without invasively and destructively 'pricking and goring' it. It allows him to claim for himself the potential of both horns of his naming dilemma, and in doing so acknowledges the contingent fiction and radical mutability of any sound-self we might choose to tell about ourselves.

## Butler's Bees

As already noted, Thomas Whythorne was not alone among his contemporaries in proposing orthographical reform by attending specifically to the sounds of speech. Among their ranks we find another musician: the seventeenth-century priest, musi-

<sup>21</sup> David Shore, 'The *Autobiography* of Thomas Whythorne: An Early Elizabethan Context for Poetry', *Renaissance and Reformation* 17, no. 2 (1981), 72–86 (75).

<sup>22</sup> On the evanescent qualities of early modern 'ayres' and their lyrics, see Scott A. Trudell, *Unwritten Poetry: Song, Performance and Media in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), and Katherine R. Larson, *The Matter of Song in Early Modern England: Texts in and of the Air* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

<sup>23</sup> Whythorne, *Autobiography*, 212.

<sup>24</sup> Stewart, *Oxford History of Life-Writing*, 80.

cian, and amateur beekeeper Charles Butler. Butler proposes, like Whythorne, an orthographic system based on sound. In his *English Grammar, or, The Institution of Letters, Syllables, and Words in the English Tongue* (1633), Butler proposes that people should write ‘altogether according to the sound now generally received’, echoing the foundational phonetic principles of Whythorne’s own orthographic system—though he calls upon a far more extensive range of new letters and characters to help him transcribe the sounds of speech.<sup>25</sup> In his preface, arguing for the need of spelling reform, Butler recounts the frustrations of Sir John Price: ‘four good Secretaires, writing a sentence in English from his mouth, differed all, one from an other, in many letters.’<sup>26</sup> In a phrase he uses repeatedly (including in his title), the English language is in a very important sense literally the ‘English tongue’, and written text should be understood as a kind of mimetic act representing this oral/aural phenomenon.

This attention to sound, exemplified by Butler’s attempt to listen to the sound of human speech, is a principle that forms a leitmotif throughout his diverse body of work. The important role of sonic attentiveness in Butler’s work is made explicit by the commendatory poem written by Humphrey Newton ‘Upon his Booke of Musik’, in *The Principles of Musik* (1636):

Sir, I am satisf’d: since you have shown,  
By this Booke, all the former were your own.  
This is the System: those the Practick Parts  
Of Nature’s rarer Musick, and of Arts.  
For what, grave Butler, is thy *Syngeni* [Butler’s treatise on marriage],  
But Nature’s two-part song? What is thy *Bee*,  
(That little, busy thing we so admire)  
What is it else, but Nature’s complete Quire?  
As for thy *Grammar*, there I charmed lie  
With Consonants and Vowels Harmonie.  
When those sweet Accents have my Senses stole,  
Thy *Rhetorick* then robs mee of my Soule.  
Enough, good Butler: Stay thy Quill: and here  
Write not to ravish, but t’ instruct our ear.<sup>27</sup>

Newton articulates the harmonious way in which Butler’s works cohere in the ear, both ravishing and instructing via the sonic faculties in his work on a diverse range of topics—grammar, rhetoric, even beekeeping. His orthographic reform is only one part of a more extensive attempt to explore what we can learn from our sonic experience of the world. His interest in the nature of musical sound would find expression in the musical treatise *The Principles of Musik* (1636); but most revealingly, his interest in what he perceived as the musical sound of nature would result

<sup>25</sup> Charles Butler, ‘To the Reader’, in *English Grammar* (Oxford: William Turner, 1633), sig [\*3ii]r.

<sup>26</sup> Butler, *English Grammar*, sig.\*3r.

<sup>27</sup> Butler, *The Principles of Musik* (London: John Haviland, 1636).

in the publication, in 1634, of a ‘bee madrigall’ titled *Melissomelos* that would incorporate his empirical observations of the sounds made by his hive of bees.

Butler’s treatise on beekeeping, *The Feminine Monarchie*, was first published in 1609; it was enlarged and revised in 1623, before being further extended and entirely reset according to Butler’s new orthographic system in 1634. Each edition emphasizes the empirical basis on which his treatise is founded: ‘the truth written out by *experience and diligent observation*’, as he puts it on the title page to the first edition in 1609 (my emphasis). And, as he revises and enlarges each successive edition, he pays closer and closer attention to what can be learnt from sound. From 1609, the noise of the bees is already characterized not as a senseless droning or buzzing, but as a kind of music: ‘When they begin to sing’, signals a marginal note. Butler describes here how seven to eleven days after the prime swarm has left the hive, ‘the next prince, when she perceiueth a competent number to be fledged and ready, beginneth the musick in a begging tune, as if she did pray hir queen-mother to let them go.’<sup>28</sup> ‘I haue heard three of them together’, writes Butler,<sup>29</sup> and by 1623 adds, ‘sometime a fourth also interposeth hir *Minims* to fill vp the Quire.’<sup>30</sup> The 1609 edition includes Butler’s first attempt to notate the bees’ music, including a transcription of the princess’s plaintive tune (at two sets of pitches) and the queen’s lower-pitched response (Figure 6.1).

Butler is specific about pitches: in the enlarged 1623 edition, we learn that he uses a ‘[w]inde-instrument’ (probably a recorder) to help identify them.<sup>31</sup> Using this method, in 1609 he had recorded that the queen ‘sings’ between middle C and F a perfect fourth above, and that the princess (and the other bees that join in) sing between G and C above, making a complete octave. Together the bees produce chords—major thirds, perfect fifths, and octaves—all in a repeated triple-time rhythm.

Yet for all his claims to empirical accuracy, there is one small but significant detail missing: even after the text is entirely reset in 1634 according to his new orthography, Butler fails to indicate in his score the phoneme his musicians should sound as they sing. The natural assumption would be, it might be presumed, a kind of buzzing noise—which is the suggestion that James Pruett makes in the only published modern edition of Butler’s madrigal ‘[Zzzz?]’, and it is followed by Linda Phyllis Austern in an article on the perception of nature among seventeenth-century musicians.<sup>32</sup> Buzzing, however, does not sit well with Butler’s assertion that bee

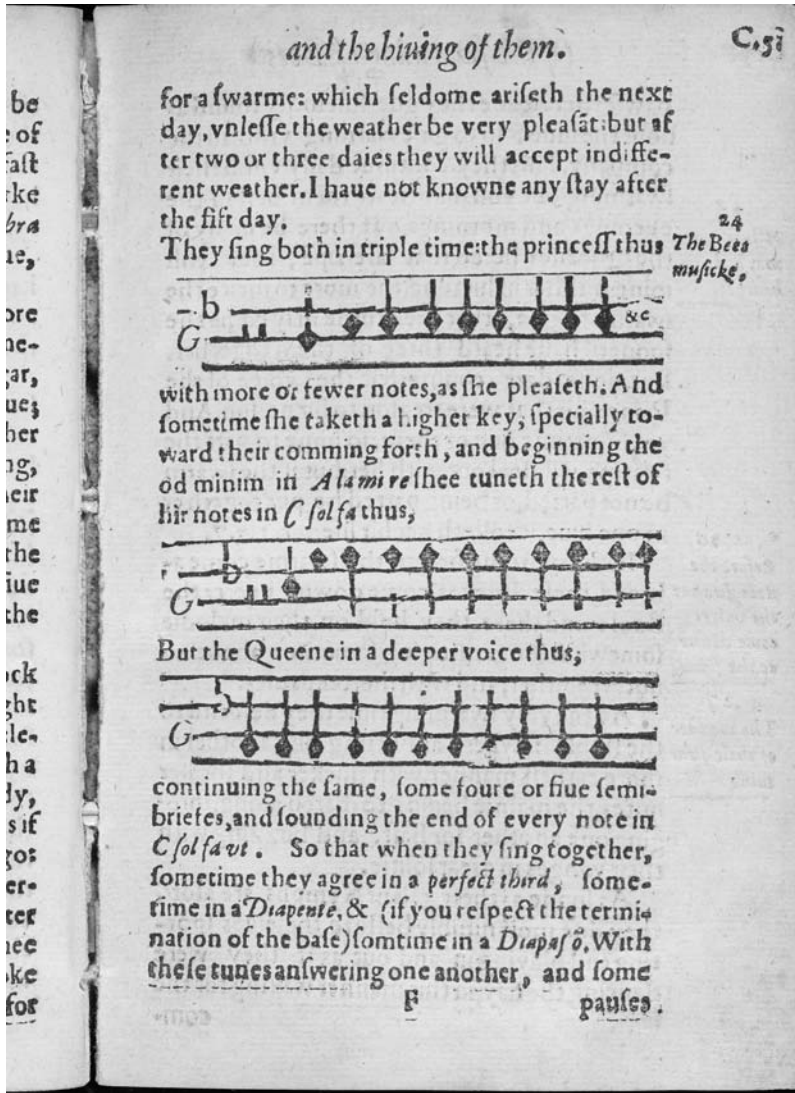
<sup>28</sup> Butler, *Feminine Monarchie* (Oxford, 1609), sig. E[8]v.

<sup>29</sup> Butler, *Feminine Monarchie* (1609), sig. Fv.

<sup>30</sup> Butler, *Feminine Monarchie* (London, 1623), K3v.

<sup>31</sup> Butler, *Feminine Monarchie* (1623), K4r.

<sup>32</sup> James Pruett, ‘Charles Butler – Musician, Grammarian, Apiarist’, *Musical Quarterly* 49, no. 4 (October 1963), 498–509 (500–2), reproduced in Linda Phyllis Austern, ‘Nature, Culture, Myth, and the Musician in Early Modern England’, *JAMS* 51, no. 1 (1998), 1–47 (16–17). Pruett also misreads the rests in the wordless sections of Butler’s madrigal, vertically misaligning the parts, making Butler’s bees seem entirely unharmonious.



**Figure 6.1** Charles Butler, *The Feminine Monarchy* (Oxford, 1609). © The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford, 8° B 27 Med., sig. F1 recto. Image not available in the digital format of the publication.

song is music. As Steven Connor rightly points out, the buzzing sound made by bees and insects is a 'figure for the vacancy or triviality of noise itself',<sup>33</sup> a sound that confounds articulation, a 'senceless Buzze', as one seventeenth-century pamphlet puts it.<sup>34</sup> In his *English Grammar*, Butler is himself dismissive of the sound repre-

<sup>33</sup> Steven Connor, *Beyond Words: Sobs, Stutters, and Other Vocalisations* (London: Reaktion, 2014), 163.

<sup>34</sup> S. Amy, *A Praefatory Discourse* (London, 1681), 3, cited in Connor, *Beyond Words*, 163.

sented by the letter ‘Z’, describing it as ‘onely a kinde of *Sibilus* as S is; though more gros and inward then S’<sup>35</sup>

Such senseless buzzing seems a far cry from the music Butler claims for his bees: so, unless he is being ironic, what is Butler hearing? It is, in fact, a noise described by Virgil in book four of the *Georgics*: bees, in addition to their buzzing, produce a second sound when preparing to swarm, a trumpet-like piping. Virgil describes ‘the warlike ring of the hoarse clarion . . . ; a sound [*vox*] . . . that is like broken trumpet blasts.’<sup>36</sup> Apiarists refer to this sound (or, for Virgil, ‘voice’) as quacking, tooting, or honking, created by the exhalation of air from the spiracles on the thorax.<sup>37</sup> The virgin queen begins by piping at the pitch, roughly, of our modern G# (very close to Butler’s own observations with the wind instrument), from which she ascends, through a portamento to a slow rhythmic honking on the tone above. Eventually, the first bee is joined by other bees, at pitches different to the voice of the first.

It is this sound that Butler is transcribing, and his musical notation is in fact a remarkably accurate and recognizable transcription of this ‘piping’ sound that bees make before they swarm. Butler claims very little compositional credit for these passages: he ‘pricks down’ their song as accurately as he can; only at the end, he admits to some creative involvement, contriving a rather out-of-place conventional seventeenth-century cadence to conclude the section: ‘I cannot altogether warrant the Conclusion: because in that confused noise, which the buzzing Bees in the busie time of their departure doe make, my dull hearing could not apprehend it: so that I was faine to make vp what I could. But I am sure, if I miss, I miss but a little.’ In the expanded 1623 edition, Butler repeats his observations, concluding that ‘if *Musicke* were lost, it might be found with the *Muses Birds*’. This he terms the bees’ ‘Naturall Art’, comparable to the arts of building and social organization which make the hive analogous to human society. The music is sung daily, at morning and evening, in procession around the hive, ‘Which musicke as it cannot but please and delight them that listen to it’. He listens attentively, and transcribes the bees’ music into a ‘*Melissomelos*, or Bees Madrigall, [in which] Musicians may see the grounds of their Art’.<sup>38</sup>

To illustrate its pleasure to the human ear, Butler incorporates the bees’ music into an elaborated setting of this *Melissomelos*, transforming it into a four-part homophonic madrigal. Literary fable and scientific observation stand side by side in Butler’s interpretation of the bees’ music. The madrigal begins by interpreting the activity of the hive and the swarming and singing of the bees allegorically in terms of the feminine monarchy of the Amazons: ‘As of all states the Monarchy is best, / So of all Monarchies that Feminine / Of famous Amazons excels the rest’ (lines

<sup>35</sup> Charles Butler, *English Grammar* (1634), ed. A. Eichler (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1910), 20.

<sup>36</sup> Virgil, *Georgics*, trans. H. Rushton Fairclough and G. P. Goold (Cambridge, MA: LOEB, 1999), 4.71–72.

<sup>37</sup> Edward F. Woods, ‘The Queen Bee’s Siren’, *New Scientist* 341 (1963), 501–3.

<sup>38</sup> All quotations in this paragraph from Butler, *Feminine Monarchie* (1623), sig. K4r.

The figure shows a musical score for a piece in 3/4 time, divided into four systems. Each system consists of two staves. The first system (bars 27-34) shows a melodic line in the upper staff with eighth and quarter notes, and a lower staff with a steady eighth-note accompaniment. The second system (bars 35-42) continues this texture with some rests in the upper staff. The third system (bars 43-50) features a more active upper staff with eighth-note patterns. The fourth system (bars 51-58) concludes with a final cadence in both staves.

**Figure 6.2** Extract from the transcription of the Bees' music from *Melissomelos*, section 4, bars 27 to end, from *The Feminine Monarchie* (London, 1623). Transcribed by the author, and reproduced with permission.

1–3). Next we hear the first part of the transcribed song of the bees, a solo of wordless piping by the Bee/Amazon Princess Orithya, hoping to lead a secondary swarm to establish a new colony. When the madrigal resumes the queen at first remains silent before finally granting Orithya's request by joining her wordless song; other bees join in to make up a four-part texture (all upper voices, within the bees' range of an octave from middle C) (Figure 6.2). The madrigal proper then continues for another three verses, in which they swarm away from the hive, 'nimble prancing' in a celebratory Morris dance.

Butler's transcription of the 'Naturall Art' of the bees' song is quite simply like nothing else in seventeenth-century music: if it resembles anything in the musical repertoire, the pulsing, repeated chords of the bees' music are closest matched by the minimalism of twentieth- and twenty-first-century music. The extraordinarily

innovative nature of Butler's music, bringing to the human soundworld of early modern England an entirely new kind of music derived from attentive listening to the natural world that surrounds him, seems to anticipate an argument made recently by Penelope Gouk, who contends that 'there is an intimate and perhaps even necessary linkage between making new music and making new (scientific) knowledge... as the nature of music and its organization changed in early modern society, so understandings of human nature and its organization were correspondingly transformed.'<sup>39</sup> Gouk's argument is interested in challenging the persistent critical idea of 'a decisive shift [that] took place in the early modern "West" from a predominantly aural to a primarily visualist culture', proposing instead that "'objective" Western scientific models and causal explanations of music's power to affect human nature are mediated through and constituted by "subjective" bodily experiences of that power, which are acquired through the senses – in this case, hearing.'<sup>40</sup> Butler's work, designed not only 'to ravish but t'instruct our ear', offers a model for the kinds of transformations—aesthetic and scientific—that Gouk is proposing. As with Whythorne's desire to 'lay open vnto yow the most part of all my pryvatt affayres, and secrets accomplyshed', Butler's attention to sound pushes at Nancy's 'edge of meaning' and strains to make sense of that which is hidden and as yet unobserved; in this instance, not the private interiority of the self, but the veiled and unseen culture of his beehive. Observed, or heard, in these terms, we can recognize Butler's *Melissomelos*, then, as part empirical observation, part allegorical interpretation; part natural instruction, part pleasurable cultured entertainment; all of which pushes at the boundaries of human knowledge about the natural world, and proposes a new and innovative soundworld in human aesthetics. It is that transformation—of both human music and human knowledge—that we encounter in Butler, listening attentively to his bees.

### Francis Bacon's 'Sound-houses'

Gouk's insight into the 'intimate and perhaps even necessary linkage between making new music and making new (scientific) knowledge' finds perhaps its fullest seventeenth-century expression in the work of Sir Francis Bacon. Bacon's work, like Butler's and Whythorne's, recognizes the way in which attentive listening pushes at the edge of meaning; where Whythorne's attention to sound had turned inwards to examine the self, Bacon shares Butler's interest in understanding what can be revealed through an empirical study of the sounds of the environment around him. Though his empirical experiments with sound did not, as it did in Butler's case, lead

<sup>39</sup> Penelope Gouk, 'Raising Spirits and Restoring Souls: Early Modern Medical Explanations for Music's Effects', in Erlmann, *Hearing Cultures*, 87–105 (88).

<sup>40</sup> Gouk, 'Raising Spirits', 87–8.

to a formal musical composition, his work explores through acts of literary imagination the potential of the sonic experience to expand our epistemological and aesthetic sense of the world. Where Butler moves us beyond questions of the sounds of language, Bacon encourages us to push our inquiry still further: to ask about the nature of sound itself.

In 1627, Bacon's posthumous *Sylva sylvarum* was published, edited by his secretary William Rawley. The first part of the text contains, according to Rawley, the 'Indigested Heap of Particulars' of Bacon's empirical experiments.<sup>41</sup> These include Bacon's observations about the nature of sound and acoustics. 'Sound is a capital thing,' writes Bacon—before lamenting that sound art, music, has become a stumbling block to a fuller understanding of its nature: 'Mvsicke, in the *Practise*, hath bin well pursued; And in good Variety; but in the *Theory*, and especially the *Yeelding* of the *Causes* of the *Practique*, very weakly; Being reduced into certain Mystically Subtilties, of no vse, and not much truth.'<sup>42</sup> Bacon has little time for mathematical theories of *harmonia mundi* and the abstract theorizing of ancient *musica speculativa*. His purpose is to examine sound as a physical, acoustic phenomenon; *Sylva sylvarum* records, among other experiments, his extensive experiments into the nature of sound. He scrutinizes it from every conceivable and imaginable angle: how it travels, for instance, how it echoes and redounds and amplifies, how it decays. In the course of his inquiries, he considers how sound travels differently indoors and out; how sound travels further along a speaking tube than in the open air; how the weather affects the transmission of sound; how musical instruments work; and he also describes the inventive experiments on which he grounds his understanding of the nature of sound (including one experiment that involves submerging himself under water with his head in a bucket, to find out what happens when sound travels through water).

At the end of *Sylva sylvarum*, Rawley appended another work by Bacon—his utopian fiction *New Atlantis*. If the empirical data of *Sylva sylvarum* is an 'Indigested Heap of Particulars,' Rawley notes that what he calls this 'fable' too is 'unfinished' and 'imperfect.' Nevertheless, he tells us that it was intended by Bacon to be printed at the conclusion of *Sylva sylvarum* because '[i]n regard it hath so neare Affinity . . . with the Preceding *Naturall History*.'<sup>43</sup> This fable imagines a utopian society, Bensalem, founded upon the principles of empirical scientific investigation, and includes the '*Description of a Colledge, instituted for the Interpreting of Nature, and the Producing of Great and Marueilous Works for the Benefit of Men; Vnder the Name of Salomon's House*'—a fictional institution, it has been noted, that anticipates the foundation of the Royal Society in 1660.<sup>44</sup> 'The *End* of our *Foundation*,' the Father of Salomon's

<sup>41</sup> William Rawley, 'To the Reader,' in Francis Bacon, *Sylva sylvarum* (London: William Lee, 1627), sig. Ar.

<sup>42</sup> Bacon, *Sylva* (1627), 35.

<sup>43</sup> Rawley, 'To the Reader,' preface to Bacon, *New Atlantis*, in *Sylva* (1627), sig. a2v.

<sup>44</sup> Rawley, 'To the Reader,' preface to Bacon, *New Atlantis*, in *Sylva* (1627), sig. a2r.



House tells Bacon's narrator, 'is the Knowledge of *Causes*, and Secret Motions of Things; and the Enlarging of the bounds of *Humane Empire*, to the Effecting of all Things possible.'<sup>45</sup>

Among the technological advances described by the Father of Salomon's House, we are told of fabulous 'sound-houses' in which the people of Bensalem 'practise and demonstrate all Sounds, and their *Generation*'. If Butler's bee madrigal had anticipated the minimalism of the twentieth century, these 'sound-houses' imagine a more avant-garde music still—replete with microtones, 'slidings', and all sorts of artificial effects. What is more, Bacon's description of the sonic miracles that take place in these sound-houses are strongly reminiscent of the kind of acoustic experiments Bacon had detailed in his preceding inquiries into natural history:

Wee haue *Harmonies* which you haue not, of *Quarter-Sounds*, and lesser *Slides* of *Sounds*. Diuerse *Instruments of Musick* likewise to you vnknowne, some sweeter then any you haue; Together with *Bells* and *Rings* that are dainty and sweet. Wee represent *Small Sounds* as *Great* and *Deepe*; Likewise *Great Sounds*, *Extenuate* and *Sharpe*; Wee make diuerse *Tremblings* and *Warblings* of *Sounds*, which in their *Originall* are *Entire*. Wee represent and imitate all *Articulate Sounds* and *Letters*, and the *Voices* and *Notes* of *Beasts* and *Birds*. Wee haue certaine *Helps*, which sett to the *Eare* doe further the *Hearing* greatly. Wee haue also diuerse, *Strange* and *Artificiall Echo's*, *Reflecting* the *Voice* many times, and as it were *Tossing* it: And some that giue back the *Voice Lowder* then it came; some *Shriller*, and some *Deeper*; Yea, some rendring the *Voice*, *Differing* in the *Letters* or *Articulate Sound*, from that they receyue. Wee haue also meanes to conuey *Sounds* in *Trunks* and *Pipes*, in strange *Lines*, and *Distances*.<sup>46</sup>

In this way, Bacon's own empirical work seems to be transmuted from the world of physical experience to the world of the imagination, and empirical speculation gives way to the fantasy of literary fable.

Why does Bacon reconceive his empirical work in the literary form of the fable? It is a question that drives at the heart of the relationship between literature and the senses, and especially the particular ways of knowing the world we experience through sound. 'We haue laboured (as may appeare) in this *Inquisition of Sounds*, diligently', Bacon writes at the end of the record of his empirical investigations into sound, 'Both because *Sound* is one of the most Hidden Portions of *Nature*... And because it is a *Virtue* which may be called *Incorporeall* and *Immateriate*; wherof their be in *Nature* but few.'<sup>47</sup> Incorporeal, immaterial, and 'one of the most Hidden Portions of *Nature*': for Bacon, sound seemingly defies the senses of sight and touch, and therein lie both the intriguing mystery and the empirical promise of its study. Once again, then, the investigation of the nature of sound is understood to be important because of its 'hiddenness': it demands attention because its workings are not readily disclosed. He continues, '[f]or we desire that Men should learne and

<sup>45</sup> Bacon, *New Atlantis*, 31.

<sup>46</sup> Bacon, *New Atlantis*, 41.

<sup>47</sup> Bacon, *Sylva* (1627), 74.

perceiue, how seuere a Thing the true *Inquisition of Nature* is; And should accuse themselues, by the light of particulars, to enlarge their Mindes, to the Amplitude of the World; And not reduce the World to the Narrownesse of their Mindes.<sup>48</sup>

In other words, the ‘hidden’, secret workings of sound present an exemplary model for the kind of empirical study Bacon is proposing in *Sylva sylvarum*.<sup>49</sup> The processes of the imagination are not anathema or antithetical to this empirical approach; rather, they are prerequisite: we must enlarge the scope of our minds in order to inquire into ‘the Amplitude of the World’. As Bacon writes elsewhere, ‘[w]hatsoever science is not consonant to presuppositions, must pray in aid of similitudes.’<sup>50</sup> As Claire Preston has argued, the processes upon which Bacon and his contemporaries founded their empirical scientific inquiries relied upon such analogical, imaginative, and creative forms of thinking, ‘memorable stories of the more abstruse and unaccountable movements of insight, Baconian similitudes that illuminate discovery . . . , true fictions.’<sup>51</sup>

In the conjunction of his two texts, redeploying and echoing his experimental work on the nature of sound in the sound-houses of his utopian fiction, Bacon’s work establishes what might be termed a sympathetic resonance, a ‘consonance’, between his empirical work and the speculative possibilities of fiction. Because of its ‘incorporeall’, ‘immaterial’, and ‘Hidden’ nature, Bacon’s understanding of sonic phenomena is ungraspable and resists easy ‘illumination’. Instead, the ‘Indigested heap of particulars’ of *Sylva sylvarum* resonates with the ‘imperfect’ and ‘unfinished’ speculations of his literary fable. In this way, the sound-houses of Bensalem come to stand for the potential of an empirical imagination that takes seriously the distinctive kinds of knowledge offered by different sensory experiences. Bacon’s attention to sound in turn prompts his imagination to conceive, in his utopian fiction of new instruments, ‘Diuerse *Instruments of Musick* likewise to you vnknowne, some sweeter then any you haue’, and of sonic effects that push at the boundaries of the soundworld of seventeenth-century music: ‘Wee haue *Harmonies* which you haue not, of *Quarter-Sounds*, and lesser *Slides of Sounds*.’ Attentive listening prompts the imaginative possibilities of Bacon’s avant-garde soundworld and its musical possibilities, while at the same time ‘enlarg[ing] . . . Mindes, to the Amplitude of the World’.

<sup>48</sup> Bacon, *Sylva* (1627), 74.

<sup>49</sup> On the relationship between the experience of musical sound and rhetorical style in Bacon’s work, see Isaac Harrison Louth, ‘Musical Matter and Rhetorical Experience in Bacon’s Natural Philosophy’, in Giuseppe Gerbino and Jacomien Prins, eds, *Hearing the Voice, Hearing the Soul: Music, Mind and Body in Renaissance Thought* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2021).

<sup>50</sup> Francis Bacon, *De Augmentis*, Book 2, xvii.9, in *The Works of Francis Bacon*, ed. James Spedding, Robert Leslie Ellis, and Douglas Denon Heath, 13 vols (London, 1857–74), vol. III, 137.

<sup>51</sup> Claire Preston, *The Poetics of Scientific Investigation in Seventeenth-Century England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 13.

## Conclusion

Bacon's phrase 'the light of particulars' (quoted above) may gesture towards that persistent visual metaphor of modernity, the illumination of 'Enlightenment'; but he writes this in the context of explaining what might be known when we listen to sound. As his study of the nature of sound and his imagined sound-houses suggest, and indeed as all the early modern writers discussed here intimate, the 'enlightened' sense of sight is not the only way to make sense of the world. 'Hearing proposes; sight disposes,' writes Steven Connor: if the term 'Enlightenment' suggests a way of viewing the world in which comprehension is already achieved, and the assured light of scientific knowledge has already cast on the darkness of ignorance, the inquisitive posture adopted by these writers in their literary texts is perhaps better understood in terms of an aural receptivity—a 'sounding out'.<sup>52</sup>

If, as Nancy suggests, 'to be listening is always to be on the edge of meaning,' our perceptions of the world through attention to sonic experience is bound up with this sense of inquiry, of exploring the hidden and (as yet, perhaps) only partially understood. This is not to reject outright the illumination of what Bacon describes in visual terms as 'the light of particulars'; it is instead, as Don Ihde puts it, 'a deliberate decentring of visualism in order to point up the overlooked and the unheard... to move toward a radically different understanding of experience'.<sup>53</sup> To recognize how these texts attend to the sense of sound is to acknowledge how literary texts might posit different modes of knowing through different kinds of sensory experience.

All three of the writers examined here explore in their literature the distinctive ways in which attention to sound shapes our perception of the world—whether that be through the sonically inflected sounding of the self encountered in Whythorne's text, or through the attentive listening of a subject attempting to better understand their environment mediated through sound which we encountered in Butler's and Bacon's texts. As the works of Whythorne and Butler suggest, these early modern writers were concerned with the issue of how best to record and reproduce sound on the silent, written page. Their attempts to transcribe sound faithfully on the page and to think, as Whythorne does, of authors speaking to their readers gesture beyond a purely visual encounter with the page to a more richly imagined conception of the sensory space of early modern text in sonic terms. In Bacon's work, the possibilities of that sonically inflected page are taken further still: it becomes a space for speculative sonic imagination, an invitation to the reader to hear sounds and music as yet unknown and unheard.

<sup>52</sup> Steven Connor, 'Hearing Edison's Teeth: Touching Hearing,' in Veit Erlmann, *Hearing Cultures: Essays on Sound, Listening, and Modernity* (Oxford: Berg, 2004), 154.

<sup>53</sup> Ihde, *Listening and Voice*, 15.

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# ACOUSTICS, ECHOES, AND WHISPERING GALLERIES IN ROMANTIC LITERATURE

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STACEY McDOWELL

In François Rabelais's *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (1532–64), passengers aboard a ship suddenly hear the sound of battle. Alarmed, they look about them and yet cannot see any sign of a battle taking place or discover where the sound is coming from. What they are hearing, it turns out, is a battle that had taken place the previous winter, a winter so cold that all that ‘martial din and noise’—words and cries, the clash of axe and armour, the neighing of horses—had frozen in the air.<sup>1</sup> Now that the weather has grown warmer, the sounds slowly begin to thaw and give up their sound. This episode has often been seen as a remarkable, sixteenth-century prefiguring of sound recording. But the sounds are not recorded and replayed so much as suspended, frozen in time. Sound, usually so fleeting, gets stuck in the air. What's more, the intangibility of a sound yet to be heard becomes, momentarily at least, tangible as the passengers grab frozen words by the fistful until they melt in the hand and release their sound. As well as commenting on the preservation of sound, Rabelais's frozen words episode raises questions about what it means to carry on hearing something, particularly a note of alarm, when the source or originating moment of that sound has passed.

This chapter focuses on writers writing about sounds that linger or echo in the air. Rather than the open air at sea that Rabelais describes, the examples I discuss locate sound within the enclosed airy spaces high up in architectural structures such as cathedrals and chapels. I begin with Rabelais, though, because I want to keep in mind the idea of sound being suspended in air rather than contained in space. Writers who describe the acoustics in solid architectural structures are interested in how sound is held without being fixed. Writing about the phenomenon

<sup>1</sup> François Rabelais, *Le Quart Livre*, ed. Robert Marichal, 2 vols (Geneva: Droz, 1947), II. 228.

of music seeming to float in the roof of a cathedral, for example, or an echo reverberating in a lofty building are instances that evoke the movement of sound in space: its lingering in empty air or bouncing off hard surfaces, diminishing and distorting. When the acoustic effects of architectural spaces are depicted in literature, this offers an occasion to think about literary form as a space that can shape sound. I include various writers who describe how architectural structures hold and transmute sound at the same time as the linguistic structures in their own writing (syntax, repetition, rhyme) become a means of containing sound but not fixing it.

An awareness of how space shapes sound, and sound shapes space, has been the focus of sound studies, especially in the past few decades since R. Murray Schafer introduced the concept of the soundscape.<sup>2</sup> Being able to sense an open door, or a low ceiling, or the emptiness of a room—even with our eyes shut—is an everyday instance of how we hear spatial acoustics.<sup>3</sup> Goethe, writing in 1795, notes that while we might expect architecture to appeal to the eye alone, it works on all the senses involved in bodily movement. The pleasant sensation of dancing to a rhythm he compares to the feeling of being led blindfold through a well-built house.<sup>4</sup> How might the rhythms and structures of language seek to evoke an equivalent sensation? The architectural structures I focus on in this chapter are mainly cathedrals and chapels, places of worship whose design aims to direct or enhance religious experience by guiding the eye upwards or amplifying the sound of voice, song, and music.<sup>5</sup> Although the examples I discuss are not about religious experience, they share an interest in how these atmospheric buildings can produce sensory and affective responses. These, often vivid, responses range from the positive ways in which such places might evoke a sense of transcendence or a sense of peace or refuge to the negative states of fear or dread that might arise not because the place itself feels haunted, exactly, but because it somehow taps into feelings that hauntingly resound in the mind.

The writers I discuss incorporate a kind of ‘literary acoustics’ into their writing which aims to reproduce the emotional resonance of these places. In a positive sense, this seeks to preserve and hold memory as a place holds sound; writing provides a space in which thoughts and feelings can reflect and reverberate. The flip side is that negative thoughts and feelings may persist or echo in disturbing and

<sup>2</sup> R. Murray Schafer, *Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> See Barry Blesser and Linda-Ruth Salter, *Spaces Speak, Are You Listening?* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).

<sup>4</sup> Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Briefe, Tagebücher und Gespräche, Sämtliche Werke*, ed. Hendrik Birus et al., 40 vols (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 1987–99), I. XVIII. 368.

<sup>5</sup> See Otto Von Simson, *The Gothic Cathedral: Origins of Gothic Architecture and the Medieval Concept of Order*, 2nd rev. edn (New York: Pantheon Books, 1962); Michael Forsyth, *Buildings for Music: The Architect, the Musician, and the Listener from the Seventeenth Century to the Present Day* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985); Barbara Nolan, *The Gothic Visionary Perspective* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977).

distorting ways. I begin with William Wordsworth's sonnets about the chapel in King's College, Cambridge, where the sound of music lingering inspires in him thoughts of eternity. Dorothy Wordsworth's experience in that same building then provides a stark contrast, one which emphasizes the role of auditory perception not just for hearing but for spatial awareness. Dorothy describes the sensation of dizziness that arises from the perceptual confusion of sound, sight, balance, and movement. She also records a feeling of fear, and in attributing this to her dizziness rather than an external threat she raises questions about the source of that fear, and the kinds of somatic response that might be its symptom or cause. A second example from Dorothy describes a similar experience of fear and dizziness felt in the whispering gallery in St Paul's Cathedral. The letter in which she recounts this experience makes no mention of the whispering gallery's famed acoustic phenomenon, yet when she describes a significant life event elsewhere in the same letter her language becomes curiously full of repetitions and doublings. I use this coincidence as a way into thinking about echoes in a more figurative sense to describe the echoing effects of language—how writing about something preserves and repeats it at the same time as introducing reverberations and distortions.

The chapter then turns to whispering galleries. I discuss the peculiar acoustics that allow a whisper voiced in one part of the gallery to be heard distinctly in another, and how this feature has been used as metaphor. A whisper is a hushed sound halfway between breathing and speaking which usually asks for a particularly attentive kind of listening. With echoes, sound gets repeated (sometimes in a transmuted or diminished form, as in the Ovidian myth), whereas in the whispering gallery sound carries along the wall to be heard elsewhere. The effect is akin to throwing your voice—as the participle in the name makes it seem as though the gallery itself is whispering. Drawing on this effect, Thomas De Quincey makes the whispering gallery in St Paul's a metaphor for the projected inner voice of the conscience.

My examples are drawn principally from Romantic-period writers, who, as Judith Pascoe points out, 'were the last generation to go unrecorded.'<sup>6</sup> John Hollander reminds us that 'until an astoundingly late moment in the history of technology—that of Edison's sound transcription—the only means of perpetuating sound . . . were echoes.'<sup>7</sup> Scholarly attempts to recover the lost soundscapes of the past are often particularly drawn by the metaphorical suggestiveness of the echo. Joanna E. Taylor, in her study of Romantic-period soundscapes, writes that echoes provide 'a record of sound's interactions with the environment', adding that, as 'by-products of sound's

<sup>6</sup> Judith Pascoe, *The Sarah Siddons Audio Files: Romanticism and the Lost Voice* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011), ix.

<sup>7</sup> John Hollander, *The Figure of Echo: A Mode of Allusion in Milton and After* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 1–2.

interactions with solid objects, echoes seem to materialize sound.<sup>8</sup> Architectural historians have found new ways of listening to past soundscapes by studying the material environments of historic buildings and trying to recreate the auditory experience people may once have enjoyed within them. Deborah Howard and Laura Moretti conducted pioneering research into past musical performance practices and the acoustic properties of Venetian churches.<sup>9</sup> Using a combination of scientific acoustic measurements, live choral experiments, and the subjective responses of modern audience members gathered from questionnaires, they aimed to determine how devotional music would have sounded in the past within these atmospheric architectural interiors.

Writing about sixteenth-century musical innovations in the church of San Marco, Howard notes that, 'although personal devotional experience cannot be quantified, scientific examination of the boundary conditions can help us to understand the impact that acoustics may have had on those in attendance at the ceremonies.'<sup>10</sup> The insights provided by writers of the past into their subjective experiences of sound in architectural space may be one of the things that literature in particular can add to sound studies. The literature of the Romantic period is often credited with having given new expression to subjectivity. But it is not as if the examples I provide here can fill in the gaps between subjective experience and what can quantifiably be known about the sonic past. Rather, they explore the boundaries between one person's sensory experience and another's, boundaries which language, in seeking to communicate that subjective experience, both defines and tries to move beyond. When it comes to auditory experience, the idea of sound in air offers a suggestive metaphor for how literature might evoke, without aiming fully to capture or make tangible, a sense of sound for the reader.

For Samuel Taylor Coleridge, the idea of sound's motion through air provided an analogy for reading. In his *Biographia Literaria* (1817), he describes the reader's progress through a poem as being 'like the path of sound through the air; at every step he pauses and half recedes, and from the retrogressive movement collects the force which carries him onward.'<sup>11</sup> Every step, every component part, should be savoured as part of the pleasure taken in the composition as a whole. Since sound is made up of vibrations in the air which it is also a part of, in a typically Coleridgean figure of unity, the 'path of sound through the air' suggests an idea of reading as a

<sup>8</sup> Joanna E. Taylor, 'Echoes in the Mountains: The Romantic Lake District's Soundscape', *Studies in Romanticism* 57, no. 3 (2018), 383–406 (394).

<sup>9</sup> Deborah Howard and Laura Moretti, *Sound and Space in Renaissance Venice: Architecture, Music, Acoustics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> Deborah Howard, 'Sound, Space, and Sensory Perception: The Easter Mass in the Liturgy of San Marco, Venice', in Bissera V. Pentcheva, ed., *Icons of Sound: Voice, Architecture, and Imagination in Medieval Art* (London: Routledge, 2020), 135.

<sup>11</sup> Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, 2 vols (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983), II. 14.



unifying, animating process. Reading may also be thought of as a way of animating the sound latent in the written word. Whether heard inwardly or read aloud, the written word creates ‘a text of hints at voicing, whose centre in utterance lies outside itself’, Eric Griffiths suggests, ‘and also an achieved pattern on the page, salvaged from the evanescence of the voice in air.’<sup>12</sup> The sound of a poem evoked by ‘hints at voicing’, whose ‘utterance lies outside itself’ engages the reader in an act of auditory imaging that gets pushed even further by a text which asks readers to imagine echoes of voices or music they will never hear. The achieved pattern on the page that promises to ‘salvage’ sound is reimagined here in the achieved pattern of architectural space.

Wordsworth’s sonnets about the chapel of King’s College, Cambridge were published in his 1822 collection of *Ecclesiastical Sketches*. The first of the sonnets describes how wisps of sound and light seem to get caught in the chapel’s vaulted roof, according to the design of the architect,

the Man who fashioned for the sense  
 These lofty pillars—spread that branching roof  
 Self-poised, and scooped into ten thousand cells,  
 Where light and shade repose, where music dwells  
 Lingering—and wandering on as loth to die,  
 Like thoughts whose very sweetness yieldeth proof  
 That they were born for immortality.<sup>13</sup>

High up in the ornately sculpted roof, ‘scooped’ into cells like pockets of air, ‘music dwells / Lingering—’. ‘Dwells’ suggests how the music in cathedrals inhabits the space and seems prolonged by it. The line ending then creates a moment’s lingering suspension. Poise, balance, symmetry of line: this is the craftsmanship admired in the architect and these qualities can be heard in the verse, too. A further pause is introduced by the dash: ‘Lingering—and wandering on’. The more familiar formulation is ‘lingering on’, which would be in keeping with ‘loth to die’. The preposition seems to float free of its expected location by being attached instead to ‘wandering’. It is as if words are like the scooped cells that hold sound, and here the sounds of words that are normally heard one after another are allowed to wander on within the space of the line. The scooped cells where music dwells are like the syntactic units that make up a poem.

The final half-rhyme of ‘loth to die’ with ‘immortality’ seems clumsily put together, a botch job of a rhyme in which content aligns but sound does not quite. Yet the effect is eloquent about the imperfections of sound, and the way echoes can

<sup>12</sup> Eric Griffiths, *The Printed Voice of Victorian Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 60.

<sup>13</sup> William Wordsworth, ‘Inside of King’s College Chapel, Cambridge’, in *Sonnet Series and Itinerary Poems 1820–1845*, ed. Geoffrey Jackson (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 202 (ll. 8–14). All further references to Wordsworth’s sonnets will be to this edition.

repeat sound in diminished or transmuted form. Even as the music's lingering holds off its inevitable end, that ending is balanced against the solid integrity of the building that holds it. The thoughts that 'yieldeth proof' of their own immortality are linked by rhyme to the idea of self-sufficiency earlier ascribed to the 'roof / Self-poised'. This stabilizing effect is reinforced by the layering up of internal rhymes: 'roof', 'self', 'loth', 'yieldeth', 'proof'. Wordsworth elsewhere had used the phrase 'self-poised' to suggest a state of composure that is stilled without being fixed: 'self-poised in air thou seem'st to rest', he says of the daisy, similarly describing a butterfly resting 'self-poised' on a flower.<sup>14</sup> In this case, the music, like the thoughts that give proof of their lastingness, is not characteristically ephemeral but remains dwelling, lingering, and wandering within the interstitial spaces of the chapel. The design of Gothic architecture incorporated visual and acoustic properties that aimed to create a sense of divine order and eternity, as Otto von Simson puts it in his classic study: 'architecture mirrors eternal harmony, as music echoes it.'<sup>15</sup>

Wordsworth had visited the Gothic chapel of King's College during a return trip to Cambridge, where he had formerly been a student, in November 1820. From Cambridge he went on to Coleorton in Leicestershire to stay with his friend Sir George Beaumont, who was about to build a new church in the area. It was the pair's conversations surrounding the plans for this new church that prompted Wordsworth to write the *Ecclesiastical Sketches*.<sup>16</sup> He had earlier drawn a connection between church architecture and poetry in his preface to *The Excursion* (1814), whose relation to his projected poem *The Recluse* he compares to that which 'the Anti-chapel has to the body of a gothic Church'. His 'minor Pieces', he adds, may be likened to 'the little Cells, Oratories, and sepulchral Recesses, ordinarily included in those Edifices'.<sup>17</sup> Several of Wordsworth's poems feature Gothic churches, including Tintern Abbey, Salisbury Cathedral, and Bolton Abbey, yet his interest in architecture has not often been discussed in relation to the auditory dimension of these spaces, or the significance of acoustics for thinking about poetic form.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Wordsworth, 'To the Daisy (With Little Here)', in *Poems, in Two Volumes, and Other Poems, 1800–1807*, ed. Jared R. Curtis (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1983), 239 (l. 38); Wordsworth, 'To a Butterfly', in *Poems, 1800–1807*, 215–16 (l. 2).

<sup>15</sup> Von Simson, *The Gothic Cathedral*, 23.

<sup>16</sup> As noted by Wordsworth in the Advertisement to the sonnets: *Sonnet Series*, 137.

<sup>17</sup> Wordsworth, *The Excursion*, ed. Sally Bushell, James A. Butler, and Michael C. Jaye (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 38.

<sup>18</sup> Dale Townshend notes the emphasis on the visual in 'Gothic Visions, Romantic Acoustics', in Robert Miles, ed., *Gothic Technologies: Visuality in the Romantic Era, Romantic Circles Praxis* (2005), <http://www.rc.umd.edu/praxis/gothic/townshend/townshend.html>. For Wordsworth's interest in Gothic architecture, see Tom Duggett, *Gothic Romanticism: Architecture, Politics, and Literary Form* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Jessica Fay, *Wordsworth's Monastic Inheritance: Poetry, Place, and the Sense of Community* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

Sound is sometimes imagined to be itself endowed with architectural properties. In classical myth, for example, Apollo creates Troy with his lyre, and at the sound of Amphion's lyre the stones needed to fortify the city of Thebes glide into place. In Wordsworth's sonnet on King's College Chapel, the 'roof / Self-poised' seems to be held up by the music it holds. Similarly, in John Keats's poem *Lamia*, the enchanted palace is filled with '[a] haunting music, sole perhaps and lone / Supportress of the faery-roof'.<sup>19</sup> Letitia Landon is equally drawn to the contrast between music's illusory or ephemeral qualities and the structural solidity of architecture. In the opening lines of 'The Bayadere. An Indian Tale' she envisions an exotic palace: "There were seventy pillars around the hall, / Of wreathed gold was each capital, / And the roof was fretted with amber and gems." Amidst these ornately wreathed and gem-encrusted surfaces, '[t]here floated the breath of the harp and flute'.<sup>20</sup> Landon again imagines the play of sound and surface in her description of the roof of San Mark's, beneath which 'deep-voiced music floated round, / As the far arches sent forth sound—'.<sup>21</sup>

In Wordsworth's second sonnet on King's College Chapel, the sound of music touches the hard surface of stone with a rich sensuousness:

But, from the arms of silence—list! O list!  
The music bursteth into second life—  
The notes luxuriate—every stone is kiss'd  
By sound, or ghost of sound.<sup>22</sup>

Poetry might be a way of granting to music a second life, of trying to hold and reanimate sound, or 'ghost of sound'. Wordsworth seems to be thinking as well in these sonnets about the posterity of his own verse. The first sonnet that describes music 'lingering—and wandering' would later echo in the mind of Thomas Hardy, who when he visited the chapel in 1880 wrote that 'Wordsworth's ghost, too, seemed to haunt the place, lingering and wandering on somewhere alone in the fan-traceried vaulting'.<sup>23</sup> The added flourish of 'fan-traceried' has an eye to Hardy's expertise in church architecture, while his sense of the place as haunted recalls also the memory of his friend Horace Moule, who had committed suicide in Cambridge several years previously. Hardy's allusion sees the sonnet's lingering and wandering music transmuted into Wordsworth's lingering and wandering ghost, echoing the sound of Wordsworth's own poem.

<sup>19</sup> John Keats, *Lamia*, in *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. Jack Stillinger (London: Heinemann, 1978), 452–75 (ll. 122–3).

<sup>20</sup> Letitia Landon, 'The Bayadere. An Indian Tale', *The Improvisatrice and Other Poems* (London: Hurst, Robinson & Co, 1824), 155–78 (ll. 1–3, 25).

<sup>21</sup> Landon, *The Improvisatrice*, ll. 90–1.

<sup>22</sup> Wordsworth, 'The Same', 202–3 (ll. 9–12).

<sup>23</sup> Thomas Hardy, *The Life and Work of Thomas Hardy*, ed. Michael Millgate (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1985), 145.

In his third and final sonnet, Wordsworth takes comfort in the sense of enduring solidity that the chapel provides: 'Be mine, in hours of fear / Or grovelling thought, to seek a refuge here.'<sup>24</sup> He goes on to name other churches. Westminster Abbey is imagined to have a kind of protective forcefield, '[w]here bubbles burst, and folly's dancing foam / Melts, if it cross the threshold.'<sup>25</sup> Bubbles and foam give a visible, substantial form to a space in air, and sound too might be said to give an audible form to vibrations in seemingly empty air. Where bubbles and foam symbolize ephemerality, architecture gives a more lasting form to artistic imagining while yet retaining an impression of aerial unboundedness. The final edifice mentioned is St Paul's Cathedral, 'whose sky-like dome / Hath typified by reach of daring art / Infinity's embrace.'<sup>26</sup>

I will return to St Paul's and its sky-like dome in the second half of this chapter. For now, I want to contrast William's sonnets on King's College Chapel with his sister Dorothy's account of visiting the chapel nearly a decade earlier. Dorothy doesn't write about sound, but I include her remarks because she describes a sensation of dizziness, a moment of sensory disruption that draws attention to the normally unnoticed role that auditory perception plays in keeping us balanced. Dorothy latches on to her perceptual response to try to explain, or explain away, the emotional feeling of fear that she experiences after being pressured to ascend the heights of the chapel:

my Guide persuaded me to go to the top of the Building, where I had a fine view of all the Colleges and the town. When I found myself there alone with that stranger an odd fright came upon me I seemed to be so completely in his power, he might, as I thought have done what he pleased with me and nobody could have seen or heard or done any thing about it. This was very foolish and after sitting down a little while I got the better of it. Perhaps my dizziness from mounting to so great a height might be the main cause of this feeling.<sup>27</sup>

Her fear is a rational one: the fear of a woman finding herself alone with a strange man. But once the danger has passed, she looks to trace fears that might be deemed paranoid or unfounded back to their source in perceptual experience. The sensation of dizziness, she suggests, 'might be the main cause of this feeling'. The experience seems genuinely to have unsettled her, but she later dismisses her fear ('this was very foolish'). Once she regained her balance, she briskly states, she 'got the better of it'. Writing about the experience seems to have had a similarly stabilizing effect. Her remarks reveal not only how the auditory-spatial perception of a place can give rise to an emotional response but also how being able to locate, or relocate,

<sup>24</sup> Wordsworth, 'Continued', 203 (ll. 2–3).

<sup>25</sup> Wordsworth, 'Continued', ll. 5–6.

<sup>26</sup> Wordsworth, 'Continued', ll. 8–10.

<sup>27</sup> Dorothy Wordsworth to Mrs Cookson, 29 August 1810, *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Middle Years: 1806–1820*, ed. Ernest De Selincourt, rev. Mary Moorman and Alan G. Hill, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), II. 433.

the source of a negative feeling becomes another way of being able to say you have got the better of it.

A similar instance, this time at the top of St Paul's Cathedral, sees Dorothy again experience a kind of vertigo that connects giddiness with fear, as she recounts in a letter:

When I was in the whispering gallery at St. Paul's, I had the most dreadful sensation of giddiness and fear that I ever experienced. I could not move one foot beyond another, and I retired immediately, unable to look down; and I am sure when the sense of personal danger should be added to that other bodily fear, it would be too much for me.<sup>28</sup>

While Dorothy distinguishes between a 'sense of personal danger' and 'bodily fear' (which might mean embodied fear, or fear for the body's safety, or both), the overwhelming impression here is that, again, the psychological and physiological are linked. She does not mention that striking and famous feature of the whispering gallery: its echoing effect. And yet her account of how fear resounds and reduplicates—how a sense of danger 'should be added' to other fears—corresponds with the way the whispering gallery is often written about in psychologized terms, its famed echoes a metaphor for reverberating fears or dread. This follows her description of an event that was a source of profound joy, and at this point, curiously, her writing is full of repetitions and doublings. So even though she does not record the whispering gallery's echoing phenomenon, it is as if the memory of it manifests in indirect and transmuted ways through the effect of verbal echoing in her letter.

These echoes give voice to her feelings on the birth of her nephew. This was the third child of her brother William and sister-in-law Mary. The couple already had an older boy, John, aged 3, and a daughter, Dorothy, nearly 2. The birth of this second son occurred almost exactly three years (save a few days) after the first. Dorothy makes much of the coincidence, presenting the second son's birth as a repetition of the first's: it was 'the very same thing over again,' she writes, 'our first feelings were revived... I felt a double rushing-in of love.'<sup>29</sup> She seeks to preserve the memory while also placing it in the family's history as an echo of the past. The baby was initially going to be called William, after his father, but as their friend the poet Robert Southey pointed out, you could not have 'two *William Wordsworths*' (emphasis original). There was confusion enough already with the daughter being named after the sister, and so 'the inconvenience would be doubled.'<sup>30</sup> Still, there must have been something tempting in the thought that the adult siblings' cherished bond might be repeated in a pair of younger namesakes.

<sup>28</sup> Dorothy Wordsworth to Lady Beaumont, 17 June 1806, *Letters: Middle Years*, II, 44.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Dorothy Wordsworth, *Letters: Middle Years*, II, 43, 44.

Dorothy was a loving aunt, but overseeing the birth of another child had been a strain and once it is over she reflects with relief that ‘after my confinement to the house for these two days past I now doubly enjoy the quiet of the moss-hut, where I am writing.’<sup>31</sup> The homonym seems to raise the ghost echo of that other kind of confinement that is Mary’s, not hers. After the cramped confines of Dove Cottage, filled with all the violent noise of childbirth, Dorothy can now ‘doubly’ enjoy the insulated space for writing in the ‘quiet of the moss-hut.’<sup>32</sup> That faint rhyme of ‘quiet’ with ‘moss-hut’ is a condensed example of the way words carry echoes, and while this might be just a coincidence, it draws attention to how patterns of coincidence, doublings, and repetitions make their way into Dorothy’s letter. Writing becomes the space where associative thought resounds. Dorothy writes of present joys that seem like a repetition of past joys, which may yet carry echoing undertones of private turmoil. Although when she mentions the whispering gallery she does not pick up on its echoing phenomenon, the effect seems to reside within the letter as a kind of submerged metaphor, manifesting in the verbal repetitions. The submerged quality that I want to ascribe to the whispering gallery as metaphor raises questions, not least about how much to make of coincidences and echoes but also (relatedly) about how writing can be understood to trace subconscious echoes.

Ever since St Paul’s Cathedral had opened in 1711, visitors had flocked to the whispering gallery to experience for themselves the strange phenomenon whereby the slightest noise made in one part of the gallery was sent reverberating around the walls to be heard distinctly in another part. Other famous whispering galleries existed around the world—in ancient Mayan architecture, for example, in the seventeenth-century tomb Gol Gumbaz in India, and in the fifteenth-century Temple of Heaven in Beijing. The one in St Paul’s featured in numerous English travel guides of the eighteenth century, and was also frequently cited by scientists and musicologists.

The natural philosopher John Rowning observed that ‘the ticking of a watch may be heard from side to side, and a very easy whisper sent all round the dome.’ What Rowning adds to familiar observations about the whispering gallery’s echoing phenomenon is an alertness to the odd effect by which sound does not just travel from one space to another but, in moving, bypasses other spaces to leave pockets of silence: ‘sound is conveyed from one side of a whispering gallery to the opposite

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, II. 44. The moss-hut was a summer house built by the Wordsworths in the garden at Dove Cottage. Dorothy writes that it was intended to be ‘a place for my Brother to retire to for quietness’, and both William and Dorothy describe it as a place of sheltered quietness, from which they could hear the sound of the birds or nearby children playing. See *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Early Years, 1787–1805*, ed. Ernest De Selincourt, rev. Chester L. Shaver (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1967), 521, 593, 598.

<sup>32</sup> Jeffrey C. Robinson discusses the significance of the moss-hut at Dove Cottage (and in later years the summer house at Rydal Mount) as a space for listening and writing: Jeffrey C. Robinson, *Poetic Innovation in Wordsworth, 1825–1833: Fibres of These Thoughts* (London: Anthem Press, 2019), 144–52.

one, without being perceived by those who stand in the middle.<sup>33</sup> The composer William Gardiner also noted the echo's uncanny, disembodied effect: 'to hear one's own voice returned, as if it were the voice of another, is perhaps more surprising than the reflection of one's self in a glass.'<sup>34</sup>

Scientific explanations of sound waves often drew comparisons with the way light reflects and used the whispering gallery as an illustrative example.<sup>35</sup> While most often discussed for the apparent tricks it plays with sound, the dome of St Paul's also presented an optical illusion. The painter James Thornhill had produced a trompe l'oeil design of painted pillars and arches inside the dome which seemed to continue the solid architectural features below. The representation of the whispering gallery in literary works operates as a kind of rhetorical trompe l'oeil; its echoing effect provides a metaphor for the auditory hallucinations by which writing seems to reproduce speech.

In other contexts, too, the whispering gallery provided a suggestive metaphor. The way it allows people to listen in on private whispers led to its being thought of as an internalized form of eavesdropping. In Gloucester Cathedral there is a whispering wall fitted with a plaque to reassure or admonish visitors:

Doubt not but God who sits on high,  
Thy secret prayers can hear,  
When a dead wall thus cunningly,  
Conveys soft whispers to the ear.<sup>36</sup>

Like that chilling warning, 'the walls have ears', the possibility of being overheard also made the whispering gallery a sound-based metaphor for political surveillance. Edmund Burke, objecting to the oppression and corruption of British rule in India, argued against a new parliamentary bill put forward in 1786 that would grant the Board of Control yet further intrusive powers. As Burke saw it, the bill effectively aimed to 'erect a whispering gallery for the Board of Control, which demanded auricular confession, and armed with the new powers the Bill was to give it, would prove a direct copy of the ear of Dionysius'.<sup>37</sup> Burke aligns the whispering gallery with a famous cave in Sicily whose heightened acoustics made it a byword for political surveillance. Named the 'Ear of Dionysius', the cave was said

<sup>33</sup> John Rowning, *A Compendious System of Natural Philosophy*, 4 vols (London: John Rivington, 1779), I, 148.

<sup>34</sup> William Gardiner, *The Music of Nature* [1832] (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 297.

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, William Nicholson, *An Introduction to Natural Philosophy*, 2 vols (London: J. Johnson, 1805), II, 66–7.

<sup>36</sup> Quoted by Thomas Rudge in *The History and Antiquities of Gloucester* (Gloucester: Hough and Pace, 1811), 297.

<sup>37</sup> *The Parliamentary Register: Volume 29*, ed. John Stockdale (London: Debrett's, 1787), 418.

to have been used by Dionysius to imprison political dissidents in order to eavesdrop on them.<sup>38</sup>

Jeremy Bentham also mentions the cave in his plans for the panopticon. The famed observation device had initially been intended to include a mechanism for overhearing, too. Bentham had wanted the panopticon to include a series of tin tubes running from each prisoner's cell to the inspector's lodge so that 'the slightest whisper of the one might be heard by the other'. But there is a crucial difference, Bentham points out, between this and the Ear of Dionysius, since the latter is a means of detection rather than prevention; whereas, for those being listened in on in the panopticon, 'the object of the inspection principle is directly the reverse: it is to make them not only suspect, but be assured, that whatever they do is known.'<sup>39</sup> The effect is to produce an internalized disciplining process.

Some of these more sinister associations of surveillance and self-monitoring characterize Thomas De Quincey's account of the whispering gallery in St Paul's. When in 1856 De Quincey came to revise his exposing, unflinchingly candid *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (first published in 1821), he introduced a series of references to the whispering gallery.<sup>40</sup> The work follows in the line of Romantic autobiography characterized by the tell-all narration of self in Rousseau's *Confessions* (1782). But what De Quincey's addition of references to the whispering gallery reveals is a more fretful attitude towards disclosure and self-regulation that brings to mind Foucault's account of the confessional. For Foucault, the injunction to render into language the truth about oneself is what creates the private subject. In the various confessional practices to have emerged beyond the church context, Foucault traces 'the infinite task of extracting from the depths of oneself, in between the words, a truth which the very form of the confession holds out like a shimmering mirage.'<sup>41</sup> When De Quincey comes to give an account of himself he becomes obsessed with tracing things back to their source: an error, a wrong choice, a word that cannot be unsaid. His fears surrounding his own agency relate to the confessional's ambiguous role in allowing for the unburdening or production of guilt.

De Quincey was still a schoolboy when, along with a friend, he first visited St Paul's. On entering the whispering gallery he had been struck anew by a thought that 'often had persecuted' him: 'this thought turned upon the fatality that must often attend an evil choice. As an oracle of fear I remembered that great Roman

<sup>38</sup> See Leigh Eric Schmidt, *Hearing Things: Religion, Illusion, and the American Enlightenment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 27.

<sup>39</sup> Quoted by Lauri Siisiäinen, *Foucault and the Politics of Hearing* (London: Routledge, 2013), 58–9.

<sup>40</sup> Kathleen Blake has an excellent essay on the whispering gallery and narrative chronology: 'The Whispering Gallery and Structural Coherence in De Quincey's *Revised Confessions of an English Opium-Eater*', *Studies in English Literature, 1500–1900* 13 (1973), 632–3.

<sup>41</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: Volume 1, The Will to Knowledge*, trans. Robert Hurley (London: Penguin, 2020), 59.



warning, *Nescit vox missa reverti* (that a word once uttered is irrevocable).<sup>42</sup> Mark Ellis Thomas suggests that the Roman warning applies to the *Confessions* themselves, whose earlier text, once uttered, had returned again and again throughout De Quincey's life in an ongoing process of revision and expansion.<sup>43</sup> The context of the phrase 'nescit vox missa reverti' in Horace's *Ars Poetica* bears this out, since it appears in a warning about publishing work too soon.<sup>44</sup> But more than this, the whispering gallery's acoustics come to signal a warning about how one wrong choice will have consequences that go on reverberating and magnifying for the rest of our lives.

A couple of years after De Quincey visited it, the memory of the whispering gallery returned to him just as he was on the brink of running away from school, an action which the *Confessions* claim set in motion a series of events that later led to his opium addiction. On the morning of his escape, in a trance-like waking dream he recalls remembering the Roman warning:

This sentiment of nervous recoil from any word or deed that could not be recalled had been suddenly re-awakened on that London morning, by the impressive experience of the Whispering Gallery. At the earlier end of the gallery had stood my friend, breathing in the softest of whispers a solemn but not acceptable truth. At the further end, after running along the walls of the gallery, that solemn truth reached me as a deafening menace in tempestuous uproars.<sup>45</sup>

De Quincey describes a dramatically amplifying effect that transmutes the 'softest of whispers' into 'deafening', 'tempestuous uproars'. But in the whispering gallery of St Paul's sound travels; it does not actually get any louder. (A footnote takes similar licence when explaining how the 'gentlest of whispers' at one end 'is reverberated at the other end in peals of thunder'.)<sup>46</sup> De Quincey attributes to the gallery's acoustic effect the amplified emotional resonance that for him it has come to symbolize.

The confessional practice of giving outward expression to a private truth seems almost parodied in his writings, which swap the confiding intimacy of the sealed confession box for the exaggeratedly amplifying effect of the whispering gallery. But as with the Foucauldian confessional, the truth once uttered seems to take on its own constitutive agency. The past perfect tense describes how his friend 'had stood' at the end of the gallery when he first whispered the truth; that truth then gains its own momentum 'after running along the walls'. With the shift in tense the truth becomes a part of the passing time, its reverberations set running.

<sup>42</sup> Thomas De Quincey, *Volume 2: Confessions of an English Opium-Eater 1821–1856, The Works of Thomas De Quincey*, gen. ed. Grevel Lindop, 21 vols (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2000–3), II, 156.

<sup>43</sup> Mark Ellis Thomas, 'Repetition and Difference in Nineteenth-Century British Narrative', PhD thesis, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1992, <https://www.proquest.com/docview/304012322>, 79.

<sup>44</sup> Horace, *Satires, Epistles, The Art of Poetry*, trans. H. Rushton Fairclough (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 483.

<sup>45</sup> De Quincey, II, 156.

<sup>46</sup> De Quincey, II, 156 n.

The gallery's acoustic phenomenon is then reimagined as the hallucinatory inner voice of the conscience, which will sound again at 'the other end of thy long life-gallery':

a voice, too late for warning, seemed audibly to say, 'Once leave this house, and a Rubicon is placed between thee and all possibility of return. Thou wilt not say that what thou doest is altogether approved in thy secret heart. Even now thy conscience speaks against it in sullen whispers; but at the other end of thy long life-gallery that same conscience will speak to thee in volleying thunders.'<sup>47</sup>

The distance between one end of the gallery and another is figured not only as the distance between now and the end of his life but also as the distancing of voice, as his conscience seems to speak from outside himself. 'A' voice speaks to him in language oddly archaic and estranged. Set apart from the self-narrating voice of the *Confessions* by quotation marks, the conscience speaks as internalized judgment.

The idea of the whispering gallery as the projected voice of conscience again returns to De Quincey years later, after his mother levels the charge at him that in running away from school he had set a bad example for his younger brothers. 'My conscience smote me at these words,' he writes: 'Here now, within three days, rang like a solemn knell, reverberating from the sounding-board within my awakened conscience, one of those many self-reproaches so dimly masked, but not circumstantially prefigured, by the secret thought under the dome of St. Paul's Cathedral about its dread Whispering Gallery.'<sup>48</sup> What it was that went on ringing we do not get to hear until the fifth clause of the sentence, as if the syntax structure carries that reverberating, prolonging quality of sound and dinning self-reproach. This one of many self-reproaches can be traced back to the 'secret thought' in St Paul's, 'about its dread whispering gallery'. The word 'about' suggests the way a whisper runs *about* the walls of the dome, while also hinting at the uncertainty of 'aboutness' peculiar to dread.

Dread often involves a hovering, undefined sense of threat or inner conflict, unlike fear, which tends to be focused on an external danger. Fear is 'generally "fear about" something,' Martin Heidegger writes, in drawing a distinction between fear (*Furcht*) and dread (*Angst*). 'We are always *afraid* of this or that definite thing, which threatens us in this or that definite way,' he suggests, whereas dread 'is always a dreadful feeling "about" – but not about this or that. The indefiniteness of *what* we dread is not just lack of definition: it represents the essential impossibility of defining the "what".'<sup>49</sup> De Quincey does not let us in on the secret of that 'secret thought' whose warning later reverberates ('so dimly masked, but not circumstantially prefigured') in the sounding-board of his conscience.

<sup>47</sup> De Quincey, II. 156.      <sup>48</sup> De Quincey, II. 169.

<sup>49</sup> Martin Heidegger, 'What is Metaphysics?', trans. R. F. C. Hull and Alan Crick, in *Existence and Being*, intro. Werner Brock (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1949), 335.

His references to the whispering gallery relate more broadly to the disturbing experience of continuing to hear a sound of warning that is detached from any identifiable source of danger. In the example of Rabelais's frozen words, with which this chapter began, the sound of a battle is heard long after it has actually taken place. Continuing to hear a note of alarm long after the danger has passed might offer a suggestive figure for trauma. When Rabelais's characters hear the shouts and cries signalling battle, they are caught between a fight or flight response, not knowing whether to stay and defend themselves or flee. A character urging flight insists, 'I do not say this out of any fear [*paour*] that I have; for I dread [*crains*] nothing but danger.'<sup>50</sup> There is a teasing irony to this denial of cowardice in the face of a battle that is not actually happening any more, but still the remark touches on something urgent about the need to justify and pinpoint his source of fear. It also suggests a distinction between facing an immediate fear versus dread of some apprehended but undefined danger. Once the frozen sounds melt in the air, Rabelais's characters discover that the battle was over long ago; the warning stops being a warning as soon as the danger is known to have passed. The difference for De Quincey is that the whispering gallery sets off a warning that continues to sound, so that any later danger comes to be retrospectively folded back into that warning and its reverberating feelings of dread.

If putting those feelings into words then proves self-fulfilling, it also holds out the promise of relief. He longs to explain to his mother what had caused him to run away from school that time, but paradoxically it is his prolix way with words that prevents him: 'My mother was predisposed to think ill of all causes that required many words: I, predisposed to subtleties of all sorts and degrees, had naturally become acquainted with cases that could not unrobe their apparellings down to that degree of simplicity.' 'Causes' is elided with 'cases', as if the upshot of all his eloquent subtilizing is to turn the former into the latter. For all this, he cannot bring himself to confide in his mother: 'a solitary word, which I attempted to mould upon my lips, died away into a sigh.' And if, he concludes, 'in this world there is one misery having no relief, it is the pressure on the heart from the *Incommunicable*.'<sup>51</sup>

When he attempts to give an account of himself before another, the solitary word loses its mould and fades into a non-verbal sigh. In the whispering gallery, that act of confession can be internalized and can find a familiar pattern (a pattern that is both reassuringly and tormentingly familiar) for feelings of dread that yet remain obscure:

<sup>50</sup> Rabelais, II. 225. '*Fuyons! Sauvons nous! Je ne le diz pour paour que je aye, car je ne crains rien fors les dangiers*'. The words '*paour*' and '*crains*' are sometimes translated as 'fear' and 'dread' and sometimes both as 'fear'. There seems to be a subtle difference between *la peur* and *la crainte*, where the former relates to a fear in the face of a known danger, whereas the latter has more to do with anticipating something as a danger or threat and seems closer to dread. I am grateful to Thomas Docherty for his advice on this matter.

<sup>51</sup> De Quincey, II. 170.

I had erred: that I knew, and did not disguise from myself. Indeed, the rapture of anguish with which I had recurred involuntarily to my experience of the Whispering Gallery, and the symbolic meaning which I had given to that experience, manifested indirectly my deep sense of error through the dim misgiving which attended it—that in some mysterious way the sense and the consequences of this error would magnify themselves at every stage of life.<sup>52</sup>

There is a point at which self-reproach begins to sound self-aggrandizing. De Quincey's prose picks up the repeating, amplifying effect of the gallery: 'erred' is heard again in 'recurred', while 'sense of error' extends into 'the sense and the consequences of this error'. The 'symbolic meaning' that he attaches to the gallery suggests how the architectural metaphor allows for analogous forms of thinking. It grants expression to what otherwise 'manifested indirectly' or was felt only as a 'dim misgiving'. The whispering gallery becomes for De Quincey, then, not just a symbol of guilt and glorified self-reproach but also the need to find in writing an equivalent 'sounding-board' of the conscience.

One of the best known of De Quincey's architectural metaphors is Giovanni Battista Piranesi's *Carceri d'Invenzione* (Imaginary Prisons) or 'prison dreams', which he invokes in the *Confessions* to describe his opium dreams. His description of Piranesi's prisons, with their intricate architectural designs, their optical illusions of endlessly repeating staircases, and their replicating self-portraits of multiple Piranesi figures, at times sounds similar to the whispering gallery. De Quincey pictures their 'vast Gothic halls', where, instead of a whisper, 'creeping along the sides of the walls you perceived a staircase'. The multiple selves positioned on staircases leading ever onwards might correspond to De Quincey's sense of the proliferating possible lives determined by every choice, as 'again Piranesi is perceived, by this time standing on the very brink of the abyss'.

De Quincey draws a direct link between the prisons and his own dreams: 'with the same power of endless growth and self-reproduction did my architecture proceed in dreams,' he writes, 'my dreams were indeed chiefly architectural.'<sup>53</sup> Critics have extended the comparison to De Quincey's prose style, too, with its convolutions, repetitions, digressions, and winding chronology. In his essay on Milton, De Quincey defends the use of architectural metaphors by arguing that they give the imagination the forms it needs to work with in order to conceptualize an otherwise unimaginable world: 'Paradise could not, in any other way, or by any artifice less profound, have been made to give up its essential and differential characteristics in a form palpable to the imagination.'<sup>54</sup> This also offers an explanation of how the architectural metaphor of the whispering gallery in De Quincey's own prose serves to make structures of thought palpable to the imagination.

<sup>52</sup> De Quincey, II. 171.

<sup>53</sup> De Quincey, II. 259.

<sup>54</sup> De Quincey, XI. 439.

I conclude with Coleridge's architectural metaphor of the echo chamber, which he uses in a notebook entry to sum up a key difference in thinking about the relationship between the world within us and the world without:

The Materialist is the Idealist of the intelligible World – as the Idealist constrains the realities *ab extra* into illusions *ab intra*, so the Mat[erialist does] the realities *in* us into reflexes and echoes of things without us. – To the one the Universe is but an echo-chamber of the Soul; to the other the Soul is but an empty echo-chamber or whispering Labyrinth of the World –. Both alike deduce the 'Is' from the 'Appears', the Substance from the Shadow, the Sound from the Echo –<sup>55</sup>

Coleridge characterizes the idealist and materialist as taking the opposite extremes of the same approach (turning outer realities into inner illusions, or inner realities into the reflexes and echoes of things without). The examples discussed in this chapter—writing about music getting lodged in a roof, sound kissing stone, or a whisper running around the walls of a dome—bring together the immateriality of sound with the solid materiality of architecture. Seeking to evoke something of the perceptual reality of sound and space within the imaginary realm of a literary work then offers a further means of conceptualizing the interchange between the material and immaterial, and between inner and outer worlds. Coleridge's 'echo-chamber or whispering Labyrinth' is not only a metaphor for the writer actually standing in an echoey chapel or under the dome of St Paul's—even as that perceptual experience takes on rich or disturbing metaphorical resonance.

The echo chamber in Coleridge's notebook entry also brings to mind his famous definition of the primary and secondary imagination. While the primary imagination is held to be 'the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception', the secondary imagination is 'an echo of the former'.<sup>56</sup> Not *merely* an echo or *merely* secondary though, the secondary imagination is an actively creative principle that can be seen operating in works of art: it 'dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create', Coleridge writes, 'yet still at all events it struggles to idealize and to unify'.<sup>57</sup> But in his notebook entry Coleridge associates the echo with a negative kind of secondariness, one which works backwards to 'deduce the "Is" from the "Appears", the Substance from the Shadow, the Sound from the Echo'.

Trying to deduce the sound from the echo might be all that the literary representation of sound and voice can aim for. The writers I include in this chapter are especially alert to the ways in which echoes preserve sound, while also transmuting it in the process. If writing about echoes signals an especially self-conscious attempt to deduce the sound from the echo, then what the literary reimagining of echoes also demonstrates is the distortive, diffusive, and re-creative quality of echoes that brings them closer to Coleridge's account of the secondary imagination. The

<sup>55</sup> Coleridge, *Coleridge's Notebooks: A Selection*, ed. Seamus Perry (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 125–6.

<sup>56</sup> Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, I. 304.

<sup>57</sup> Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, I. 304.

metaphor of the universe as echo chamber is curiously literalized when writers respond to the acoustics in the material world of architectural space, but that metaphor then gets turned back around again when their writing gives voice to the echo chamber of the mind. Writing accordingly becomes the space for listening in on the interplay between voice and what Wordsworth calls ‘the mind’s / Internal echo of the imperfect sound.’<sup>58</sup>

#### FURTHER READING

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<sup>58</sup> Wordsworth, *The Thirteen-Book ‘Prelude’*, ed. Mark Reed (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1991), I. ll. 64–5.

# THE ROAR ON THE OTHER SIDE OF SILENCE

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## Sound, Hearing, and Social Change in Victorian Literature

ANNE-JULIA ZWIERLEIN

George Eliot's famous reference in *Middlemarch* (1871–2) to the 'roar which lies on the other side of silence', the world of noise below the threshold of ordinary human perception ('hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat'), captures a new nineteenth-century scientific interest in the epistemology and phenomenology of the auditory sense, its variable scales and potential technological enhancement.<sup>1</sup> While sound-amplifiers like the stethoscope had long been in use, new techniques for capturing, transporting, and reproducing sounds and voices—the phonograph and the telephone—had their genesis during this period. A whole range of scientific disciplines, and literary texts engaging with the sciences, investigated energetically the mechanisms of the auditory system and the sense of hearing: the groundbreaking treatise by physicist John Tyndall, *On Sound: A Course of Lectures* (1867), presented sonic vibrations as a physical force, further explaining how 'sonorous motion is transmitted to the auditory nerve', there resulting in the sensory perception of sound.<sup>2</sup> Literary texts of the time probed on multiple levels the new subjectivities and forms of social connection (or disconnection) that resulted from the period's dominant physio-psychological modelling of the human constitution. Amid these discussions, literary representations of, and metadiscursive engagements with, the problem of sense perception took centre stage—and these literary representations

<sup>1</sup> George Eliot, *Middlemarch*, ed. David Carroll, introd. Felicia Bonaparte (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 182.

<sup>2</sup> Anon., 'Professor Tyndall on Sound', *Littell's Living Age* 1218 (5 October 1867), 55–9 (56, 59). Repr. from the *Saturday Review*. References are to John Tyndall, *Sound: A Course of Lectures Delivered at the Royal Institution of Great Britain* (London: Longmans & Co., 1867).

were homing in specifically on the precarious intersection between inward and outward being, the permeable threshold between the social and material world and the world of subjective experience. Eliot, developing her work in dialogue with her partner G. H. Lewes's writings about physio-psychology, throughout her writings complicates and probes the precarious distinction between 'sense by impressions, derived from inward conditions, [and] those which are directly dependent on external stimulus'.<sup>3</sup>

Nineteenth-century literary texts were closely allied with and informed by the sciences, and, as literature and science studies never tire of emphasizing, relations between the two domains were not (yet) a 'one-way street': literary and cultural representations did not just modestly reflect new scientific findings but actively engaged in a dynamic, reciprocal set of relations with scientific theory and practice. At the centre of interest in this chapter are the ways in which literary texts, inextricably tied to the rhythms of speech and the question of 'printed sound', share with scientific treatises a preoccupation with the properties, conceptualizations, and remediations of sound and hearing. Even more centrally and building on these investigations, the chapter is concerned with the social dimension of sound, the exclusionary and inclusionary practices of represented social formations as they are enacted through the literary representation of sense experiences. Schroeder reads the mid-nineteenth century as a 'culture that had begun to theorize aural experience in anticipation of the mechanical recording, reproduction, and commodification of sound in the late nineteenth century', and she asks us to expand our notion of 'sonic media' so as to encompass 'novels as sound technologies that foreshadowed later ones'.<sup>4</sup> This helpful proposition alerts us to the fact that nineteenth-century literary texts can be seen to not only share the preoccupations of science but also explore them via different representational techniques: as with the telepathic voices in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847)—on which more below—and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), which in the one case anticipate, and in the other produce a deliberate opposition to, the voice-storing and transporting capacities of the phonograph.

Tracing these aspects enables us to take seriously Colligan and Linley's suggestion that 'in the literature of the period especially we find [the] forgotten nineteenth-century theory of media': inquiring into representations of sensory perception—hearing, in this case—always also means scrutinizing the period's literary thinking about mediation (of orality into print and vice versa) and literary representations of mediality (the texts' metadiscursive awareness of their own status as a sensory medium). Moreover, it is among the distinctive characteristics of literary writing that, besides the scientific and aesthetic dimensions of textualized

<sup>3</sup> George Eliot, *The George Eliot Letters*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, 5 vols (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), V. 280.

<sup>4</sup> Janice Schroeder, 'Village Voices: Sonic Fidelity and the Acousmatic in *Adam Bede*', *Victorian Review* 37, no. 1 (2011), 181–98 (181).



sound, there is also a political dimension: the intricate represented affiliations and interactions between the senses are shown to play out across, comment upon, and even to some extent produce, the texts' representations of multifarious social and political life.<sup>5</sup>

Nineteenth-century literary prose writings, especially novels but also some novellas and short stories, receive privileged attention in this chapter, despite the fact that in many respects poetry is the more immediately recognizable literary form to investigate and generate sound. Novels during this period, the chapter argues, explore the scientific properties as well as the social and political implications of the sense of hearing most energetically in two modes of writing: realism and the Gothic—literary modes which sometimes also converge and overlap. Central phenomena recurring in such literary explorations of the auditory sense are unlocatable sound; hypersensitivity to sound; and the passivity of hearing. Brief introductory examples are offered here in order to highlight the close nexus between scientific thinking about the auditory sense and literary probings of its implications for social formation and individual subjective experience.

Firstly, new possibilities of sound storage and enhancement via stethoscope and phonograph gave rise to new—and reinforced existent—philosophical speculations about disembodied voices and 'sonic monstrosity' in Gothic and horror literature. Sounds are here dissociated from their source, for instance in Edgar Allan Poe's short story 'The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar' (1845), where an unearthly voice issues from the broken automaton of a dead body.<sup>6</sup> Secondly, another area of intense dialogue between literary and scientific investigations was the challenge of modelling pathological hypersensitivity to sound, evident for instance in Eliot's half-realist, half-Gothic novella *The Lifted Veil* (1859), which focuses on protagonist Latimer's sensory overstimulation and phantasmagoric hearing of voices. Combined with the dark secret of the murderous Bertha at its core, this novella also evokes the tradition of Poe's highly sound-sensitive Gothic short stories—a famous instance being 'The Tell-Tale Heart' (1843), where the increasingly loud 'beating of [the murdered old man's] hideous heart' is generated inside the narrator's warped mind.<sup>7</sup> Besides their negotiation of an aesthetics of horror, these texts also ask questions

<sup>5</sup> Colette Colligan and Margaret Linley, 'Introduction: The Nineteenth-Century Invention of Media', in Colligan and Linley, eds, *Media, Technology, and Literature in the Nineteenth Century* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 1–19 (15).

<sup>6</sup> See Isabella van Elferen, 'Sonic Monstrosity', *Horror Studies* 7, no. 2 (2016), 307–18; and Anne-Julia Zwierlein, 'Sonic Monstrosity and Visionary Women: Female Speaking Automata and Mass Mediation in Late-Nineteenth-Century British Science and Fiction', *Anglistik: International Journal of English Studies* 30, no. 3 (December 2019), 89–105. See Fred Botting, 'Poe, Voice and the Origin of Horror Fiction', in Jorge Sacido-Romero and Sylvia Mieszkowski, eds, *Sound Effects: The Object Voice in Fiction* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 73–100 (77).

<sup>7</sup> Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Tell-Tale Heart', in *Tales of Mystery and Imagination*, ed. Graham Clarke (London: J. M. Dent, 1993), 313–17 (317).

about the possibilities of individual liberty and exceptional subjectivities vis-à-vis social conventions and religious pieties.

My third (and last) introductory example is the scientific and literary discussion of the paradoxically passive action of hearing, which was commented upon widely in scientific observations about the strange ‘inescapability’ of sound.<sup>8</sup> James Sully in ‘Civilisation and Noise’ (1878), for instance, emphasizes that ‘nature has . . . left the ear without any power of self-protective movement.’<sup>9</sup> Developing these comments by nineteenth-century scientists into what we might term an allegory of social existence, Eliot has her narrator persona contemplate, in the literary, realist mode of *The Mill on the Floss* (1860), the effects of (individual) habituation to perpetual noise which transforms sound into silence: the narrator’s imagination here both expands and contracts while the background noises of the ‘rush of the water, and the booming of the mill’ are turning into ‘a great curtain of sound, shutting one out from the world beyond.’<sup>10</sup> We might argue that one of the central themes of this novel, the question of individual perception and experience set against the ready-made judgments and pressure for conformity exerted by ‘society’, can be said to be foreshadowed in these introductory observations about the peculiar properties of sound and hearing.

Homing in on this panorama of nineteenth-century interdisciplinary engagements with the auditory sense, and surveying a range of literary examples with an emphasis on the mid- to late Victorian period, this chapter focuses on Victorian literary prose fiction as a sounding board both incorporating and producing sound, intervening in scientific discussions but also moving beyond them in probing the social impact and social meaning of (represented) sound.<sup>11</sup> This includes attending to the social settings of literary production and readerly reception, and to literary writings’ pronounced metatextual awareness of their own mediality and sensory affordances. Textual representations of sounds, voices, and the sense of hearing can be shown to be closely interlinked with more general questions about shifting Victorian societal power balances and exclusionary and inclusionary practices. The chapter here especially investigates how literary evocations of the auditory sense negotiate nineteenth-century shifts in gender and class divisions, the increasing visibility and vocality of women, and finally, changing perceptions and persistent echoes of the British Empire.

<sup>8</sup> Kate Flint, ‘Sensuous Knowledge’, in Anne-Julia Zwierlein, ed., *Unmapped Countries: Biological Visions in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture* (London: Anthem Press, 2005), 247–56 (249).

<sup>9</sup> James Sully, ‘Civilisation and Noise’, *Fortnightly Review* 30 (1878), 704–20 (710).

<sup>10</sup> George Eliot, *The Mill on the Floss*, ed. Gordon S. Haight, introd. Dinah Birch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 8.

<sup>11</sup> See Garrett Stewart, *Reading Voices: Literature and the Phonotext* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

## Victorian Sound Studies and Printed Voices

By attending to the sonic, and more specifically to vocal sound, this chapter promotes ongoing endeavours to readjust the ‘critical focus on the visual [which] has become entrenched in nineteenth-century studies, . . . obscuring historical research on other forms of media and mediation’—although, indeed, there has been a rapid increase in recent decades of work on nineteenth-century acoustics.<sup>12</sup> Picker’s study *Victorian Soundscapes* (2003), tracing the new Victorian ‘age of “auscultation”’, the new sensitivity to sounds ‘from the tramp of a fly’s footstep to the roar of a volcanic blast’, received the compliment of a response publication, *Victorian Soundscapes Revisited*, edited by Hewitt and Cowgill (2007).<sup>13</sup> The BBC chimed in with their online ‘Victorian Soundfiles’ (2012) on street and factory noises and the sounds of a dairy. Yet as Picker emphasizes, cultural analysis is not interested primarily in reconstructing fugitive historical acoustics, but in the ‘subjective nature of sensation.’ While his study is intensely aware of distinct sounds of the Victorian past, for instance the street noises that drove Thomas Carlyle to construct his soundproof study, or the new ‘ghostly’ voices captured by the phonograph, the main emphasis of his work rests on ‘an analysis of the experiences of particular individuals listening under specific cultural influences and with discernable motivations . . . for hearing as they did.’<sup>14</sup>

Drawing on and developing his propositions, we can home in on how literary texts represent and at the same time destabilize sensory perception, and more specifically how they emphasize the localized, historicized, and social meanings of sound. Equally helpful for the purposes of this chapter is Sterne’s similar pioneer work in *The Audible Past* (2003), combining the history of communication technology (sound recording and transmission devices) with more general questions about the acculturation of sound and the visual bias in definitions of modernity. Colligan and Linley (2011), in attending to the question of sensory perception, emphasize how the nineteenth-century media environment contributed to ‘producing and recording alterations of consciousness and extensions of the human sensorium’ which created ‘the possibility for understanding the seeing, hearing, and touching body as a multi-media machine.’<sup>15</sup> This ties in with the important intervention by Schroeder (2011), mentioned earlier, who suggests ‘an expansion of our definition of sonic media beyond machines and their functions, to the relations between people, practices, and the technologies that were available in a given time and place for experiencing sound’—and among these technologies she proposes that we include the novel.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Colligan and Linley, ‘Introduction’, 9.

<sup>13</sup> John Picker, *Victorian Soundscapes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 6, 4.

<sup>14</sup> Two preceding quotations: Picker, *Victorian Soundscapes*, 14.

<sup>15</sup> Colligan and Linley, ‘Introduction’, 4.

<sup>16</sup> Schroeder, ‘Village Voices’, 181.

Discussing the place of the auditory in Victorian culture and literature (especially the novel) by examining the ‘noise of print’, this chapter singles out textual mediations of the voice and the vocal, which can be argued to echo the period’s interest in vocal sound as much more than a passive conduit of speech.<sup>17</sup> Investigations of historical orality also have to be concerned with vocal sound as the ‘social-material dimension of human language’.<sup>18</sup> As Kolesch and Krämer have shown, the voice can be analysed as a trace of the body while always remaining both natural and artificial, formed by rhetorical techniques and changing cultural conventions about tone, pitch, and rhythm in vocal delivery—and the examples of represented orality to be considered in this chapter show a deep metadiscursive awareness of this dimension, including implicated class and gender hierarchies.<sup>19</sup>

Attending to the sound of Victorian literary texts thus also involves revisiting the contexts of their production and reception. After all, orality and print were in this period understood to be radically intertwined. The Victorian rise of mass print media, fuelled by the abolition of the newspaper stamp tax in 1855 and novel print technologies as well as rising literacy rates after the introduction of the Education Act in 1870, competed against persisting cults of presence and orality. Storytelling, political speeches, sermons, penny readings, public lectures, courtroom trials, and stage versions of books contributed to a heterogeneous and thriving oral culture which, considering the huge audiences these vocal performances commanded, can well be seen as a mass culture in its own right.<sup>20</sup> Speech and sound, ubiquitous as they were in Victorian cultural life, were also incorporated into, and remediated by, the pedagogical and commercial projects of mass literacy and mass print. Ellison in his analysis of spoken and written nineteenth-century sermons argues that ‘residual orality is one of the most significant aspects of Victorian discourse’ and that, indeed, a great part if not most of Victorian writing had its origins in oral performance; while Leary has commented on the ‘sea of talk out of which emerged the Victorian periodical.’<sup>21</sup> From popular to more elevated forms of cultural production, orality retained its paramount importance: Hewitt emphasizes that ‘there is... a complex archaeology of the orality of intellectual production in nineteenth-century culture,’

<sup>17</sup> David Vincent, *The Rise of Mass Literacy: Reading and Writing in Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), 94.

<sup>18</sup> Charles Bernstein, ‘Foreword’, in Matthew Rubery, ed., *Audiobooks, Literature, and Sound Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2011), xiii–xvii (xvii).

<sup>19</sup> See Doris Kolesch and Sybille Krämer, eds, *Stimme: Annäherung an ein Phänomen* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2006).

<sup>20</sup> Further aspects are traced in Anne-Julia Zwierlein, ed., *Victorian Oral Cultures*, special issue of *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik* 63, no. 1 (2015).

<sup>21</sup> Robert H. Ellison, *The Victorian Pulpit: Spoken and Written Sermons in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Cranbury: Susquehanna University Press, 1998), 132. Patrick Leary, ‘Lost Voices’, Colby lecture delivered at the RSVP Conference at Canterbury Christ Church University, 22–23 July 2011. Transcript by A.-J. Zwierlein, n.p. Leary is referring to his *The Punch Brotherhood: Table Talk and Print Culture in Mid-Victorian London* (2010).

and he underlines ‘the influence of platform rhetoric and the rhythms of the spoken word on the form of Victorian prose writing’.<sup>22</sup>

Vice versa, rather than being read silently and reverently, printed texts were often performed orally—read out loud to groups of listeners in the workplace or family settings, as in Charles Dickens’s *Our Mutual Friend* (1864–5) where the orphan Sloppy, reading out the newspaper to the impoverished widow Betty Higden, ‘[does] the Police in different voices’.<sup>23</sup> The Victorian ‘craze for elocution’ and classroom recitation can be observed in corresponding popular middle-class contexts, with public oral performances staged on a daily basis.<sup>24</sup> Qualifying the notion of silent, contemplative reading with a view to the Victorian period, Vlock maintains that ‘people read novels, newspapers, social criticism – indeed, just about everything worth reading – through the lens of popular performance’.<sup>25</sup> The rhythm of Victorian literary texts routinely imitated the cadences of speech, using rhetorical sound figures like onomatopoeia, anaphora, and alliteration (in prose as well as poetry); Griffiths and Kreilkamp have written powerfully about the ‘printed voice of Victorian poetry’ in relationship to ‘voice and the Victorian storyteller’.<sup>26</sup> Victorian literature *was* sound; to engage with literature meant *hearing* the words on the page.

The mechanical reproduction of the voice via phonograph, radio, and telephone added a further dimension to this feedback loop between print and orality. And indeed, Stewart’s description of the act of reading as the creation of a ‘phonotext’ or sounding board is helpful for this chapter’s investigations of textually mediated sound and hearing.<sup>27</sup> Literary texts trace and project self-consciously the ‘huge whirlpool of noise’ which, as Thomas Carlyle expresses it in a letter written in 1853, arises from the ‘silent voices inside [the author’s] head’.<sup>28</sup> Nineteenth-century literature thus implicitly theorized sound, turning literary writings into a vast sensorium and a metadiscourse on sound at the same time. Thus, while mass print culture to some extent displaced the voice, on the other hand it enshrined it via its multiple

<sup>22</sup> Joseph Meisel, *Public Speech and the Culture of Public Life in the Age of Gladstone* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 1; Martin Hewitt, ‘Aspects of Platform Culture in Nineteenth-Century Britain’, *Nineteenth-Century Prose* 29, no. 1 (2002), 1–32 (6).

<sup>23</sup> Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend*, ed. Michael Cotsell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 198. See also Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 87–8.

<sup>24</sup> Amanda Adams, *Performing Authorship in the Nineteenth-Century Transatlantic Lecture Tour* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2014), 4. For classroom recitations see Catherine Robson, *Heart Beats: Everyday Life and the Memorized Poem* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

<sup>25</sup> Deborah M. Vlock, *Dickens, Novel Reading, and the Victorian Popular Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 3.

<sup>26</sup> Eric Griffiths, *The Printed Voice of Victorian Poetry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989); Ivan Kreilkamp, *Voice and the Victorian Storyteller* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

<sup>27</sup> Stewart, *Reading Voices*, 71.

<sup>28</sup> Thomas Carlyle, Letter to Alexander Carlyle (8 April 1853), quoted in Picker, *Victorian Soundscapes*, 56.

representations of vocal sound, reinforcing the ambivalent status of textual voices as 'both troubling and an object of desire'.<sup>29</sup>

## Hearing Voices: Class and Gender

Class was deeply inscribed in speaking voices and their mediation, first and foremost in terms of what Mugglestone describes as 'the rise of accent as a social symbol'.<sup>30</sup> As Vlock argues, 'English society is built on voices, with volumes of social history inscribed in the accents, inflections, vocabularies of English speech'.<sup>31</sup> Politically engaged criticism intent on the (metaphorical) 'recuperation' of working-class or 'women's voices' can obfuscate to some extent the processes of mediation and (re)-construction that were and are involved.<sup>32</sup> In literary representation, the noise of the 'masses' and fears about fluctuating class and gender hierarchies are often intricately interlinked: Victorian literary texts are ripe with fears of unruly working-class crowds, often equated with a monstrous, dangerous, far-off noise getting closer—a different kind of 'roar on the other side of silence'. Examples are the workers' riots in Dickens's *Hard Times* (1854), Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1854), and Eliot's *Felix Holt* (1866)—a noise described in Carlyle's *Chartism* (1839), an influence on all of these texts, as 'these wild inarticulate souls, struggling there, with inarticulate uproar, like dumb creatures in pain, unable to speak what is in them!'<sup>33</sup> Yet the phenomenon of textual orality is also tied to the question of cross-class ventriloquisms, famously so in *North and South*, where both the protagonist Margaret's voice and the narrator's own voice increasingly adopt the dialectal inflections of the northern working classes with whom Margaret comes to empathize.

Speaking voices were also profoundly gendered: Victorian elocutionists explored the differences in modulation and physical reach between male and female voices. Samuel Beeton's *Art of Public Speaking* (1882) on 'Registers of Voices' includes only 'men's voices', ranging from tenor through bass to baritone, the 'best for public speaking'; and there were handbills advertising elocutionary training (for men) which explicitly promised help in eliminating an 'effeminate voice'.<sup>34</sup> Schroeder reminds us that the meanings of speech performances are only partially under the

<sup>29</sup> Kreilkamp, *Voice and the Victorian Storyteller*, 29, 32.

<sup>30</sup> Lynda Mugglestone, *Talking Proper: The Rise of Accent as Social Symbol* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

<sup>31</sup> Vlock, *Novel Reading*, 18.

<sup>32</sup> Susan Hamilton, 'Women's Voices and Public Debate', in Joanne Shattock, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to English Literature, 1830–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 91–107 (91).

<sup>33</sup> Thomas Carlyle, *Chartism*, 2nd edn (London: James Fraser, 1840), 6.

<sup>34</sup> Samuel Orchard Beeton, *Beeton's Art of Public Speaking: A Practical Treatise on Oratory* (London: Ward, Lock & Co., 1882), 71. Anon., 'How to Eliminate an "Effeminate Voice"', Handbill advertising Elocution Lectures (1867), Bodleian Library, Oxford, John Johnson collection, Box 37 (Education).

speaker's control: 'A "feminine" voice... was (and often remains) a distraction from, or negation of, the "content" of [a woman's] speech.'<sup>35</sup> Victorian literary and journalistic mediations of female orality also often conflate the feminist orator and the hysterical female, while, as Kahane asserts, 'there is a significant distinction to be drawn between them as historical figures... [T]he feminist orator claimed an active subject position and the power of the voice; the hysteric passively acted out through her body what her voice could not speak.'<sup>36</sup> From the later nineteenth century onwards, however, there was also increased emphasis on the aptitude of women's voices for public speaking; Ray Strachey, in her history of the women's rights movement, *The Cause* (1928), remembers the early days: 'these first speakers... hardly knew whether the female voice could carry in a large hall...; [yet] the fact that the meetings were always successful and their voices always audible must have been a recurring delight.'<sup>37</sup>

Listening, likewise, was not seen as a neutral act: again, there were assumptions about a divergent (and to-be-monitored) susceptibility to sounds and voices in the working-class and female demographic. While there was an energetic working-class culture engaging with literature through various media and the spoken word via extensive projects of self-education, still social reformers of the period also offered heavily mediated and in part patronizing accounts, such as the 'Literature of Costermongers' chapter in Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851–61), which describes the costermongers as 'very fond of hearing any one read aloud to them' and offers condescendingly amused versions of their comments and reactions.<sup>38</sup> Such semi-fictional accounts of raptured (but also subversive) working-class audiences tie in with the nineteenth-century elitist dilemma of whether one should 'attempt to capture and hold the attention of the masses', or rather 'shut out the crowd and make art, literature, and science more exclusive.'<sup>39</sup> Huyssen has underlined the late Victorian debate about the lost 'authenticity' of art in the context of a new mass popular culture, which was 'obsessively gender[ed]... as feminine' in political, psychological, and aesthetic discourse, 'while high culture... clearly remain[ed]

<sup>35</sup> Janice Schroeder, 'Speaking Volumes: Victorian Feminism and the Appeal of Public Discussion,' *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 25, no. 2 (2003), 97–117 (98).

<sup>36</sup> Claire Kahane, *Passions of the Voice: Hysteria, Narrative, and the Figure of the Speaking Woman, 1850–1915* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 7–8.

<sup>37</sup> Ray Strachey, *The Cause: A Short History of the Women's Movement in Great Britain* (London: Bell & Sons, 1928), 119. See Jessie Murray-Clark, *How to Excel in Singing and Elocution: A Manual for Lady Students* (London: Cramer & Co., 1884), and Lucy D. Bell, *The Art of Public Speaking* (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1923), esp. 92–5, with many examples of successful women speakers. These aspects are analysed in more detail in my monograph in progress, issuing from my DFG-funded project 'Lecturing Women: Sensation, Gender, and Mass Print Culture in Britain, 1860–1910' (ZW81/8-1; 8-2).

<sup>38</sup> Henry Mayhew, 'The Literature of Costermongers,' in Victor Neuburg, ed., *Henry Mayhew: London Labour and the London Poor* (London: Penguin, 1985), 24–7 (25). On working-class self-education see Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes*.

<sup>39</sup> Nicholas Daly, *Sensation and Modernity in the 1860s* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), blurb.

the privileged realm of male activities.<sup>40</sup> Persisting cultural pessimisms thus projected readerships and audiences in the newly widened popular cultural sphere as indiscriminating, sensation-hungry, and sensitive to sounds that were actually noise; compare Henry James's reminiscences about an 1890s lecture by George du Maurier where he describes half-admiringly, half-sceptically his friend's successful manner of 'addressing the many-headed monster . . . , mak[ing] the mass (as *we* know the mass), to vibrate'.<sup>41</sup>

Fears of the demagogical powers of the voice became prevalent in the context of the extension of the vote to working-class men in 1867: Meisel offers vital insights into the 'novel functionality that public speech acquired in nineteenth-century public culture' at this point, and Biagini investigates anxieties about the 'charismatic leader' as discussed in the press.<sup>42</sup> The potentially dangerous link between sensory perception, the 'feeling of reading', and demagogical or seductive appeal was also emphasized in debates about gender—as when H. L. Mansel famously ostracized 1860s sensation novels for corrupting females, feminizing males, and 'preaching to the nerves' of readers.<sup>43</sup> Garrison, in *Science, Sexuality, and Sensation Novels* (2010), shows that the debate about sensation fiction was closely linked to constructions of female physiology. In popular serialized texts of the time, the affect produced in readers by reading was often implicitly represented in terms of the affect produced in audiences by hearing the lecturer's voice: for instance, an instalment in the penny fiction weekly *The London Reader* describes 'shock after shock of electric thrills' passing through its intradiegetic (to a great extent, female) audience members' bodies. These shocks are generated synaesthetically—by the sight of a represented (male) speaker, and by this speaker's 'soul thrilling tones', his 'magnetic power and eloquence'.<sup>44</sup> Female readers were thought and feared to be more susceptible to sensory (and sensual) impressions—compare Eliot's feminized, hypersensitive Latimer—and thus had to be shielded from the depraving influences of sensation literature, with its reinterpretation of the home as a scene of transgression, its fluid gender boundaries, and emphasis on sexual passions and violence. Remarkably, Mansel's metaphor styles such overstimulation of the nerves as deriving from

<sup>40</sup> Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture and Postmodernism* (London: Macmillan, 1986), 47.

<sup>41</sup> Henry James, 'George Du Maurier', quoted in Jill Galvan, *The Sympathetic Medium: Feminine Channeling, the Occult, and Communication Technologies, 1859–1919* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), 111–12. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>42</sup> Meisel, *Public Speech*, 5; see Eugenio F. Biagini, *Liberty, Retrenchment, and Reform: Popular Liberalism in the Age of Gladstone, 1860–1880* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

<sup>43</sup> Henry Longueville Mansel, 'Sensation Novels' [1863], in Andrew King and John Plunkett, eds, *Victorian Print Media: A Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 55–7 (55). See Rachel Ablow, ed., *The Feeling of Reading: Affective Experience and Victorian Literature* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010).

<sup>44</sup> Anon., 'Gloria, or Married in Rage', *The London Reader of Literature, Science, Art, and General Information* 30, no. 764 (22 December 1877), 184–6 (184).



perverted forms of ‘preaching’: sensation fiction is imagined as using the voice of a sinister cleric-demagogue.

### Schizophrenia: ‘Where Is the Speaker? Is It Only a Voice?’

The sound of the voice, ‘both troubling and an object of desire’, always potentially demagogical and seductive, and deeply inscribed with the marks of class and gender, in nineteenth-century literary texts thus frequently becomes an allegory of literature’s own interactions with the readership (and the audience of its ‘phonotext’). The Gothic dissociation of sound from source, which this chapter glanced at in its introductory references to Poe, is a recurring literary topos which establishes a metadiscourse about the links between print and orality and the question of authorial production and readerly reception. The dissociation of sound from its origin is addressed as ‘schizophrenia’ in Schafer’s work on soundscapes, and more recently, van Elferen has developed the concept of ‘sonic monstrosity’ to describe the ‘cognitive dissonance’ created by unlocatable sound.<sup>45</sup> However, Barthes’s well-known analysis of the elusive ‘grain’ of the voice, the specific individual vocal properties that are lost once the moment of speaking has passed, alerts us to the fact that where vocal sound is concerned, such dissonance is an inherent feature. Immaterial and ephemeral, the voice is both a product of the body and, in transcending the body, links life and death: ‘This phantom being of the voice is what is dying out . . . it is one of those objects which exist only once they have disappeared.’<sup>46</sup>

An iconic early-century literary example of the voice as the central defining feature of a person is offered in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818), where the unalienable, singular humanity (indeed, the ‘soul’) of Frankenstein’s Creature, albeit physically pieced together from multiple dead bodies, is revealed through his voice when he interacts politely with the blind father of the De Lacey family—and, by proxy, with the readers who ‘hear’ him along with the old man (and who, resulting from a nested structure of echoing voices, have been listening to the Creature as first-person narrator for several chapters). As Brantlinger argues, ‘this subaltern’s story is the heart and soul, the reason for being, both of the entire novel and of its author’s originary nightmare. The disfigured figure of monstrous articulation and literacy *is*, in a figurative sense, the novel – or rather, it is *both* the novel and the reading Monster, ourselves as readers.’ This moment of interaction also highlights the scientific and literary debate about hearing: nineteenth-century physiologists expounded on the amplified sense of hearing in the blind, arguing that sensory disabilities could result in a corresponding strengthening of other sensory capaci-

<sup>45</sup> Murray Schafer, *Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and Tuning of the World* (Rochester: Destiny, 1994), 90–1. Van Elferen, ‘Sonic Monstrosity’, 308.

<sup>46</sup> Roland Barthes, *A Lover’s Discourse* (1977), trans. Richard Howard (Paris: Seuil, 2002), 114.

ties.<sup>47</sup> In literary scenes revolving around impaired sensory perception, as with the old De Lacey's blindness, we are thus made doubly aware of the 'listening' act that is reading, of the 'sounding board' that is a text. Against this backdrop we can also discern the pitfalls of later cycles of adaptation, as the 'monster' in Shelley's text was increasingly silenced in the course of literary history—exchanged for the 'mute Monster' of later stage versions, and also often marked as a social subordinate by added features of class (and race).<sup>48</sup>

Another half-realist, half-Gothic text, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), combines schizophonia with the enhanced susceptibility to sound in the blind. The final reunion between Jane Eyre and Mr Rochester here has the blinded Rochester ask, despairingly, 'where is the speaker? Is it only a voice?', pleading to be allowed to 'feel', for the voice to be 'perceptible to the touch'.<sup>49</sup> Yet Jane's voice, which had also, earlier, claimed her own equality with him before God, captures her essence for him—and the readers. It is, in fact, through their voices that they are united, as staged in the novel's earlier central scene of telepathic connection: Rochester's cry for 'Jane! Jane! Jane!' resounding inside her own and the readers' heads is among the best-known mid-Victorian Gothic moments, and the process of hearing is also carefully prepared for the reader, the direct speech being introduced by physiological commentary: 'The feeling was not like an electric shock, but it was quite as sharp, as strange, as startling: it acted on my senses as if their utmost activity hitherto had been but torpor, from which they were now summoned and forced to wake.... I saw nothing, but I heard a voice somewhere cry.' Jane's entire perception is here concentrated in her sense of hearing; whether the stimulus is internal or external is left undecided in this passage (yet she convinces herself that, rather than a supernatural event, 'it is the work of nature').

Rochester later recapitulates the moment of connection as a moment of synaesthetic experience, the creation via sound of scenes before the 'mind's eye': 'I heard a hill-sent echo repeat the words. Cooler and fresher at the moment the gale seemed to visit my brow: I could have deemed that in some wild, lone scene, I and Jane were meeting. In spirit, I believe we must have met.'<sup>50</sup> Combining his description of sound with the evocation of abstract landscapes, he is also repeating Jane's earlier assertion of a spiritual meeting ground. Blind Rochester offers a version of the nineteenth-century post-Romantic synaesthetic coalition between sound and image, 'the inseparability of multiple aesthetic media in nineteenth-century art and literature'.<sup>51</sup> Schroeder (with reference to Eliot's slightly later texts) has similarly

<sup>47</sup> See Kate Flint, *The Victorians and the Visual Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 64–92.

<sup>48</sup> Both quotations: Patrick Brantlinger, *The Reading Lesson: The Threat of Mass Literacy in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 68, 63.

<sup>49</sup> Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1992), 525.

<sup>50</sup> Preceding quotations: Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 508, 509, 542–3.

<sup>51</sup> Colligan and Linley, 'Introduction', 12.

emphasized the importance of synaesthesia, equally relevant for both authors: she draws our attention to the fact that ‘visual and sonic references often co-mingle in [her] writing, suggesting that she[, too,] did not privilege one form of sensory experience over another, but rather probed the ways in which they were mutually reinforcing or contradictory.’<sup>52</sup> Importantly, during the final reunion when Rochester addresses her as ‘only a voice’, Jane does not disclose the fact that she had earlier had the same telepathic experience of voices answering each other—like Mary, mother of Christ, she ‘kept these things then, and pondered them in [her] heart’. However, both in terms of the final pronounced shift in the couple’s power relations and the novel’s metadiscursive reflection about authorial production and readerly response, it is crucial that Jane’s ‘heart’, mind, and voice are, of course, coextensive with the words she divulges to her main interlocutor in the novel: not Rochester but the ‘Reader.’<sup>53</sup>

### Speaking and Hearing Automata

While the links between the sounding voice and the powers of manipulation are only implied in *Jane Eyre*, later nineteenth-century texts, probing (even) more relentlessly the mechanisms of gender and social inequality, accord centre stage to the seductive, manipulative capacities of the printed voice. A late nineteenth-century literary example, the ‘Woman and Actress’ section in George Gissing’s *The Nether World* (1889), offers a darker moment of reunion, which can be read as an embittered, disillusioned adaptation of the reunion scene in *Jane Eyre*. Here, in the squalid surroundings of a London slum, the disfigured actress Clara carefully stages an encounter with her former fiancé. Having abandoned her working-class family and hard-working faithful lover to pursue her aspirations for stage fame and social advancement, Clara has become the victim of a rival’s vicious acid attack, with her face now scorched beyond recognition. She is left with nothing but her voice in a dark room—and during this well-prepared meeting she uses vocal sound, ‘the modulations of this voice which had no light of countenance to aid it’, in order to win back her former lover. The latter, attracted despite himself, is captivated by the pure sound of her voice, not daring to stir, ‘lest the slightest sound should jar on her speaking’, thus becoming a proxy for the ‘listening’ readers.<sup>54</sup> Yet by contrast with the harmonious union of blinded man and female helpmeet which is effected at the end of *Jane Eyre*, in Gissing’s novel the magical moment of sentimental, exquisitely modulated vocal appeal, which is actually created by the routine performance of a

<sup>52</sup> Schroeder, ‘Village Voices’, 181.

<sup>53</sup> Both quotations: Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, 543.

<sup>54</sup> Both quotations: George Gissing, *The Nether World*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 285.

trained actress, is overwritten many times in the novel's ensuing account of the unhappy marriage that follows.

This brief juxtaposition of two very different Victorian scenes of reunion, with dissociated voices as the central feature, prepares the ground for the main concern of this section: literary moments where the Gothic mode and misogyny meet in representations of 'female speaking automata'. The scene of Clara's private theatrical performance and supreme vocal control, on the one hand, castigates her implicitly for manipulating her lover; on the other hand, her almost somnambulant, automatic routine projecting the partly tragic, partly romantic heroine figure also carries associations with the widespread late Victorian popular and scientific culture of what Lehman has called the 'Theatre of Trance' (2009): the stage performances of hypnotized or hysterical female speakers. Lehman's inquiries into stage hypnotism trace how female mediums, who allegedly channelled the words of the deceased, prompted questions about authority and control, about simulation and role play. The automatic female voice (hypnotized or hysterical) thus calls into doubt political and cultural authority, probing assumptions about agency, selfhood, and the gender system. Nineteenth-century literary texts showed a deep awareness of these social mechanisms, and negotiated their own conflicted position as cultural products through their use of printed voices. Dovetailing with Kahane's emphatic distinction between the passive female hysteric and the active feminist orator, Straumann looks at the representation of female singers in selected nineteenth-century writings and concludes that 'it is only those whose voices are associated with effects of noise that have a voice of their own'.<sup>55</sup>

Female speaking automata are frequently created by the intradiegetic and/or extradiegetic male gaze (quite literally, as sight is thereby privileged over hearing). One literary example is an uncanny scenario of woman-as-voice in Eliot's *The Lifted Veil* (1859), told from the (distorting) perspective of the above-mentioned hypersensitive Latimer. Here we are offered at a key moment the sounding of an unearthly female voice, harking back to Poe's M. Valdemar: the briefly resuscitated dead maid who curses and betrays her mistress Bertha, in a 'gasp[ing] eager voice'—a mechanical reflex action stored up in the muscles at the moment of death.<sup>56</sup> Eliot here negotiates scientific inquiries into nerves as transmitters between 'body' and 'spirit'; yet this dramatic scene can also be construed, as Shuttleworth suggests, as the 'culmination of the general misogyny of the text', linked to Eliot's own 'struggles with the gender politics of her own bid for authorship': the 'immortal' voice of the female

<sup>55</sup> Barbara Straumann, 'Noise and Voice: Female Performers in George Meredith, George Eliot and Isak Dinesen', in Sylvia Mieszkowski and Sigrid Nieberle, eds, *Unlaute: Noise/Geräusch in Kultur, Medien und Wissenschaften seit 1900* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2017), 239–60 (240).

<sup>56</sup> George Eliot, *The Lifted Veil*, in *The Lifted Veil and Brother Jacob*, ed. Sally Shuttleworth (London: Penguin, 2001), 3–42 (41). For a more detailed discussion of this example see also section 1 in Zwierlein, 'Sonic Monstrosity', and section 3 for the James and du Maurier examples below.

writer is fused with the artificially induced voice of hatred.<sup>57</sup> Then again, the misogyny might also derive from the unreliable narrator's own twisted perspective.

During the final decade of the century, 'the volatility and integrity of [the period's newly augmented] sensory scaffolding' were probed energetically, and fin-de-siècle texts soon introduced the imaginary of the phonographic voice into debates about automatic speaking women.<sup>58</sup> We can compare the vocal monstrosities manifested in female bodies, from Jules Verne's *Carpathian Castle* (1889), which fetishizes a dead female singer's recorded voice, via Dr Seward's ghostly recordings and the telepathic voice of the vampire resounding inside Mina's head in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), to Arthur Conan Doyle's 'Story of the Japanned Box' (1899). Here the narrator comes under the spell of a mysterious 'gasping' voice, 'whispered' into a phonograph with the 'last breath' of a dying woman.<sup>59</sup> Behind such scenarios were also discussions about 'the social and physiological possibilities of expanded sensory states [enabled by] synesthesia and neuresthesia', and the accompanying fears about sensory loss and 'hauntings'.<sup>60</sup>

The transformation of speaking women into synaesthetic performances thus also carries, in late Victorian fiction, the threat of stifling women's meaning. In Henry James's *The Tragic Muse* (1890), for instance, the 'bright, up darting flame of [Miriam's] talk' is described as '[rising and falling] like an improvisation on the keys': the voice, sounding like the exquisite music produced by a piano, is 'enchanting' to her male admirers, while the content of her speech is described as irrelevant: '[the] richness [of her voice] was quite independent of the words she might pronounce'.<sup>61</sup> Similarly, Avice the First in Thomas Hardy's novella *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved* (1892) becomes a speaking automaton because the male focalizer refuses to listen to her words: her lover watches through the window as she is speaking and thus sees, but does not hear her: Avice has to 'recite poetry from a platform' as part of her home town's evening entertainment. Arriving on the scene when the performance has already started, Pierston observes her through the hall window, taking in her bodily presence and 'pretty embarrassment on facing the audience'. Unable (and unwilling) to hear what she is saying, he concentrates on her physicality: 'A heavy wagon passing without drowned her small, soft voice for him; but the audience were pleased, and she blushed at their applause'.<sup>62</sup> Suppressed by the male

<sup>57</sup> Both quotations: Sally Shuttleworth, 'Introduction', in Eliot, *The Lifted Veil*, xi–l (xxx, xxxi).

<sup>58</sup> Colligan and Linley, 'Introduction', 3.

<sup>59</sup> Arthur Conan Doyle, 'The Story of the Japanned Box', *The Strand* 97 (January 1899), 3–11 (6, 11).

<sup>60</sup> Both quotations: Colligan and Linley, 'Introduction', 3.

<sup>61</sup> Henry James, *The Tragic Muse*, ed. Philip Horne (London: Penguin, 1995), 298, 315. On the association between the 'piano keyboard' and 'new media technologies' that is implicit in this quotation, see Colligan and Linley, 'Introduction', 13.

<sup>62</sup> Three preceding quotations: Thomas Hardy, *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved*, in *Thomas Hardy: The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved and The Well-Beloved*, ed. Patricia Ingham (London: Penguin, 1997), 1–168 (16, 17, 17). On this example see also Zwierlein, in Christina Meyer and Monika Pietrzak-Franger, eds, *Transmedia Practices in the Long Nineteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 2022).

focalizer's concentration on the visual, the voice is then further drowned out by the noise of the wagon created as background for the scene (while the reader retains an impression of her 'small, soft voice', divested of the words).

Pierston's unwillingness to join the audience is a deliberate textual staging by Hardy, an 'honorary New Woman writer' according to Patricia Ingham, of male anxieties about the female voice raised in public.<sup>63</sup> Cultivated Avice, who goes on to lead an independent life, finally lives up to Pierston's ideal only after her death, when he reencounters her (silent) image in a photograph. Written at a time when the women's rights movement was entering its militant phase, the text exposes Pierston as a retrograde escapist, whose 'selective vision' is also a selective sense of hearing.<sup>64</sup> A similar juxtaposition of female orator with non-listening male audience member is offered in Henry James's novel *The Bostonians* (1885–6), where the male focalizer Basil Ransom erases the political content of lecturer Verena Tarrant's performance, preferring sight above hearing: attracted by 'the picture and figure of the half-bedizened damsel', he emphasizes 'those charming notes of her voice'—rather than her words—and settles down to 'regarding her as a vocalist of exquisite faculty, condemned to sing bad music. How prettily, indeed, she made some of it sound!'<sup>65</sup>

Finally, there is a similar (subliminal) violence at work in the 'apotheosis of voice' elicited from a hypnotized female singer in du Maurier's novel *Trilby* (1894). The concept of the woman as medium is spelled out in Victorian Gothic mode as Trilby acquires her public (singing) voice by becoming a mesmeric subject to the sinister, ethnically othered musician Svengali, who henceforth 'sing[s] [to audiences] with her voice'. A corrupted sense of hearing in mass culture, as the text implies, institutionalizes such violent appropriations: the artistic and industrial commodification of Trilby's various body parts—from her voice organs to her feet—is a central topic in the novel. She becomes a 'singing machine' dispersing herself across the crowd, communicating 'not just music...but the mesmeric state itself'.<sup>66</sup> Trilby and the crowd share a combination of deepened sense perception and loss of autonomy; importantly, the crowd is in raptures irrespective of the 'quality' of the music: high operatic art and popular songs are met with the same frenetic applause. Trilby's performances, which Galvan compares to those of a 'human phonograph', are thus a co-creation between performer, subject, and audience/readership who function as 'sounding board'.<sup>67</sup> Of course, part of the ideological subtext in du Maurier and

<sup>63</sup> See Patricia Ingham, 'Introduction', in Hardy, *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved*, xvii–xxxiii (xxix).

<sup>64</sup> Annette Federico, 'Thomas Hardy's *The Well-Beloved*: Love's Descent', *English Literature in Transition, 1880–1920* 50, no. 3 (2007), 269–90 (281).

<sup>65</sup> Both quotations: Henry James, *The Bostonians*, ed. R. D. Gooder (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 56, 85.

<sup>66</sup> Three quotations: George du Maurier, *Trilby*, ed. Dennis Denisoff (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 213, 299, 298.

<sup>67</sup> Both quotations: Galvan, *The Sympathetic Medium*, 106, 101–2. Stewart, *Reading Voices*, 3.

James is that the speaking female automaton is linked to both fascinated and sceptical representations of mass culture—not only the singing automaton but also the listening crowd is gendered as feminine. The sense of hearing (always already physiologically ‘passive’) has degenerated, in these cultural-pessimistic accounts of acts of listening turned equally ‘passive’, into an organ of easy, indiscriminating consumption.

## New Vocalities and Imperial Echo Chambers

The suffragette movement consciously revisited—and revised—the history of women’s performed vocality. The female body and embodied voice had become precarious in polemical accounts of speaking automata, as we have seen, and New Woman and suffragette novels hence aimed to redeploy the trope of the vocal woman to represent not the hysteric, but a self-assured and rhetorically trained woman speaker whose sounds are not associated with ‘noise’ (see Straumann), but who delivers speeches, as Evelyn Sharp has it in 1910, ‘in a voice that no longer faltered or apologised, a voice that was pitched exactly right and held her listeners strangely’.<sup>68</sup> Conversion narratives routinely offer moments of first speaking—and first hearing, as the *Women’s Penny Paper* asserts in 1888 that it is necessary that ‘ladies should get used to hearing their own voices... in public’, and another Sharp piece shows the heroine suddenly speaking, ‘in a voice she never seemed to have heard before’.<sup>69</sup>

The sense of hearing in these contexts also often attains a spiritual dimension, being reinterpreted as the special gift of a new kind of sensitive audience who have the collective ‘voice of [women’s] silent suffering... always in [their] ears’, as the feminist (and, possibly, hysteric) Olive Chancellor is made to state in James’s *The Bostonians* (but almost without the Jamesian irony): these were alternative ways of conceptualizing the audience as sounding board, which did not automatically denigrate mass appeal and female participation in cultural performance.<sup>70</sup> The spiritual conversion narratives underlying suffrage fiction and autobiography, with their links to domestic and sensation fiction, and their reiterations of the ‘first speech’ trope as a sensational moment of awakening, have roots in the biblical account of Pentecost. Examples of New Woman and suffrage writings which incorporate such central moments of conversion are Sarah Grand’s *The Beth Book* (1897), Elizabeth Robins’s *The Convert* (1907), Adrienne Mollwo’s *A Fair Suffragette* (1909), and Ray

<sup>68</sup> Evelyn Sharp, ‘Dissension in the Home’, in *Rebel Women* [1910], repr. (Middletown: n.p., 2016), 43–5 (45).

<sup>69</sup> Anon., ‘Leaderettes’, *Women’s Penny Paper* 9, 22 December 1888, 4. Evelyn Sharp, ‘Shaking Hands with the Middle Ages’, in *Rebel Women*, 8–12 (11).

<sup>70</sup> James, *Bostonians*, 33.

Strachey's *The Cause* (1928). The descent of the Holy Spirit upon the disciples, making them speak in tongues, creating a new community with those who hear them, is the archetype invoked by the represented conversions in these novels and autobiographical texts, which were meant to carry over into the lives and actions of their (female) readers, driving them to join the 'Cause'. Robins, author of *The Convert*, reports her own experience of a suffrage rally in 1906 when she 'first heard women talking politics in public... and a new chapter was begun for me in the lesson of faith in the capacities of women.'<sup>71</sup> Ethel Smyth 'was won over to the cause after hearing Emmeline Pankhurst speak', and Evelyn Sharp became a member of the WSPU after hearing a lecture by Elizabeth Robins.<sup>72</sup>

On closer inspection, however, many New Woman and suffrage novels also seem to derive their claims to full citizenship and public speech for women from an imperially inflected consciousness of superiority: the emphatically *British* woman is seen as speaking in imitation of, and against a backdrop of, British military victories. Florence Fenwick Miller's autobiographical account of 'How I Made My First Speech' (1894) is staged explicitly so as to replicate British military valour—and the 'sounds' of battle—during the Crimean War: 'the world resounded on the very day of my birth with the wild sounds of one of the greatest combats of modern times – "the soldiers' battle" of Inkerman... That date was the fifth of November, 1854. My first speech was delivered on March the twenty-seventh, 1873.' As Miller continues, her speech can be conceived as part of 'another war... in which those same qualities of courage and indomitable resolution... were required, the battle for the enfranchisement of women.'<sup>73</sup> Similarly, the self-assured feminist speaker in Adrienne Mollwo's *A Fair Suffragette* (1909) derives the strength of a 'martyr' and her remarkable elocution in fighting for the Cause from her deceased father's own 'heroic' fight, as a colonel in the British colonial army, against a 'rebellious native tribe in India.'<sup>74</sup>

Such imperial certainties, styled as spiritual insights, were of course rapidly evaporating around the turn of the century, and the (conditional) winning of the vote for women coincided with the end of the First World War in 1918 and the accelerating disintegration of the former British Empire. At this point we could revisit the 'voice without a body' and the 'phonographic logic' of Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902).<sup>75</sup> Here, famously, the intradiegetic narrator finds himself unable to repeat Kurtz's last words to the latter's fiancée, shielding the 'British woman' by

<sup>71</sup> Quoted in Marion Shaw and Lyssa Randolph, *New Woman Writers of the Late Nineteenth Century* (Horndon: Northcote House Publishers, 2007), 79.

<sup>72</sup> Glenda Norquay, *Voices and Votes: A Literary Anthology of the Women's Suffrage Campaign* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 316.

<sup>73</sup> Both quotations: [Florence] Fenwick Miller, 'How I Made My First Speech', *Woman's Signal* 1, no. 1 (4 January 1894), 4–5 (4).

<sup>74</sup> Both quotations: Adrienne Mollwo, *A Fair Suffragette* (London: Drane, 1909), 135.

<sup>75</sup> Kreilkamp, *Voice and the Victorian Storyteller*, ch. 7.



taking refuge in a (seemingly) benign lie. The famous ejaculations of Kurtz's last echoing speech ('A voice! a voice!', as Marlow reminisces), with the final cry of 'The horror! The horror!', indeed reveal the ultimate loss of imperial and existential certainties—an insight too disturbing to be repeated.<sup>76</sup> In this context we could also re-examine the dysfunctional mother figure in E. M. Forster's dystopian short story 'The Machine Stops' (1909), who lives isolated in her room and 'lecture[s] and attend[s] lectures' via televised screens while oblivious to the fact that she—and humanity as a whole—have been utterly incorporated and subjected by the all-powerful, imperial Machine.<sup>77</sup>

Social change, it has become evident, is filtered closely through representations of sounds and voices in late Victorian literature. As one last example, this chapter now briefly addresses another famous novel that examines eroding imperial certainties: Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924), with its central juxtaposition of the problem of female speech with the universal emptiness of the 'Boum' sound echoing in the Indian Marabar caves. This early modernist text, which harkens back explicitly to Victorian times and writings, uses women's bewilderment as a metaphor for the inadequacies of British assumptions of rulership, and intimations of the end of Empire: it is the sense of hearing, and the impossibility of grasping the echoing sounds of the world, that represent the impasse described by the novel. The 'passive agents' of this impasse are, importantly, both Indian and English women, victims of the unrelenting cultural ideologies of purdah and English chivalry: Dr Aziz's dead Indian wife, who had lived in purdah all her life and who listens, captured in the frame of a photograph, to an 'echoing contradictory world', and the Englishwoman Adela Quested, who at the climax of the novel finds herself facing the real-world embodiment of the (previously only metaphorical) 'echoing walls' of her failed attempts at 'seeing India'—the Marabar caves, with their indifferent sounds of 'Boum', archaic sites beyond the remit of all cultural information gathering and explanation, where 'echoes generate echoes'.<sup>78</sup>

Coooped up before the famous trial where she will have to confirm her accusations against Dr Aziz—which in the meantime have caused the British expatriate community to close ranks around their womenfolk and, as the narrator remarks with pronounced sarcasm, feel 'reminded . . . that they were an outpost of Empire'—Adela's own lasting confusion is equated with the synaesthetic impression, combining hearing, touch, and sight, of this 'echo flourish[ing], raging up and down like a nerve in the faculty of her hearing'. She frees herself momentarily from the encumbrances of civilization, convention, and British imperial attitudes, eventually withdrawing her charge against Dr Aziz, when during her cross-examination she has a

<sup>76</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (London: Sangam Books, 1992), 83, 84.

<sup>77</sup> E. M. Forster, 'The Machine Stops' (1909), in *E. M. Forster: Collected Short Stories* (London: Penguin, 1976), 131–76 (138).

<sup>78</sup> Four preceding quotations: E. M. Forster, *A Passage to India*, ed. Oliver Stallybrass (London: Penguin, 1989), 129, 62, 301, 159.

spiritual vision, which starts as soon as she 'hear[s] the sound of her own voice.' This sound then merges with a 'voice in the distance' guiding her on, a moment of spiritual insight reminiscent of the conversion moments in *New Woman* and suffrage fiction (where the female speaker's voice is often amplified by the spiritual, collective voice of 'womanhood'), yet in Forster's text this experience is both less liberating and less sustainable.<sup>79</sup>

Schizophrenia, the dissociation of sound from its source, in nineteenth-century literary writing emphasizes unsettled and unsettling subject positions, as we have seen. The uncomfortable mixture in Forster's novel of imperial conflict and gender struggle (via Adela's incomplete moment of 'awakening' and—almost—autonomous speech) is eventually reinforced via yet another, amplified and multiplied, scene of sonic intensity. Famously, the novel ends with the 'hundred voices' (of horses, earth, rocks, the temple, the palace, the birds) denying the possibility of a post-imperial friendship between free people and nations. These are the final, multiple, and non-human voices heard in the novel: 'no, not yet; . . . no, not there.'<sup>80</sup> British civilizatory techniques, and human vocality, have reached their limits: this novel of the interwar years, which Forster would have preferred to be pure 'melody', offers its own version of the sound of literature, and the mediated sense of hearing.<sup>81</sup> The noises of human life produced from 'inside [the] cocoon of work or social obligation' are shown here as vying against the perpetual stifling echo, the 'same monotonous noise' of nihilism generated inside the Marabar caves: in consequence, 'a perfectly adjusted organism', as a gnomic passage asserts at the beginning of the cave expedition chapter, 'would be silent.'<sup>82</sup>

As this chapter has shown in its survey of prose fiction from the mid-Victorian to the early modernist period, representations of sound (especially vocal sound) and the sense of hearing were profoundly linked to literary and scientific investigations of shifting subjectivities and social formations. Negotiating physiopsychological constructions of the human constitution and the epistemology and phenomenology of sensory perception, the novels, novellas, and short stories examined in this chapter show a deep awareness of their own status as sensory medium and sounding board. From Mary Shelley to Edgar Allan Poe, Charlotte Brontë, George Eliot, George Gissing, Thomas Hardy, Henry James, George du Maurier, *New Woman* writers, and finally Joseph Conrad and E. M. Forster, this chapter has examined how long-nineteenth-century literary texts, oscillating between realism and the Gothic, display and negotiate a deep interest in the phenomena of unlocatable sound and schizophrenia, hypersensitivity to sound, enhanced auditory sensitivity in the blind, synaesthetic experiences, and the question

<sup>79</sup> Four quotations: Forster, *A Passage to India*, 190, 200, 229, 230.

<sup>80</sup> Forster, *A Passage to India*, 316.

<sup>81</sup> E. M. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel* [1927] (London: Penguin, 1962), 170.

<sup>82</sup> Three preceding quotations: Forster, *A Passage to India*, 145, 159, 145.

of the passivity of hearing. Both reflecting and challenging scientific models of sensory perception, many of these novels also respond to each other, thereby creating their own literary 'echo chambers'.

Most importantly, the chapter has proposed that explorations of sound and hearing in literary texts of the long nineteenth century are always tied to wider questions about the social impact and social meaning of (represented) sound and acts of hearing, especially in the context of shifting class and gender boundaries as well as eroding imperial certainties. With an emphasis on vocal sound, the chapter has commented on the disembodied voice of Gothic fiction, the manipulative and demagogical voice construed in anxious bourgeois representations of working-class empowerment, the automatic (hypnotized or hysterical) voice of women speakers, and the newly assertive female voice speaking for the first time in the conversion scenes of New Woman and suffrage fiction. The chapter ends on the echoing voices of the Marabar caves in Forster's novel and the 'phonographic logic' in Conrad. Kurtz's ejaculations and the 'monotonous noise' at the centre of Forster's novel have both been seen as conveying a sense of the absurdity of imperialism and the meaninglessness of the universe. While these sounds of nihilism do not subsume all the previous diversified and energetic literary debates about connections between the auditory sense, shifting subject positions, and social change, still, Forster's conceit about 'perfect silence' is in dialogue with Eliot's observation in *Middlemarch* quoted at the outset of this chapter: both in Forster's novel and in the nineteenth-century literary writings which it responds to, silence, and the roar on the other side of silence, are indeed profoundly connected.

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## A POETICS OF SILENCE

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### Deafness, Poetics, and the Fate of the Senses

MICHAEL DAVIDSON

Among the more durable tropes in modern poetics is an appeal to silence.<sup>1</sup> In Keats's ode, a Grecian urn depicting a wedding procession is described as an 'unravish'd bride of quietness',<sup>2</sup> a reference both to the urn and the virgin bride depicted on its surface.<sup>3</sup> The price of silence is death, nature stilled forever into art. Here, silence refers both to the body of the artwork—a 'well-wrought urn' in Cleanth Brooks's terms—and the body of its female subject, a connection that I will pursue with reference to disability.<sup>4</sup> 'Heard melodies are sweet', as Keats says in the same ode, 'but those unheard / Are sweeter' (lines 11–12). Unheard melodies appeal not to the sensate ear but to 'ditties of no tone' (14). Keats does not disparage heard melodies but suggests that those 'unheard' tap into another level of sensory experience too deep for tears and presumably inaccessible to ears. What, one might ask, would the oxymoronic music of 'no tone' sound like?<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> I am grateful to Peter Middleton, Rebecca Sanchez, and Maren Linnet for their helpful comments on early drafts of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> John Keats, 'Ode on a Grecian Urn', in *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. Jack Stillingier (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), 372–3 (l. 1).

<sup>3</sup> My subtitle expresses a debt to Susan Stewart's important book, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), which studies the foundational role of poetry in human consciousness. Speaking of Giambattista Vico, Stewart explains, '[l]anguage here is pressured to be in some way commensurate to sense experience and at the same time intelligible to others. . . . Language [and poetry] is the forum within which such a speaking subject emerges' (15).

<sup>4</sup> Cleanth Brooks, *The Well Wrought Urn: Studies in the Structure of Poetry* (London: Methuen, 1968).

<sup>5</sup> Although my focus will be on the role of silence in poetics, it is worth acknowledging that the dominant trend in poetry focuses on the study of sound and the vicissitudes of 'hearing' either represented in the text or manifested through the poem's prosody. The work of Susan Stewart, Don Ihde, Jonathan Culler, Eric Griffiths, and those who focus on the technologies of sound reproduction such as Garrett Stewart and Peter Szendy all presume that poetry is founded on the ear and the registration of acoustic information. Angela Leighton's *Hearing Things: The Work of Sound in Literature* (Cambridge,

Richard Wagner, reflecting on Beethoven's deafness, provided one answer:

A musician without hearing! Is a blind painter to be imagined?

But we have heard of a blind *Seer*. Like Tiresias, from whom the phenomenal world was withdrawn, and who, in its stead, discovered the basis of all phenomenality, the deaf Musician, undisturbed by the bustle of life, now heard only the harmonies of his soul and woke from its depths to that world which to him – had nothing more to say.<sup>6</sup>

Wagner was to change his mind about the advantages of deafness for Beethoven's music, but his remark offers an alternative view of the composer's 'tragic' deafness. From as early as 1801, according to Robin Wallace, Beethoven was composing while becoming almost totally deaf, a factor that helps explain the harmonic and rhythmic complexity of his late quartets and piano sonatas. By listening to the 'harmonies of his soul', according to Wagner, he was able to compose works like the *Grosse Fuge*, op. 133, which, to his contemporaries, was unhearable.<sup>7</sup>

Post-Romantic writers have provided a variety of linguistic and formal solutions to the challenge of representing silence, embodied in the work of Emily Dickinson, Stéphane Mallarmé, Osip Mandelstam, Paul Celan, Edmond Jabès, George Oppen, Claude Royet-Journoud, and Susan Howe. The silences they invoke are materially represented on the page by empty spaces, portmanteau verbal constructions, incomplete phrases, and graphic elements that thwart closure and frustrate paraphrase. Emily Dickinson's dashes or the variable fonts and indentations of Mallarmé's *Un coup de dés* are obvious instances of a poetry that invokes silences between and among words. Such graphic features are the surface manifestations of a philosophical recognition of language's inadequacy, the disparity between a word and the space it attempts to fill. A poetics of silence attempts to reveal the space of that disparity in material form, whether rendered on the page, in the voice, through manual signs on the body, or, as we shall see, by not speaking at all.

The work of Samuel Beckett offers a capacious survey of this disparity as his plays and novels became increasingly shorter, action reduced to minimal gestures and movements and dialogue condensed into single phrases—and finally, silence. The culmination of this tendency is Beckett's 1969 play *Breath*. At thirty-five seconds it may be the shortest dramatic work ever written. It is also the quietest. There is no 'action', in the usual theatrical sense, nor is there dialogue. A light gradually illuminates a stage littered with 'miscellaneous rubbish'.<sup>8</sup> Beckett's stage directions call for 'a

MA: Harvard University Press, 2018) provides a useful overview of, as she indicates in her subtitle, 'the work of sound in literature.'

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in Peter Szendy, *Listen: A History of Our Ears*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 121.

<sup>7</sup> The work occasioned consternation in the Viennese press, causing one journalist to remark that 'it was incomprehensible, like Chinese': quoted in Robin Wallace, *Hearing Beethoven: A Story of Musical Loss and Discovery* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 182.

<sup>8</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Breath. The Collected Shorter Plays of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Grove Press, 1984), 210–11.

faint cry' reproduced through an amplified recording that is then repeated.<sup>9</sup> In a letter to Kenneth Tynan, who solicited the work, Beckett indicated that the cry is that of breathing, the 'light coming up and going down on a stage littered with miscellaneous unidentifiable muck, synchronized with the sound of breath, once in and out, the whole (ha!) begun and ended by the same tiny vagitus-rattle.<sup>10</sup> Vagitus refers to the baby's first cry upon leaving the womb, suggesting that for Beckett human life begins as a breath that is also an inaugural utterance. Although he is not speaking of Beckett, Jean-Luc Nancy describes the vagitus as the inaugural cry of subjectivity, the 'first cry as himself being – his being or his subjectivity – the sudden expansion of an echo chamber, a vault where what tears him away and what summons him resound at once... Someone who comes to himself by hearing himself cry.'<sup>11</sup> The titular 'breath' is visually reinforced by the 'expiration and slow decrease of light' that provides a technological analogue to breathing. Beckett called *Breath* 'a farce in five acts', suggesting, albeit sardonically, that its minimalist shape belies a larger study of mediated destiny.<sup>12</sup>

In all of Beckett's plays silence is highly choreographed, the pauses between words carefully indicated, rhythms of speech given almost musical notation. Silence is the horizon toward which articulation aspires, even though in Beckett's plays characters talk incessantly—Lucky's logorrheic speech in *Waiting for Godot*, Hamm's music-hall routines in *Endgame*, Winnie's formulaic refrains in *Happy Day*, Mouth's endless monologue in *Not I*—to fill that silence with something resembling significance. *Breath* inverts that imperative by reducing speech to the primordial breath upon which life and speech depend. Most importantly for our concerns is that sensations of hearing, breathing, and sight are distributed through technologies of sound and visual reproduction. In his radio dramas, television plays, and film, Beckett deployed forms of sound reproduction to suggest the mediated nature of communication, whether in Krapp's use of a tape recorder to remember his past life, or in *Eh, Joe* with Joe listening to a recording of a woman's accusatory voice, or in the megaphone voice of *What Where* that appears to sanction torture. Against the voices that threaten to drown T. S. Eliot's Prufrock, silence promises order and

<sup>9</sup> In one version available on YouTube the 'cry' is the sound of heavy breathing. It is not, despite Beckett's instructions, 'faint' at all.

<sup>10</sup> *Breath* was originally intended as part of a prologue to Kenneth Tynan's erotic review *Oh! Calcutta!*, possibly to undercut that play's ribald content. Beckett was furious when he learned that his stage directions had been emended to include the fact that among the detritus on stage would be 'naked people.' Adding insult to injury was the photograph that accompanied the script which featured naked bodies among the refuse on stage. On the conflicts over the Tynan production see James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 501–2.

<sup>11</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 18.

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Ruby Cohn, *A Beckett Canon* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 298, although the remark about *Breath* as farce is unattributed to a specific work by Beckett.

clarity.<sup>13</sup> Or as Clov says in *Endgame*, 'I love order. It's my dream. A world where all would be silent and still and each thing in its last place, under the last dust.'<sup>14</sup>

What is the noise of the world that makes silence so compelling?<sup>15</sup> Is modern silence distinct from silence in the past? Cultural historians and sound theorists might respond by speaking of changing demographics, urbanization, migration, mobility (railroads, automobiles), sound reproduction (telephones, movies, radio), and the apparition of the crowd that so intrigued (and repulsed) Poe, Baudelaire, Pound, and Eliot. Within this tradition silence promises a site for solitude and reflection or, to complete my appropriation of Pound, 'petals on a wet, black bough.'<sup>16</sup> For later poets who lived through the horrors of World War II, silence is an inevitable response to historical trauma. For Paul Celan, the Holocaust makes speech and writing untenable. His answer to Adorno's famous query about the futility of writing after Auschwitz is a language of indirection and concision. In his Büchner Prize lecture, *Der Meridian*, Celan notes that 'the poem unmistakably shows a strong bent toward falling silent.'<sup>17</sup> Words no longer secure the world; they are, in William Franke's terms, 'not names but traces, shattered and scattered remnants of an expropriated, destroyed meaning.'<sup>18</sup>

Mallarmé diagnosed a crisis in poetry that was much more than a matter of the viability of the alexandrine; it was a crisis in language that had become instrumentalized and debased by the marketplace: 'Language in the hands of the mob leads to the same facility and directness as does money.'<sup>19</sup> A new poetry requires a fusion of senses such that '[w]e now *hear* undeniable rays of light, like arrows gilding and piercing the meanderings of song.'<sup>20</sup> This synaesthesia or 'derangement of the senses,' as Rimbaud advocated, would redistribute sensation, allowing one to experience the totality of sensate life in a single word or phrase. Rimbaud and Mallarmé

<sup>13</sup> 'We have lingered in the chambers of the sea / By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown / Till human voices wake us, and we drown': T. S. Eliot, 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,' *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909–1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1962), 129–31 (ll. 3–7).

<sup>14</sup> Samuel Beckett, *Endgame* (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 57.

<sup>15</sup> Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), understands noise as power, against which music is 'an instrument of differentiating' (5). Noise is power and thus, under capitalism, must be ordered, rationalized, and commodified. Music for Attali exists as an attempt to organize noise into an aesthetic totality, but it remains vulnerable to rationalization through censorship, on the one hand, and to commodification in the culture industry on the other.

<sup>16</sup> Ezra Pound, 'In a Station of the Metro', in *Personae: The Collected Shorter Poems of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1971), 109: 'The apparition of these faces in the crowd; / Petals on a wet, black bough.'

<sup>17</sup> Paul Celan, 'The Meridian', in *Selected Poems and Prose of Paul Celan*, trans. John Felstiner (New York: W.W. Norton, 2001), 401–14 (409).

<sup>18</sup> William Franke, 'Poetics of Silence in the Post-Holocaust Poetry of Paul Celan', *Journal of Literature and Trauma Studies* 2, nos 1–2 (Spring/Fall 2013), 137–58 (142).

<sup>19</sup> Stéphane Mallarmé, 'Crisis in Poetry', in *Mallarmé: Selected Prose Poems, Essays, and Letters*, trans. Bradford Cook (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1956), 34–45 (42–3).

<sup>20</sup> Mallarmé, 'Crisis in Poetry', 39.



were hardly thinking of disability, but inadvertently their celebration of sensory *dérèglement* describes an important aspect of disability experience.<sup>21</sup> For deaf poets, rays of light are heard differently through the movements of hands and facial expressions of sign language. For the blind photographer Evgan Bavcar, the subjects he captures with his camera must be touched and felt to be seen. The deaf drummer Evelyn Glennie claims, counter-intuitively, that her job is to ‘listen’, albeit through various sensory inputs.<sup>22</sup> She refers to the use of her whole body in performance as ‘touching the sound’. This redistribution of sensation in disability aesthetics is a recognition of bodily contingency and capability that are the cornerstone of aesthetics since Aristotle figured tragedy around the limping, blind Oedipus. In its eighteenth-century usage, *aesthesia* means *corporeal* perception or what we might today call proprioception.<sup>23</sup>

I have elsewhere described my use of the term ‘redistribution of the senses’ as a variation on a more familiar usage by Jacques Rancière, who argues that aesthetics *distributes* the sensible—what one can hear and see and taste, what is sayable and unsayable—within a social totality.<sup>24</sup> When the state determines what can be thought, known, heard, or seen, the aesthetic function is enlisted as a form of policing and control. Modernist art and literature upsets this policing function by distributing sensory experience differently, whether by deconstructing the retinal image in abstract painting, reimagining tonality around different pitch systems, or defamiliarizing conventional linguistic usage.

My slight adjustment of Rancière’s phrase emphasizes how an art that *distributes* the senses toward a new, inclusive commons also *redistributes*, or resites social values assigned to each sense. ‘Silence’ and ‘sound’ are two such social values that mean one thing for hearing people and another for people who are deaf and who are mischaracterized as living in a ‘silent’ world. Many deaf people have some residual hearing, and those who wear cochlear implants or use hearing aids live on a spectrum of sonic experiences. As Carol Padden and Tom Humphreys explain, ‘[t]he truth is that many Deaf people know a great deal about sound, and that sound itself – not just its absence – plays a central role in their lives.’<sup>25</sup> The binary opposition

<sup>21</sup> ‘Il s’agit d’arriver à l’inconnu par le dérèglement de *tous les sens*’: Arthur Rimbaud to Georges Izambard, 13 May 1871, *Arthur Rimbaud, Complete Works, Selected Letters*, trans. Wallace Fowlie (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), 301.

<sup>22</sup> Evelyn Glennie, ‘How to Truly Listen’, *TED* (2003), [https://www.ted.com/talks/evelyn\\_glennie\\_shows\\_how\\_to\\_listen/transcript#t-735162](https://www.ted.com/talks/evelyn_glennie_shows_how_to_listen/transcript#t-735162).

<sup>23</sup> Jacques Rancière describes the break between classical and modern aesthetic theory as one from an emphasis on ‘ways of doing’ to ‘ways of sensible being’: *Aesthetics and its Discontents*, trans. Steven Corcoran (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), 11.

<sup>24</sup> I have discussed Rancière in ‘Siting Sound: Redistributing the Senses in Christine Sun Kim’, *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* 15, no. 2 (2021), 219–37. Rancière develops the idea of distribution of the senses in *Aesthetics and its Discontents* and *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible* (London: Continuum, 2004).

<sup>25</sup> Carol Padden and Tom Humphreys, *Deaf in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 93.

sound/silence must be qualified by recognizing the social meaning of sound and the systems of communication that reinforce it. A redistribution of the senses acknowledges the multimodal nature of sensory experience and the persons for whom it is a value. When deaf poets and artists redistribute 'hearing' to other senses, they provide insights into the variability of the sensorium.

## Disability Aesthetics

When Odysseus deafens his crew against the Sirens' song, he provides an early literary example of hearing loss as a metaphor for not-knowing. Kirkē warns that if the Sirens' tempting song is heard it will lead to disaster. On her advice, Odysseus lashes himself to the mast to hear their song—to witness its beauty and power—while retaining his authority as captain of the ship. Deafness will permit the crew to ply their oars and pass safely beyond the seductive music while Odysseus may witness the alluring song without succumbing to its seduction. It is one of many instances in the *Odyssey* where the hero's cunning and cleverness anticipate what Adorno and Horkheimer call the 'dialectic of Enlightenment'. By adhering to the law set down by the gods he discovers an 'escape clause in the contract which enables him to fulfill it while eluding it'. Odysseus, as the prototype for bourgeois rationality, masters nature by renouncing it; he 'listens to the song of pleasure and thwarts it as he seeks to thwart death'.<sup>26</sup>

In the chapter devoted to the Sirens in James Joyce's *Ulysses*, our modern day Odysseus, Leopold Bloom, admires the skills of the deaf waiter, Pat, at the Ormond bar and notes that he 'seehears lipspeech', condensing the twin modalities by which hearing and sight are joined; he hears by reading lips.<sup>27</sup> Bloom's empathy for Pat may resonate with his own outcast Jewish identity in which he is figuratively neither heard nor seen by the Irish nationalists he encounters throughout his perambulations around Dublin. Joyce figures the Sirens in this chapter as a couple of barmaids whose irreverent banter provides a comedic counter voice to the glib voices of the bar's male patrons. Pat's deafness links him to the more proletarian rowers of Homer's poem, but he is also Odyssean in his capable skills as a waiter while engaging with his clients and barmaids. As Maren Linett suggests, '*Ulysses* recasts the

<sup>26</sup> Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1993), 59.

<sup>27</sup> James Joyce, *Ulysses* (New York: Random House, 1986), 232. It is appropriate that the one deaf character in *Ulysses* appears in the 'Sirens' chapter whose organ is the ear and whose art is music. For a full discussion of blindness and deafness in the novel, see Maren Tova Linett, *Bodies of Modernism: Physical Disability in Transatlantic Modernist Literature* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017), 119–41.

issue of knowledge, associating both its blind and deaf characters not quite with the absence of knowledge but with its suspension.<sup>28</sup>

These two examples, ancient and modern, suggest the continuity of sensory loss—or more accurately sensory *difference*—as a theme in works that in ‘suspending’ knowledge provide an alternate perspective on what can be known. A disability aesthetics, in Tobin Siebers’s terms, ‘names the emergence of disability in modern art as a significant presence, one that shapes modern art in new ways and creates a space for the development of disabled artists and subjects.’<sup>29</sup> A disabled character is not merely a metaphor for some ethical failing or social ill but a presence that unsettles the integrity of sensory response, causing a degree of what Ato Quayson calls ‘aesthetic nervousness.’<sup>30</sup> As Siebers says, ‘[a]esthetics tracks the sensations that some bodies feel in the presence of other bodies,’ bringing the aesthetic into the affective and social realm where some bodies are rendered normal and others disqualified.<sup>31</sup> Such considerations are rather different from the classical view of aesthetics as a philosophy of disinterested judgment.

The problem for deaf poets is somewhat complicated since most culturally Deaf people think of themselves as a linguistic minority rather than persons who live with a disability. But whether they compose poems in American Sign language (ASL) or write in English or other languages, whether prelingually deaf, late-deafened, or CODAs (children of deaf adults), a recurrent theme within Deaf culture is the presumption of hearing as a putative norm, what activists call ‘audism.’ Rather than speak of ‘hearing loss,’ deaf advocates now speak of ‘Deaf gain’ and the advantages of speaking with the eye and hand.<sup>32</sup> The work of deaf artist Christine Sun Kim, for example, is often about the cultural and social value of sound. In her 2019 Whitney Biennial Exhibition, she submitted a series of large panels depicting her ‘Deaf Rage’ at institutions and public venues that presume a hearing audience. Her drawings depict a series of geometric angles (‘acute rage,’ ‘obtuse rage’) that express degrees of rage at airports without proper signage, museums without ASL interpreters, airplanes without captioned movies.<sup>33</sup> Her critique of a hearing-centred world permits (invites?) viewers to imagine public spaces and soundscapes from different angles.

A number of recent films have explored the limitations of the presumptive reliance on sound as an adjunct of visual language, often using captioning, sign language, and silence as key elements: Caroline Link’s *Beyond Silence* (1996), Zeinabu

<sup>28</sup> Linett, *Bodies of Modernism*, 119.

<sup>29</sup> Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 3.

<sup>30</sup> Ato Quayson, *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

<sup>31</sup> Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics*, 1.

<sup>32</sup> My capitalization of Deaf reflects the practice of using the capital ‘D’ when referring to Deaf cultural identity and small ‘d’ when referring to audiological and biological condition.

<sup>33</sup> I discuss Christine Sun Kim’s ‘Deaf Rage’ exhibition in ‘Siting Sound,’ 233–5.

irene Davis's *Compensation* (1999), Éric Lartigau's *La Famille Béliet* (2014), Todd Haynes's *Wonderstruck* (2017), John Krasinski's *A Quiet Place* I (2018) and II (2021), and Sian Heder's *CODA* (2021).<sup>34</sup> As Lennard Davis says, these films are largely intended for hearing audiences, but there are variations among them that illustrate the director's awareness of cultural Deafness.<sup>35</sup> In addition to offering an alternative to the sound-based film these recent versions reorient the relationship between sound and text, between the primordial 'voice' that underwrites subjectivity and the distributed voice of media technology.

In Darius Marder's 2021 film *Sound of Metal*, silence is at times the viewer's experience as well as that of the film's protagonist. In an interview with Alison O'Daniel, Marder refers to his sound perspective as 'POH' or 'point of hearing'.<sup>36</sup> His transformation of the more familiar phrase 'point of view' reverses the usual ocularcentric treatment of film—the 'gaze', the 'camera eye', and the 'viewer's perspective'. Of course, the phrase 'point of hearing' privileges an auditory perspective, but Marder's film is also about the ideology of hearing and what it means to lose it. By adopting a 'point of hearing', Marder redirects the gaze of the camera onto the soundscape and most importantly onto the complex interplay of visual and acoustic information.

*Sound of Metal* concerns a heavy-metal rock drummer, Ruben (Riz Ahmed), who loses his hearing and must confront the challenges this poses to his masculinity, his social and sexual relations, and, not insignificantly, his sobriety. When his hearing suddenly drops out, he becomes—understandably—angered and shaken, unable to process this volcanic change. The film mimics his hearing loss by cutting out the soundtrack from time to time, giving the film's hearing listeners some sense of Ruben's disorientation. Ruben and his girlfriend Lou are both recovering addicts, four years sober, for whom music and their relationship have been crucial for recovery. Now, Lou fears that Ruben will relapse because of hearing loss and works to place him in a sober living community for deaf people. Although Ruben initially repudiates his own deafness, he gradually learns ASL and comes to appreciate the support he receives from the Deaf community and the version of tough love that the group's leader, Joe (Paul Raci), administers.

Despite his growing familiarity with sign language and the friendship he develops in the deaf rehab centre, Ruben has not relinquished his desire to regain his hearing. He sells off his recording equipment and the big Airstream trailer that he

<sup>34</sup> It is worth remembering that silent films offered deaf viewers equal access to the viewing experience since all films prior to 1927 conveyed dialogue through intertitles. On the history of captioning see George J. Downey, *Closed Captioning: Subtitling, Stenography, and the Digital Convergence of Text with Television* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007). On deaf people and silent films see Rebecca Sanchez, *Deafening Modernism: Embodied Language and Visual Poetics in American Literature* (New York: New York University Press, 2015). See also Michael Davidson, *Distressing Language: Disability and the Poetics of Error* (New York: New York University Press, 2022), ch. 7, 'A Captioned Life.'

<sup>35</sup> Lennard J. Davis, 'Screening Deafness', *Los Angeles Review of Books* 19 (September 2021).

<sup>36</sup> Alison O'Daniel, 'The Noise Inside: Writer/Director Darius Marder on *Sound of Metal*', *Film-maker Magazine* (28 October 2020).

and Lou used for their tours to raise money for a cochlear implant. After the operation, he returns to the sober living community, hoping to continue living there, at least temporarily. Joe tells him that his implant may cure his hearing but not his mind and that his continued presence at the farm would challenge the deaf protocols of the community by attempting to fix a condition that the residents do not deem a problem. What is important, Joe says, is to achieve a ‘moment of stillness’ in which one is no longer trying to fix or remedy loss. Ruben sets out on his own, living for a time in a motel while his wounds, both physical and psychological, heal, and he contemplates his next move as a returning hearing person.

*Sound of Metal* is, in some respects, a ‘silent film’. Spoken dialogue is open-captioned, and sound is often modulated through Ruben’s hearing loss. During the segment at the deaf rehab centre, the members’ sign language is not captioned, thereby instantiating Ruben’s alienated—and perhaps the hearing viewer’s own—perspective on the Deaf world. To further the alienation effect of Ruben’s hearing loss, director Marder and his sound designer Nicolas Becker created a soundscape that utilized foley effects that replicate the mechanical output of cochlear implants. The dull thud of drums, muffled conversations, and the shrill electronic screeching of the implant itself occupy much of the soundtrack. The film occasionally returns to what hearing people might regard as ‘subjective sound’, but it is entirely possible to watch the film without the soundtrack, filling in gaps in communication and providing one’s own audio cues. Becker, who has experienced hearing loss, explains that as the film moves forward subjective sound ‘becomes less and less strong. The more you go in the film, the more it comes back to typical levels. We come back to the kind of typical world that people know.’<sup>37</sup>

*Sound of Metal* provides a useful example of how a medium whose theorization is often based on sight has been modified to foreground its ‘point of hearing’. By using non-professional actors, some of whom are deaf, and by warping the soundtrack to reflect Ruben’s auditory experience, the film embraces the possibilities of silence, static, noise, and sign to create several apertures for its reception. Critics of the film have qualified its minimal treatment of deaf people and sign language and its thematics of hearing loss as a tragic event, but those qualifications at least move the film into a debate about what it means to represent deafness in film and what it means to be an audience.

## Speaking in Hands

One of the more important documents in post-war poetics, Charles Olson’s ‘Projective Verse’ (1950) stresses the importance of the poet’s body in composition.

<sup>37</sup> Dan Reilly, ‘How *Sound of Metal* Reimagined the Silence in Hearing Loss,’ *Vulture* 12 (2020).

According to Olson the poetic line should extend from the musculature and breathing of the poet rather than adhering to traditional metrics or syllabics. As for the management of smaller units, the poet must draw on the resources of the ear: 'I say the syllable, king, and that it is spontaneous, this way: the ear, the ear which has collected, which has listened, the ear, which is so close to the mind that it is the mind's, that it has the mind's speed.'<sup>38</sup> Olson's emphasis on the variable qualities of the syllable and its proximity to 'mind' derives from Ezra Pound's emphasis on 'melopoeia', 'the dance of the intellect among words', and the 'variable meter' advocated by William Carlos Williams.<sup>39</sup>

What would happen to Olson's formulation if the poet were deaf and signed poems in ASL? It may be only a thought exercise to imagine what the equivalent sign language features would be to the ear and audition, but it is worth extending Olson's thought to what he could not imagine. At one level, his emphasis on the body as poetic resource would speak to disabled artists and poets whose different body-minds demand or enable different aesthetic strategies. And this emphasis has implications for deaf poets who sign their poems on the body. Olson's emphasis on the 'ear', however, would seem to pose a severe limit. Clayton Valli and other deaf poets have argued that handshapes and other classifiers would be the basic building blocks of sign language poetry, and like the syllable can be modified based on contextual factors. But the point should not be whether one can map elements of English language onto sign language, a kind of linguistic settler colonialism, but rather what new forms of poetry are produced by a language composed in space, with hands, body position, and facial expression.

Let's take the example of diction: the choice of words in a text and the multiple levels of language deployed in a poem that manage the variability of spoken language. Daniel Tiffany discusses the ways that diction in poetry often code-switches between registers that signify a poet's class, gender, race, and regional background, the 'social textures of language associated with various communities.'<sup>40</sup> A poet's incorporation of vernacular argots, pidgins, or interlingual merging of several languages—his examples include Lois-Ann Yamanaka, Cathy Park Hong, Rodrigo Toscano—brings dominant and subaltern languages into conversation. The same could be said for deaf poets, but the categories of shared experience, the meaning of 'communities', might be different depending, for example, on whether the poet was educated in an oral school, a community with a large deaf population, a community

<sup>38</sup> Charles Olson, 'Projective Verse', in *Collected Prose: Charles Olson*, ed. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 239–49 (242).

<sup>39</sup> Pound discusses 'logopoeia' in 'How to Read', *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, n.d.), 25. Williams discusses his ideas of variable metres or 'variable foot' in various late interviews and essays. On Williams's theory of variable metres see Stephen Cushman, *William Carlos Williams and the Meanings of Measure* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

<sup>40</sup> Daniel Tiffany, 'Speaking in Tongues: Poetry and the Residues of Shared Language', *Tupelo Quarterly* 20 (2021), <https://www.tupeloquarterly.com/tq20-table-of-contents/>.

of Black signers, a public school, or a family that does not sign.<sup>41</sup> As Margalit Fox has written, the origin of ASL itself is a product of intersecting dictions.<sup>42</sup> When Thomas Gallaudet opened the first school for deaf students in Hartford, Connecticut, with his native French deaf teacher Laurent Clerc, he incorporated Clerc's French sign language overlaid with imposed English word order, tenses, and pronouns, plus local vernacular and 'homesigns' developed among the students independent of their classes. ASL, like all languages, grew by a rhizomatic path from pidgins to creole and then to increasingly more complex syntactic and morphological structures.

In my own experience working with several ASL tutors and teachers, I have noticed dramatic differences in the meanings and shapes of various signs, depending on generation, schooling, and family background. And there is plenty of sign playfulness between languages. The ASL sign for UNDERSTAND involves the right index finger pointing up next to the temple. One of my tutors joked by taking the sign for STAND, the index and third fingers in a 'V' shape on top of the left palm, but inverting the sign so that STAND was, indeed, standing *under* the palm. This example reveals the 'residues of shared languages' that include the overwhelming authority of audism, the ideology that privileges hearing. The portmanteau sign for audism, THINK-HEARING, is represented by an index finger rotating in front of the forehead. Here the conventional sign for SPEECH, the index rotating in front of the mouth, is shifted to the head to show how 'speech' is naturalized as ideology.<sup>43</sup>

Let me illustrate these points through two examples of how diction is used in some lines by John Ashbery and in Clayton Valli's poem 'Snowflake' (1990). Ashbery's 'Daffy Duck in Hollywood' (1977) is an operatic display of multiple dictions, from the sublime to the ridiculous, different levels of rhetoric often overlapping within a few phrases:

That mean old cartoonist, but just look what he's  
Done to me now! I scarce dare approach me mug's attenuated  
Reflection in yon hubcap, so jaundiced, so *déconfit*  
Are its lineaments – fun, no doubt, for some quack phrenologist's  
Fern-clogged waiting room, but hardly what you'd call  
Companionable.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Historical segregation of Black populations into separate neighbourhoods and schools has led to the development of a distinct black signing tradition which makes more use of two-handed signing, broader gestures, and idiomatic variants of ASL.

<sup>42</sup> Margalit Fox, *Talking Hands: What Sign Language Reveals about the Mind* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2007), 32–7.

<sup>43</sup> On THINK-HEARING see Carol Padden and Tom Humphreys, *Deaf in America: Voices from a Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 54.

<sup>44</sup> John Ashbery, 'Daffy Duck in Hollywood', in *John Ashbery: Selected Poems* (New York: Penguin, 1985), 227 (ll. 11–16).

Here the wildly shifting set of sociolects reflects class and cultural levels, from Looney Tunes ('That mean old cartoonist', 'me mug's attenuated / Reflection') to cocktail party banter ('so jaundiced, so *déconfit*') to intellectual camp ('quack phrenologist's / Fern-clogged waiting room').<sup>45</sup> Ashbery's dance of dictions is in some respects a verbal collage of Hollywood movies, one part Walter Brennan, the other part Laurence Olivier. These sudden transitions imitate the 1953 Daffy Duck cartoon it celebrates (Chuck Jones's *Duck Amuck*, 1953) in which Daffy undergoes multiple transformations—and erasures—by the absent 'mean old cartoonist'. Just as Daffy is becoming comfortable playing his ukulele in a tropical setting with palm trees, he is rudely moved—on skis—to a snowy alpine landscape. Deixis in the poem strives to locate cartoonist and Daffy, artist and creation, only to expose the placelessness of identities, the absence of any authorizing subjectivity in a media-drenched environment. The mediated subject exists as a portrait in a convex mirror, a hubcap, that expands the 'mug' to grotesque proportions.

Clayton Valli's signed poem 'Snowflake' is a different species altogether in tone but nevertheless manages to move between registers on several significant levels. I have discussed this poem elsewhere, but I want to call attention to Valli's fusion of diction and deixis (aspects of language like pronouns and prepositions that situate individuals in relation) in a lyric whose centre concerns a conversation between a deaf boy and his hearing father.<sup>46</sup> This conversation is framed by an opening and closing lyric describing a cold winter day. The poet looks through a window and sees a tree full of leaves that then fall onto grass that is withered and barren. There is no colour; everything is grey. Suddenly a snowflake falls in a diagonal movement. Valli's sign for snowflake, the thumb and index finger connected in an 'o' shape, moves across his body from left to right.<sup>47</sup> This image of the solitary snowflake inspires a memory of an earlier time, signalled by signs for HEARTBEAT followed by MEMORY and concluding with NEVER FORGET EYES.

The eyes that inspire his emotional response belong to a young boy speaking to his father. The father, who does not sign, is trying to impress his hearing friends by asking his deaf son to verbalize answers to questions: 'what is your name', 'how old are you?'. Valli signs the entire poem in ASL, but switches registers to represent the father's oral speech and the child's halting attempts to respond. Spatial and positional deixis here is embodied by the father's shifting body position as he addresses his friends, using the sign for spoken nonsense ('blah blah blah') to indicate the boy's confusion about his father's oral conversation. He turns to the son to ask him

<sup>45</sup> I am indebted to Peter Middleton for the phrase 'intellectual camp'.

<sup>46</sup> See 'Tree Tangled in Tree: Resiting Poetry through ASL', in Michael Davidson, *Concerto for the Left Hand: Disability and the Defamiliar Body* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 100–15.

<sup>47</sup> Clayton Valli, 'Snowflake', in *Poetry in Motion: Original Works in ASL*, VHS (Burtonsville, MD: Sign Media, 1990).



questions and then adopts the son's point of view as he attempts to respond to his father's questions. Their interchange is conducted in Signed Exact English (SEE), an invented language that imposes English syntax on ASL signs. It also includes fingerspelling of certain words that do not have ASL equivalents such as the copula in the phrases 'how old a-r-e you?' and 'my name i-s...'

The image of this early encounter fades, and Valli returns to the winter day and a falling snowflake signed using ASL syntax and an innovative collaboration between dominant and subordinate hands. The snowflake that falls in the first part from left to right now falls in a diagonal from right to left using the non-dominant hand. Valli uses at least four levels of manual signing: fingerspelling, SEE, regular ASL, and a version of ASL that modifies handshapes, body position, and facial expression. This, in Tiffany's terms, marks not formalist experiment but 'a disruption and expansion of poetic diction' by making the dominant language (English) subservient to ASL.<sup>48</sup>

Deixis and diction are intertwined in the way that the interchange between hearing father and deaf son replicates the historical division of oral and Deaf cultures. It may also replicate Valli's own experience as a deaf child of hearing, non-signing parents. The very use of SEE embodies this history. One might add that for a deaf person the presence of SEE *is* a kind of diction since it brings the 'outside' into the poem as a creolized form of sign language. But this interchange is itself contained or wrapped into a more lyrical use of ASL in the framing lyric concerning the cold winter day, suggesting that the poet, Clayton Valli, has contained this unequal relationship on his own (signed) terms. 'Snowflake' is about the positional relationship not only of speakers but of unequal power relationships between hearing and deaf persons.

Valli is a much more conservative poet than more recent deaf practitioners like Peter Cook, Sean Forbes, Signmark, and Prinz D who have drawn from rap and urban subcultures as well as the activism on behalf of Deaf cultural identity to create a vibrant deaf jam tradition.<sup>49</sup> And needless to say, Valli comes out of a very different aesthetic tradition from Ashbery. Although he has likened his use of ASL to Robert Frost and the prosodic traditions of English poetry, his ventriloquized use of several idiolects links him more closely to the New York School poet than one might think. For Ashbery the 'outside' is, as I have said, like the image in a convex mirror, a version of oneself enlarged and distorted. For Valli the 'outside' is a culture that expects him to assimilate the dominant culture's attitudes towards hearing and speech.

<sup>48</sup> Tiffany, 'Speaking in Tongues,' 29.

<sup>49</sup> Judy Lief's documentary film *Deaf Jam* is a good introduction to new def/Deaf poetries; <https://www.newday.com/film/deaf-jam>.

## The Silence at Epidaurus

In *The Five Senses* (*Les Cinq Sens*), Michel Serres describes sitting in the ancient theatre of Epidaurus, listening to silence. If this seems like a contradiction in terms, it is one that Serres exploits as he reflects on the healing properties of silence in an amphitheatre famous for its perfect acoustics: '[we] are healed better by leaving noise behind than by diving into language'.<sup>50</sup> He realizes that he prolongs that noise by 'diving into language' through his essay. The tutelary spirit at Epidaurus is Asclepius, the god of medicine, whom Socrates, according to Plato, invoked in his last words: 'Crito, we owe a cock to Asclepius' (90). Socrates on his deathbed asks to be 'healed', not from the hemlock's poison but from the noise of the world he perpetuates by continuing to talk. The silence that Serres experiences at Epidaurus anticipates the silence to come when language and the body are finished.

Suddenly a group of tourists interrupts Serres's reverie: 'They talk, squawk, discuss, and exclaim, admire out loud, call to each other, give explanations . . . and test, for the hundredth time, the location's exact acoustic properties'.<sup>51</sup> The collective voice 'detonates peace' and destroys, for Serres, the amphitheatre's contract with the gods and their healing powers. Serres's phrasing epitomizes the endurance of that poetics of silence with which I began, expressing as with my Keats example that the extreme condition of silence is death. What Serres wishes to escape is the roar of the crowd: 'the collective only believes in its own noise'.<sup>52</sup> One wonders what would have happened if Serres had considered not only what he heard at Epidaurus but also what the experience of a deaf person might have been. What is a language that hears without speech, or that speaks by other means—touch, gesture, vibration? Deaf persons must wonder what all the fuss is about at Epidaurus since they are perfectly able to communicate and are hardly irritated at the eruption of crowd noise. The end of language is not death, as Serres suggests, but the continuity of community *in* and *through* a language of signs.

In this chapter I have argued that the long modernist period, from Keats's Grecian urn to the present, has cultivated a poetics of silence that is silent about its presumptions about sound. As Rebecca Sanchez notes, 'so deeply enmeshed in our language use is the concept of sound that even the ways we describe the absence of audition cannot help but make reference to it'.<sup>53</sup> What Sanchez calls a 'Deaf epistemology' allows us to rethink the modernist period through a deaf lens, rejecting the equation of deafness with unknowing ('what, are you deaf?') and thinking about the distributed nature of knowledge among the senses. This move is not a compensatory

<sup>50</sup> Michel Serres, *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies*, trans. Margaret Sankey and Peter Cowley (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 85.

<sup>51</sup> Serres, *The Five Senses*, 86.

<sup>52</sup> Serres, *The Five Senses*, 86.

<sup>53</sup> Sanchez, *Deafening Modernism*, 2.

account that treats ocular models as substitutes for hearing loss. Rather, it is a recognition of the variable nature of sensate life. When a sensory level is absent, it is not a loss but a different kind of melody, a phenomenological space for those 'ditties of no tone' to which Keats aspired.

#### FURTHER READING

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III

SMELL



## FESTERING LILIES

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### Seeing and Smelling Gender and Race in Renaissance Art and Poetry

HOLLY DUGAN

Lilies, especially white lilies (*Lilium candidum*), are complex visual and metaphoric symbols in the Renaissance. Associated with Hera and Juno in ancient mythology and with purity in ancient Jewish traditions, lilies came to signify the Virgin Mary's divine chastity in medieval art.<sup>1</sup> The flower's sensuous qualities—the visual whiteness of its petals and its strong scent—are particularly constitutive of its representational power. For medieval and early modern artists, white lilies signal purity. But lilies also decay rapidly, releasing a strong scent as they die. For poets like Ronsard and Shakespeare, the smell of 'festerling' lilies provided them with a powerful metaphor about the unseen dangers of desire. The sensuous qualities of white lilies as symbols of both sexual purity and contamination helped to solidify cultural ideals of chastity, beauty, and whiteness as discernible phenomena. Lilies, I argue, show how beauty was configured as a corruptible whiteness.

Though we are often used to thinking of race as a visual phenomenon, these lyric poems and their metaphors of lilies demonstrate how olfactory tropes helped to bolster visual codes of gender and race. Because smell has been positioned as a 'fugitive' sense within Western philosophical traditions, it is a powerful medium for representing what Hsuan Hsu describes as 'risk perceptions' in literature.<sup>2</sup> Whereas Hsu's analysis focuses on the links between modern and postmodern literary genres and environmental health hazards, olfaction also conveyed fears about contagion and risk in premodern literature, especially in lyric poetry.

<sup>1</sup> Riklef Kanderer and Wolfram R. Ullrich, 'Symbolism of Plants: Examples from European Mediterranean Culture Presented with Biology and History of Art: June: Lilies', *Journal of Experimental Botany* 60, no. 7 (2009), 1893–5 (1894).

<sup>2</sup> Hsuan Hsu, *The Smell of Risk* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), 17.

Festering lilies and their smell, imagined in juxtaposition to the white lily as a visual symbol of virginity, signalled the unseen but debilitating effects of sexual contact with unseemly partners, linking the stench of fetid flowers to a metaphorical blight on white beauty.<sup>3</sup>

White lilies, I argue, were an important eco-material marker of race, infusing descriptions of their beauty with visual and olfactory qualia. Lilies function as an important metaphor of whiteness in Renaissance literature, drawing on the flower's religious symbolism as well as its botanical history. Here I argue that the lily documents how smell functions more broadly within discourses about race, religion, and gender in the Renaissance. As Kim Hall has argued, English sonneteers drew upon a wide array of sources in order to craft powerful metaphors of desire, particularly in their depictions of a metaphoric and physical blackness. Commenting on the ubiquitous deployment of black/fair imagery in lyric poetry, Hall argues that sonneteers depicted beauty in paradoxical ways, describing a beauty that could be both black and fair, dark and white.<sup>4</sup> Doing so signalled poetic prowess: 'Positing a mistress as dark allows the poet to turn her white, to refashion her into an acceptable object of Platonic love and admiration.'<sup>5</sup>

Whereas Hall explores the connotations of lyric poetry through metaphors of darkness, I extend her argument here to examine metaphors of whiteness, configured in Renaissance poetry as lilies, both floral and perfumed and fetid and rotting. These metaphors built upon the visual and religious symbolism of the flower as chaste and beautiful, emphasizing through descriptions of floral stench that beauty can also deceive, decay, and rot. As Jonathan Reinartz argues, notions about 'odorous others' abound in histories of race and smell. 'Perceived stench', he argues, is a racializing process that extends back to antiquity.<sup>6</sup> Smell is rooted in cultural norms; disgust about certain smells reveals occluded processes of 'habitation', including social norms and beauty ideals.<sup>7</sup> Poetic metaphors of the 'perceived stench' of 'festering' lilies point towards implicit codes of gender and race embedded in the flower's religious symbolism: if pure white lilies represent divine chastity, festering lilies represent the disfiguring effects of sin, symbolized by decay and floral stench.

The ecological and literary histories of lilies intertwine in the Renaissance, creating a powerful metaphor of aesthetic and social norms of chastity. White lilies have long been valued for their visual and olfactory beauty. They bloom in early summer with tall stems and erect flower buds, which emit a pleasant fragrance. Their natural

<sup>3</sup> See Kim Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 66.

<sup>4</sup> Hall, *Things of Darkness*, 70.

<sup>5</sup> Hall, *Things of Darkness*, 67.

<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Reinartz, *Past Scents: Historical Perspectives on Smell* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2014), 84–5.

<sup>7</sup> Mark S. R. Jenner, 'AHR Forum: Follow Your Nose? Smell, Smelling, and Their Histories', *American Historical Review* 116, no. 2 (2011), 335–51 (342).

habitat is in the dry, mountainous regions of the Balkan peninsula and in the hills and mountains of Palestine and Lebanon. But lilies also thrive as cultivated plants and have been traded in Mediterranean regions for over 2,500 years.<sup>8</sup> Ancient writers emphasized both the colour and smell of the flower. Greek naturalist Theophrastus divided lilies into two groups (red and white), describing the former as *krinon* and the latter as *leiron*.<sup>9</sup> Pliny the Elder described the lily as holding 'the highest rank after the rose', noting both the beauty of its fragrance and the whiteness of its petals.<sup>10</sup> The noun *candeo* in Latin describes a 'brilliant', 'glittering', and illuminated whiteness.<sup>11</sup> But Pliny the Elder also describes the 'twofold' nature of the lily, emphasizing the flower's prominent pistil and stamen. These function as if they were a second flower. For Pliny, only the white petals of the lily are valued for their smell.<sup>12</sup>

Lilies are, for the most part, a hardy botanical species, but unspotted white lilies are incredibly rare. Those that do exist in the wild last for only a few, fleeting moments before the pollen from the stamen falls on the petals, causing orange-coloured spots. Spotted lilies become heavily scented, a natural horticultural effect that helps with pollination.<sup>13</sup> Spotted lilies can be a sign of disease: lilies, especially white ones, are susceptible to botrytis, a fungal infection that accelerates rotting and causes orange and brown spots to appear on the leaves and petals of the flower.<sup>14</sup> Removing the pollen from the stamen as soon as the plant blooms mitigates these effects. Images of the flower from antiquity and in the early medieval period often depict lilies with the stamen removed.

The botanical properties of the flower, especially its smell, made it a powerful symbol. Biblical allusions to lilies associate the flower and its perfume with erotic desire and with religious faith. In the Song of Songs, the bride famously describes herself as 'black but beautiful' [*Nigra sum sed formosa*] and as the 'the flower of

<sup>8</sup> Images of white lilies appear on the walls of buildings in Assyria, Egypt, Greece, and Rome. See Kandeler and Ullrich, 'Symbolism of Plants', 1893. See also F. Nigel Hepper, *Pharaoh's Flowers: The Botanical Treasures of Tutankhamun* (Chicago: KWS Publishers, 2009), 25.

<sup>9</sup> He also described them as 'twofold' (along with roses and violets) because they have 'another flower inside the flower in the middle'. Theophrastus, *Enquiry into Plants*, trans. Arthur Fenton Hort (London: Heinemann: 1916), 6.6.7 and 6.6.8, 1.13.2, 3.18.9, <https://topostext.org/work/242>.

<sup>10</sup> Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History*, trans. John Bostock and H. T. Riley, Perseus Digital Library, ch. 11. 5, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0137%3Abook%3D21%3Achapter%3D11#note-link8>.

<sup>11</sup> Morgan Library, *De Materia Medica*, MS. M 652, fol. 84r. See also R. K. Ashdowne, D. R. Howlett, and R. E. Latham, eds, *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources* (Oxford: British Academy, 2018), 'candeo', ui, 2 v.n.

<sup>12</sup> Morgan Library, *De Materia Medica*, MS. M 652, fol. 84r.

<sup>13</sup> Bright flower petals visually attract pollinators such as birds and bees, but the strong scent of white lilies attracts pollinators such as moths and butterflies that rely more on smell.

<sup>14</sup> Cynthia Wescott, *Wescott's Plant Diseases Handbook*, 5th edn, rev. R. Kenneth Host (New York: Springer, 1990), 126.



the field / and the lily of the valley' ['Ego flos campi et lilium convallium'].<sup>15</sup> The bridegroom also describes his love as flourishing like a lily 'among thorns' ['Sicut lilium inter spinas sic amica mea inter filias', 2:2]. Both imagine love as 'feeding among the lilies'. The bridegroom describes his beloved's breasts as 'two young roes that are twins, which feed among the lilies'; the bride describes her lover's cheeks and lips as 'aromatical spices set by the perfumers', and as 'lilies dropping choice myrrh' ['Labia ejus lilia, distillantia myrrham primam', 5:13]. These gustatory and olfactory allusions connect the beauty of the flower to sexual and sensual pleasure (within marriage). In other parts of the Bible, lilies are associated with religious faith. In the Sermon on the Mount, Christ admonishes those who desire colourful adornment, advising them to 'consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin'.<sup>16</sup> The many translations of these passages across history make it almost impossible to identify with certainty the species of flowers mentioned in them. The imagery, however, describes a plant much closer to *Lilium candidum* than what we now identify as 'lily of the valley' (muguet or *Convallaria majalis*). Though *Lilium candidum* is no longer prevalent in Palestine and Lebanon, it is possible that it once was. Its strong herbaceous stem and erect flowers provide a powerful image of a white flower that does not bend, 'toil', or 'spin'.

Medieval theologians interpreted the frank depiction of erotic desire and sensuous pleasure in the Song of Songs as a spiritual allegory of God's love for the soul or, relatedly, of God's love for the Church.<sup>17</sup> It was among the most frequently interpreted books in medieval Christianity, in large part because of its investments in metaphors of corporeality, especially, as Julie Orlemanski argues, 'its intimate but peculiar phrasing' and its 'crosshatched invitations both to watch a spectacle of desire unfolding and to make this speaker's voice one's own'.<sup>18</sup> Writers such as Origen of Alexandria, Ambrose of Milan, and Augustine interpreted not only the bride's blackness as a symbol of toil and of the persecution of the faithful but also the lily's whiteness and its smell as a symbol of a purity of faith.<sup>19</sup> Medieval theologians also connected such imagery (especially the white lily) to biblical passages about the Apocalypse, particularly the 'dazzling, jewel-like appearance of the Risen Christ' riding a white horse.<sup>20</sup> Such interpretations emphasized the metaphorical meanings of colour in the Song of Songs, crafting an image of the Church that was both vulnerable to persecution (in the present) and triumphant (in the future).

<sup>15</sup> 'Canticle of Canticles', *The Vulgate Bible*, ed. Swift Edgar with Angela M. Kinney, 6 vols (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), III, 731–55 (1. 4 and 2. 5). See also Bruce Holsinger, 'The Color of Salvation: Desire, Death, and the Second Crusade in Bernard of Clairvaux's *Sermons on the Song of Songs*', in David Townsend and Andrew Taylor, eds, *The Tongue of the Fathers: Gender and Ideology in Twelfth-Century Latin* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), 157–92.

<sup>16</sup> Matthew 6:28–30, c.f. Luke 12:27–31, *The Vulgate Bible*, VI, 28–9.

<sup>17</sup> Hannah W. Matis, *The Song of Songs in the Early Middle Ages* (Leiden: Brill, 2019), 95.

<sup>18</sup> Julie Orlemanski, 'Literary Persons and Medieval Fiction in Bernard of Clairvaux's *Sermons on the Song of Songs*', *Representations* 153 (2021), 29–50 (30).

<sup>19</sup> Matis, *The Song of Songs*, 98.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 94.

Lilies, cultivated in gardens, allowed these writers to extend this analogy further. Just as the bride longs for the bridegroom, so too do the faithful long for heaven. Ambrose imagines the chosen waiting in an enclosed garden for Judgment Day, 'browsing among the lilies'.<sup>21</sup> In his *Exposition on the Book of Psalms*, Augustine also imagines the Church as a flower garden, but one that must include both lilies and thorns, for just as '(white) lilies grow among thorns; so too must the devout flourish amongst evil'. The white lily represents faith that is tested and remains pure.

Bernard of Clairvaux, for example, interprets the bride's physical blackness in the Songs as a powerful spiritual metaphor in his *Sermons on the Song of Songs*.<sup>22</sup> In doing so, as Bruce Holsinger argues, Bernard's sermons also work to construct whiteness 'in no uncertain terms' as 'the colour of salvation'.<sup>23</sup> By interpreting physical blackness in the Song of Songs as metaphoric, Bernard's sermons engage with an increasingly 'globalized semiotics of colour', interpreting the Bride as a spiritual avatar for Christians like the Knights Templar, who imagined themselves as subjected to physical and spiritual trials of faith. Holsinger argues:

Starting with 'Nigra sum,' two simple words spoken by the Bride in the Song of Songs, Bernard produces an elaborate metonymic spectacle in which black bodies are repeatedly and energetically gazed at, beaten, and penetrated, only to shed their darkened skin and reveal the underlying whiteness of the Christian soul and, finally, the resurrection body.<sup>24</sup>

Lilies are part of this construction of a metaphoric whiteness. In his sermons, Bernard insists that lilies, too, must be interpreted metaphorically and not physically. He delineates that the bridegroom does not feed on the lilies but among them, interpreting this claim as a sign of modesty and an invitation to 'refreshment' in the 'spiritual meaning' of feeding 'among the lilies'.<sup>25</sup>

Lilies were only one of the many figurations of religious piety in medieval discourse.<sup>26</sup> Like the lily, some of these images included implicit olfactory associations. Medieval interpretations of the Bible expanded black/white imagery to include developing notions of religious race.<sup>27</sup> M. Lindsay Kaplan's research on thirteenth-

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 101.      <sup>22</sup> See further Orlemanski, 'Literary Persons'.

<sup>23</sup> See Holsinger, 'The Color of Salvation'; Cord Whitaker, *Black Metaphors: How Modern Racism Emerged from Medieval Race-Thinking* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), 25.

<sup>24</sup> Holsinger, 'The Color of Salvation', 169.

<sup>25</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs IV*, trans. Irene Edmonds (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1980), Sermons 67–86.

<sup>26</sup> On eco-materiality and whiteness, see Peggy McCracken, 'Animate Ivory: Animality, Materiality, and Pygmalion's Statue', 2020 Oxford Medieval Studies Lecture, given at the University of Oxford, 23 January 2020, <https://www.medievalists.net/2020/02/animate-ivory-animality-materiality-and-pygmalions-statue/>; see also Whitaker, *Black Metaphors*, 30; Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, 'Some Fantasies of Race in Late Medieval France and England', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 31, no.1 (Winter 2001), 113–46.

<sup>27</sup> Geraldine Heng, *The Invention of Race in the European Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 149.

century English psalters, for example, shows how images of the Passion marked Jews as visually different from Christ by depicting medieval stereotypes of Jewishness (red hair, badges, and distorted facial features) but also, increasingly, by depicting them with black skin.<sup>28</sup> As Kaplan argues, such images document how ‘a concept of Jewish blackness developed across a range of medieval discourses and visual representations.’<sup>29</sup> Likewise, Geraldine Heng argues that medieval Christian religion theorized religious otherness as bodily difference: within Christian accounts, ‘Jewish bodies were always giving themselves away – as cacophony or noise, as smell, as menstrual effluvia or a bloody flux, as the tactile and visual cut of circumcision.’<sup>30</sup> Racialized religious difference, Heng argues, was experienced viscerally: felt, heard, and smelled.<sup>31</sup>

Lilies helped to foster visual and olfactory connections between spiritual faith, divine light, and white skin. The figural power of the lily was starkly visual. The denatured image of the white lily in medieval art, especially images of the Annunciation, depict a cultivated flower with its pistil and stamens removed. The white lily, early in bloom, became a marker of purity and chastity, whereas the smell of it rotting became associated with corruption, sin, and, increasingly, a racialized blackness.<sup>32</sup> Renaissance poets drew upon medieval olfactory associations between sin and stench and the visual trope of white lilies as a symbol of chastity to describe the sensory confusion of dangerous desire, especially those whose beauty was visually appealing but contained malodorous risks. As Mark Smith argues, these tropes are foundational within longer histories of racial thinking: medieval associations of smell and morality provided an elastic trope that was repeated in other historical contexts, including the racist notion that smell ‘could be used to reveal the truth about a person’s race and ethnicity.’<sup>33</sup>

The whiteness of lilies signified the Virgin’s chaste divinity in highly animate—and sensuous—ways.<sup>34</sup> As Richard Dyer argues, the Virgin Mary was the ‘supreme exemplar’ of a feminized whiteness, defined by her chastity.<sup>35</sup> Fra Filippo Lippi’s

<sup>28</sup> M. Lindsay Kaplan, *Figuring Racism in Medieval Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 81–103.

<sup>29</sup> M. Lindsay Kaplan, ‘The Jewish Body in Black and White in Medieval and Early Modern England,’ *Philological Quarterly* 92, no. 1 (Winter 2013), 41–65 (59).

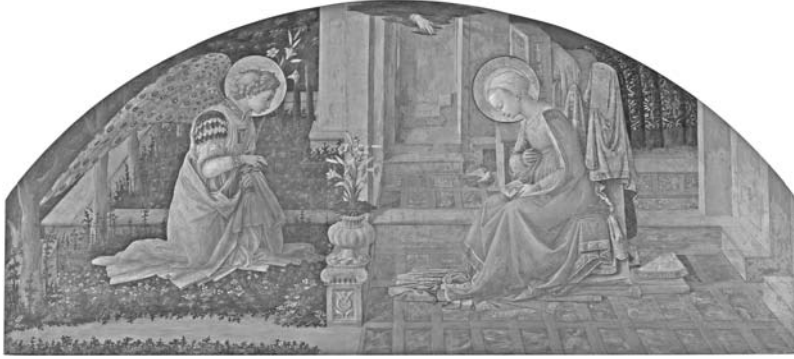
<sup>30</sup> Heng, *The Invention of Race*, 81. <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> On smell and race in seventeenth-century discourse, see Andrew Kettler, *The Smell of Slavery: Olfactory Racism and the Atlantic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), xi. See also Holly Dugan, ‘Shylock’s Senses: Entangled Phenomenologies of Difference on Early English Stages,’ in *Embodiment, Expertise, and Ethics in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 132–53 (143).

<sup>33</sup> Mark Smith, ‘Transcending, Othering, Detecting: Smell, Premodernity, Modernity,’ *Postmedieval* 3, no. 4 (2012), 380–90 (383).

<sup>34</sup> Ülle Sillasoo, ‘Medieval plant depictions as a source for archaeobotanical research,’ *Vegetation History and Archaeobotany* 16 (2006), 61–70 (64).

<sup>35</sup> Richard Dyer, *White: Twentieth Anniversary Edition*, introd. by Maxime Cervulle (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 74.



**Figure 10.1** Fra Filippo Lippi, *The Annunciation* (c.1450–3), oil on panel. © The National Gallery, London.

*Annunciation* for the Benedictine order of nuns in the Monastery of Murate (Figure 10.1) depicts the archangel Gabriel kneeling and holding white lilies, suggesting that their spotless beauty is a gift from God not unlike the Virgin's chastity. Many flowers decorate the border of an image of the Annunciation in a fifteenth-century French Book of Hours (attributed to the Boucicaut Master); yet white lilies are the only flowers included in the scene itself, the whiteness of its petals heightened by the fact that the potted lilies sit in front of a red wall.<sup>36</sup> In Duccio di Buoninsegna's thirteenth-century panel of the Annunciation (Figure 10.2), potted lilies at the Virgin's feet are bright white, and the lilies have no stamens. Simone Martini's painting of the Annunciation also includes potted lilies with their stamens removed, visually aligned with the Holy Spirit flying above them, set against a gilded background.<sup>37</sup> The association of lilies without their stamens with the Annunciation links the Madonna's divine chastity to the flower's denatured appearance, especially the whiteness of spotless petals.

The flower also came to signify chastity as a human virtue, depicting sexual purity as a spotless and white flower. A thirteenth-century Bible moralisée depicts the traits of religious martyrdom, chastity, and perseverance as allegorical figures, each adorned with flowers: roses for martyrdom, lilies for chastity, and violets for perseverance.<sup>38</sup> John Peckham, Archbishop of Canterbury, drew on the legacy of the Song of Songs, reimagining its garden as one filled only with lilies, in order to instruct the abbess of Romsey Abbey to build a gate to enclose its garden and

<sup>36</sup> [Boucicaut Master,] *Book of Hours (Use of Paris)*, parchment, c.1450. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 80, <https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/2f4d10f5-ac89-4b0f-8209-bc7a3c401073/>. See also [Boucicaut Master,] *Book of Hours (Use of Paris)*, Ink, tempera, and gold on vellum, c.1420. Cleveland: Cleveland Museum of Art, <https://www.clevelandart.org/art/1942.169.50.a>.

<sup>37</sup> Simone Martini, *Annunciation with St. Margaret and St. Ansanus*, 1333. Tempera on wood, gold background. 184 × 168 cm. Florence, Uffizi Gallery.

<sup>38</sup> *Bible Moralisee*, parchment, c.1234–66. Oxford: Bodleian Library, MS Bodl 270b, fol. 040r.



**Figure 10.2** Duccio, *The Annunciation* (c. 1307–11), egg tempera on wood. © The National Gallery, London.

protect it. Lilies, he argues, require protection from ‘sowers’ of mischief: ‘In a lily garden the Bridegroom is filled with delight and finds pleasure in gathering lilies above all flowers’, but it is ‘needful to enclose this garden by the defence of shrewd and sharp disciplines . . . lest an entrance be opened by any sower of mischief’.<sup>39</sup> The lily, he notes, is ‘the ornament of virginal purity’, a trait ‘we desire to protect’.<sup>40</sup>

If white flowers signal sexual purity, then its diseased petals and other varieties signal corruption, increasingly represented as a blight upon whiteness. Race-making in the Renaissance was a complex historical process, and lilies are only a small part of this history.<sup>41</sup> Yet their role within it points to the ways in which whiteness came

<sup>39</sup> Henry George Downing Liveing, ed., *Records of Romsey Abbey: An Account of the Benedictine House of Nuns, with Notes on the Parish Church and Town* (Winchester: Warren & Sons, 1906), 82.

<sup>40</sup> Sylvia Landsberg, *The Medieval Garden* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 36.

<sup>41</sup> For more on race and medieval literature, see Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, ‘Race’, in Marion Turner, ed., *A Handbook of Middle English Studies* (Chichester: Wiley Blackwell, 2013), 109–22; Heng, *The Invention of Race*; Kaplan, *Figuring Racism*; Dorothy Kim, ‘Reframing Race and Jewish/Christian Relations in the Middle Ages’, *Transversal* 12 (2015), 52–64; and Whitaker, *Black Metaphors*. For more on race and the Renaissance, see Dennis Britton, *Becoming Christian: Race, Reformation, and Early Modern English Romance* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015); Urvashi Chakravarty, ‘Race, Natality,

to function as an aestheticized marker of gendered and racialized identity, especially when posited against medieval and early modern notions of blackness. Smell, however, allowed writers to theorize movement between these dichotomous states of being. As a symbol of holiness and purity and of sin and contamination, lilies functioned as a powerful figuration of whiteness, vulnerable to contamination. In the fifteenth-century East Anglian play the Digby *Mary Magdalene*, for example, the saint's conversion is staged as an allegorical shift from the darkness of sin to the light of grace. When the allegorical figure of 'Coryosté' seduces the saint into sin, he describes her beauty and her body as a 'swete lelly': 'Your person, itt is so womanly, / I can nat refreyn me, swete lelly.'<sup>42</sup> However, once Mary Magdalene sins, her 'person' becomes associated with the smells of hell: stage directions explain that in the moment Mary rejects her sexual past, 'seven devils shall devoid from the woman, and the Bad Angel enter into hell with thunder.'<sup>43</sup> The Magdalene's chastity is imagined first to smell like a 'swete' lily and then like the stench of devils and hell. Later, these same stage conventions are used to represent her saintly conversion of Muslim characters, connecting the staged smell of hell with the staged representation of Islam.<sup>44</sup> The moral valences of sin are performed through olfactory cues.<sup>45</sup>

These patterns of figuration also appear in Spanish and French literature. As Mary Channen Caldwell argues, the use of the lily in French heraldry infused its allegorical meanings with valences of morality: 'the lily, whether signifying the Virgin Mary, the virtues, the Holy Trinity or even the [French] king himself, reveals itself as the floral foil to evil, sin and corruption.'<sup>46</sup> Though heraldic lilies were in fact irises and medieval and Renaissance heraldic artists were careful not to conflate the visual, political symbolism of royalty (the fleur-de-lys, a symbol that mirrored the

and the Biopolitics of Early Modern Political Theology', *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 18, no. 2 (2015), 140–66; Jane Hwang Degenhardt, *Islamic Conversion and Christian Resistance on the Early Modern Stage* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010); Patricia Akhmié, *Shakespeare and the Cultivation of Difference: Race and Conduct in the Early Modern World* (New York: Routledge, 2018); Ayanna Thompson, *Performing Race and Torture on the Early Modern Stage* (New York: Routledge, 2008); Peter Erickson and Kim F. Hall, 'A New Scholarly Song: Rereading Early Modern Race', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 67, no. 1 (2016), 1–13; Imtiaz Habib, *Black Lives in the English Archives, 1500–1677* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008); and Kim Hall, *Things of Darkness*.

<sup>42</sup> *The Digby Mary Magdalene*, ed. Theresa Coletti, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2018), ll. 525–6, <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/coletti-the-digby-mary-magdalene-play>.

<sup>43</sup> Donald Baker, John Murphy, and Louis Hall, Jr, *The Late Medieval Religious Plays of the Bodleian Manuscripts, Digby 133 and E Museo 160*, EETS, o.s. 283 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), ll. 689–91, cited in Erik Wade, "'Ower Felaws Blake": Blackface, Race, and Muslim Conversion in the Digby *Mary Magdalene*', *Exemplaria* 31, no. 1 (2019), 22–45 (25).

<sup>44</sup> Wade, 'Ower Felaws Blake', 22.

<sup>45</sup> Leslie Thomson, 'The Meaning of Thunder and Lightning: Stage Directions and Audience Expectations', *Early Theatre* 2, no. 1 (1999), 11–24; Jonathan Gil Harris, 'Properties of Skill: Product Placement in Early English Artisanal Drama', in Jonathan Gil Harris and Natasha Korda, eds, *Staged Properties* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 35–66 (43).

<sup>46</sup> Mary Channen Caldwell, "'The Flower of the Lily": Late-Medieval Religious and Heraldic Symbolism in Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, MS Français 146', *Early Music History* 33 (2014), 1–60 (2).

shape of the iris flower) with the visual, religious symbolism of the Virgin (the white lily), both symbolic traditions emphasized the whiteness of the flower.<sup>47</sup> One thirteenth-century French *motet* (choral song), for example, juxtaposed the lily's beauty with the stench of a dung heap; the lily's virtue was its grace, which could challenge the smell of 'corruption'.<sup>48</sup>

Naturalist writers fostered misogynistic associations between the breed's 'natural' changeability, its olfactory properties, and its role as a symbol of inconstancy, especially for women.<sup>49</sup> In *Batman upon Bartholomew* (1582), English translator Stephen Batman juxtaposes white lilies with purple or yellow lilies, defining white lilies as 'pure . . . and most mightie in working'.<sup>50</sup> He also notes that the smell of the white lily is the source of its grace: 'Nothing is more gracious than the Lily in fairness of cosent, in sweetness of smell, and in effect of working and virtue'.<sup>51</sup> He warns his readers that touching lilies will defile them: 'lilies smelleth full sweete, while it is whole and not broken, and stinketh full sowle, if it be broken and frothed with handses'.<sup>52</sup>

Writers like John Gerard divided lilies into binary groupings, differentiating between tame, domestic, cultivated lilies and wild, foreign varietals: 'There be sundry sorts of Lilies, whereof some be wild, or of the field, others tame, or of the garden'; he continues, 'some [are] white, others red; some of our own country's growing, others from beyond the seas'.<sup>53</sup> White lilies are distinct from all others: the 'white lily hath long smooth and full bodied leaves', and 'upon them do grow fair white flowers strong of smell'.<sup>54</sup> Gerard emphasizes the flower's moral valences. For example, in his book of prayers, Gerard includes a prayer for the 'private' family, invoking lilies as images of chastity. He instructs the faithful to pray that the marital bed remain 'undefiled': 'Let the marriage-bed be undefiled, and let the minds of them all be

<sup>47</sup> For more on the political, heraldic, and botanical history of lilies see Vittoria Feola, 'Botanical, Heraldic, and Historical Exchanges Concerning Lilies: The Background of Jean-Jacques Chifflet's *Lilium Francicum* (1658)', in Christoph Lüthy and Sven Dupré, eds, *Silent Messengers: the Circulation of Material Objects of Knowledge in the Early Modern Low Countries* (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2011), 13–42 (24, 31).

<sup>48</sup> 'Sit convallium lilium, sit tuum virtus stadium. Sterquilinum munda sordidum gratie per aucilium', in 'Si vere / Si ver / In Seculum', in *The Montpellier Codex*, ed. H. Tischler, cited in Caldwell, 'The Flower of the Lily', 2.

<sup>49</sup> Venetian printer Aldus Manutius published an edition of Dioscorides in 1499. For more on the dissemination of classical science and Renaissance reception, see A. Touwaide, 'Printing Greek Medicine in the Renaissance: Scholars, Collections, Opportunities, and Challenges', *Early Science and Medicine* 17, no. 4 (2012), 371–7 (374).

<sup>50</sup> Stephen Batman, *Batman upon Bartholome* (London: Thomas East, 1582), XVII. ch. 91, Sig. Eeevii-Eeevii v, <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/e/eebo/A05237.0001.001/1:28.93?rgn=div2;view=fulltext>.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, Sig. Eeevi-Eeevii v.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, Sig. Eeevi v.

<sup>53</sup> John Gerard, *The Herbal, or Generall Historie of Plantes* (London, 1597), ch. 102, sig Q2v. Gerard's reputation is dubious in histories of science, but his impact on aesthetic traditions, especially floral imagery, is substantial. For more see Vin Nardizzi, 'Daphne Described: Ovidian Poetry and Speculative Natural History in Gerard's Herbal', *Philological Quarterly* 98, no. 1 (2019), 137–56 (137–8).

<sup>54</sup> Gerard, *Herbal*, sig Q3r.

unspotted: Let them be violets of humilitie, and lilies of chastity: Let them be roses of charitie, and balsam of sanctitie.<sup>55</sup> And Henry Peacham describes the lily as ‘clothd by power divine, / in purest white, fair’st object of the eie, / Religion’s weede, and badge of Chastitie.’<sup>56</sup>

The very thing that made lilies valuable in the garden—their ability to produce colourful varieties—thus became something salacious in Renaissance lyric poetry.<sup>57</sup> In particular, the smell of festering white lilies came to represent not only the allure of sexual desire but also the bodily and moral risks associated with sexual contact with people deemed corrupted. As Kim Hall argues, early modern European racial thinking was primarily defined through a black/white binary, linking medieval understandings of religious race to new ‘concerns over skin colour, economics, and gender politics.’<sup>58</sup> Hall’s research shows how black and white metaphors of beauty in lyric poetry form a ‘poetics of colour’ constitutive of economic and social histories of race.<sup>59</sup> This poetics of colour intersects with gendered tropes of beauty and chastity. As Nancy Vickers argues, Renaissance lyric poetry includes gendered tropes of power, especially in the widespread use of the blazon.<sup>60</sup> Lyric poetry demonstrates in minute detail how the power to survey and describe beauty participated in wider social and economic histories of colonialism, including similar strategies of surveying and describing people, animals, and fauna of the Americas in travel narratives and scientific treatises.<sup>61</sup>

Lilies most often appear in Renaissance lyric poetry as gendered visual metaphors, describing the colour of women’s cheeks, hands, or breasts.<sup>62</sup> In ‘The Lover Praiseth the Beauty of his Lady’s Hand’, Thomas Wyatt describes his lover as fair, comparing her skin to lilies and roses: ‘With lilies white / And roses bright / Doth strain thy colour fair.’<sup>63</sup> In his *Epithalamion*, Spenser describes his beloved’s breasts as ‘paps lyke lyllies budded’, a convention that Linda Woodhouse notes is ‘stiffly

<sup>55</sup> John Gerard, *Gerards Meditations*, trans. Ralph Winterton (Cambridge: Buck and Daniel, 1638), 125 sig V3 r.

<sup>56</sup> Henry Peacham, *Minerva Britanna* (London, 1612), 116.

<sup>57</sup> Amy Tigner, *Literature and Renaissance Garden from Elizabeth I and Charles II: England’s Paradise* (New York: Ashgate, 2012), 123.

<sup>58</sup> Hall, *Things of Darkness*, 2–3. <sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 65, 83.

<sup>60</sup> Nancy Vickers, ‘Diana Described: Scattered Woman and Scattered Rhyme’, *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 2 (1981), 265–79.

<sup>61</sup> Louis Montrose, ‘The Work of Gender in the Discourse of Discovery’, *Representations* 33 (1991), 1–41 (13); Patricia Parker, *Literary Fat Ladies: Rhetoric, Gender, Property* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018; first pub. London: Methuen, 1987), 8–35; Hall, *Things of Darkness*, 65; Dennis Britton, ‘Red Blood and White Saints’, in Arthur L. Little, Jr., ed., *White People in Shakespeare: Essays on Race, Culture and the Elite* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), 65–76.

<sup>62</sup> See Farah Karim-Cooper, *The Hand on the Shakespearean Stage: Gesture, Touch and the Spectacle of Dismemberment* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 125.

<sup>63</sup> Thomas Wyatt, ‘The Lover Praiseth the Beauty of his Lady’s Hand’, in *The Poetical Works of Sir Thomas Wyatt*, ed. Nicholas Harris Nicolas and William Pickering (London: Pickering, 1831; repr. BiblioLife), 62–3 (ll. 13–15).



conventional' (even in the sixteenth century).<sup>64</sup> In *Amoretti* 1, Spenser imagines his lover's 'lilly hands' holding his book of poems.<sup>65</sup> The smell of lilies, however, signalled an eroticized, sexual intimacy. Ronsard's 'Si mille oeillet, si mille liz' imagines the tactile and olfactory pleasure of encountering a thousand pink dianthus and lilies, their vines entwining him in an overwhelming amorous—and perfumed—embrace.<sup>66</sup> In other poems, Ronsard specifies that his lover's skin is 'whiter than the lily' ['Vu que tu es plus blanche que le lis'], invoking visual tropes of beauty. But when he imagines her mouth, it becomes a fount of sweetness; her breath is a perfume that breathes life into him.<sup>67</sup> These olfactory references transformed floral poetic tropes into multisensorial metaphors about embodiment, connecting the olfactory aspects of the flower to eroticized imagery of sexual contact. Garcilaso de la Vega's sonnet 23 describes his lover's visual beauty, comparing the colours of her face to the lily and rose ('En tanto que de rosa y de Azucena / se muestra la color en vuestro gesto'), but he also qualifies this at the end of the poem with a warning: his desire may soon cool, for just as a cold wind threatens the rose, so too does time alter affection ('Marchitará la rosa el viento helado, / todo lo mudará la edad ligera / por no hacer mudanza en su costumbre').<sup>68</sup>

Like Garcilaso's and Ronsard's, Shakespeare's sonnets invoke the smell of flowers to create a sense of erotic intimacy. Perfume, for instance, is prominent early in Shakespeare's sonnet sequence. Sonnets 5 and 6 (known by many as the 'perfume sonnets') use perfumery as a metaphor for non-normative erotic desire.<sup>69</sup> Like poetry, perfumery is an art form that can bypass the cyclical aspect of nature, preserving beauty through artistic intervention. Later in the sequence, however, smell functions differently; the smell of flowers is a natural essence more trustworthy than visual qualia. Shakespeare's sonnets 94 and 95 exploit the disjuncture between vision and smell, crafting a powerful warning about the pleasures and dangers of sex. By the end of the sonnet sequence, desire seems to run counter to sensory qualia; neither his 'five wits' nor 'five senses' can dissuade his 'foolish heart' (141: 9, 10),

<sup>64</sup> Edmund Spenser, 'Epithalamion', in *The Works of Edmund Spenser: The Minor Poems, Volume Two*, ed. Charles Grosvenor Osgood and Henry Gibbons Lotspeich with Dorothy E. Mason (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1947), 241–52 (l. 176). Linda Woodbridge, 'Black and White and Red All Over: The Sonnet Mistress Amongst the Ndembu', *Renaissance Quarterly* 40, no. 2 (1987), 247–97 (247).

<sup>65</sup> Edmund Spenser, 'Amoretti', in *The Works of Edmund Spenser: The Minor Poems, Volume Two*, 195–32 (l. 1).

<sup>66</sup> Pierre Ronsard, 'XXIX', *Ronsard and La Pléiade*, ed. George Wyndham (London: Macmillan, 1906), 18.

<sup>67</sup> Pierre de Ronsard, 'Ce ris plus doux que l'œuvre d'une abeille', in *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Paul Laumonier, 18 vols (Paris: Droz & Didier, 1914–67), IV, 108–9, cited in Gregory de Rocher, 'Laughter as Metaphor: Ronsard and d'Aubigné on Energy and Identity', *French Forum* 18, no. 1 (1993), 5–22 (5).

<sup>68</sup> Willis Barnstone, *Six Masters of the Spanish Sonnet* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 1993), 4. Garcilaso de la Vega was one of the first translators of Petrarch into Spanish.

<sup>69</sup> See Richard Halpern, *Shakespeare's Perfume: Sodomy and Sublimity in the Sonnets*, Wilde, Freud, and Lacan (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2002).

and his two loves emerge as figurative angels and devils, the beauty of the 'fair' youth corrupted by the temptations of the 'dark' lady.

Across the sonnets, smell is thus linked to the pleasures and risks of desire, indexing proximity to bodies through imagined encounters with flowers. In sonnets 5 and 6, the beloved youth's beauty is described as a sweet smell preservable from the ravages of time through the art of poetry: 'flowers distilled, though they with winter meet / Lose but their show; their substance still lives sweet' (5: 12–14). The smell of flowers is the 'substance' and not the 'show' of beauty. Sonnets 94 and 95, however, rework this imagery, using the smell of lilies to issue an olfactory warning to the fair youth that his beauty will not only fade, it will fester. As Helen Vendler argues, the tone of the poem is 'stern', one 'not of infatuation but of social reproof and moral authority',<sup>70</sup> while Harold Bloom suggests that the poem 'implicitly warns the "fair youth" to be fair and pure of heart'.<sup>71</sup> If read in sequence with the next poem, the impact of such imagery intensifies. In sonnet 95, the fair youth's 'shame' is imagined as a metaphoric 'canker in the fragrant rose', which 'doth spot the beauty on thy budding name' (1–3). His body is described as a 'mansion' filled with 'vices' and a space '[w]here beauty's veil doth cover every blot / And all things turn to fair that eyes can see' (9, 11–12). Vision, the poems suggest, can deceive, but smell cannot. Sonnet 95 reminds the reader that vice can be sensed, transforming the perfume imagery of the end of 94 and opening sequence of 95 into a powerful condemnation of the beloved's beauty (in sonnet 94) and his 'name' (in sonnet 50), especially if not 'used' in ways the poet deems fit. In contrast, the poet's desire for a woman who is defined by her blackness is configured as a disorienting sensory experience. In sonnet 127, the narrator notes that:

In the old age black was not counted fair,  
or if it were, it bore not beauty's name;  
but now is black beauty's successive heir,  
And beauty slandered with a bastard shame. (1–4)

Returning to the opening poems' configuration of nature, time, and beauty, sonnet 127 emphasizes that poetic artifice itself 'fairs' the foul, profaning beauty:

For since each hand hath put on nature's power,  
Fairing the foul with art's false borrowed face,  
Sweet beauty hath no name, no holy bower,  
but is profaned, if not lives in disgrace. (5–8)

Reworking the imagery of the Song of Songs, sonnet 127 hails a '[s]weet beauty' that cannot be described but can be experienced. Sonnet 129 revels in the bodily aspects of beauty: 'the expense of spirit in a waste of shame is lust in action' (1).

<sup>70</sup> Helen Vendler, *The Art of Shakespeare's Sonnets* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997), 406.

<sup>71</sup> Harold Bloom, *Shakespeare's Poems and Sonnets* (Broomall, PA: Chelsea House Publishers, 2009), 17.

And in sonnet 130 such embodied desire is anti-poetic; his mistress's eyes are nothing like the sun, nor does her breath smell like floral perfumes. Instead, it 'reeks' (7–8). Although the poet's point is to work against 'false compare' (130: 14), he uses phenomenological markers of difference in order to juxtapose two kinds of sexual desire, one fair that festers and another foul that appears fair.

Shakespeare's metaphors of festering lilies emphasize that the youth's beauty is valued because it is fragile and corruptible, whereas his metaphors about the embodied aspects of black beauty, especially in sonnets 127 and 130, luxuriate in the very thing denounced in sonnet 94: stench. Read together, Shakespeare's olfactory metaphors point towards the power of smell to index shifting ideas about whiteness, beauty, and sexual desire. The Princess of France states this explicitly in *Love's Labour's Lost*, rebuking the King of Navarre for calling 'vice' a 'virtue'; she swears instead on her 'maiden honour, yet as pure as the unsullied lily'.<sup>72</sup> The temporal marker 'yet' configures the lily as beautiful but vulnerable to tactile corruption. Elsewhere in his poetry, the sight of white skin incites lust and violence. In *The Rape of Lucrece*, Lucrece's skin is described by Tarquin as whiter than a 'lily' three times before he rapes her (lines 71, 386, 478).<sup>73</sup> Tarquin explicitly connects the paleness of her skin to his lust (413–15). The poem also portrays rape as physically changing Lucrece, 'polluting' her body (1726) and staining her blood 'black' (1743). And in Shakespeare's play *Cymbeline*, Giacomo uses similar language to describe Innogen's body when he hides himself in her bedchamber. She is as a '[f]resh lily, and whiter than the sheets!<sup>74</sup> Like Tarquin, Giacomo's desire is inflamed by the sight and smell of her skin. Innogen is a 'fresh'—not festering—lily, at least until he tarnishes her reputation. Later in the play, she is addressed as the 'sweetest, fairest lily' (IV.ii.201).

Yet this imagery of corrupted lilies also emphasizes how stench indexed other kinds of embodied difference. In a poem attributed to 'W. Shakespeare' and published in *The Passionate Pilgrim*, the narrator describes his beautiful but false lover as '[a] lily pale, with damask dye to grace her, / None fairer, nor none falser to deface her'.<sup>75</sup> Such imagery emphasizes that beauty—even the beauty of the lily—can be deceptive; the white lily dyed 'damask' hints at the false beauty of cosmetics, whereas Lucrece's 'Tarquin-stained' black blood demonstrates how floral metaphors of virtue quickly collapse into imagery of sin, lust, and violation (1743).<sup>76</sup> Even in the

<sup>72</sup> William Shakespeare, *Love's Labour's Lost*, in *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, 2nd edn, ed. John Jowett, William Montgomery, Gary Taylor, and Stanley Wells (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986), 307–36 (5.2.352).

<sup>73</sup> William Shakespeare, 'The Rape of Lucrece', in *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, 237–65.

<sup>74</sup> William Shakespeare, *Cymbeline*, in *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, 1185–220 (2.2.15–16).

<sup>75</sup> Poem 7, in *Various Poems*, in *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, 808 (5–6).

<sup>76</sup> Farah Karim-Cooper, *Cosmetics in Shakespearean and Renaissance Drama*, 2nd rev. edn (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 3.

sonnets when Shakespeare seems to praise the ‘dark’ skin of his beloved, his imagery ‘moves from praise to blame with remarkable rapidity.’<sup>77</sup> In Shakespeare’s comedies lilies are sometimes used as metaphors by characters who try to exploit poetic tropes of whiteness and fail, making visible through malapropism what usually works in more subtle ways. Lance, in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, makes an offensive joke about Jewishness, calling his dog a Jew and his staff his sister, since the dog is ‘stony’ and emotionless and his sister is as ‘white as a lily and as small as a wand.’<sup>78</sup> Flute in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* describes a ‘radiant’ Pyramus as being ‘most lily-white of hue,’ a ‘brisky Juvenal and eke most lovely Jew.’<sup>79</sup> This occurs in the play within the play, just before Bottom, the character who plays Pyramus, enters the scene wearing the head of an ass (II.ii.97). Like Lance’s slur involving his dog, Flute’s malapropism of ‘Jew’ for ‘jewel’ twists the conventions of lyric poetry into an anti-semitic comment about animality and smell, juxtaposed with references to white women and lilies.

Metaphors of lilies thus appear in Renaissance poetry on a continuum: fair and beautiful on one side and foul and sullied on the other. Shakespeare’s imagery of ‘festering’ and ‘sullied’ lilies functions as a risk perception, associating the hazards of sexual pleasure with the rankness of fetid flowers. As qualia that can be sensed if not seen, the smell of festering flowers offers a profound warning about desire and its effects on the fair youth, later helping to discern between the poet’s ‘two loves.’ In sonnet 149, the narrator describes sexual betrayal through religiously coded imagery of his lovers, describing one as foul and the other as fair:

Two loves I have of comfort and despair,  
Which like two spirits do suggest me still:  
The better angel is a man right fair,  
the worse spirit a woman coloured ill. (1–4)

Imagining comfort and despair as a ‘better angel’ and a ‘woman coloured ill,’ Shakespeare describes seduction and its effects as corruption. He goes so far as to imagine one a saint and the other a female ‘fiend’:

my female evil,  
Tempteth my better angel from my side,  
And would corrupt my saint to be a devil,  
Wooing his purity with her foul pride. (5–8)

<sup>77</sup> See Ilona Bell, ‘Rethinking Shakespeare’s Dark Lady,’ in Michael Schoenfeldt, ed., *A Companion to Shakespeare’s Sonnets* (New York: Wiley, 2010), 293–313 (297).

<sup>78</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Two Gentleman of Verona*, in *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, 1–24 (2.3.19).

<sup>79</sup> William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, in *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, 401–24 (2.2.87–90).

Though he warns the ‘fair’ youth that his beauty will fester like lilies, Shakespeare’s sonnets end with increasing metaphors of desire as disease, charting the effects of sexual risk through unseen, yet anticipated, embodied effects. In the ending couplet of sonnet 144, the narrator articulates his frustration at an unknowable outcome, forced to ‘guess one angel in another’s hell’: ‘Yet this shall I ne’r know, but live in doubt / Till my bad angel fire my good one out’ (12–14). Shakespeare, like other poets, draws not only on a poetics of colour but also on smell associations to describe the perception of sexual risk, whether with a ‘fair’ man, whose sexual deeds will potentially fester like lilies, or a ‘woman coloured ill’ (149: 4).

In his eleven theses on the archaeology of the senses, Yannis Hamilakis argues that ‘the sensorial field is also a field of power, a terrain of contestations.’<sup>80</sup> Shakespeare’s metaphors of the smell of festering lilies function in precisely this way, mapping out a field of power through contested and paradoxical references to visual and olfactory beauty. Lilies, as both visual and olfactory symbols, enabled medieval theologians to craft a powerful religious metaphor of chastity and purity. Renaissance poets like Shakespeare expanded this symbolism, poetically exploiting the disjuncture between the visual symbolism of the flower’s white petals and the cloying smell of its powerful perfume in order to craft not only a poetics of colour but also a poetics of risk. Drawing on both the eco-materiality of lilies and their iconographic whiteness in religious discourse, poets like Shakespeare used the divergence between lilies’ olfactory and visual properties to index a host of value judgments about bodily norms. Imagining the ‘fair’ youth as a flower, Shakespeare connects the ‘substance’ of his beauty to his smell, imaginatively distilling it like a perfume or letting it fester and rot (94: l.12). In doing so, Shakespeare maps sexual risk through olfactory metaphors, exploiting visual tropes of beauty and embodied norms. Powerful and visceral, ‘festering lilies’ demonstrate how the ‘poetics of colour’ so integral to Renaissance lyric descriptions of beauty built upon multisensory associations. Mutable, spotted, and festering, lilies came to represent a powerful figuration of a corruptible whiteness in the Renaissance, mobilized through metaphors of smell.<sup>81</sup>

#### FURTHER READING

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<sup>80</sup> Yannis Hamilakis, ‘Afterword: Eleven Theses on the Archaeology of the Senses’, in Jo Day, ed., *Making Senses of the Past: Toward a Sensory Archaeology* (Carbondale: University of Southern Illinois Press, 2013), 409–20 (415).

<sup>81</sup> For more on the politics and history of whiteness in Shakespeare’s works, see Arthur L. Little, Jr. ‘Introduction: Assembling an Aristocracy of Skin,’ in Arthur L. Little, Jr., ed., *White People in Shakespeare Essays on Race, Culture and the Elite* (London: Bloomsbury, 2023), 1–28.

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# BARTHOLOMEW FAIR'S OLFACTORY CROSS-MAPPINGS

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## Smell, Place, Memory

ISABEL KARREMANN

### Olfactory Cross-Mapping I: Smithfield/Hope

Crossing the river to attend the first staging of Ben Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* at the new Hope Theatre on the afternoon of 31 October 1614, audiences would have moved through the city's smellscape. The smells of the Thames water lapping its muddy banks mingled with the first sea-coal fires kindled against the cool autumn air, and on reaching Bankside gave way to the complex 'aroma of the pike stews, soap-boiling yards, rose gardens, mud and the flooded, polluted ditches of the surrounding area',<sup>1</sup> which would have been somewhat alleviated by the fresher airs of the fields beyond. On entering the playhouse, however, the smells would have evoked for the theatregoers quite a different part of the city: Smithfield, located in the north-east just outside Aldgate, where the eponymous Bartholomew Fair was held each year. This, at least, is claimed by the Stage-keeper in the play's Induction:

though the Fair be not kept in the same region that some here, perhaps, would have it, yet think that therein the author hath observed a special decorum, the place being as dirty as Smithfield and as stinking every whit.<sup>2</sup>

This reference has been the starting point for several critical explorations of the distinct smellscape the Hope Theatre afforded. Most critics accept the Stage-keeper's

<sup>1</sup> Holly Dugan, "As Dirty as Smithfield and as Stinking Every Whit": The Smell of the Hope Theatre, in Farah Karim-Cooper and Tiffany Stern, eds, *Shakespeare's Theatres and the Effects of Performance* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 195–213 (205).

<sup>2</sup> Ben Jonson, *Bartholomew Fair* [1614], ed. John Creaser, in *The Cambridge Edition of The Works of Ben Jonson*, vol. 4 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 253–490. All further references to this text in brackets, here at Induction, 159–63.

assertion of the playhouse's stench, considering that it doubled as a bear-baiting arena and was built on or near the grounds of an older animal-baiting place.<sup>3</sup> The presence of bears is explicitly evoked in the Induction when the Book-holder calls on the Stage-keeper to 'gathe[r] up the broken apples for the bears within' (Induction, 52–3). Based on the history of the site, Holly Dugan assumes that 'the smell of baiting lingered past its scheduled days of performance, providing the audience with a strong olfactory reminder of previous entertainments', and that the 'blood, sweat, and urine of the baited animals' would have saturated the ground on which the spectators stood.<sup>4</sup> Similar odours in fact pervaded Smithfield, which housed the city's biggest livestock market that left the space soiled with mud and the excrement of animals, and which was also a site of public entertainments such as festivals, joustings, wrestling matches, public executions, puppet shows, and civic processions. One occasion for such entertainments was Bartholomew Fair, held annually on 24 August—a time of the year when smells, due to the hot summer temperatures, must have been particularly high at Smithfield. Dugan is certainly right to note that Smithfield and the bear-baiting area on Bankside, where the Hope stood, were related in offering similar olfactory experiences.

But on the day of the first performance of *Bartholomew Fair*, the Hope Theatre would not yet have developed this distinctive olfactory signature: it was a new building, constructed from repurposed as well as new building materials, and likely smelled more of wood and paint and the fresh rushes that covered the ground.<sup>5</sup> It had been in operation only for a couple of weeks, and while a first theatre performance is recorded for early October, no record exists for any bear-baiting to have taken place by the time *Bartholomew Fair* was staged.<sup>6</sup> Jonson's invocation of the immediate stench of the theatre must therefore be understood as more than a bid at mimetic realism. As Andrew Bozio has recently argued, the comparison rather conjures up powerful olfactory memories of Smithfield, the place across town that many among the audience would have attended at some point in their lives, and it is these perceptual and affective memories of London's most famous site of commerce and entertainment that help to bring the Hope Theatre to life as a new place of performance.<sup>7</sup> Yet while Bozio, drawing on earlier scholarship, takes the similarity of the smellscape for granted, my chapter explores the dramaturgic strategies by

<sup>3</sup> On the location of the Hope Theatre and its history, see the archaeological report by Anthony Mackinder et al., *The Hope Playhouse, Animal Baiting and Later Industrial Activity at Bear Gardens on Bankside* (London: Museum of London Archaeology, 2013).

<sup>4</sup> Dugan, 'As Dirty as Smithfield', 205, 206.

<sup>5</sup> The building contract dated 29 August 1619 specifies the materials to be repurposed or purchased new, and contains a subcontract for the new brick and mortar foundation of the playhouse; see Mackinder et al., *The Hope Playhouse*, 71–3.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>7</sup> Andrew Bozio, *Thinking Through Place on the Early Modern English Stage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020).



which Bartholomew Fair is invoked as the *genius loci* of the new theatre, and the role that olfactory perception and olfactory memory play in this process.

In a brilliant article inspired by new materialist thinking, Emily Thompson argues that the chief dramaturgical strategy of *Bartholomew Fair* is the play's reliance on materiality to achieve its theatrical effect: the spatial and material realities of the performance site, the use of stage properties, the 'fungible corporeality' of the characters which is literalized in the crude physicality of the puppet show in act 5, and the constitution of proximity through crowdedness both on and off the stage all serve to generate a vibrant sense of theatricality that is the essence of entertainment.<sup>8</sup> From Thompson's perspective of theatre semiotics, inanimate matter has the capacity to assume vibrant agency on the stage. Taking my cue from her, I claim that this effect extends from the stage to the playhouse. By staging 'the overwhelming materiality of the Smithfield locale, to the point that the fair itself becomes the protagonist', *Bartholomew Fair* manages to 'infuse the inanimate materiality' of the new playhouse with its *genius loci*: the heightened theatricality of the fair turns the raw materials of the Hope Theatre into animated, vitalized, vibrant matter.<sup>9</sup> A key vehicle for this process are the smells of the staged locale and the material environment of the theatre.

The fairground across town is presented on stage in terms of the sensory experiences it affords: the play is full of sights, sounds, and smells associated with Bartholomew Fair. I will focus here only on the last. I am interested in how moments of olfactory perception in the play map one place—Smithfield—onto another—the Hope Theatre—by means of the audience's sense perception and sense memories. The Induction, as Bozio notes, negotiates two cognitive models of audience perception, both linked to memory: the one is a memory of figures typically associated with the historical fair, the other a memory of feelings and sense perceptions afforded to its visitors.<sup>10</sup> Although the Stage-keeper decries the absence of what he deems typical 'Bartholomew-birds' (Induction, 15), the play is in fact peopled by characters featuring in most historical records and accounts of the fair: there are vendors of toys and goods ranging from hobby horses and gingerbread to roast pig, a delicacy so typical of the fair as to have become proverbial; there are ballad singers and puppet-theatre players; there is a horse dealer, embodying Smithfield's early purpose as a horse market; a clothier, whose presence alludes to the fair's main contemporary existence as a cloth market; and a host of unsavoury figures who represent the darker underbelly of the fair—pickpockets, bullies, pimps, and prostitutes. What is interesting for my purpose is that most of these fairground inhabitants are

<sup>8</sup> Emily Thompson, "Fleshly Motion": Puppets and the Performing Body in *Bartholomew Fair*, in Marshall Botvinick, ed., *Staging Ben: A Collection of Essays on the Theatricality of Jonson's Plays* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2016), 71–93.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.      <sup>10</sup> Bozio, *Thinking Through Place*, 171.

explicitly connected with specific smells or acts of olfactory perception, and I wish to explore how these evoke the smellscapes of both the fair and the theatre.

The smellscape of Bartholomew Fair would have been evoked mainly through language and props in performance. In addition, the audience, too, unwittingly participated in creating the smellscape at the theatre. This 'olfactory environment',<sup>11</sup> as Hristomir Stanev's study of the sensory experience of play-going in Jacobean London establishes, was composed of the press of unwashed bodies in the pit, and equally unwashed but also perfumed ones in the galleries; the playgoers' dietary habits that produced odorous breath (especially the garlicky breath of the groundlings was frequently commented on); the recreational use of tobacco-smoking which took place during performances; and the lack of public toilets at the playhouse, for which buckets in back corridors made a poor substitute.<sup>12</sup> The effluvia at packed theatres were one reason for their closure during times of plague, with fumigation of playhouses and use of perfume as additional preventive measures. As Stanev points out, the 'strong, pungent odors' emitted by audiences often served satirical playwrights as a trope for attacking 'the vaporous tastes and criticisms of their spectators,' and thus 'smell factored not only as an inevitable by-product of the crowding of theatres, but also as a handy and imaginative tool to probe into the nature and forms of dramatic and meta-dramatic exchange'.<sup>13</sup> The actual smells at the playhouse thus become additional 'offstage' props and are infused with meaning through dramatic language, thereby during a play intermingling the play's action with the audience's habitual activities.

The audience was thus implicated in creating the olfactory environment of the theatre. To say that playgoers smelled is true in both the transitive and intransitive sense of the verb. The theatre's smellscape was a result of their bodily presence and the olfactory affordances of the material environment as well as of the audiences' perceptual experience of them and the associations and memories such smells evoked for them. Moreover, smelling odours is not only a physiological process but also a social and cultural activity, as historians of smell have argued: 'odours are invested with cultural values and employed by societies as a means of and a model for defining and interacting with the world'.<sup>14</sup> Jonathan Gil Harris therefore rightly claims that 'playgoers' responses to the odor [of strong-smelling props or stage technology] were not just physiologically conditioned, but implicated within larger

<sup>11</sup> Mark S. R. Jenner, 'Civilization and Deodorization? Smell in Early Modern English Culture', in Peter Burke, Brian Harrison, and Paul Slack, eds, *Civil Histories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 127–44 (134).

<sup>12</sup> Hristomir Stanev, *Sensory Experience and the Metropolis on the Jacobean Stage (1603–1625)* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014), 85.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 49–50. For the contemporary understanding of infectious odours in the spread of a plague, see, for instance, Simon Kellwaye, *A Defensative Against the Plague* (London, 1593).

<sup>14</sup> Constance Classen, David Howes, and Anthony Synnott, *Aroma: The Cultural History of Smell* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 3.

cultural syntaxes of olfaction and memory'. And such olfactory memory not only points to one specific historical moment but creates what Harris calls a 'poly-chronicity: that is, a palimpsesting of diverse moments in time, as a result of which past and present coincide with each other'.<sup>15</sup> This adds a temporal dimension to the cross-mapping that I see at work in *Bartholomew Fair*: smells evoke not only other places but other times as well. As we will see, the Induction's cross-mapping of Smithfield onto the Hope Theatre is merely the start. Subsequent scenes employ various strategies for tapping into the olfactory memories of the audiences.

## Fair Smells

The historical Bartholomew Fair was famous for its roast pork, to the extent that 'Bartholomew pigs' became a standing phrase. Its scent and taste also permeate Jonson's play, drawing all characters to the booth of Ursula, who prepares and sells this delicacy. Named for a 'she-bear' (II.iii.1) and a 'pig woman' (II.ii.72) by occupation, this figure alludes to the scents of both the animal-baiting arena and the fair. Ursula smells of the fire over which she roasts her pigs, of the sweat with which this labour in hot weather has drenched her fat body (II.ii.49–53), and of course of the roast meat that she sells. At her booth, 'the best pig and bottle-ale i' the Fair' (III.ii.59) is to be had, and it becomes the gravitational centre of the play. Dugan comments that, '[g]iven the attention paid to the scent of Bartholomew pigs in accounts of the fair (and in Jonson's play), it is likely that pork, pigs' heads and grease were used as props in *Bartholomew Fair*'.<sup>16</sup> The same would be true for the other items that are conspicuously consumed during the course of the play, such as gingerbread, ale, or tobacco. Smelling (as a transitive verb) thus becomes one of the defining features of attending both the fair and the play.

The way in which the characters visiting the fair respond to the sensory experience is instructive for how smell can become a guide to the cognitive understanding of space, both in the play and in the theatre.<sup>17</sup> As is typical for Jonson's comedies, *Bartholomew Fair* offers its lessons through biting satire and parody. Thus the figure who embodies this lesson about how one's senses can become a guide through urban space is, paradoxically, one who utterly refuses to rely on his senses. Zeal-of-the-Land Busy is a parody of the ascetic Puritan, and as he strolls through the fair-ground, he is utterly determined to ignore its pleasures. Nor shall his companions, the Littlewit family, be seduced by the sinful temptations of the fair. They must not look at the wares on display, nor listen to the hawkers, for 'this place is Smithfield'

<sup>15</sup> Jonathan Gil Harris, 'The Smell of *Macbeth*', *Shakespeare Quarterly* 58, no. 4 (2007), 465–86 (467).

<sup>16</sup> Dugan, 'As Dirty as Smithfield', 202.

<sup>17</sup> My reading here is indebted to Bozio's excellent discussion of the 'cognitive ecologies of place' that *Bartholomew Fair* enacts: Bozio, *Thinking Through Place*, 172–7.

he informs them, which is the 'shop of Satan': 'Let not your eyes be drawn aside with vanity, not your ears with noises', he admonishes them, for '[t]hey are hooks and baits, very baits, that are hung out on every side to catch you and to hold you, as it were, by the gills and by the nostrils, as the fisher doth' (III.ii.31–2, 42–5). Intimidated by Busy's zeal against such idolatry, Master Littlewit wonders how they are ever going to find the booth that sells roast pork if they are not allowed to look for it. The answer is obvious—they must smell their way to this delicacy: 'it may offer itself by other means to the sense, as by way of steam, here in this place'. Busy proceeds to enact this relationship between sensation and space, comically sniffing after the steam in an attempt to find the roast pig through its smell: 'Huh, huh! (*Busy scents after it like a hound.*) Yes, it doth!' (III.ii.81–3). Elated by his success, he even celebrates smelling as the ideal perceptual means of navigating Smithfield, first declaring that 'it were a sin of obstinacy, great obstinacy, high and horrible obstinacy, to decline or resist the good titillation of the famelic sense, which is the smell', before entreating his companion to embrace it as a means of orientation: 'Follow the scent!' (III.ii.84–8).

Observing that the Neoplatonic hierarchy of the senses distinguished forms of perception according to their being more corporeal than others, with smell and touch as more embodied modes of cognitive processing than sight, Bozio points out that, sniffing their way to the roast pork, Busy and Littlewit thus 'both rely upon embodiment as a means of determining their immediate emplacement, using sensation to navigate the space of the fair'.<sup>18</sup> Such olfactory perception, however, does not automatically indicate the mastery of subject over space; instead, the material environment, perceived through the senses, appears to exert a considerable influence on the subject also. The stage direction '*Busy scents after it like a hound*' (s.d. III.ii.83) is telling in that it takes up the trope of animality that was already used to figure a potentially dangerous sensual captivity within the environment: the sensory impressions of the fair are like 'baits and hooks' that 'catch' the visitor 'by the gills and nostrils' like a fish. Busy's captivity by the smells and sights of the fair thus signals his 'becoming-animal', a creaturely absorption of the organism within its environment. It suggests that selves cannot be separated from space, that embodied thought is profoundly permeable with regard to its environment.

And yet the play does not present this as a *loss* of subjectivity or agency; on the contrary, if Busy perceives captivity as dangerous to his sense of self, we do well to remember that this figure is a parody of asceticism, which is exposed to ridicule. Through satirical negation, the play asserts instead that captivity is both an inescapable condition and a necessary competence. We become part of our environment through being able to 'read' its marks skilfully and competently. In Bozio's words, 'perception, as an organizational process that selects and interprets features of the environment, shapes the subject and space at the same time'.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, such

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 175.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

creaturally captivation is entirely in keeping with the cognitive ecologies of an early modern phenomenology that posits a permeability of mind, body, and environment as the very condition of human subjectivity.<sup>20</sup> In a similar sense, the audience of *Bartholomew Fair* may have been captivated not only by the action represented on stage but also by the sights, sounds, and above all the smells that evoked embodied memories of Smithfield across the river, and performatively infused them into the material environment of the Hope Theatre on that late October afternoon in 1614.

### Smoking Smithfield

The fires of Ursula's pig-booth are not the only source of smoke in *Bartholomew Fair*'s Smithfield. Another is the tobacco which numerous characters on stage call for and consume, and which a good number among the audience would have been smoking, too.<sup>21</sup> Around 1600, the recreational use of tobacco was seemingly ubiquitous in London and occurred in alehouses and taverns as well as playhouses. The German traveller Paul Hentzner, who visited London in the year 1598, reported that he saw a production of *Every Man in His Humour*—a play which itself features mock praise of tobacco as 'divine' (III.ii.56)—and commented on the smoking habits of the audience: 'At these spectacles, and everywhere else, the English are constantly smoking tobacco.'<sup>22</sup> While ubiquitous, it was not an unchallenged habit. The increasing import and consumption of tobacco since the late sixteenth century triggered a heated debate about smoking in England. This debate was conducted in medical treatises as well as in travel narratives, popular pamphlets, ballads, broadsides, and plays. One strand of the debate was concerned with tobacco as either medicinal or detrimental to health: its defenders thought that tobacco could cure colds, venereal disease, or impotence, while its attackers claimed that it caused nausea, sterility, and effeminacy. The other strand was more concerned with the recreational use of tobacco and its mainly harmful social consequences: it was thought an expensive habit that wasted the patrimonies of young gentlemen, while the noisome smell of it on clothes and breath was held to diminish personal attractiveness.<sup>23</sup>

Among the many publications on tobacco, two may exemplify the opposing views. Published almost the same year, King James's *A Counterblaste to Tobacco* (1604) and a popular song printed in Tobias Hume's *Musically Humors* (1605) take

<sup>20</sup> See, for instance, the essays in Garrett A. Sullivan, Jr, and Mary Floyd-Wilson, eds, *Environment and Embodiment in Early Modern England* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

<sup>21</sup> Stanev, *Sensory Experience*, 49–50.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Henry Morley, *Memoirs of Bartholomew Fair* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1859), 137. The clay tobacco pipes found through the archaeological excavation of the site yield material evidence of this: see Mackinder et al., *The Hope Playhouse*, 73–5.

<sup>23</sup> See Matthew P. Romaniello, 'Who Should Smoke? Tobacco and the Humoral Body in Early Modern England', *Social History of Alcohol and Drugs* 27, no. 2 (2013), 156–73.

diametrically opposed stances. King James rejects all medical benefits, taking the 'stinking smoake' and 'hatefull smell'<sup>24</sup> as a direct signal of tobacco's hurtfulness to the brain.<sup>25</sup> The medical argument, which takes up most of the tract, is interspersed with several sociocultural arguments. King James condemns tobacco because of its unchristian associations, asking why his countrymen should 'imitate the barbarous and beastly maners of the wilde, godlesse, and slauish *Indians*, especially in so vile and stinking a custome?' (B1<sup>v</sup>). This openly xenophobic argument segues to a concern with trade as a factor in international relations, for James fears that the addiction to tobacco might turn the English into 'slaues to the Spaniards' (B2<sup>r</sup>), who monopolized the global trade in tobacco until its commercial production in the American colonies allowed England to take control over its imports.<sup>26</sup> Having dismissed tobacco consumption as a foreign 'fashion' and 'foolish custom' (C1<sup>r</sup>), he further castigates it as a sinful form of intoxication and 'shamefull imbecilitie' (C4<sup>r</sup>), a dangerous effeminacy that renders soldiers unable to defend their country (C4<sup>v</sup>). Finally, it is a 'filitie custome' that defiles the home: he wonders that 'at the table, a place of respect, of cleanliness, of modestie, men should not be ashamed to sit tossing of Tobacco pipes, and puffing of the smoke of Tobacco to another, making the filthy smoke and stinke thereof', thereby turning the housewife's life into a 'perpetuall stinking torment' (D1<sup>r</sup>). By contrast, Tobias Hume's popular song praises tobacco as being like love. Beginning and ending with the lines 'Tobacco, Tobacco / Sing sweetly for Tobacco, / Tobacco is like love', the song substantiates its claim with various arguments, from medical-sounding ones like 'Love still dries uppe the wanton humor' to others casting it as a stimulant to action and feeling, such as 'Love makes men sayle from shore to shore', 'Tis fond love often makes men poor', 'Love makes men scorne all Coward feares', and so on, each affirmed by the chorus-like 'So doth Tobacco.'<sup>27</sup> Remarkably, tobacco is associated with both positive and negative traits, rather than exonerated from all attacks, the point being that tobacco is defended and joyfully accepted as a force that governs people's lives, just like love.

Around the time *Bartholomew Fair* was produced, the debate had reached a new climax, as the number of publications indicates.<sup>28</sup> Jonson could count on his audi-

<sup>24</sup> King James, *A Counterblaste to Tobacco* (London, 1604), sig. B4<sup>r</sup>. Further references are given in brackets in the text.

<sup>25</sup> Contemporary physiological knowledge held that to smell was to take substance directly to the brain, which was the seat of this sense, while the nose merely conveyed scents there: Jenner, 'Civilization and Deodorization', 133–8, n. 9.

<sup>26</sup> Romaniello, 'Who Should Smoke?', 165.

<sup>27</sup> Tobias Hume, 'Tobacco', in *The first part of ayres . . . and other muscalle conceites* (London, 1605), <https://www.proquest.com/books/first-part-ayres-french-pollish-others-together/docview/2248504196/se-2?accountid=14796>.

<sup>28</sup> For instance, Edmund Gardiner's *The Triall of Tobacco* appeared in a second edition in 1611 just as the London audiences were able to see Moll Frith smoking on stage in Middleton and Dekker's *The Roaring Girl*; Atlantic travel narratives like Robert Coverte's *A True and Almost Incredible Report of an Englishman* (1612) and Robert Harcourt's *A Relation of a Voyage to Guiana* (1613) featured tobacco

ence being familiar with the terms of the debate, which the play itself dramatizes rather than settles. Being dedicated to King James (and performed at court the day after its premiere at the Hope),<sup>29</sup> *Bartholomew Fair* obviously caters to the king's preferences when Justice Overdo, in act 2, scene 6, openly disparages smoking: his sermon against tobacco echoes several of the arguments in *A Counterblaste*. One should bear in mind, however, that Overdo delivers this speech disguised as a fool and that his audience greets it as yet another spectacle at the fair, which frames the condemnation of smoking ironically. He begins with a warning against the harmful 'fruits of bottle-ale and tobacco' that trades on both xenophobia and disgust: calling tobacco a 'tawny weed' of the same colour as 'the India[n] that smokes it', Overdo, too, associates it with its exotic origins in the Caribbean, adding that an alligator might have pissed on it, thereby instilling its 'creeping venom' in the 'perilous plant' (II.vi.22–7, 36–7). He then spells out the ill effects of smoking on health: 'The lungs of the tobacconist are rotted, the liver spotted, the brain smoked like the backside of the pig-woman's booth here, and the whole body within, black as her pan you saw e'en now, without' (41–4). Not only recalling King James's warning that smoking pollutes 'the inward parts of men, soiling and infecting them, with an vnctuous and oily kinde of Soote, as hath bene found in some that Tobacco takes, that after their death were opened', Overdo also links the recreational consumption of tobacco to another substance that King James detested—pork—as Ursula's smoke-blackened booth and pan illustrate the inward effects of 'the blacke stinking fume thereof'.<sup>30</sup> And smoking does not just inwardly mark the body: Overdo decries that some smokers can exhale smoke in fanciful shapes through a hole in the bridge of their nose. Such deformations were usually associated with syphilis and the mercury taken as medication, yet Overdo insists that they are 'caused from the tobacco, the mere tobacco, when the poor innocent pox, having nothing to do there, is miserably and most innocently slandered' (II.vi.51–4). Playing on the ambivalent status of tobacco as both an incitement to sexual promiscuity and a cure against the pox, his assertion of venereal disease as innocent is ludicrous and invites laughter. Justice Overdo then castigates tobacco's effects on social behaviour, as King James did. Smoking 'causeth swearing, it causeth swaggering, it causeth snuffling and snarling, and now and then hurt' (II.vi.69–71), thus bringing about a degeneration of civil intercourse

and smoking as manly habits, while William Barclay's *Nephentes, or The vertues of tobacco* (London, 1614) highlighted its benefits for women; in 1615, the broadside *A Merry Progress to London to see Fashions, by a young Country Gallant, that had more Money than Witte* depicted smoking as a wasteful habit, and the King's physician Helkiah Crooke rejected tobacco as a cure for 'Hystericall Paroxisme of fits of the mother' in *Mikrokosmographia, A Description of the Body of Man* (London, 1615); a year later, John Deacon dedicated his *Tobacco Tortured, or, The Filthie Fume of Tobacco Refined* (London, 1616), which traced the Gunpowder Plot of 1605 to the evil influence of smoking, to King James.

<sup>29</sup> Dugan, 'As Dirty as Smithfield', and Kathleen Lynch, 'The Dramatic Festivity of Bartholomew Fair', *Medieval and Renaissance Drama in England* 8 (1996), 128–45, discuss how the courtly performance site might have changed the sensory and semantic impact of the play.

<sup>30</sup> King James, *A Counterblaste*, sig. D2<sup>r</sup>.

and human speech into the animal-like sounds of hogs and hounds that leads to quarrelling and physical violence.

Ironically, the sermon is cut short by just such a violent quarrel. When Bartholomew Cokes, a young fairgoer utterly captivated by its entertainments, realizes that his pocket has been picked while his attention was captured by Overdo's performance, his tutor, the irate Wasp, believes Overdo to be an accomplice of the pickpockets and beats him. Overdo entreats Wasp not to punish him, casting himself as innocent by referencing two religious holidays that commemorated unjust violence: 'Hold thy hand, child of wrath and heir of anger! Make it not Childermas day in thy fury, or the feast of the French Bartholomew, parent of the Massacre!' (II.vi.145–7). Childermas Day was the Feast of the Holy Innocents, kept on 28 December in remembrance of the massacre of young children in Bethlehem by King Herod in his attempt to kill the infant Jesus (Matthew 2:16–18).<sup>31</sup> It featured in several medieval mystery plays that depicted biblical events, such as the N-Town plays or *The Pageant of the Shearman and Tailors*; the so-called 'Coventry Carol' from the latter referred to the Massacre of the Innocents and became a popular Christmas song in sixteenth-century England.<sup>32</sup> As one of a series of days known as the Feast of Fools, Childermas was also a festival of inversion, with role reversals between children and adults such as teachers and priests, and boy-bishops presiding over the liturgy. Overdo's role reversal of the justice disguised as a fool would match this festive topsy-turvy logic and motivates the reference additionally.

The allusion to the second religious holiday is multiply overdetermined. The 'French Bartholomew', 'parent of the Massacre' refers to the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre in Paris, which began on 24 August 1572. The order by French King Charles IX for killing a group of Huguenot leaders was joined by Catholic mob violence; the slaughter spread through Paris and across the country, lasting for weeks and claiming up to 30,000 lives. Twenty years later, Christopher Marlowe's *The Massacre at Paris* was staged at the Rose Theatre in January 1592/3 and inspired about a dozen productions and adaptations before it was revived again in 1601/2. While there are no recorded performances after this point, the massacre of St Bartholomew's Day remained alive in popular memory, as the editor of the Cambridge edition notes: 'Alongside the Fair's festivity, the massacre was commemorated every year in London; booksellers, for example, displayed only bibles.'<sup>33</sup> Not only the day, also the place connected the French massacre to the London Fair held at Smithfield: Smithfield had served as a site of public execution since the early fourteenth century, and was used in particular for the burning of martyrs at the

<sup>31</sup> 'Feast of the Holy Innocents', *Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Feast-of-the-Holy-Innocents>.

<sup>32</sup> While the author is unknown, the text of the Coventry Carol was written down in 1534, and the oldest known printing of the melody dates from 1591: see William E. Studwell, Frank Hoffmann, and B. Lee Cooper, eds, *The Christmas Carol Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 15.

<sup>33</sup> *Bartholomew Fair*, ed. John Creaser (2007), 331, note to II.vi.118–19.



stake. In the second year of Queen Mary's reign, seventeen Protestants were burned there for heresy. These Marian martyrs are commemorated in Foxe's *Acts and Monuments* (1563) as well as in a popular poem of seventy-seven doggerel stanzas by clergyman Thomas Brice, 'The Register of Martyrs' (1559). And even in the days of 'Good Queen Bess,' a Victorian history of *The Old Town* records, 'recreant papists were occasionally burnt, and a few obstinate sectarians were tried by burning.'<sup>34</sup> Another nineteenth-century urban historian noted the temporal proximity of the last martyr execution at Smithfield to Jonson's play: 'In 1611 the ashes of the last martyr-fire in Smithfield smouldered out. The victim was Bartholomew Leggatt, a pious Unitarian, burnt for distrust of the Athanasian and Nicene creeds by James the First, at the sentence of John King, newly made bishop of London.'<sup>35</sup> For Overdo to evoke the 'French Bartholomew' is to activate this darker history of London's Bartholomew Fair.

Smoke on Smithfield thus had diverse sources and held an ambiguous meaning: the pig-roasting and tobacco-smoking which pointed to its nature as a pleasure ground; the smoke from stakes on which martyrs were burnt that identified it as a place of execution. Jonson's play mobilizes and entangles both into the distinct smellscape of Bartholomew Fair. In so doing, the play generates a polychronic palimpsest which maps past and present onto each other, immersing the audience at the Hope Theatre in the sensory experience of Smithfield. Marlowe's play may well have provided a dramaturgic model for this. In a recent reading of *The Massacre at Paris*, Patricia Cahill proposes that the play prompts its audience to an affective immersion in the past by combining embodied verbal enactment with the materiality of props to create a sensory experience shared by characters, actors, and audience alike. The past atrocities of the massacre are, for instance, rendered visceral, indeed palpable, by the use of animal blood and meat to simulate wounds in scenes of murder and mutilation—props whose strong smell would have cued affective responses of disgust and even 'panick', preconscious affects that suspend cognitive processing and instead 'call [audiences] into sensory awareness.'<sup>36</sup> The word 'massacre', Cahill notes, while here applied to the murder of human beings, was etymologically derived from the Old French word for 'slaughterhouse' or 'butcher's shop'<sup>37</sup>—odorous places that made up another component of the smellscape of Smithfield which also served as a market not only of livestock but of butchered

<sup>34</sup> William Harvey, *The Old Town and its Highways and Byways* (London, 1865), 338, <https://www.ebooksread.com/authors-eng/william-harvey/the-old-city-and-its-highways-and-byways--sketches-of-curious-customs-charact-vra/page-25-the-old-city-and-its-highways-and-byways--sketches-of-curious-customs-charact-vra.shtml>.

<sup>35</sup> Henry Morley, *Memoirs of Bartholomew Fair* (London, 1859), 144; see also Harvey, *The Old Town*, 339.

<sup>36</sup> Patricia Cahill, 'The Feel of the Slaughterhouse: Affective Temporalities and Marlowe's *The Massacre at Paris*', in Amanda Bailey and Mario DiGangi, eds, *Affect Theory and Early Modern Texts* (New York: Palgrave, 2017), 155–74 (168).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

meat, and was a source of the roasted pigs served as Bartholomew delicacies. Jonson may well have taken the cue from the pronounced sensescape that *Massacre at Paris* provides, as well as the temporal cross-mapping it facilitates, to achieve similar effects of olfactory memory in *Bartholomew Fair*.

## Smelly Language

It has often been noted that smell is a 'mute sense' because olfaction is so difficult to represent in language.<sup>38</sup> *Bartholomew Fair* demonstrates the opposite. It is full of words for olfactory phenomena. The Induction already introduces the idea of the stench that links Smithfield and the Hope Theatre. As the play progresses, smelling is evoked literally as a perceptual activity and a property of bodies, as well as in a metaphorical sense. Busy's sniffing out the roast pig booth signals a medical-physiological understanding of 'the famelic sense, which is the smell', as do Justice Overdo's comments on the noxious effects of tobacco smoking on health. More generally, the consumption of foodstuff renders a person's breath sweet or foul. Winwife congratulates Littlewit on his 'wife here with a strawberry breath' (I.ii.14), thereby introducing the idea of scent as erotically charged which permeates Winwife's and Quarlous's language of wife-hunting as 'nosing' a woman's 'scent' (I.iii.65; 10, 80). When Ursula comments cynically, '[g]o, snuff after your brother's bitch, mistress Commodity' (II.v.119–20), she exposes the sexual and mercenary motivations behind their amorous quest. More often, however, food, drink, and above all smoking leave bad breath. Wasp deals a predictable insult to the Welshman Bristle: 'You stink of leeks, metheglin, and cheese, you rogue' (IV.vi.52), while Overdo admonishes that 'tobbaco stinketh' (II.vi.67). In the crudest, though thankfully metaphorical, rendition of this, Wasp repeatedly hurls the scatological insult 'turd in your teeth' (I.iv.53 and *passim*) at other characters in an attempt at silencing contradiction.

The consumption of substances affects not only one's breath but also one's words. Justice Overdo orders Ursula's servant boy Mooncalf to bring him some ale, 'but of thy best, lest it be bitter in my mouth, and my words fall foul on the Fair' (II.ii.132–3). The material taste of beer infuses the semantic quality of his words. Overdo evokes a material-physiological understanding of how smelling and speaking are interconnected when he says that tobacco causes 'swearing', 'swaggering', 'snuffling and snarling' (II.vi.69–70). The *Oxford English Dictionary* gives as one early modern meaning of 'to snuffle' '[t]o speak through the nose; to have a nasal

<sup>38</sup> Diane Ackerman, *A Natural History of The Senses* (New York: Random House, 1990), 5. On the difficulty of representing smell in a visual register, see Holly Dugan, 'Seeing Smell', in Simon Smith, Jackie Watson, and Amy Kenny, eds, *The Senses in Early Modern England, 1558–1660* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), 91–110.

twang, illustrating it with a quotation from a medical treatise that states the following diagnosis: ‘They cannot pronounce their words distinctly, but obscurely and snuffling.’<sup>39</sup> Smoking not only impacts enunciation but also registers semantically, as a type of speech associated with unruly masculine behaviour: using swear words, boasting, and above all ‘snarling’, which is ‘to quarrel; to grumble viciously; to show strong resentment or ill-feeling’.<sup>40</sup>

This type of speech also goes by the name of ‘vapours’ in the play, a term that intermingles the physiological-literal with the behavioural-metaphorical, as Gail Kern Paster argues.<sup>41</sup> In the physiological sense, vapours signified liquid humours involved with air and heat, producing steam or bodily exhalations; in the behavioural sense, vapours referred metaphorically to a different kind of bodily exhalation: the idiosyncratic features of one’s language that signalled individuality. This choleric type of speech produces words that are themselves characterized as odorous: vapours in the play are ‘noisome’, ‘foul’, and ‘stink’ (although, in attempts at moderation, they are sometimes evoked as ‘good’ and ‘sweet’); usually, ‘they are stale, and stink like’ (III.ii.85) the person who has uttered them; they even become metonymically identified with a person, as when Justice Overdo tries to find out whether the ale-loving, tobacco-consuming, swaggering horse dealer Knockem might be the disreputable figure his speech indicates: ‘is this goodly person before us here, this vapours, a knight of the knife?’ (II.iii.27–8). Vapours, finally, seem to take on the quality of a person’s idiosyncratic temperament and behaviour: they are ‘courteous’ and ‘noble’ or ‘foolish’, ‘ignorant’, and ‘idle’, as the case may be. Jonson famously declared that ‘[I]anguage most shows a man: speak, that I may see thee’.<sup>42</sup> The humanist scholar’s understanding of self-fashioning through rhetorical eloquence is here burlesqued into a low bodily register; but it is affirmed nevertheless.

Stimulated by the consumption of heat-inducing ale and tobacco, the aggressive, quarrelsome mode of speech associated with ‘noisome vapour’ (IV.iv.111) is formalized into the ‘game of vapours’ that comes to dominate act 4. Jonson explains its rules in a stage direction: the aim of the game is for ‘*every man to oppose the last man that spoke, whether it concerned him, or no*’, constant contradiction resulting in sheer ‘*nonsense*’ (s.d. IV.iv.28). Jordan Knockem, who most insistently calls for bottle-ale, tobacco, and vapours throughout the play, acts as its master of ceremonies: he sets off the game and identifies its workings in later scenes involving often unwitting players. The figure who has been playing it all along, whose predominant humour is indeed that of aggressive contradiction, is the aptly named, irascible Wasp. Wasp is explicitly described by one character as ‘transported with

<sup>39</sup> ‘snuffle’ 2.3., *OED*, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/183583>.

<sup>40</sup> ‘snarl’ 2.2.a, *OED*, <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/183058>.

<sup>41</sup> Gail Kern Paster, ‘*Bartholomew Fair* and the Humoral Body’, in Garrett A. Sullivan, Jr, Patrick Cheney, and Andrew Hadfield, eds, *Early Modern English Drama: A Critical Companion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 260–71 (266–7).

<sup>42</sup> Ben Jonson, *Discoveries* [1640], ed. Lorna Hutson, in *The Cambridge Edition of The Works of Ben Jonson*, vol. 7 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 481–595 (567).

vapours' (IV.iii.106), a condition that Paster explains as being carried away by his choleric temperament, by the vapourish steams that rise in the air around Ursula's booth, and by the emotional stimuli resulting from social interactions with strangers at the fair.<sup>43</sup> These interactions—potentially harmonious but actually hostile—are provided with a rule-based form in the game, which at the same time provides emotional release for intersubjective tension. For as Paster notes, the true nature of the game is not contradiction but collaboration: 'In order to participate in the game at all, each man must take turns, cooperate, and perhaps above all listen to each other. . . . the structure of the game insists on contradiction as an intimately social act, even among strangers.'<sup>44</sup> The fact that vapours can neither be cured nor controlled, only acknowledged as a shared physiological disposition afforded by a particularly steamy environment makes the game, in Jonas Barish's words, 'a compelling reminder of the kinship between men'—as well as between women: the fight between Punk Alice and Ursula in act 4 is identified as 'Cat-a-mountain vapours' (IV.v.65).<sup>45</sup> Vapours reduce all human beings to their most physiological, creaturely mode of existence.

## Olfactory Cross-Mapping II: Hellespont/Thames

In act 5, fairgoers and playgoers alike are treated to a puppet show, a popular entertainment at markets that has already been promised the spectators in the Induction (Ind. 136). The puppet show 'Touchstone of true love' presents the love story between Hero and Leander as a burlesque of licentious corporeality, interrupted by the verbal skirmishes between Damon and Pythias.<sup>46</sup> With its bawdy ribaldry, gratuitous violence, and nonsensical language, the puppet show has often been dismissed as a mindless, tasteless entertainment by critics. Usually only its end is commented on, when the anti-theatrical intervention of Zeal-of-the-Land Busy against this piece of idolatry and indecency concludes, hilariously, in the conversion of the Puritan into a rapt spectator. Some critics, however, have acknowledged that the puppet show is an integral part of the play. In what is still one of the best essays on Jonson's play, Jonas Barish describes it as a piece of 'microtheater' that embodies both the themes of the play and its relation to the world: 'if the Fair is in this play a microcosm of the world, and the puppet show, in its turn, a microcosm of the Fair, then [it serves to] reproduce in concentrated form the

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 267.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 268.

<sup>45</sup> Jonas Barish, 'Bartholomew Fair and Its Puppets', *Modern Language Quarterly* 20, no. 1 (1959), 3–17 (10).

<sup>46</sup> Hero and Leander are based on the mythical lovers in Marlowe's poem, as the play itself informs us, while Damon and Pythias, the legendary embodiments of true friendship, were probably inspired by an interlude by Richard Edwards (1564, printed 1571): see Kenneth Gross, 'Puppets Dallying: Thoughts on Shakespearean Theatricality', *Comparative Drama* 41, no. 3 (2007), 273–96 (286).

same qualities distributed among the live inhabitants of Smithfield'; these qualities include a desire for eating and drinking, for whoring and pimping, for trading abuse and insults in a game of vapours that is here 'raise[d] to a hysterical pitch'.<sup>47</sup> Noel Blincoe similarly argues that the puppet show embodies the 'festive nature' of *Bartholomew Fair*: its exhibition of erotic desire and sexual promiscuity serves as a kind of fertility rite like those of the folk tradition of May festivals, which makes it an appropriate part of the nuptial rites for Grace and Winwife's wedding that they agree on just before the show (V.ii).<sup>48</sup>

Another structural link with the basic concerns of the play is that the puppet show brings to a climax the Induction's initial gesture of cross-mapping one place onto another. After announcing that the subject of the puppet play will be the myth of Hero and Leander, familiar to early modern readers from the 'printed book' (V.iv.106) of Marlowe's famous poem (published in 1598), the puppet master Leatherhead explains the dramaturgic necessity of adapting the 'too learned and poetical' (110–11) material of myth for the popular audience at a fair: 'What do they know what Hellespont is? "Guilty of true love's blood"? Or what Abydos is? Or "the other Sestos height"?' (111–13) Shot through with direct quotations from Marlowe's poem that provide a taste of its elevated style, Leatherhead's questions quickly find their answer: the subject matter, twice removed by time and geography, needs to be made 'a little easy and modern for the times' (121). As Barish comments, this 'technique of belittlement' was typical of early seventeenth-century satires when, after 'the glut of mythological poems that poured from English presses in the 1590s,' Jonson and other writers turned to burlesquing that material by infusing it with realism.<sup>49</sup> Such belittlement was also a typical operation of puppet theatres, Scott Shershow remarks, which debased the subject matter of stage theatre to farcical performances that were more topical for common audiences.<sup>50</sup> Drawing on a well-established satirical technique, Jonson literalizes its gesture by cross-mapping the ancient locations onto the material topography of early modern London:

As, for the Hellespont, I imagine our Thames here; and then Leander I make a dyer's son about Puddle Wharf; and Hero a wench o' the Bankside, who going over one morning to old Fish Street, Leander spies her land at Trig Stairs, and falls in love with her. (V.iii.121–6)

Moments later, in his 'induction' for the onstage audience, Leatherhead repeats and further specifies this 'domestication'<sup>51</sup> of the foreign: he explains that the play is set in 'Puddle Wharf; / Which place we'll make bold with, to call our Abydus, / As the Bankside is our Sestos' (v.iv.121–3). This cross-mapping identifies the chief figures

<sup>47</sup> Barish, 'Bartholomew Fair', 3, 13, and 11.

<sup>48</sup> Noel Blincoe, 'Bartholomew Fayre: A Celebration of English Folk Festivals', *Ben Jonson Journal* 8, no. 1 (2001), 65–84 (70–1).

<sup>49</sup> Barish, 'Bartholomew Fair', 12.

<sup>50</sup> Quoted in Thompson, 'Fleshly Motion', 75.

<sup>51</sup> Barish, 'Bartholomew Fair', 13.

in the puppet play through their association with particular places in London, or, to be more precise, with particularly smelly places in London. Thus 'amorous Leander' (V.ii.119) is the son of a dyer at Puddle Wharf. Puddle Wharf was a water gate close to Baynard's Castle next to Blackfriars Monastery. If one walked a short distance west from Baynard's Castle, one reached a similar-sounding locale, Paul's Wharf or Poles Wharf, where the Dyers' Company had owned property from the sixteenth century on. The adjoining streets, stairs, and landing places along the Thames were occupied by dyeing businesses. Given Leander's family occupation, Jonson would seem to be directing the audience's attention punningly to the Dyers' district. The craft of dyeing clothes was a notoriously insalubrious activity, as the report of the Dyers' Company notes: 'Urine might be used; woad can be extremely smelly; much water is used.' The need for fresh water as well as for waste disposal facilities meant that 'a position on the banks of the Thames was an asset and by the later 1400s there were several dyehouses on riverside sites.'<sup>52</sup> The Dyers' activities contributed to the pollution of the Thames and rendered the streets from river to dyeing house filthy with mud and puddles—possibly a material trigger for the pun on Puddle/Paul's Wharf.<sup>53</sup>

The 'Trig Stairs' (V.iv.126, 139), where Hero lands on her way from across the river's southern Bankside—the puppet show's disreputable Sestos—mark her entry point into this smelly district by the river. Trig Lane, the commentary in the Map of Early Modern London database informs us, was 'in a fairly rowdy area full of water traffic, sailors and porters' as well as prostitutes, who came from the other side of the river. 'Hero of the Bankside' (V.iv.300) is explicitly identified as such a whore by Puppet Damon and implicitly by Leander himself when he calls her endearingly his 'goose', evoking the syphilitic sores spread by Bankside prostitutes that were known as 'Winchester goose'.<sup>54</sup> This lane connected the river with Thames Street, from which Old Fish Street could be reached. Old Fish Street brings an additional olfactory component to this cross-mapping: the location of not only one but two of London's fish markets (West Fish Market, to distinguish it from the one located east on London Bridge, and New Fish Market), it would have been associated with the distinct smells of that trade. Hero goes there 'to eat some fresh herring' (V.iv.149).

Coming through the Dyers' neighbourhood, she is spotted by Leander, who instantly falls in love with her and follows her back 'to the Swan' (V.iv.151), where they have an amorous encounter.<sup>55</sup> Given that Leander in the myth follows Hero across the Hellespont to Sestos and that in the puppet show he gets aboard a boat to

<sup>52</sup> Ian Mackintosh, 'The Dyers' 1471 Charter', The Worshipful Company of Dyers (n.d.), <https://www.dyerscompany.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/1471-The-Dyers-Charter.pdf>.

<sup>53</sup> 'Trig Lane', *Map of Early Modern London*, <https://mapoflondon.uvic.ca/TRIG1.htm>.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>55</sup> This victualling house was, however, located considerably further East, close to London Bridge, which either renders it an unlikely destination for Hero or is intended to signal the extent of the Dyers' district. In any case, according to the Map of Early Modern London database, there were several establishments across London that went by this name, which makes a precise topographical identification difficult.

take him to Bankside, it is possible that Jonson alludes here to the Swan Theatre, which lay close to the Paris Stairs on the South Bank and which had served as the architectural model for the Hope Theatre—the very place in which the audiences were just watching the performance of both *Bartholomew Fair* and its puppet show.<sup>56</sup> This theatrical topography connecting both sides of the river also underpins Jonson's choice of 'Puddle Wharf' as Leander's home: in addition to the homophone connection with the Dyers' district around Paul's Wharf, the actual Puddle Wharf served as the main landing place for playgoers visiting Blackfriars Theatre and lay directly opposite the water stairs closest to the bear-baiting area on which the Hope now stood. Leading Jonson's audience repeatedly across the river and back, the puppet show thus connects the distinct smellscape of early modern London with its popular performance sites, with all olfactory traces converging at the Hope.

The metatheatrical nature of the puppet show invites us to understand such cross-mappings, supported by the olfactory signatures of places, as a dramaturgic principle of *Bartholomew Fair*: Jonson's play begins and closes with moments that demonstrate how spatial and temporal cross-mappings can be forged through invoking the sense of smell, while the intervening scenes interweave the (memories of the) smellscape of fair and playhouse. The puppet show's familiarization of classical sources serves to 're-place' foreign stories with domestic ones—we are watching Hero and Leander enacted by Judy- and Punch-like figures for a London audience. In a similar manner, rather than relying on 'learned and poetical' subject matter as Marlowe, Shakespeare, and Jonson himself did often enough when writing for the Globe or the Blackfriars, it is now the popular domestic tradition of entertainment, festivity, and performance at Bartholomew Fair that gets invoked as the *genius loci* for the new Hope Theatre. This spatial and temporal cross-mapping is effected through a dramaturgy that deftly employs the affordances of the theatre as an olfactory environment which is jointly created by actors, props, and audience, in a performance that infuses inanimate matter with the spirit of theatricality.

#### FURTHER READING

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<sup>56</sup> See building contract in Mackinder et al., *The Hope Playhouse*.

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# A SANITARY SENSE OF SMELL

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## Olfaction and Bodily Boundaries in Victorian Writing

URSULA KLUWICK

Smell has been characterized as a ‘mute sense’ because ‘there is no taxonomy of smells, no “semantic field”’.<sup>1</sup> As Dan Sperber observes, ‘[e]thno-linguists systematically describe colour classifications’, but no equivalent studies exist for smell; most probably, he concludes, ‘because there is nothing for such a work to be about.’<sup>2</sup> And yet, smell sends powerful messages; it is able to communicate with our memories across time and space and to convey information about the environment, about the air we breathe, and about human bodies, our own and others. In this chapter, I look at a specific historical moment and place—Victorian Britain during the period of sanitary reform—in which smell was appreciated as an eloquent indicator of environmental conditions, as a diagnostic as well as an affective tool. I focus specifically on the period between the early 1840s, when the sanitary movement was gaining momentum after the publication of Edwin Chadwick’s *Report Into the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population* (1842), and the years leading up to and including 1858, when the River Thames collapsed during the ‘Great Stink of London’ and the smell of the river became virulent—both as an actual odour and as a discursive phenomenon in the press. Drawing on new materialism, I discuss what smell reveals about human self-positionings with respect to unsanitary environments. In particular, I compare and contrast different olfactory strategies in non-literary sanitary reform documents and in novels by Charles Dickens, Benjamin Disraeli, and

<sup>1</sup> Melanie A. Kiechle, *Smell Detectives: An Olfactory History of Nineteenth-Century Urban America* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017), 7. David Trotter, ‘The New Historicism and the Psychopathology of Everyday Modern Life’, in William A. Cohen and Ryan Johnson, eds, *Filth: Dirt, Disgust, and Modern Life* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005), 30–48 (38).

<sup>2</sup> Dan Sperber, *Rethinking Symbolism*, trans. Alice L. Morton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 115.

Elizabeth Gaskell. My analysis will illustrate the different ways these works engage the particular way smell violates the boundary of self and other.

In the hierarchy of the senses that prevails in Western philosophy, sight and hearing have been privileged as cognitive senses since classical antiquity,<sup>3</sup> and vision in particular is 'considered to have the greatest significance for the development of knowledge.'<sup>4</sup> In discussing scientific objectivity, for instance, Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison read its history as 'an account of kinds of sight', locating at its heart 'ways of seeing that were at once social, epistemological, and ethical.'<sup>5</sup> This definition is in tune with a tradition of evaluating sight, hearing, and touch as 'objective', and smell and taste as 'subjective senses', that goes back to Kant and which in turn relies on interpretations of the 'lower' senses (smell and taste and, following Aristotle, touch) as bodily,<sup>6</sup> driven by sensation rather than cognition, already prevalent in pre-Socratic Greece.<sup>7</sup>

The conflation of the higher senses with the mind and of the lower senses with the body relates to the supposed distance between the perceived object or substance and the organ of perception. Sight obviously relies on a communication between body and environment as light enters the eye and creates images that are then translated by our brains, but in looking, the body can retain a distance from the observed object itself. The same is true of the second of the higher senses, hearing: while sound waves need to enter sentient bodies for sound to be heard, the distance between the object that produces these waves and the body that receives them can remain intact. Smell is different. The sense of smell relies on air and airborne particles that enter the body; one can only smell by inhaling the air and all it contains, and smell always indicates that the inhaled air is not pure but contains something other than itself, i.e. chemicals that are either not a part of or else present in a higher concentration than in the regular composition of air. In this sense, the very act of smelling is transgressive and exposes the permeability of bodily boundaries. Indeed, breathing and smelling show that living bodies are never closed off, but exist in and through continuous processes of active material communication with the world. Like the sense of taste, therefore, smell is an intrusive sense. Arguably, it is the most invasive of all the senses, as, in contrast to taste, where bodily contact with external matter can be restricted to the taste buds of the tongue, it cannot fully be separated from breathing. The act of smelling carries foreign material deep into our bodies:

<sup>3</sup> See Nicholas Humphrey, *A History of the Mind: Evolution and the Birth of Consciousness* (New York: Copernicus, 1999), for instance, 62. See also Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), and Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999).

<sup>4</sup> Carolyn Korsmeyer, 'Taste as Sense and as Sensibility', *Philosophical Topics* 25, no. 1 (Spring 1997), 201–30 (203).

<sup>5</sup> Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2010), 10.

<sup>6</sup> See Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. Victor Lyle Dowdell (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978), 41.

<sup>7</sup> Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste*, 12.

into our lungs, hence into our blood, and hence everywhere. In this sense, smell exposes the *principal* permeability of bodily boundaries, and the classification of smell as ‘bodily’ reflects this.<sup>8</sup>

This bodily quality also affects the position of smell in the hierarchy of the senses. As Korsmeyer remarks, in ‘virtually all analyses of the senses in Western philosophy the distance between object and perceiver has been seen as a cognitive, moral, and aesthetic advantage.’<sup>9</sup> If the study of the senses and of sense perception is fundamentally concerned with how the human body interacts with the world, this equation of distance with the ‘higher’ human faculties suggests that the preservation of bodily independence is valued more highly than active material engagement, as represented by smell, taste, and touch. This very basic but persistent understanding of the senses as hierarchical is, therefore, also directly related to a long history of privileging visions of human bodily autonomy over conceptions of human and more-than-human enmeshments.<sup>10</sup> Because the first thing that smell tells us is that we are always already entangled with an agential environment. With the help of the materialist framework which I outline in my next step I suggest that Victorian disease aetiology already relied on an implicit acknowledgement of this fact and that sanitary reactions to smell can be conceptualized in terms of material agency, transgression, and enmeshment.

## The Sanitary Meaning of Smell

As is widely known, the Victorian sanitary reform movement, whose purpose was the improvement of the sanitary infrastructure of Britain and of the sanitary condition of the population in general, was mainly informed by anti-contagionist theories of disease aetiology.<sup>11</sup> Disease was thought to be ‘transmitted by contact with a

<sup>8</sup> This principal bodily permeability is, of course, demonstrated by all sense perception; in fact, in the new materialist framework sketched below, all senses could be conceptualized as communicative channels between the human body and its environment.

<sup>9</sup> Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste*, 12.

<sup>10</sup> This history is extensively discussed in the work of new materialists such as Jane Bennett (*Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010]) and Karen Barad (*Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007]).

<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of the sanitary reform movement see, for instance, Pamela K. Gilbert, *Mapping the Victorian Social Body* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), and *Cholera and the Nation: Doctoring the Social Body in Victorian England* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008); Michelle Allen, *Cleansing the City: Sanitary Geographies in Victorian London* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2008); Stephen Halliday, *The Great Stink of London: Sir Joseph Bazalgette and the Cleansing of the Victorian Metropolis* (Stroud: History Press, 2009); Sabine Schülting, *Dirt in Victorian Literature and Culture: Writing Materiality* (New York: Routledge, 2016); Anthony S. Wohl, *Endangered Lives: Public Health in Victorian Britain* (London: J. M. Dent, 1983).

corrupt environment, specifically, with the poisoned air generated by decomposing matter.<sup>12</sup> According to this view, ‘diseases arose spontaneously from the miasma, or effluvia, or noxious gases emanated by accumulated organic matter.’<sup>13</sup> I am rehearsing these well-known tenets here in order to draw attention to what they reveal about Victorian views on environmental impact and human–nonhuman interactions, as these also shaped the perception of the role of smell in the context of public health. When Edwin Chadwick concluded that ‘atmospheric impurities’ were ‘produced by decomposing animal and vegetable substances, by damp and filth,’<sup>14</sup> or when civil engineers referred to ‘the generation and evolution of gases from the impounded sewage,’<sup>15</sup> these writers relied on a common understanding of matter as agential and transformative: it could suddenly change, create miasma, and thus disease, and so influence and alter human bodies. In fact, sanitary writers explicitly used the term ‘agency’ in relation to and occasionally even *for* matter, as when Chadwick claimed with respect to the interrelation between disease and organic matter, damp, and filth that ‘where the removal of the noxious agencies appears to be complete, such disease almost entirely disappears.’<sup>16</sup>

In the wake of new materialism, material agency has developed into a prominent focus of literary and cultural studies, and this chapter is inspired by this theoretical approach. In the Victorian era on which this chapter concentrates, material agency was the subject of much scientific discovery and experimentation. To mention just two examples that loosely bracket the period on which this chapter focuses, when examining the pollen of *Clarkia pulchella* under the microscope in 1827, the botanist Robert Brown observed that the particles inside the pollen were in motion, changing both their form and their position, and that this motion was not induced externally but ‘belonged to the particle itself.’<sup>17</sup> And in 1874, John Tyndall famously declared that ‘[e]very meal we eat, and every cup we drink, illustrates the mysterious control of Mind by Matter.’<sup>18</sup> He might have added ‘every smell we smell’ to this list. As Brilmyer states, Tyndall ‘ushered in a new materialist paradigm in which movement and power were understood to be immanent to all matter,’ but in essence,

<sup>12</sup> Allen, *Cleansing the City*, 10.

<sup>13</sup> Wohl, *Endangered Lives*, 87.

<sup>14</sup> Edwin Chadwick, *Report to Her Majesty's Secretary of State for the Home Department from the Poor Law Commissioners, On an Inquiry into the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain; With Appendices. Presented to Both Houses of Parliament, By Command of Her Majesty, July 1842* (London: W. Clowes, 1842), 369.

<sup>15</sup> J. Bailey-Denton, *Sewage Disposal: Ten Years' Experience in the Works of Intermittent Downward Filtration, Separately and in Combination with Surface Irrigation; With Notes on the Practice and Results of Sewage Farming* (London: Spon, 1881), 6.

<sup>16</sup> Chadwick, *Report*, 369.

<sup>17</sup> Robert Brown, ‘A Brief Account of Microscopical Observations Made in the Months of June, July, and August, 1827, on the Particles Contained in the Pollen of Plants; and on the General Existence of Active Molecules in Organic and Inorganic Bodies,’ in *The Miscellaneous Botanical Works of Robert Brown*, ed. Joseph John Bennett, 3 vols (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), I, 467.

<sup>18</sup> John Tyndall, ‘The Belfast Address, 1874,’ in *Fragments of Science: A Series of Detached Essays, Addresses, and Reviews, by John Tyndall*, 5th edn (New York: Appleton, 1881), 472–534 (523).

this conception of matter had long been implicit in the theory of the spontaneous generation of disease from decomposing matter, even if this theory itself proved to be incorrect.<sup>19</sup>

An important aspect which new materialism stresses about matter and its agency is the notion of enmeshment. In Jane Bennett's words, new materialism highlights 'the extent to which human being and thinghood overlap' and 'slip-slide into each other'.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Karen Barad conceives of matter in terms of materializations and 'entangled material agencies',<sup>21</sup> and Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann insist that matter should be viewed as a 'field of distributed agency'.<sup>22</sup>

This perspective is important for my consideration of smell and its role in the sanitary reform movement insofar as I argue that one strategy pursued by non-literary sanitary writers was the containment of the mesh created by disease and miasma. Many sanitary texts convey a vivid sense of material agency, but the observers from whose perspectives they are written frequently try to distance themselves from what they describe. One way in which they do so is through their engagement with the act of smelling, since olfaction, in addition to being understood as transgressive in its own right, is, in the context of sanitary conceptions of disease as caused by the inhalation of matter, also explicitly related to material intermingling.

As my reference to observers indicates, one of the key pillars of sanitary reform was the monitoring of sanitary conditions and their effects, and this was often conducted through personal inspection by doctors, health officers, and volunteers, such as, for instance, the members of the Ladies' Sanitary Association. Chadwick's *Report*, one of the most prominent sanitary reform documents, for instance, was compiled from questionnaires based on visits to the homes of working-class and poor families by local doctors and health inspectors. The published *Report* teems with quotations from these questionnaires and hence with verbatim descriptions of the impressions individual health visitors formed on their sanitary rounds. To a significant degree, therefore, Chadwick's *Report* consists of eyewitness accounts of the sanitary living conditions of the working classes. As such, and together with similar accounts in other reports and publications, it offers insights into how middle-class observers processed and represented their experiences, including their sensory impressions, of working-class and poor dwellings.

It is precisely this sensory aspect of sanitary literature that David Trotter claims has been ignored in critical discussions of the Victorian public health movement. Though Chadwick's *Report*, for instance, has become a favourite subject of

<sup>19</sup> S. Pearl Brilmyer, 'Plasticity, Form, and the Matter of Character in Middlemarch', *Representations* 130 (Spring 2015), 60–83 (62).

<sup>20</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 4.

<sup>21</sup> Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 56.

<sup>22</sup> Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, 'Theorizing Material Ecocriticism: A Diptych', *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 19, no. 3 (Summer 2012), 448–75 (450, 451).

Foucauldian and New Historicist critics, he argues, their focus on the development of disciplinary structures has led them to disregard precisely the 'banquet of the senses' which Chadwick and others offer their readers.<sup>23</sup> My discussion of strategies devised by sanitary writers in response to the sensory threat of enmeshment takes another look at how they approached this 'banquet' in order to identify strategies which allowed them to convey and, at the same time, defuse the potential threat constituted by the smells of disease and poverty.

### To Smell, or Not to Smell

Given the danger that foetid air indicated, it is not surprising that bad smells attracted attention and public notice. In the years leading up to the Great Stink, magazines and newspapers were rife with references to the stench pervading London, a phenomenon which Allen calls 'Thames fever'.<sup>24</sup> But sanitary publications in general were full of descriptions of miasma and its causes. In this respect, the following passage from Hector Gavin's *Unhealthiness of London* (1847) is typical of the representation of insanitary environments and foul air in sanitary reform documents. Gavin was a lecturer on forensic medicine at Charing Cross Hospital, and *Unhealthiness of London* is the published version of a lecture which he delivered on behalf of the Health of Towns and the Health of London Associations. Gavin's lecture is based on a digest of 3,000 questionnaires enquiring into the sanitary condition of London and hence, like Chadwick's *Report*, on characteristic practices associated with the monitoring of public health. He describes visits to specific places and dwellings which are subjected to close examination, a process that results in the description of the sanitary observer's impressions, in an idiom shared by most sanitary reform texts.

In the passage I am citing here, Gavin describes how he visits Lamb's Fields in London, a place with which he is familiar from its description by prominent physician and sanitary reformer Thomas Southwood Smith, who visited this place nine years earlier and described it as a 'fruitful source of fever'.<sup>25</sup> On his own visit, Gavin finds this location even more deteriorated. He describes the place as 'one enormous

<sup>23</sup> Trotter, 'New Historicism', 35, 36. While Trotter's call for closer attention to the role of the senses in sanitary reform literature is still relevant, critical engagements with sanitary reform have diversified over the past decade. See, for instance, Schülting for a reading of the sanitary reform movement from the perspective of Material Culture Studies, and Kiechle for an explicit engagement with smell, although in connection with US sanitary reform.

<sup>24</sup> Allen, *Cleansing the City*, 54.

<sup>25</sup> Thomas Southwood Smith, quoted in Hector Gavin, *Unhealthiness of London, And the Necessity of Remedial Measures; Being a Lecture Delivered at the Western and Eastern Literary and Scientific Institutions, Leicester Square, and Hackney Road*, Health of Towns and Health of London Associations (London: John Churchill, 1847), 23.

ditch or stagnant lake of thickened putrefying matter' and, with reference to the 'profusely scattered' dead and decomposing animals which fill this ditch, paints a picture of toxicity:

Bubbles of carburetted, and sulphuretted-hydrogen gas, and every pestilential exhalation resulting from putrefaction, were being most abundantly given off from the ditches and the lake. The ripples on the surface of water occasioned by a shower of rain are not more numerous than were those produced by the bursting of the bubbles of these pestilential gases, which were about to produce disease and death.<sup>26</sup>

This passage pursues an interesting strategy that I suggest is characteristic of much sanitary reform literature. On the one hand, it abounds in references to gases and other substances that produce foul smells. There are rotting animals, the ditch is bubbling with gas produced by putrefying matter, and the air is full of 'pestilential' effluvia. Gavin's description evokes disgust: he specifies that the 'dead cats and dogs' exhibit 'every stage of disgusting decomposition', that the water is 'foul', and that the entire area he surveys is 'one enormous ditch or stagnant lake' of 'putrid water'.<sup>27</sup> In addition, his depiction also creates fear with its reference to how the miasma is not only able but 'about to produce disease and death'.

On the other hand, however, and very surprisingly given the abundance of implicit allusions to smell in this passage, what is noticeably absent here are direct references to smelling. While Gavin's description employs the rich if conventional olfactory vocabulary of sanitary reform, the specific expressions he uses evade straightforward engagement with the process of smelling. References to the stench are mainly concealed in nouns and adjectives, and verbs denote material agency rather than the fact that Gavin smells anything. The most explicit reference to smell is couched in a complicated passive structure that studiously avoids any direct allusion to the actual process through which olfactory impressions are created: 'gas, and every pestilential exhalation...were being most abundantly given off from the ditches and the lake.' Odours are produced here, but only implicitly perceived. Even while he creates the impression of an atrocious stench, therefore, Gavin rhetorically sweeps the act of smelling under the carpet.

I argue that this rhetorical strategy serves to uphold the distance between observer and matter which smell collapses because of its intrinsic intrusiveness. Gavin vividly depicts the dangerous agential environment and the miasma which signifies the production of disease, but he avoids any sense of direct contact between himself and the foetid matter; in short, he avoids any sensory or material enmeshment. He remains an observer—disgusted and shocked, but also safely separate from what he records. The evasion of any acknowledgement that Gavin must smell the stench in order to ascertain its presence helps him keep a scientific distance.

<sup>26</sup> Gavin, *Unhealthiness of London*, 23–4.

<sup>27</sup> Gavin, *Unhealthiness of London*, 23.

This preservation of distance is a rhetorical technique shared by many sanitary reform texts. To quote just one example from Chadwick's *Report*, we see this same tendency in the following description by a Mr Gilbert, formerly Assistant Commissioner for Cornwall and Devon, who recounts a visit to a marshy district in the town of Tiverton as follows: 'Before reaching the district, I was assailed by a most disagreeable smell; and it was clear to the sense that the air was full of most injurious malaria.'<sup>28</sup> Like Gavin, Gilbert stops short of actually saying that he smelt anything, rhetorically rendering 'the sense' external to himself and providing it with a separate consciousness that diagnoses the condition of the air. In this manner, the boundary between the observer's body and the contagious environment is kept intact and the intrusiveness of smell is curtailed: Gilbert is 'assailed' by the smell, but he is neither invaded by nor entangled with it. With the help of such rhetorical strategies of olfactory avoidance, scientific observers can diagnose possible solutions to the sanitary problem—drainage—and leave the foetid environment unmaimed.

### Insanitary Smells in the Condition of England Novel

I now turn to literary texts and compare the strategies of olfactory avoidance I have identified in non-literary sanitary writing with the representation of smell in Victorian novels that engage with poverty. I look specifically at condition of England novels, since their focus on the situation of the poor also extends to their sanitary state. As Kate Flint argues, early condition of England novels of the 1840s and 1850s actively engaged with the 'proliferation of information... about social conditions' and calls for reform and are hence 'inseparably connected' with official reports and individual surveys,<sup>29</sup> such as the non-literary texts from which I have quoted. This makes a comparison of their engagement with smells and smelling particularly interesting.

I start with a short passage from one of the founding texts of the genre of the condition of England novel, Benjamin Disraeli's *Sybil, or The Two Nations* (1845). Chapter 3 of book 2 begins with a description of a rural town that might have come straight out of Chadwick's *Report*: the idyllic aspect of the town is stressed, only to be exposed as an 'illusion', masking an insanitary nightmare.<sup>30</sup> The town consists of poor cottages surrounded by 'open drains full of animal and vegetable refuse, decomposing into disease', with 'every species of dissolving filth... allowed to soak

<sup>28</sup> Chadwick, *Report*, 5.

<sup>29</sup> Kate Flint, 'Introduction', in Kate Flint, ed., *The Victorian Novelist: Social Problems and Social Change* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 1–13 (1).

<sup>30</sup> Benjamin Disraeli, *Sybil, or The Two Nations* [1845], ed. and introd. Sheila M. Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). All references will be given in parentheses in the main text.



through and thoroughly impregnate the walls and ground adjoining' (52). Refuse is deposited next to houses and when their inhabitants open windows they are 'met with a mixture of gases from reeking dunghills' (53).

So far, this description echoes the style of non-literary sanitary reform texts of the kind quoted above. There is the usual spectacle of filth and decomposition, and of bad smells and moisture contaminating everything. Smells are referred to, but the act of smelling is avoided. Given that *Sybil* is a programmatic, even didactic, text which invests at least as much energy into its socialist agenda as in its literariness, this rhetorical similarity with non-literary sanitary documents is not necessarily surprising. The one moment when the passage in question departs from this rhetoric is all the more forceful. This moment is embedded in a description of childbirth, as the narrator imagines life in the cottages: while a mother lies in labour, her husband 'lies stricken by that typhus which his contaminating dwelling has breathed into his veins' (52).

Disraeli here paints a vivid image of material agency: the cottage is personified, and what should be a protective shell—the home—is, instead, an active agent of disease. There is no boundary here: disease is 'breathed' directly into the man's 'veins', in a radical vision of enmeshment. The comparison of this literary scene with non-literary depictions of sanitary conditions by middle-class visitors hence exposes the difference between observation and dwelling. While observers can extract themselves from potential contagion by preserving their distance, a strategy reinforced by the rhetorical avoidance of olfaction, for the paupers who inhabit contaminated houses all boundaries have already collapsed so that their dilapidated dwellings are both cause and reflection of their precarious state (52–3). The literary trope of the personified home breathing disease into its inhabitants expresses the physical transgression that is carried by the act of the smelling when it is not avoided in sanitary literature.

But what is also striking in this scene, of course, is the *absence* of smell. While the presence of foul odours is clearly implied, not least in the reference to the 'reeking dunghills' and the lack of ventilation, as well as in the link between smell and typhus in Victorian aetiology, smells and smelling are not explicitly mentioned here. I suggest two possible reasons for this absence: firstly, the fact that contagion has already happened means that smell has lost its function as a signal of danger. This, I contend, is related to the literary nature of the passage. While non-literary accounts of visits to insanitary dwellings rely on the presence of actual observers who convey their personal experience, literary texts manage without such personified eyewitnesses. Disembodied narrators such as Disraeli's in this passage are not susceptible to the dangers of contagion which smells signal to the embodied observers in non-literary sanitary reports. In this sense, Disraeli's narrator can literally do without smells, a fact that is reflected in the noticeable lack of anxiety about contagion in this scene. This is related to my second suggestion of how the absence of smell in this scene can be read: I argue that it also reflects the bourgeois notion that the poor

no longer smell bad odours because they have become accustomed to them. In the scene Disraeli describes, there is no middle-class observer whose senses might recoil from the foetid air, and the inhabitants of the cottage, the novel implies, no longer perceive the offensive atmosphere of their home. Rather than fear of disease, they feel misery and pain.

This second interpretation is explicitly confirmed by a passage from Elizabeth Gaskell's *Mary Barton* (1848), another condition of England novel that engages with the insanitary situation of the poor as a part of their general destitution.<sup>31</sup> In the following scene, John Barton and George Wilson visit the Davenports, a family suffering from typhoid fever, who live in a cellar. The living conditions are described as abominable; the street where the Davenports live is a mere gutter. The smell of the place completes the picture of abjection, being 'so foetid as almost to knock the two men down' (58). As in non-literary sanitary reform texts, this depiction contains a reference to the smell, but not to smelling. Nevertheless, the distance that sanitary reformers are eager to uphold through olfactory avoidance is seriously challenged here: the smell is personified and attacks, almost overcomes, the two visitors. However, Gaskell gives this scene another twist by stressing the two men's ability to ignore the stench, acquired through years of dulling their senses: 'Quickly recovering themselves, as those inured to such things do, they began to penetrate the thick darkness of the place' (58). This suggests that even though they smell the offensive odour of the cellar, their senses are no longer seriously affected by it. While they are certainly not safe from the physical threat signalled by bad smells, their sensory perception of this threat is reduced as a luxury they can ill afford. As Gaskell's narrator states, 'the poor are fatalists with regard to infection; and well for them it is so, for in their crowded dwellings no invalid can be isolated. Wilson asked Barton if he thought he should catch it, and was laughed at for his idea' (59). The extradiegetic narrative situation here allows Gaskell to shift between narratorial comment and speech report and hence to include two perspectives at once: that of the bourgeois narrator who observes 'the poor' and comments on their behaviour, demanding sympathy for them while nevertheless observing a marked ideological distance that is partially conveyed through a difference in olfactory sensibility, and that of the working-class characters for whom the insanitary conditions which the narrator merely observes are a daily experience.

While non-literary sanitary reform texts avoid olfaction to circumvent the transgression indicated by smelling and thus also to contain the anxiety raised by boundary breaches, the sanitary passages in Disraeli's and Gaskell's condition of England novels embrace material entanglement to show that the poor are unable to guard the distance between contagious matter and their own bodies. At the same time, they omit or qualify direct references to smell and smelling in order to indicate the

<sup>31</sup> Elizabeth Gaskell, *Mary Barton* [1848], ed. and introd. Shirley Foster (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). All references will be given in parentheses in the main text.

difference between middle- and working-class sensibilities as honed by the specific living conditions of these groups. Where non-literary sanitary reform texts tend to foreground the reactions of middle-class observers to the conditions they encounter, literary representation uses smell perception as an indicator not only of risk but also of class. In Disraeli and Gaskell, the fact that the poor no longer smell the offensive atmosphere surrounding them shows the extent to which they are removed from the bourgeois standards of sensibility on which sanitary reform was based.

### Smelling as Entanglement in *Bleak House*

As a final step in my discussion of sanitary smell, I turn to Charles Dickens, whose engagement with sanitary reform is unrivalled among canonical Victorian novelists. Dickens was an enthusiastic supporter of sanitary reform and actively lobbied for the purification of the Thames. It is hence surprising that in his literary writing the Thames, despite being immensely important for his work,<sup>32</sup> has left few olfactory traces.<sup>33</sup> Although the polluted river constitutes a key motif in his oeuvre and provided Dickens with a major source of aesthetic inspiration, his engagement with the Thames was mainly visual. This can, for instance, be seen in *Our Mutual Friend*, published in 1865, the year in which Bazalgette's new sewers were officially opened.<sup>34</sup> Both the Thames and the question of waste disposal are vital for this novel, with the semi-criminal characters who live by the river being likened to 'so much moral sewage' (30), and so it is peculiar that Dickens ignores the smell of the river. But as the beginning of the novel with its famous depiction of life on the Thames demonstrates, there is a remarkable stress on sight but no reference at all to smell: Gaffer, a dredgerman, is looking for bodies and goods to fish out of the dirty water, and there is a vast number of visual details ('the dirty and disreputable appearance' of the boat and numerous references to colours) and references to seeing (Gaffer keeps 'an eager look out', he has a 'steady gaze', and observes the river 'with a most intent and searching gaze')—these are just a few of the visual references occurring on the first page of the novel alone (13). In addition, aquatic decay and the prospect of intermingling which greatly appealed to Dickens are also presented through sight and touch: the river water is described as 'filthy' and renders everything 'wet and dirty', while Gaffer's boat is '[a]llied to the bottom of the river rather than the surface, by

<sup>32</sup> On Dickens and the Thames see, for instance, Gilbert, *Mapping*, and Allen, *Cleansing the City*.

<sup>33</sup> One can, however, read frequent Dickensian motifs such as fog as attempts to 'render as "visible" not what is simply hidden from the eyes, but what is not properly an object of vision: to turn taste or smell into sight', as Samalin proposes; Zachary Samalin, 'Dickens, Disinterestedness, and the Poetics of Clouded Judgment', *Dickens Studies Annual* 45 (2014), 229–45 (236).

<sup>34</sup> Charles Dickens, *Our Mutual Friend* [1865], ed. and introd. Adrian Poole (London: Penguin, 1997). All references will be given in parentheses in the main text.

reason of the slime and ooze with which it was covered, and its sodden state' (13), in a description that mixes the visual with the tactile. The fact that smell remains absent and is not even indirectly implied here corresponds to a general paucity of descriptions of the smell of the river in Dickens's oeuvre.

However, even though Dickens's literary engagement with the sanitary reform of sewerage, which he supported with such fervour, is primarily visual, when he describes insanitary dwellings, Dickens does use smell, and he draws on olfaction as a sign of boundary transgression. To demonstrate this, I turn to *Bleak House*,<sup>35</sup> a novel that is partly a condition of England novel and that relies heavily on 'figures of inhalation, gagging, and smell'.<sup>36</sup> Dickens was deeply concerned about the circumstances of the poor, including their sanitary living conditions, and in his literary writing he drew on smell to engage with contagion and infection as forms of material circulation that breached not only bodily but also class boundaries.

Atmospheric intrusiveness shapes some of the most memorable scenes in *Bleak House*, starting with its famous opening. The fog that pervades everything has mainly been interpreted as a sign of obfuscation, but from the beginning it is more than visual: when it enters not only the eyes but also the 'throats of ancient Greenwich pensioners, wheezing by the fireside of their wards' (13), for instance, it conveys precisely the kind of atmospheric boundary breach that the non-literary sanitary texts I have discussed tend to evade. Like Disraeli, Dickens avoids reference to odours here, though he mentions the smell of fog elsewhere, for instance in *David Copperfield*.<sup>37</sup> But just as with miasma in *Sybil*, Dickens's fog has an effect equivalent to that of smell: it transgresses boundaries and effects material enmeshment.<sup>38</sup> As it makes itself heard in the difficult breathing of the Greenwich pensioners, it makes explicit the painful exchange of matter on which their existence depends.

A similar sense of intermingling is evoked later, in two different references to the smell of the dead Dedlocks, the representatives of the ancient aristocracy in the novel. The rainy atmosphere on the Lincolnshire estate with which chapter 2 opens is marked by 'a general smell and taste as of the ancient Dedlocks in their graves' (21), and when the house is shut up in chapter 29, 'there is a cold, blank smell . . . suggesting that the dead and buried Dedlocks walk there, in the long nights, and leave the flavour of their graves behind them' (458). Even though there is no reference to a smelling subject in these examples, Dickens manages to create an impression of material enmeshment, in which the decomposing and decomposed Dedlocks very perceptibly affect the air of their former estate.

<sup>35</sup> Charles Dickens, *Bleak House* [1853], ed. and introd. Nicola Bradbury (London: Penguin, 1996). All references will be given in parentheses in the main text.

<sup>36</sup> Samalin, 'Dickens', 232.

<sup>37</sup> Charles Dickens, *David Copperfield* [1850], ed. and introd. Jeremy Tambling, rev. edn (London: Penguin, 2004), 133.

<sup>38</sup> Samalin also reads fog in *Bleak House* as 'both visual and olfactory' in 'Dickens', 233.

Such material entanglement also influences Dickens's characters, and the power of his representation of smell partly lies in his depiction of how olfaction challenges the distance between characters and their surroundings, directly affecting their well-being and moods. When Esther and Ada, two of the protagonists of the novel, move into the home of the Jellyby family, the depressing state of the house almost literally dampens their spirits: 'the rooms had such a marshy smell, . . . Ada was half crying' (55). A similar effect of transferral between smell and mood can be observed in the famous spontaneous combustion scene, when two characters who attempt to take the fresh air have to concede that it is 'a tainting sort of weather', which one of them finds 'sinking to the spirits' and which gives the other 'the horrors' (507). Unlike the sanitary officers who manage to keep their distance, at least rhetorically, in non-literary texts, Dickens's characters are unable to escape the 'tainting' of bad smells and are affected by them in body as well as in their 'spirits'.

This is particularly clear in the following passage in which Mr Snagsby, a stationer, accompanies a policeman into a slum and feels its impact physically as well as mentally:

Mr. Snagsby passes along the middle of a villainous street, undrained, unventilated, deep in black mud and corrupt water . . . and reeking with such smells and sights that he, who has lived in London all his life, can scarce believe his senses. Branching from this street and its heaps of ruins, are other streets and courts so infamous that Mr. Snagsby sickens in body and mind, and feels as if he were going, every moment deeper down, into the infernal gulf. (358)

This description rehearses the familiar idiom of sanitary reform ('undrained', 'unventilated', etc.), and in this respect, like the passage from Disraeli's *Sybil* discussed above, echoes sanitary reports. Where Dickens departs from sanitary documents, however, is in his depiction of the effect this experience has on Mr Snagsby. Like the sanitary observers quoted in the first section of this chapter, Mr Snagsby is a member of the middle classes, but unlike them he is unable to retain a secure observer's stance. The boundary between his body and his environment is immediately breached by the sights and smells he encounters in the slum. When a 'line of stinking ruins' is identified as 'fever-houses' and the policeman notices that Mr Snagsby 'looks a little poorly', the latter confesses that he 'feels as if he couldn't breathe the dreadful air' (358). Yet breathe it he must, and Dickens's insistence on his inability to uphold the boundary between his body and his surroundings constitutes a fundamental departure from the strategy of containment observed in non-literary sanitary texts above. Instead of preserving the distance which these texts create by avoiding olfaction, Dickens, though also not describing the actual act of smelling, nevertheless names its effects and so directly confronts his readers with the material entanglement that is created by the smell of the slum and which makes Mr Snagsby sicken 'in body and in mind'.

As in the other literary examples discussed here, the narrative situation helps create this effect: Dickens's extradiegetic narrator slips into his character's mind and conveys his thoughts through psychonarration, a technique that allows for an almost imperceptible merging between narrator and character so that readers are tricked into sharing Snagsby's thoughts and sense perceptions almost without realizing it. The representation of smell in literary texts thus not only collapses distance between characters and their surroundings but also attempts to make readers share the characters' sense perceptions, through narrative perspective and the evocation of specific moods.

## Conclusion

For sanitary reformers, smell was a source of alarm, as is demonstrated by the complex rhetorical strategies of sanitary reform texts, which evoke smells without quite naming them, through a highly standardized lexicon that allows for little variation, and which focuses on the substances producing foul air rather than on olfaction in order to preserve the distance between sanitary observer and potentially contagious environment, thus to diffuse the spectre of material enmeshment which indicated disease. The sanitary writers I have quoted here are careful to describe but not to smell miasma, and hence manage to retreat from the insanitary scenes they depict with their bodily boundaries unbreached.

When the novelists discussed here write about foul smells, by contrast, their characters are not offered the luxury of a safe retreat. Disraeli and Gaskell show that the poor cannot protect themselves from the threat of disease signalled by smell. However, their condition of England novels also subtly suggest that the poor differ from the rest of the population (represented by their disembodied narrators) through their lack of olfactory sensitivity.

Dickens, finally, embraces the intrusiveness of smell as a form of material intermingling and confronts his readers with the abjection caused by foul matter that will not stay in place because it acts and circulates by its very nature. But Dickens does not exempt the middle classes from this circulation; rather, he paints a sweeping panorama that suggests that circulation is a key characteristic of social existence. This is in tune with the prominence of circulation and permeability as key literary motifs and structural devices of *Bleak House* and, indeed, many of Dickens's novels.

In *Bleak House*, permeability is, for instance, indicated by the fog which pervades everything in the opening of the novel, and which is figuratively linked with the influence of the Court of Chancery on the lives of so many of its characters. Permeability and circulation are, moreover, bracketed in the character of Joe, the pauper whom Mr Snagsby helps locate in the slum scene discussed above. Joe comes into contact with most of the various sets of characters and hence also links the different classes in the novel. Additionally, he is an agent of contagion, moving

through the cast of characters like the smallpox virus which he spreads, thus exposing the principal permeability of human bodies, as well as the vulnerability of society, to the outbreak of disease.

Dickens's representation of smell as a form of transgression hence belongs to a larger set of literary images, motifs, and structures that convey a conception of human beings as porous that extends to the social fabric per se. Importantly, Dickens also challenges the notion that the poor are characterized by different sensibilities and sense perceptions, as becomes clear in the final example from *Bleak House* on which I draw. This scene depicts social do-gooder Mrs Pardiggle's visit to the brickmaker's cottage, which satirizes the widespread Victorian bourgeois practice of invading the dwellings of the poor with the agenda of moral-cum-sanitary reform. As Mrs Pardiggle sits in the middle of the overcrowded dirty cottage reading from a religious book, the unemployed brickmaker challenges her unbidden invasion of his home by highlighting the material reality of abjection and asking her to stick her nose into their lives, literally: 'Is my daughter a-washin? Yes, she *is* a-washin. Look at the water. Smell it! That's wot we drinks. How do you like it, and what do you think of gin, instead?' (132, emphasis in original). His point is that abstinence is a luxury in such conditions, but what his demand that Mrs Pardiggle should smell their drinking water makes very clear is that he himself keenly perceives its stench. In fact, Dickens turns the table here on the middle-class observer and suggests that it is Mrs Pardiggle who is immune to the foul odour of the water and hence needs to be reminded of its state so that she might see the inapplicability of her bourgeois sanitary ideas to the condition of the poor. The brickmaker might be treated with suspicion by the novel—he is certainly a negative character—but he is not denied the right to share the sense perceptions of middle-class reformers. Importantly, he is also allowed directly to address bourgeois sensibilities in a manner denied to Disraeli's and Gaskell's characters.

A final literary example offers a direct contrast to Dickens's portrayal of a shared sensory experience, accentuating his own specific contribution. Charles Kingsley's 1850 condition of England novel *Alton Locke* contains a passage very similar to the one just cited from *Bleak House*, in which a character is also blamed for drinking and justifies himself by pointing to the condition of the available water, confessing himself 'ready to vomit from morning till night with the smells' of his dwelling in a radical vision of bodily porosity.<sup>39</sup> But this character's speech takes the form of a threat to the homodiegetic narrator, with whom he speaks: he promises to force the narrator to drink 'a bucket full' of 'this hell-broth' (264) and is promptly punished by falling into the ditch to drown. Here, the poor man's attempt to make the bourgeois visitor feel what his life is like miscarries spectacularly. By contrast, Dickens's brickmaker, though aggressive, extends an invitation that enables a shared sensory

<sup>39</sup> Charles Kingsley, *Alton Locke* [1850] (London: Chapman & Hall, 1851), 264. All references are given in parentheses in the main text.

experience. Dickens's broader challenge, I think, is for his readers to contemplate what it means not to be able to evade the threat of contamination and contagion despite one's awareness of their presence, and to consider the effects of the porosity of bodies, their own as well as others', that can never be closed off from the environment, human or nonhuman.

All the novels discussed here undercut the rhetorical strategy of containment, and challenge non-literary sanitary discourse and its investment in the distance between sanitary observer and environment by showing the effect of foul odours on characters. But Dickens's engagement with smell extends the clearest invitation to transcend sanitary tenets even as it follows the basic logic of Victorian disease aetiology and sanitary reform. Dickens asks his readers to activate their literary imagination to an extent that the other novels discussed here do not, not only by empathizing with his poor characters but by inviting readers to *sense* their surroundings: by giving them insight into characters' sense perceptions, for instance through psychonarration, and by including them, through direct address, in the summons to 'smell' what the lives of the poor are like. As such, the literary texts discussed here and above all, Dickens's *Bleak House* use smell to achieve a core function of literariness: to disrupt readers' habitual perception and—literally—*sense* of the world.

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# OLFACTORY FUTURES IN BIPOC SPECULATIVE FICTION

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HSUAN L. HSU

In ‘Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom’, Sylvia Wynter argues that the histories of colonialism and slavery have been sustained by the Western, bourgeois conception of ‘Man, which overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself.’<sup>1</sup> Installing this white, patriarchal, bourgeois figure as the bearer of freedom and rationality requires drawing a sharp distinction between the privileged figure of the human and figures of Otherness, who ‘are made to embody the postulate of “significant ill” of enslavement to the lower, sensory aspects of “human nature”’.<sup>2</sup> In a critical assessment of *The Tempest* (1611) and Lope de Vega’s *The New World Discovered by Christopher Columbus* (1614), Wynter notes how both plays represent figures of political rationality who project freedom as ‘mastery over their own *sensory*, irrational nature – and, as well, of all those Human Other categories who, like Shakespeare’s Caliban and Lope de Vega’s Dulcanquellín, are stigmatized as remaining totally enslaved to theirs.’<sup>3</sup> Since the early modern period, the distribution of the senses in a hierarchy that privileges ideas of visual mastery has played a vital role in maintaining distinctions between white men and racialized, gendered, and/or queer subjects imagined to be in thrall to their ‘lower’ senses. The overrepresentation of Man has been accomplished, in part, through the overrepresentation of the sense of sight.

By the same token, capitalism’s constitutive racial distinctions have relegated olfaction to the bottom of the Enlightenment sensory hierarchy. Construed as an atavistic, irrational, and embodied sense, smell has been deployed to stigmatize racialized groups and women. Philosophers, pseudoscientists, and anthropologists

<sup>1</sup> Sylvia Wynter, ‘Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation – an Argument’, *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003), 257–337 (260).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 290.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

claimed that BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People-of-Colour) and women were both transgressively odorous and excessively ruled by their noses. Meanwhile, spaces such as slave ships, ‘coolie’ ships, tenements, mines, penitentiaries, residential schools, barracks, reservations, and communities located near toxic sites have orchestrated noxious odours in ways that wear down BIPOC populations. Historians and anthropologists such as Mark Smith, Andrew Kettler, Connie Chiang, and Deborah Jackson have documented diverse scenes of olfactory violence, from the stench of the slave ship’s hold to segregationist beliefs about the distinctive smell of Black bodies, from nuisance complaints against Chinese fishermen in Monterey, California, to the olfactory effects of toxic industry on the Aamjiwnaang First Nation community in Sarnia, Ontario.<sup>4</sup>

Realist and historical fiction by BIPOC authors has pushed back against these patterns of olfactory violence and stigmatization. Recent literary scholarship has analysed how authors such as James Weldon Johnson, Edith Maude Eaton (Sui Sin Far), Chester Himes, Ann Petry, John Edgar Wideman, Toni Morrison, and Helena María Viramontes stage the diverse ways in which both material odours and olfactory discourse have been mobilized to reproduce racial hierarchies.<sup>5</sup> Building on this work, this chapter considers works of speculative fiction in which olfactory experiences do much more than index and materialize atmospheric violence. In the novels I discuss, Octavia Butler, Larissa Lai, Lee Maracle (Stó:lō), and Cherie Dimaline (Métis) write speculatively about smell, finding in it not only a powerful tool of dehumanization but a chemosensory pathway to futures situated outside the bounds of racial capitalism’s overrepresentation of Man. In framing olfaction as a pathway to new modes of kinship, I draw on Eben Kirksey’s theorization of ‘chemosociality’ as an expansive, more-than-human framework for understanding chemical exposures—one that focuses on ‘altered social experiences, and a shifting sense of normality for both humans and animals’ as chemical exposures give rise to new social worlds.<sup>6</sup> I also build on Anna Tsing’s reflections on the smell of matsutake mushrooms as a medium of interspecies

<sup>4</sup> Mark Smith, *How Race is Made: Slavery, Segregation, and the Senses* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006); Andrew Kettler, *The Smell of Slavery: Olfactory Racism and the Atlantic World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Connie Chiang, ‘Monterey-by-the-Smell,’ *Pacific Historical Review* 73, no. 2 (May 2004), 183–214; Deborah Jackson, ‘Scents of Place: The Displacement of a First Nations Community in Canada,’ *American Anthropologist* 113, no. 4 (November 2011), 606–18.

<sup>5</sup> Erica Fretwell, *Sensory Experiments: Psychophysics, Race, and the Aesthetics of Feeling* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 131–66; Stephen Casmier, ‘The Funky Novels of John Edgar Wideman: Odor and Ideology in *Reuben*, *Philadelphia Fire* and *The Cattle Killing*,’ in Bonnie TuSmith and Keith Byerman, eds, *Critical Essays on John Edgar Wideman* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2005), 191–204; Daniela Babilon, *The Power of Smell in American Literature: Odor, Affect, and Social Inequality* (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2017); Hsuan L. Hsu, *The Smell of Risk: Environmental Disparities and Olfactory Aesthetics* (New York: New York University Press, 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Eben Kirksey, ‘Chemosociality in Multispecies Worlds: Endangered Frogs and Toxic Possibilities in Sydney,’ *Environmental Humanities* 12, no. 1 (May 2020), 23–50 (24).

encounter and becoming: ‘smell, unlike air, is a sign of the presence of another, to which we are already responding. Response always takes us somewhere new; we are not quite ourselves any more . . . we are unpredictably transformed.’<sup>7</sup> The speculative works I discuss do more than expose patterns of olfactory racism; perhaps more importantly, they explore smell’s irrepressible chemosocial capacities for recognizing and making kin—capacities that have been obscured by the Western, colonial imperative of deodorization. They respond to racial capitalism’s ongoing olfactory violence by experimenting with the possibilities for intimacy and porous embodiment materialized by the sense of smell. In BIPOC speculative fiction, olfaction can be an interspecies exchange of genetic matter, a sensory tool for detecting racist violence, a chemical bond that expands reproductive networks, and a means of connecting human and more-than-human kin. Speculative fiction goes beyond providing occasions for reframing the stakes and capacities of olfaction—it also enables authors to explore how transforming our olfactory relationships can contribute to producing and sustaining alternative, more liveable futures for BIPOC.

### **Chemosensation and Interspecies Kinship in *Xenogenesis* and *Fledgling***

Whereas white supremacists have mobilized beliefs about Black body odours—or ‘the foul odors of blacks in close quarters’—to maintain the colour line, Octavia Butler embraced odour’s capacity to forge chemical connections across the lines of race and species.<sup>8</sup> In works such as *Clay’s Ark* (1984), ‘The Evening and the Morning and the Night’ (1987), the *Xenogenesis* trilogy (1987–9, later retitled *Lilith’s Brood*), and *Fledgling* (2005), she imagined modes of intimacy, reproduction, sociality, and healing conditioned by the communication of scents. In Butler’s worlds, olfactory communication forecloses liberal conceptions of autonomy, demanding instead that characters navigate the challenges of community-building and reproduction under conditions of chemical compulsion.

*Xenogenesis* imagines humanity’s future as inextricably entangled with the reproductive processes of the Oankali, an alien civilization that survives by selectively interbreeding with species from different planets. The Oankali rescue the remnants of humanity and—beginning with Lilith—carefully groom them to resettle Earth as members of hybridized families. Scent plays a pivotal role in Butler’s world-building. It binds together Oankali kinship networks, suffuses the architecture of Oankali ships (including the terraformed parts of Earth where much of the novel is set), and

<sup>7</sup> Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 46.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in Mark Smith, *How Race is Made*, 106. The phrase is from Louisiana state Assistant District Attorney Lionel Adams’s argument against Homer Plessy’s challenge to the separate cars law.

serves as a means of direct chemical communication for Oankali: ‘Their kinship group areas were clearly scent-marked. Each time they opened a wall, they enhanced the local scent markers – or they identified themselves as visitors, members of a different kinship group . . . . Lilith could not read scent signs. As far as she was concerned Oankali had no odor at all.’<sup>9</sup> Whereas the cultural imperative of deodorization has made many humans passive and incompetent when it comes to olfaction, the Oankali are able both to ‘read’ and inscribe with scent. By contrast with Lilith’s inability to ‘read scent signs’, her part-Oankali child Akin uses his superhuman sense of smell to identify edible plants and gather information as he wanders on Earth; another of her descendants, Jodahs, uses scent to pacify hostile humans: ‘My scent was at work on her. She would probably have difficulty resisting it because she was not consciously aware of it.’<sup>10</sup>

As Teresa Brennan has noted, olfaction is a powerful medium for the transmission of affect.<sup>11</sup> The comforting scent of the Oankali (particularly that of their third-gender genetic engineers, the ooloi) counteracts their visual appearance, which humans find alien and terrifying. When a bereft human is comforted by her Oankali siblings, ‘the first signals Jean received were olfactory. The male and female smelled good, smelled like family, all brought together by the same ooloi. When they took her hands, they felt right. There was a real chemical affinity.’ Through the work of olfactory communication, ‘[s]trangers of a different species had been accepted as family.’<sup>12</sup> Yet Butler never downplays the tensions between olfactory communication and self-determination: if the Oankali use chemosensation to create irresistible bonds and new forms of life, they do so through a programme of eugenics intended to optimize ‘life itself’.<sup>13</sup>

*Fledgling*, Butler’s final novel, imagines a similar dynamic of olfactory influence. The Ina, a species of vampiric beings who have long coexisted symbiotically with humans, are both hyperosmic (having an extraordinary sense of smell) and powerfully swayed by olfactory signals. Scent exerts a profound erotic influence on them, soliciting them to choose particular Ina mates and human symbionts. When Ina take blood from humans, the humans are both physically pleased and chemically transformed by the exchange: they take on their Ina partner’s scent, and in the process they become subservient to that Ina’s wishes. The novel’s protagonist, a Black Ina–human hybrid named Shori, uses her hyperosmic abilities to both survive and expose a plot against her family. Suffering amnesia as a result of an assault that eradicated her mother’s family and all of her human symbionts, Shori begins to re-establish her kinship connections over the course of the novel. Following her

<sup>9</sup> Octavia Butler, *Dawn*, in *Lilith’s Brood* (New York: Aspect, 2000), 1–248 (67).

<sup>10</sup> Octavia Butler, *Imago*, in *Lilith’s Brood*, 519–746 (632).

<sup>11</sup> Teresa Brennan, *The Transmission of Affect* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004), 9–10.

<sup>12</sup> Butler, *Dawn*, 196.

<sup>13</sup> Matthew A. Taylor and Priscilla Wald, ‘Xenopolitics’, *American Quarterly* 71, no.3 (Sept. 2019), 895–902 (896).

nose, she identifies appealing humans to feed on symbiotically, tracks the scent trails left by her kin and her attackers, and finds potential mates among the Ina.

Importantly, Shori is both hyperosmic and unusually capable of resisting olfactory influences. Nearly overwhelmed by the scents around her, she stops to analyse them:

All I cared about were the scents drifting in the air and what they could tell me. I stopped every now and then to take a few deep breaths, turning into the wind, sorting through the various scents.... Standing still, eyes closed, breathing deeply, I could sort through far more scents – plant, animal, human, mineral – than I wanted to bother with.<sup>14</sup>

Nearly overcome by the seductive scent of a young Ina man, she resists the urge to bite him. Viscerally repulsed by the ‘olfactory keep-out signs’ that her father left in his symbionts before he was killed, she bites the women anyway in order to save their lives. As Melody Jue has observed, this capacity to resist olfactory reactions is not universally shared: the Ina who assault Shori and her family are deeply offended by her because, as a human–Ina hybrid, she ‘smells “wrong”’ to them.<sup>15</sup>

Butler does not valorize the Oankali’s and Ina’s olfactory capacities. Instead, chemical compulsion frames these novels’ depictions of queer kinship in deeply ambivalent terms: if the expansion of interspecies kin networks has utopian possibilities, it is also coerced—not unlike the coerced interracial intimacies brought about by the history of transatlantic slavery. How can humans join Oankali families (where reproduction requires one ooloi, a male and female Oankali, and a male and female human) or Ina communities (where reproduction requires two or more Ina plus all of their human symbionts) under circumstances that are ethical—even if they cannot be fully autonomous? How might these symbiotic, interspecies kinship networks support interdependence, rather than a species hierarchy grounded in olfactory compulsion and relations of ‘vampiric’ exploitation? For Jue, *Fledgling’s* olfactory plot extends far beyond human–Ina symbiosis by situating truth at the level of bodily odours—a product not of individuals or races but of ‘the holobiont, the sum of the body plus its microbes.’<sup>16</sup> Here, smell is not an irrational sense that disqualifies racialized populations from rational autonomy but, rather, a mode of perceiving humanity’s pre-existing and constitutive modes of heteronomy. By centring modes of cross-species interdependence, Butler challenges readers to rethink reproduction and futurity in terms of expansive communities that refuse the fantasy of bodily autonomy.

<sup>14</sup> Octavia Butler, *Fledgling* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 2005), 103.

<sup>15</sup> Melody Jue, ‘Scenting Community: Microbial Symbionts in Octavia Butler’s *Fledgling*’, *Journal of Science Fiction* 4, no. 1 (July 2020), 17–19 (18).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

## Queer Olfactory Intimacies in *Salt Fish Girl*

In *Salt Fish Girl* (2002), Larissa Lai builds a world suffused with the pungent odours that have often been referenced by ‘atmo-Orientalist’ discourses targeting the smell of Asiatic bodies.<sup>17</sup> Whereas white supremacists have frequently cited culinary odours in efforts to denigrate, exoticize, and/or shut down Asian immigrants’ foodways (with all their ties to cultural identity and psychological, physical, and social health), Lai dwells on the queer, racialized sensory excess that characterizes the odours of durian and salt fish. These intense odours communicate with Lai’s characters on both cultural and genetic levels, presenting possibilities for interspecies kinship and queer-of-colour reproduction that exceed the erotic constraints of the patriarchal, heteronormative family.

*Salt Fish Girl* consists of two interwoven narratives set in nineteenth-century South China and in and around a walled city on the west coast of Canada between the years 2044 and 2062. The first thread features an incarnation of the half-serpent, half-human goddess Nu Wa, who falls in love with the daughter of a salt fish merchant: ‘She stank of that putrid, but nonetheless enticing smell that all good South Chinese children are weaned on, its flavor being the first to replace that of mother’s milk.’<sup>18</sup> The dystopian future storyline focuses on Miranda Ching, a young woman whose body emits the sulphurous odour of durian. The two plots intersect when Miranda falls for a clone named Evie who smells of salt fish because, in order to bypass legal regulations on human cloning, she is genetically ‘point zero three per cent *Cyprinus carpio* – freshwater carp’.<sup>19</sup> Miranda turns out to be another incarnation of Nu Wa, connected to the goddess by the material agency of a mutated durian.

Early on, Miranda describes the scene of her conception, which occurred when her father brought her mother an illicit durian: its odour—‘intriguing, yes, and familiar too, and also illicit’—both inspires and suffuses her parents’ intercourse: ‘as they tumbled to the floor, it tumbled between them... its pepper-pissy juices mixing with their somewhat more subtly scented ones and the blood of the injuries it inflicted with its green teeth.’<sup>20</sup> Miranda’s narrative begins with several pages of olfactory description conveying not only the odour of durian but the subtle ways in which Miranda’s scent permeated her family home:

The unpleasant cat pee odour oozed from my pores and flowed into every room. It swirled around the coffee table, glided smoothly over the couch and poured over the rug.... It crept under bedroom doors into the private rooms of each family member.... It rushed up their nostrils and in through ears. It poured down their throats when they opened their mouths to speak.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Hsu, *The Smell of Risk*, 113–51.

<sup>18</sup> Larissa Lai, *Salt Fish Girl* (Toronto: Thomas Allen, 2002), 48.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

The verbs in this extended catalogue underscore the unruly material agency of scent as it transgresses the architectural and corporeal boundaries of the heteronormative household.

Miranda—influenced by her father’s insistent pursuit of social norms—at first attempts to neutralize her odour. But, after leaving her family home, Evie’s pungent scent presents her with a moment of olfactory recognition: ‘I caught a whiff of something subtler, and infinitely sweeter [and] I myself was shocked by this odd glimpse of clarity, this moment of knowing.’<sup>22</sup> Miranda—whose physical idiosyncrasies include a pair of fistulas behind her ears—perceives Evie’s scent as a passage to an alternate world: elsewhere, in an essay on ‘The Sixth Sensory Organ,’ Lai speculates that fistulas ‘are for hearing and smelling sounds and odours from another world, one that co-exists with this one, one that only those with this strange organ can sense.’<sup>23</sup> Like the smell of salt fish, the durian’s odour expands across time and space to encompass Nu Wa’s lifetimes since the beginning of the world. In the beginning was a pungent smell: ‘I don’t know where the smell came from, dank and sulphurous, but there it was, the stink of beginnings and endings.’<sup>24</sup> But smell also impels towards the future: Evie leads Miranda to a group of fugitive clones called the Sonias, who reproduce by eating the impregnating fruit of a mutated durian tree. The interspecies fertility of these fruits can be explained either by genetic engineering (‘They were implanting human genes into fruit as fertility treatment for women’) or by the nineteenth-century storyline, which concludes when Nu Wa blends her essence with—and into—a durian seed.<sup>25</sup> This revelation implies, retroactively, that Miranda is not her father’s daughter, but the durian’s. Miranda eats one of the mutated durians, and the novel concludes with her giving birth in a sulphurous hot spring whose water transforms her lower body into a fish’s tail.

In *Salt Fish Girl*, subtle smells chemically solicit Nu Wa and Miranda towards queer intimacies—intimacies that cut across centuries, heteronormative kinship arrangements, and species boundaries. Like Butler, Lai leverages olfaction as a process of intimate biochemical exchange and a pathway to interspecies reproductive possibilities. ‘This is a story about stink... about how life grows out of the most fetid-smelling places.’<sup>26</sup> In Lai’s vision of a dystopian future characterized by environmental illness, pollution, walled corporate settlements, and the exploitation of labour performed by racialized, feminized, not-quite-human clones, the unruly fecundity of pungent odours materializes connections with suppressed histories

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>23</sup> Larissa Lai, ‘The Sixth Sensory Organ,’ in Brenda Lea Brown, ed., *Bringing it Home: Women Talk about Feminism in Their Lives* (Vancouver: Arsenal, 1996), 199–219 (199).

<sup>24</sup> Lai, *Salt Fish Girl*, 2.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 258.      <sup>26</sup> Ibid., 268.



and alternate worlds—what Sharon Tran glosses as ‘intimate processes of multispecies assembling toward alternative visions of queer futurity’.<sup>27</sup>

### **Smudging and Indigenous Futures in *Celia’s Song* and *The Marrow Thieves***

In ‘Settler Atmospheric’, Kristen Simmons (Southern Paiute) theorizes the diverse ways in which settler colonialism transforms the atmosphere in order to dispossess, dominate, suppress, and kill Indigenous people. These atmospheric interventions—which range from tear gas to toxic emissions—affectively constrain Indigenous communities and their supporters: ‘The settler colonial project of U.S. Empire is, after all, to place indigenous nations and bodies into suspension.’<sup>28</sup> For the Indigenous characters depicted by Lee Maracle and Cherie Dimaline, olfaction pulls in two directions: on the one hand, transformed smellscape index and enact the environmental and cultural violence wrought by centuries of settler colonial genocide; on the other hand, olfactory experience continues to offer a vital mode of knowledge and relation. Reading their novels together conveys the power of olfaction—particularly as orchestrated in smudging ceremonies—as a sensory resource for renewing spiritual, cultural, and environmental relations.

*Celia’s Song* (2014) is not, strictly speaking, a work of speculative fiction. However, it incorporates numerous elements—such as a shape-shifting mink, visionary seers, animate bones, a two-headed serpent that influences human actions—that diverge from conventional realist narratives. More importantly, Maracle shares with Butler, Lai, and Dimaline an investment in imagining equitable, decolonized futures that break from racial capitalism’s orchestrations of race, gender, environmental relations, and the senses.<sup>29</sup> The novel details the lives of a group of Stó:lō (or Coast Salish) women struggling to survive the varied effects of settler colonialism, which include epidemics, residential schools, land seizures, criminalization, suicides, violence against women, child abuse, hunger, depression, drug abuse, and the

<sup>27</sup> Sharon Tran, ‘Asian Sybils and Stinky Multispecies Assemblages: Ecofeminist Departures for Asian American Studies’, *Journal of Asian American Studies* 21, no. 3 (October 2018), 453–80 (464). For another olfactory analysis of the novel, see Paul Lai, ‘Stinky Bodies: Mythological Futures and the Olfactory Sense in Larissa Lai’s *Salt Fish Girl*’, *MELUS* 33, no. 4 (Winter 2008), 167–87.

<sup>28</sup> Kristen Simmons, ‘Settler Atmospheric’, *Cultural Anthropology Fieldsights* (20 November 2017), <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/settler-atmospherics>.

<sup>29</sup> Geoffrey MacDonald describes the novel as a work that ‘uses marvelous realism to consider the spiritual aspects and implications of social transformation and to interrogate the realism of traditional resistance literature’: Geoffrey MacDonald, ‘Liberation Textualities: Decoloniality, Feminism, and Aesthetics in Anglophone Caribbean and Indigenous North American Resistance Literature’, PhD Dissertation, York University, Toronto, 2018, 66. Madeline Mendoza (Laguna Pueblo) reads the novel as a work of ‘Indigenous Futurism’: Madeline Mendoza, ‘Resisting Invisibility: Indigenous Women’s Self-Representation in Imagined Futurisms’, MA Thesis, University of Lethbridge, 2020.

prohibition of ceremony. The novel's plot focuses on the community's response to sadistic acts of child abuse committed by a residential school survivor named Amos. While many of the tortured girl's relatives contribute to the family's recovery, *Celia's Song* centres the healing processes of two seers, Celia and her nephew Jacob. By interweaving a plot about human struggles with Stó:lō traditions about more-than-human beings and scents, Maracle frames healing as a process that involves the entanglement of sensory ecologies and spiritual experience.

The novel opens with a 'horrific' stench—the smell of rotting flesh, bones, mould, and fibre in the ruins of S'ěalth's (Chief Seattle's) longhouse, which was razed in 1871. With their 'scent of death,' the unsettled, rattling bones situate the events of the novel within a longer history of settler violence.<sup>30</sup> Maracle goes on to characterize the legacy of settler genocide—and the post-apocalyptic condition of those inhabiting its wake—in atmospheric terms.<sup>31</sup> As a result of deforestation and the settler state's regulation of wood gathering, Stó:lō homes no longer smell of cedar. The smell of a bough of cedar prompts Celia to reflect on the loss of familiar smells: 'The old houses were cedar planked . . . . The walls soaked up smells, held them, and layered one smell over the next until the smells of the day before and the days after created a unique blend of the family's favourite foods.'<sup>32</sup> If 'the very smell of [homes] marked the caring of the women,' then the loss of cedar—along with the repressive olfactory effects of central heating, 'cleaning agents and air fresheners'—have suffused the novel's women in a deodorized, settler smellscape.<sup>33</sup> This olfactory transformation threatens both cultural continuance (the material context for shared stories)<sup>34</sup> and a vital form of future-oriented knowledge:

Sometimes memory gets stuck in some sort of soup inside my mind and only the right scent will dislodge it. Stirring the soup can help you recall the story, the teaching that is going to solve this trouble, this terrible moment, and now those smells are gone. The smells are gone from the roadside, the hillside, and the houses, and I just can't remember anymore.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Lee Maracle, *Celia's Song* (Toronto: Cormorant, 2014), 23.

<sup>31</sup> For post-apocalyptic framings of Indigenous continuance, see Lawrence Gross, 'The Comic Vision of Anishinaabe Culture and Religion,' *American Indian Quarterly* 26, no. 3 (Summer 2002), 436–59; Cutcha Risling Baldy, 'Why I Teach "The Walking Dead" in My Native Studies Classes,' *Nerds of Color* (24 April 2014), <https://thenerdsofcolor.org/2014/04/24/why-i-teach-the-walking-dead-in-my-native-studies-classes/>; Kyle Powys Whyte, 'Our Ancestors' Dystopia Now: Indigenous Conservation and the Anthropocene,' in Ursula Heise, Jon Christensen, and Michelle Niemann, eds, *The Routledge Companion to the Environmental Humanities* (London: Routledge, 2017), 206–15.

<sup>32</sup> Maracle, *Celia's Song*, 58. <sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>34</sup> See Kyle Powys Whyte, 'Collective Continuance,' in Gail Weiss, Ann Murphy, and Gayle Salamon, eds, *50 Concepts for a Critical Phenomenology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2019), 53–9.

<sup>35</sup> Maracle, *Celia's Song*, 60–1.

Listening to Celia discussing this loss of smells and their associated stories with a group of women, Jacob reflects on the often overlooked consequences of olfactory colonialism: *'How in the world can you change the smells of someone else's world?'*<sup>36</sup>

This transformed smellscape shows how settler colonialism functions as an 'affective atmosphere.' The geographer Ben Anderson defines affective atmospheres as 'a class of experience that occur *before* and *alongside* the formation of subjectivity, *across* human and non-human materialities, and *in-between* subject/object distinctions.... As such, atmospheres are the shared ground from which subjective states and their attendant feelings and emotions emerge.'<sup>37</sup> For the Stó:lō nation, this affective atmosphere is deadly: *'Suicide is... a licence to kill that hangs in the air like a stench. This stench covers everything. It calls up the murderous spirit in everyone who sniffs the scent of it.'*<sup>38</sup> Here, suicides—most notably the death of Celia's son, Jimmy—are not just individual tragedies but a violent atmosphere that affects the entire community. Amos—a survivor of sexual violence at a Catholic residential school—projects his suicidal impulses into the abuse of women and children: *'What difference does it make if you murder yourself or someone else?'*<sup>39</sup> And the suffering of the tortured child threatens to precipitate more violence, as her mother attempts suicide and Celia plots to murder Amos.

Celia and Jacob eventually turn from the question of how settlers could change the smells of their world to how they might reclaim some measure of olfactory sovereignty that might end these cycles of violence. When the conversation about lost smells makes Jacob feel confused, resentful, and angry, Celia recognizes his 'dangerous emotions' and smudges Jacob with the cedar. *'He feels cedar's smoke go down his throat. It settles in his belly and calms him. He gives Celia a half smile when she finishes cleansing him.'*<sup>40</sup> In order to cleanse the atmosphere of feelings associated with abuse and suicide, Jacob helps to build a longhouse and invites Amos to participate in a ceremony at the smokehouse. When Amos dances, *'years of toxic memories [sweat] out through his pores.... He reeks of the deep toxicity of the memory of hate, of hurt',* and *'[h]is spirit struggles to extricate from the living world.'*<sup>41</sup> As the cleansing ceremony exhausts his body, Amos has a vision of his grandmother and hundreds of other ancestors and chooses *'to dance himself into their arms.'*<sup>42</sup> In *Celia's Song*, the resurgence of long-prohibited rituals ('The last smokehouse had been burned in the 1920s') clears the air for more liveable futures in which smell will provide a powerful connection between the community and the land. Maracle represents both cedar smudging and the smokehouse dance as pro-

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 61, italics in original.

<sup>37</sup> Ben Anderson, 'Affective Atmospheres', *Emotion, Space, and Society* 2 (2009), 77–81 (78).

<sup>38</sup> Maracle, *Celia's Song*, 159.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. <sup>40</sup> Ibid., 67.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 255. <sup>42</sup> Ibid., 255.

cesses of ‘cleansing’ attuned to the material and spiritual interconnections between people and the atmospheres they inhabit.

Although it is set in a dystopian future, Dimaline’s *The Marrow Thieves* shares Maracle’s interest in ceremony as a counterweight to the environmental and affective consequences of settler colonialism.<sup>43</sup> One of the novel’s epigraphs, from Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*, frames the story in terms of the difficulty and necessity of ceremony in a post-apocalyptic world: ‘Where you’ve nothing else, construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them.’<sup>44</sup> But whereas McCarthy’s protagonists approach ceremony in Christian, settler colonial, and individualist terms (projecting myths of patriarchal Christian civilization outwards through exhalation), Dimaline depicts smudging as a ceremony of environmental receptivity and Indigenous renewal. *The Marrow Thieves* is set in a dystopian North America ravaged by Water Wars, flooding, earthquakes, pollution, climate migration, and a mysterious disease that deprives its victims of the ability to dream. Believing that this condition can be cured by medicine forcibly harvested from Indigenous people’s bodies, settlers set up a new system of residential schools and send armed Recruiters out to capture non-consensual donors. A work of young adult climate fiction, the novel is narrated by Frenchie, a young, orphaned Métis who joins a community of Indigenous fugitives. Led by two adults—Miigwans and Minerva—who have knowledge of Anishinaabe language and traditions, the group finds ways to resist the depredations of settlers through cultural resurgence, ceremony, and alliances with other Indigenous nations.

Dimaline uses olfactory description to convey how toxicity permeates the landscape. ‘The smell from the lake here was nauseating. . . . We hadn’t been here more than a day, so the smell was pungent for us. We breathed into bandanas and built shelter from the stench with plywood and tarp.’<sup>45</sup> Here, stench is not just a sign of pollution—it is a toxic substance from which characters seek shelter. In the novel’s first smudging scene, smell is both a spiritual force and a potential warning of ‘sickness’:

Old Minerva, near-sighted to squinting, lifted her nose at the smell [of tobacco]. Her lips fell slack and she sighed. Those first few exhales were big and wasteful as Miig tried to get the damp paper to light, and smoke billowed across the clearing like messages. Everything was always damp, so we were trained to sniff out mould to keep that sickness at bay. Minerva made her hands into shallow cups and pulled the air over her head and face, making prayers out of ashes and smoke. Real old-timey, that Minerva.<sup>46</sup>

<sup>43</sup> While *Celia’s Song* is not mentioned by name, *The Marrow Thieves* acknowledges Maracle when the narrator notices ‘a hardcover by a great woman I had heard quoted at Council named Maracle’: Cherie Dimaline, *The Marrow Thieves* (Toronto: DCB, 2017), 216.

<sup>44</sup> Quoted in Dimaline, *The Marrow Thieves*, n.p.

<sup>45</sup> Dimaline, *The Marrow Thieves*, 11.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

In the novel's scenes of smudging, the community is unified by a ceremony that exercises some agency over the surrounding atmosphere. Following Christine Sharpe's concept of 'Black microclimates' that sustain Black life in the face of a pervasive 'weather' of antiblackness, smudging creates a communal microclimate through a shared atmosphere.<sup>47</sup> It orients the group—which consists mostly of Indigenous children and teenagers deracinated from their languages and cultures—towards cultural continuance, while materializing connections between humans, air, and Indigenous plants such as tobacco and sweetgrass.

The group's connections and loyalties are forged through the sharing of stories, prayers, and smoke. Thus, when Miig gathers the kids for a story as he smokes, Frenchie experiences language as a modulation of the air around them: 'I watched the word *Story* puff over the fire and spread into a cumulative haze that smelled of ground roots and acrid burn just above our dark heads.'<sup>48</sup> When the fugitives are found by the Council—an intertribal group devoted to reconstructing Indigenous languages and knowledges—Frenchie and Rose have an experience of olfactory anagnorisis (recognition):

Then I smelled it.

Tobacco. Cedar. And the thick curl of something more, something I thought I'd only ever smelled with the memory of smell.

'Holah, that's sweetgrass!' Rose slipped into her old accent, picked up from years with the elderly before she'd come to us.

'We grow sweetgrass here.' It was the man from the woods. 'That's what you see all around you.' He was smiling, patting the tips of the longer strands we stood in.<sup>49</sup>

In 'Sweetgrass Stories: Listening for Animate Land', the artist, writer, and scholar Warren Cariou (Métis) offers an informative account of the plant's ceremonial significance:

In the cultures I am most familiar with – Métis, Cree, and Anishinaabe – sweetgrass is used in ceremonies for the purposes of healing, purification, and clearing the mind. Its rich and aromatic scent, both when fresh and when it is burned, is regarded as an important part of its healing power. Indeed, one could say that the plant's scent is its most direct mode of physical communication with human beings, bringing them knowledge that has bodily, spiritual, and psychological effects and meanings.<sup>50</sup>

The scent of sweetgrass materially transforms breathers, in part by connecting them with culturally significant, place-based plants. Sweetgrass smoke enacts both

<sup>47</sup> Christina Sharpe, 'Antiblack Weather vs. Black Microclimates', interview with Léopold Lambert, *Funambulist* 14 (November–December 2017), 48–53.

<sup>48</sup> Dimaline, *The Marrow Thieves*, 22. <sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>50</sup> Warren Cariou, 'Sweetgrass Stories: Listening for Animate Land', *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* 5, no. 3 (September 2018), 338–52 (342).

interspecies communication and cultural continuance by materially reaffirming Indigenous people's knowledge and ties to more-than-human kin.

Dimaline's scene of olfactory anagnorisis may be influenced by Robin Wall Kimmerer's (Citizen Potawatomi) powerful accounts of sweetgrass—from the embodied experiences of planting, braiding, and smudging it to its cosmological significance for numerous Indigenous nations—in her award-winning and bestselling essay collection *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (2013). Drawing on her research in Indigenous plant science, Kimmerer writes that '[i]n our language [sweetgrass] is called *wiingasshk*, the sweet-smelling hair of Mother Earth. Breathe it in and you start to remember things you didn't know you'd forgotten.'<sup>51</sup> Whereas the most canonical instance of olfactory anagnorisis in Western literature is Proust's madeleine—whose taste and scent bring back a surge of personal childhood memories—the scent of sweetgrass recalls collective stories and knowledge. Later in the book, Kimmerer explains how settler dispossession and environmental stewardship have decimated sweetgrass populations on ancestral Mohawk land. 'Losing a plant can threaten a culture in much the same way as losing a language. Without sweetgrass, the grandmothers don't bring the granddaughters to the meadows in July. Then what becomes of their stories. Without sweetgrass, what happens to the baskets? To the ceremony that uses these baskets?'<sup>52</sup> Kimmerer reframes the scent of sweetgrass as a mode of interspecies communication that solicits people to engage in mutually sustaining, symbiotic relationships with the plants. Thus, she works to reseed sweetgrass at a Mohawk settlement dedicated to educating youth in Indigenous languages and knowledge. Cultivating sweetgrass not only reverses colonialism's transformations of the Indigenous smellscape—it also enables cultural practices associated with the plant, such as the basket-weaving and healing ceremonies described elsewhere in Kimmerer's book.

Dimaline's narrative of resurgence, however, takes a speculative approach to the recovery of Indigenous plants and traditional knowledge. One of the novel's climactic scenes—in which Minerva allows herself to be captured by the Recruiters and, once she is strapped into their extraction machine, 'call[s] on her blood memory, her teachings, her ancestors' in a song that destroys the entire 'School'—is followed by a quiet scene of smudging, in which Indigenous people gather around the burning building and bathe themselves in its smoke: 'The wind shifted so that the heat and smell bore down on the road. And with the Council's man watching, the campers made their hands into shallow cups and pulled the air over their heads and faces, making prayers out of ashes and smoke. Real old-timey.'<sup>53</sup> Just a few pages

<sup>51</sup> Robin Wall Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge, and the Teachings of Plants* (Minneapolis: Milkweed Editions, 2013), ix.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 261.

<sup>53</sup> Dimaline, *The Marrow Thieves*, 173–4.

after Frenchie and Rose are surprised by the healing smell of sweetgrass, these witnesses suffuse themselves with the smoke of a burning residential school/extraction facility: for them, the healing capacities of the burned school are more significant than the risk of inhaling the smoke's toxic particulates. Cleansing their spirits requires cleansing the landscapes of settler violence: as one character puts it, '[w]hen we heal our land, we are healed also.'<sup>54</sup> Bound together by their shared atmosphere, this community of witnesses adapts the 'old-timey' ceremony of smudging as a means to enact prayers for a future free of settler violence.

In *Celia's Song* and *The Marrow Thieves*, sensory encounters with the atmosphere embody Indigenous conceptions of health and medicine that have long been suppressed by settler biomedicine. Both novels contrast Indigenous healing ceremonies—which heal people by addressing spiritual connections, cultural continuance, and relations with human and non-human kin—with settler colonialism's tendency to reduce health to discrete, biological instances of disease and cure. In *Celia's Song*, the settler legal system, ignorant of 'the medical value of the dance,' prosecutes Amos's death as a result of '[b]ad medicine.'<sup>55</sup> When a white character insists that the tortured girl needs to be taken to the hospital for professional medical care, Celia 'believes the child needs glucose, a sanitary room, and surgical instruments, but she also believes that those sterile things alone will not be enough.'<sup>56</sup> In *The Marrow Thieves*, settlers who stop dreaming as a result of stresses induced by climate disaster view Indigenous ceremony not as a source of environmental and cultural continuance, but as a marketable physical cure. Thus, they become desperate to disarticulate the benefits of ceremony from the environment in which—and with which—it takes place: 'How could they best appropriate the uncanny ability we kept to dream? How could they make ceremony better, more efficient, more economical?'<sup>57</sup> To the extent that it involves a material, communicative exchange between human breathers and plants, smudging can only heal the individual through reciprocity—an interspecies inhalation that strengthens community ties with both human and non-human kin.

Because they have had extensive experience with both olfactory violence and olfactory exclusion, many BIPOC are acutely aware of the connections between olfaction and power, as well as the ways in which stigmatizing and regulating smell can circumscribe culturally meaningful ways of engaging with the human and non-human world. The BIPOC-authored works of speculative fiction discussed in this chapter demonstrate the power of olfactory knowledges and relationships that have long been suppressed—and also mobilized as a means of racial suppression—by Western liberalism's (racialized, gendered, sexualized, and ableist) fiction of the rational, autonomous individual. Instead of simply exposing historical pro-

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

<sup>55</sup> Maracle, *Celia's Song*, 259.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

<sup>57</sup> Dimaline, *The Marrow Thieves*, 88.

cesses of deodorization and olfactory violence, Butler, Lai, Maracle, and Dimaline immerse readers in sensuous olfactory descriptions that evoke smell's capacities as an intimate vehicle of environmental involvement, kinship expansion, cultural resurgence, and personal and collective healing.

Together, these works exemplify speculative fiction's affordances as a genre for experimenting not only with sensory experience but with the potential futures it might build, sustain, or unravel. They raise provocative questions about how the plasticity and vast, widely suppressed potential of human olfaction might become the basis for future (and sometimes past, resurgent) modes of knowledge, communication, and intimacy. For Butler, Lai, Maracle, and Dimaline, speculative fiction is an occasion for not only 'cognitive estrangement'<sup>58</sup> but sensory estrangement—a form that can explore new modes of queer, interspecies, decolonial relationality that might be enabled by the shattering and reshaping of existing orderings of sensory experience.

#### FURTHER READING

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<sup>58</sup> Darko Suvin, *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction: On the Poetics and History of a Literary Genre* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 4.



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IV

TASTE



## READING ‘FUL SAVOURLY’

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### Taste and Good Taste in Later Medieval English Literature

MARY C. FLANNERY

What might the sense of taste have to do with good taste—that is, with the development and exercise of aesthetic value judgment? Although the modern English word *taste* can now refer to either of these concepts, the word did not refer to a ‘[s]tyle or manner exhibiting aesthetic discernment’ or ‘good or bad aesthetic quality’ before the turn to aesthetics in eighteenth-century philosophy.<sup>1</sup> In a recent study, Elizabeth L. Swann notes that the accepted account of taste’s rise to prominence locates that rise ‘in the context of late seventeenth-century and early eighteenth-century consumer culture and aesthetic theory, as authors including Anthony Ashley Cooper, third earl of Shaftesbury, Richard Steele, and Joseph Addison made a metaphor out of what had previously only been a physical sensation.’<sup>2</sup> Terry Eagleton is perhaps foremost among those who have shaped this widely accepted narrative, exploring in depth the contributions of such philosophers as Edmund Burke, Alexander Baumgarten, Johann Winckelmann, Immanuel Kant, and Friedrich Schiller to what he views as the ‘birth’ of aesthetics as ‘a discourse of the body’ in the mid-eighteenth century.<sup>3</sup> However, the Middle English word *taste* could refer to enjoyment or discernment centuries earlier, when vernacular writers

<sup>1</sup> See *OED*, s.v. *taste*, n. 1, especially definition 8b.

<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth L. Swann, *Taste and Knowledge in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 10, although Swann also argues that as early as the sixteenth century ‘the relationship between physical and discriminative taste . . . was . . . intimate and overt’ (12).

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Terry Eagleton, ‘The Ideology of the Aesthetic,’ *Poetics Today* 9, no. 2 (1988), 327–38, and his later book by the same title, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990). Eagleton opens his essay on ‘Aesthetics and Politics in Edmund Burke’ by declaring that ‘Aesthetics was born in the mid-eighteenth century as a discourse of the body’: *History Workshop Journal* 28, no. 1 (1989), 53–62 (53).

were drawing on and responding to earlier scholastic and monastic models of literary criticism.<sup>4</sup>

Studies of how the sense of taste and the idea of good taste are connected, and of when that connection was first made, have typically focused on what historical developments in philosophy, rhetoric, and science might be able to tell us about the sense of taste as it features in literature and art.<sup>5</sup> In what follows, I consider what light literary form (in this case, narrative poetry) and literary analysis might be able to shed on the interrelated histories of the physical sense of taste and the idea of good taste or aesthetic judgment at a formative moment in the history of English language and literature: the later Middle Ages. This chapter uses Geoffrey Chaucer's *Miller's Tale* as a test case in order to explore how we might use literary sources as a means of understanding what the physical sense of taste might have meant to men and women in the medieval period. Not only can books come into contact with mouths (as when an individual devoutly kisses a holy text), but—as *The Miller's Tale* illustrates—books can also inspire readers to *imagine* what transpires when the physical senses of the mouth are stimulated. The means by which this imagining is elicited by literary texts can tell us a great deal about what taste meant to people in different times and places.<sup>6</sup> In particular, literary works reveal how the sense of taste is semantically bound up with broader concepts of discernment and pleasure that are important aspects of literary history—to have good taste in literature is to possess the ability to recognize and appreciate what is excellent in literature.<sup>7</sup> A certain text might not be to someone's taste, or might leave 'a bad taste in the mouth'. And literature can bring experiences of physical taste to life on the page, inviting us to indulge in or recoil from what characters experience.

In the first half of this chapter, I will briefly outline some of the prevailing medieval theories regarding the physical sense of taste, as well as the rhetorical significance of this sense in later medieval English writings. Taste was a peculiarly

<sup>4</sup> While a thorough account of medieval literary theory lies beyond the scope of this chapter, a valuable overview may be found in Alastair Minnis and Ian Johnson, eds, *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism, Volume II: The Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). See also the *accessus ad auctores* collected in A. J. Minnis and A. B. Scott, with David Wallace, eds, *Medieval Literary Theory and Criticism, c.1100–c.1375: The Commentary Tradition*, rev. edn (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Mary Carruthers, *The Experience of Beauty in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), especially chapter 4; and Swann, *Taste and Knowledge in Early Modern England*. While her study does not focus on the links between the physical sense of taste and aesthetic judgment, an extensive investigation that links the epistemology of the mouth to various forms of knowledge is Katie L. Walter's *Middle English Mouths: Late Medieval Medical, Religious, and Literary Traditions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

<sup>6</sup> In some cases this practice might lead to the accidental or even deliberate consumption of part of a book, as argued by Kathryn Rudy in her study of Philip the Good's veneration of the Face of Christ in his grandfather's prayer book ('Eating the Face of Christ: Philip the Good and his Physical Relationship with Veronicas', *Convivium* 4, iss. Supplementum (2017), 168–79).

<sup>7</sup> See *OED*, s.v. *taste*, n. 1.

ambivalent sense in the Middle Ages, simultaneously believed to be ‘low’ and elevating, viewed as a crude means of perception and a path to direct knowledge.<sup>8</sup> Even pleasurable tastes, particularly ‘sweetness’, were not unproblematic in either physical or rhetorical terms. However, I will argue that the very qualities that rendered the sense of taste so ambivalent also figured it as a moment in which men and women had the opportunity to acquire and/or exercise *discernment*, an association likely encouraged by the etymological link between Latin *sapor* (taste, flavour) and *sapientia* (intelligence, discernment).<sup>9</sup> In the second half of this chapter, I consider how Chaucer (c.1342–1400) exploits precisely this aspect of taste in order to reflect on the decision-making processes involved in the acquisition and exercise of good taste in literature. Focusing on his famous literary portrayal of an experience of literal or physical taste (Absolon’s mistaken, yet ‘savourily’, kissing of Alison’s arse in *The Miller’s Tale*), my aim is to show how Chaucer uses narrative verse to depict an otherwise brief sensory encounter unfolding in time, and how that painstaking (and rather painful) unfolding both paints a picture of knowledge being acquired via the senses and invites readers to reflect on what kind of narrative *they* consider to be in good taste.

### Taste in the Later Middle Ages

As a number of scholars have pointed out, ‘the senses are not universal, are not transhistorical, and can only be understood in their specific social and historical contexts.’<sup>10</sup> An added complication is the fact that, as Constance Classen has remarked, ‘[i]n the West we are accustomed to thinking of perception as a physical rather than a cultural act’, whereas, in fact, ‘[a]s our habits of eating, dress, language, and so on are determined by our culture, so are our habits of perception’, including our understanding and interpretations of the senses.<sup>11</sup> If we accept that sensory perception is largely culturally determined, then we should also consider that a great deal of information about the senses may be found in culture itself—that is, in the cultural artefacts within and through which men and women ‘make sense’ of the senses. I hope to make a case here for the value of literature as a resource for the

<sup>8</sup> I here use ‘ambivalent’ to denote the profoundly opposed associations of taste in the medieval imagination (e.g. as both ‘low’ and potentially elevating); see *OED* s.v. *ambivalent*.

<sup>9</sup> *Lewis & Short Latin Dictionary*, s.v. *sapor*, *sapientia*, online at the Perseus Digital Library, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/resolveform?redirect=true&lang=Latin>.

<sup>10</sup> Mark M. Smith, *Sensing the Past: Seeing, Hearing, Smelling, Tasting, and Touching in History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 3.

<sup>11</sup> First quotation from Constance Classen, *Worlds of Sense: Exploring the Senses in History and across Cultures* (London: Routledge, 1993), 1; second quotation from Constance Classen, ‘The Sensory Orders of “Wild Children”’, in David Howes, ed., *Varieties of Sensory Experience: A Sourcebook in the Anthropology of the Senses* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 59.

history of the senses. But even if I wish to resist universalizing or transhistorical approaches, for the sake of clarity I cannot abandon definitions altogether. Consequently, when I refer to the physical sense of taste, I primarily mean the body's ability to detect the flavour of a particular substance via the mouth, although this cannot be completely disentangled from the ways that a food's texture or aroma might be sensed or might contribute to gustatory experiences and processes.

While a comprehensive study of medieval ideas concerning the physical sense of taste has yet to be produced, gustation has played a prominent role in studies of other topics and phenomena in the Middle Ages, particularly medieval devotional culture.<sup>12</sup> A considerable body of research related to culinary history has also been conducted concerning *what* medieval people tasted.<sup>13</sup> Within broader histories of the medieval senses, taste has featured either only incidentally or within the confines of small-scale studies.<sup>14</sup> This leaves considerable room for exploration.

If today the sense of taste is recognized as partially dependent on (and even frequently conflated with) the sense of smell, in medieval theories of the senses taste was also closely associated with and even categorized as a form of 'touch'.<sup>15</sup> Aristotelian theories designated taste and touch the 'lower senses', in contrast with the more 'noble' senses of sight and hearing (smell seems to have hovered somewhere in the middle); thus, John of Trevisa's Middle English translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus's thirteenth-century encyclopaedic text *De proprietatibus rerum* notes that 'þe witte of sight is more sotile and more nobil þan oþir wittes', whereas 'þe tonge is sette last, þat is þe instrument and lyme of taast and touche;

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987); Carruthers, *The Experience of Beauty*, especially chapters 3 and 4; and Walter, *Middle English Mouths*.

<sup>13</sup> Recent studies of medieval culinary history include Christopher M. Woolgar, Dale Serjeantson, and Tony Waldron, eds, *Food in Medieval England: Diet and Nutrition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); C. M. Woolgar, 'Food and the Middle Ages', *Journal of Medieval History* 36, no. 1 (2010), 1–19; Massimo Montanari, *Medieval Tastes: Food, Cooking, and the Table* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); C. M. Woolgar, *The Culture of Food in England, 1200–1500* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016).

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, the chapter on taste in C. M. Woolgar, *The Senses in Late Medieval England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 105–16; the discussion of taste in Heather Webb, 'Cardiosensory Impulses in Late Medieval Spirituality', in Stephen G. Nichols, Andreas Kablitz, and Alison Calhoun, eds, *Rethinking the Medieval Senses: Heritage, Fascinations, Frames* (Baltimore, MA: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 265–85 (277–9); and, for a brief account of taste and smell in *The Miller's Tale*, Thomas J. Hatton, 'Absolon, Taste, and Odor in the Miller's Tale', *Papers in Language and Literature* 7 (1971), 72–5.

<sup>15</sup> For studies on the conflation of the senses in medieval theory and discourse, see, for example, Javier Enrique Díaz-Vera, 'Coming to Past Senses: Vision, Touch and Their Metaphors in Anglo-Saxon Language and Culture', in Annette Kern-Stähler, Beatrix Busse, and Wietse de Boer, eds, *The Five Senses in Medieval and Early Modern England* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 36–66, and Rory G. Critten and Annette Kern-Stähler, 'Smell in the York Corpus Christi Plays', 239–68 of the same volume.

þe worchinge þerof is aboute greet and boistous substaunce'.<sup>16</sup> The 'sotil' nature of sight (its sharpness or keenness) is juxtaposed here with the relatively 'boistous' (unrefined; earthy) nature of taste, which was not believed to possess the same subtlety.<sup>17</sup> Taste's status as one of the comparatively lower senses in medieval theory was also in part connected to its location in lower parts of the human body than those connected with the nobler senses. While the tongue might be described as 'þe instrument and lyme of taast and touche', taste was also recognized as connected to the rest of the mouth, to saliva, and even—though less directly—to the rest of the digestive system.<sup>18</sup>

The relative 'lowness' of taste notwithstanding, in the Middle Ages the human tongue was believed to be capable of recognizing up to nine different kinds of taste, as C. M. Woolgar explains:

[C]ommon opinion in medieval Europe, largely following Constantine the African and his translations of Arabic medical works, was that there were eight [different tastes], or nine if one included a wearish savour or 'tastelessness' (*insipidus*). These were sweet (*dulcis*), greasy (*unctuosus*), bitter (*amarus*), salty (*salsus*), harsh or styptic (*stipticus*), salty like the sea (*ponticus*) and vinegary (*acetosus*).<sup>19</sup>

As the above enumeration of different kinds of taste indicates, taste overlapped or intersected with touch in the medieval imagination. Moreover, like touch, taste was distinguished from sight and hearing by virtue of its unmediated nature: it 'requires direct contact between the object tasted and the mouth: neither of these senses can keep at a distance, but necessarily work at close quarters and act in and on bodies'.<sup>20</sup> Ironically enough, this quality imbued the so-called lower senses with profound experiential value in the eyes of medieval theorists, as Mary Carruthers observes:

<sup>16</sup> 'The wit of sight is more subtle and noble than other wits, whereas 'the tongue is set last, that is the limb of taste and touch; the working thereof concerns large and coarse matter' (my translation); *On the Properties of Things: John Trevisa's Translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus, De Proprietatibus Rerum*, ed. M. C. Seymour et al., 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), I: 172, cf. 1, 108, ll. 4–10. While Aristotle numbered touch among the lower senses, Daniel Heller-Roazen notes that he also labels it 'the most acute [*akribestatēn*] of all man's senses' (*The Inner Touch: Archaeology of a Sensation* (New York, NY: Zone Books, 2007), 292; quoting from Aristotle, *Historia animalium*, trans. A. L. Peck (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), 1.15.494b16).

<sup>17</sup> *Middle English Dictionary* (henceforth *MED*), s.v. *sotil*, *boistous*. On 'boistousness' and the body in medieval English literature, see Katie L. Walter, 'Books and Bodies: Ethics, Exemplarity, and the "Boistous" in Medieval English Writings', *New Medieval Literatures* 14 (2012), 95–125.

<sup>18</sup> As Swann notes, as late as the early seventeenth century taste was occasionally connected with other body parts besides the mouth: 'although the organ of taste was most usually identified as the tongue, it is not uncommon to find authors attributing the capacity to perceive flavour to the palate (the roof of the mouth), throat, and stomach, too' (*Taste and Knowledge in Early Modern England*, 13).

<sup>19</sup> Woolgar, *The Senses*, 105–6. Despite the belief that humans could detect as many as nine different tastes, 'in the medieval period man's ability to taste was reputed to be inferior to that of some animals, notably monkeys and deer, but also bears, pigs, crows and the ostrich, which was renowned for its ability to eat anything' (105).

<sup>20</sup> Walter, *Middle English Mouths*, 37.



Most commentators in the Aristotelian tradition regarded taste as a kind of touch, though the two senses have distinct media through which they operate[.]...As an activity of knowing, taste is directly experiential: acting upon the heart as well as the mind, basic to eating and necessary for elemental growth, *sapientia* is also *sapor*, ‘flavor,’ thus a varying mixture of bitter and sweet.<sup>21</sup>

Neither touch nor taste work at a distance; both operate directly on the body’s surfaces but transmit information deeply inward to be used for cognition and the experience of emotion.

As the above quotation also suggests, *sapor* (taste, flavour) was intimately connected to *sapientia* (intelligence or discernment, a natural or God-given knowledge distinguished in the Middle Ages from ‘the traditions of *scientia*, or specifically human modes of knowing’), both physically and etymologically.<sup>22</sup> In his *Etymologies*, Isidore of Seville observes that

Sapiens dictus a sapore; quia sicut gustus aptus est ad discretionem saporis ciborum, sic sapiens ad dinoscientiam rerum atque causarum; quod unumquodque dinoscat, atque sensu veritatis discernat[.]

*Sapiens* is from *sapor*; for as taste is able to distinguish the flavor of foods, so knowing is to analyze matters and causes, for whoever analyzes also discerns the truth by sense[.]<sup>23</sup>

Isidore’s analogy between taste and knowing also points towards the way taste *is* knowing, a natural form of discernment (*discretio*) that enables one to distinguish one food’s flavour from another (‘ad discretionem saporis ciborum’).<sup>24</sup> In Christian tradition, taste was associated with the beginning of a specific form of knowledge, although when Adam and Eve ate the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil it also brought about the fall of man. The Genesis story stands at one end of a long and complicated biblical tradition linking taste, knowledge, and desire, a link that was, in the case of the Fall, disastrous for mankind, but which might in other contexts also bring mankind closer to God.

The connection between taste and knowledge was one of several ways that taste was tied to ideas about influence, both the influence of substances on the human body and the influence the human body might have on whatever came into contact with it. *Where* taste was located—in the mouth, one of the key gateways to the human body—determined how it was believed to operate on and through the

<sup>21</sup> Mary Carruthers, ‘Sweetness’, *Speculum* 81, no. 4 (2006), 999–1013 (1003–4).

<sup>22</sup> On medieval English literary engagement with the distinction between *scientia* and *sapientia*, see, for example, James Simpson, ‘The Role of *Scientia* in *Piers Plowman*’, in Gregory Kratzmann and James Simpson, eds, *Medieval English Religious and Ethical Literature: Essays in Honour of G. H. Russell* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1986), 49–65 (49).

<sup>23</sup> Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiarum sive originum libri XX*, ed. and trans. W. M. Lindsay (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911), 10.240.

<sup>24</sup> *Lewis & Short Latin Dictionary*, s.v. *discretio*, online at the Perseus Digital Library, <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/resolveform?redirect=true&lang=Latin>.

human body. Not only might food and drink pass through the mouth, but so did breath, air, spittle, and even (it was believed) the human soul upon one's death. Situated at such a key site of exchange between inner and outer, taste was believed to possess unique properties that enabled the tasted object to leave a more direct and more enduring mark on the soul. In her study of mouths in medieval English literary and medical traditions, Katie Walter has outlined the ways in which thinkers like Albertus Magnus (following Aristotle) in his *De animalibus* and Bartholomaeus Anglicus in *De proprietatibus rerum* saw both touch and taste as capable of a uniquely penetrative effect on the heart. Trevisa's translation of *De proprietatibus rerum* observes that 'taast and gropinge, beþ more in þe herte, and þerfore þey beþ of þe beyng of þe best and demeþ more opunliche of þinges þat he felip and knoweþ'.<sup>25</sup> Walter notes that this particular passage suggests 'that taste and touch penetrate more deeply into the body interior' than other senses like sight or hearing: 'the "open" properties of taste and touch, and their "felt" encounter with objects, implicate them in a distinct mode of knowing with a particular affinity with the heart-soul system'.<sup>26</sup>

In a more quotidian sense, a well-developed sense of taste was believed to be closely connected not only to proper nutrition but to the overall health and balance of the human body, mind, and soul. Consequently, the physical sense of taste was something to be honed and developed from birth. As Woolgar has noted in his study of the senses in medieval England, '[i]t was believed that babies initially required to have their taste stimulated'.<sup>27</sup> To that end, parents might rub honey into the gums of their infants in order to help them develop their sense of taste from an early age.<sup>28</sup> Bartholomaeus Anglicus maintained (in Trevisa's translation) that, in the case of newborns, 'þanne þe roof of þe mouþ and gomez schulde be frotid with a fingir iwette in hony, to clense and comfote þe inner partye of þe mouþ, and also to excite and cense þe childes appetite wiþ swetnes and scharpnes of þe hony'.<sup>29</sup> The fifteenth-century version of the Middle English gynaecological text now known as *The Knowing of Woman's Kind in Childing* found in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 37 gives similar advice, instructing the reader to,

<sup>25</sup> 'Taste and touch are more in the heart, and therefore they are of the being among the best [senses] and judge more unobstructedly the things that he feels and knows' (my translation). Trevisa, *On the Properties of Things*, I: 119.

<sup>26</sup> Walter, *Middle English Mouths*, 123.

<sup>27</sup> Woolgar, *The Senses*, 109.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> '[T]hen the roof of the mouth and the gums should be rubbed well with a finger wet in honey to cleanse and comfort the inner part of the mouth, and also to excite and stimulate the child's appetite with the sweetness and sharpness of the honey' (my translation). Trevisa, *On the Properties of Things*, I: 298.

‘wete yowur fyngyre in þe hony & put hit in to hys movth & let hym sok hit wele.’<sup>30</sup> Passages such as these point to the role of training and education—even from the moment of one’s birth—in the development of sensory discernment.<sup>31</sup> Equally as important as a well-developed sense of taste was an understanding of what might make one thing taste differently from another. Flavours were known to be influenced by a variety of environmental factors—honey rubbed into a baby’s mouth would taste differently if it were produced by bees feeding on clover, for example, rather than by bees feeding on lavender.<sup>32</sup>

While most medieval discussions of the physical sense of taste centred on the consumption of food and drink, medieval writers recognized that taste might also be stimulated by other activities. Kissing, for example, stimulated both taste and touch, and involved the exchange of breath and saliva between two bodies. As a result, as Walter has noted, for medieval writers the kiss ‘takes on something of the natural powers of taste and touch to penetrate and alter the body’:

Still further, and in distinction from any other bodily sense, organ or act, the kiss performs spiritual exchange in mingling saliva and breath – the material *spiritus* that mediates between and binds together body and soul, and that, in some accounts, carries something of the very core of the individual soul within it. In this way, the kiss in the late medieval period belongs to the categories of the natural and the social, but it extends into the spiritual.<sup>33</sup>

As the perceived impact of kissing suggests, the way that taste was believed to operate and its connections with particular parts of the body (especially the mouth) played an important role in the associations that taste had for medieval men and women, and in the social, intellectual, and even spiritual work it was believed to perform.

The positioning of taste at one of the key portals of the human body may also be partly responsible for one of the sense’s most notable qualities: its multivalence. Despite its ‘lowness’, taste could be a literal or figurative pathway to salvific knowledge, as well as a potential pathway to the sins of gluttony or lust. Despite its role in the consumption and absorption of food into the human body, it was also a potential point of transmission to the outside world, with saliva acting on food in order to aid in its digestion, and breath and saliva passing out of the body during a kiss.

<sup>30</sup> ‘[W]et your finger in the honey and put it into his mouth and let him suck it well’ (my translation). *The Knowing of Woman’s Kind in Childing: A Middle English Version of Material Derived from the Trotula and Other Sources*, ed. Alexandra Barratt (Turnhout: Brepols, 2001), 72 (Douce Version), ll. 468–70. For discussion of this and other examples, see Walter, *Middle English Mouths*, 85–6.

<sup>31</sup> On the relationship between education and the senses see also Richard Newhauser, ‘Educating the Senses on Love or Lust: Richard de Fournival and Peter of Limoges’, in Georgiana Donavin and Denise Stodola, eds, *Public Declamations: Essays on Medieval Rhetoric, Education, and Letters in Honour of Martin Camargo* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015), 213–28.

<sup>32</sup> Woolgar, *The Senses*, 107, on the transmission of flavours.

<sup>33</sup> Walter, *Middle English Mouths*, 115–16.

Taste's ability to point inward and outward, downward to the earth and upward to heavenly salvation, made it a potent rhetorical tool for medieval writers on a wide range of subjects, most particularly human knowledge and discernment. In biblical tradition, taste and knowledge were depicted as having been both intertwined and contradictory since the beginning of man's existence. The Genesis story of mankind's fall from grace upon tasting the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil rendered taste an ambiguous signifier, one that simultaneously evoked human enlightenment and human fallibility. And yet the physical sense of taste also held out hope to mankind, as hinted by Psalm 33:9, which urged Christians to 'taste, and see that the Lord is sweet' ('Gustate, et videte quoniam suavis est Dominus').<sup>34</sup> In medieval mystical writings the very same physical sense that had led to the condemnation of mankind also served as a means of securing salvation or even contact with the divine. As Caroline Walker Bynum puts it,

When medieval writers spoke of eating or tasting or savoring God, they meant not merely to draw an analogy to a particular bodily pleasure but, rather, to denote directly an experiencing, a feeling/knowing of God into which the entire person was caught up. . . . Thus almost all medieval mystics sometimes speak of 'tasting God', and the verb itself is a kind of bridge between the physical act of eating the host and the inner experience of resting in the sweetness (*fruitio*) of mystical union.<sup>35</sup>

Even those who were not mystics might use taste as a means of gaining access to the divine: the doctrine of transubstantiation taught that those who received the Eucharist actually tasted Christ's flesh and blood. At such moments, humans might feel themselves to be intimately connected to God by means of their bodily senses—specifically, by the sense of taste.

As the above overview makes clear, the etymological and conceptual links between *sapor* and *sapientia* operated in tandem with myriad other associations—with knowledge and pleasure, consumption and nourishment, sin and salvation. This dynamic made taste a useful tool for thinking about human discernment. Much was at stake in the exercise of taste, since much depended on a person's ability to determine what and how to taste, and how to interpret what he or she tasted. The need for discernment was particularly pressing in the case of a taste that had highly ambiguous associations in the Middle Ages: sweetness. As Mary Carruthers and Richard Newhauser have shown, sweetness was a quality that was both potentially

<sup>34</sup> Latin and English Bible quotations are taken from the parallel-text edition of the Latin Vulgate and Douay-Rheims versions of the Bible, available at *Douay-Rheims Bible Online*, <http://www.drbo.org/drl/chapter/21033.htm>. Carruthers notes, however, that the psalm was known in two different versions in the Middle Ages: the Gallican Psalter version, which attributed sweetness to God (*suavis*, as here), and Jerome's translation, which altered *suavis* to *bonus* (see Carruthers, *The Experience of Beauty*, 98, for discussion).

<sup>35</sup> Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast*, 151.

desirable and potentially dangerous.<sup>36</sup> Citing Genesis, Carruthers observes that the story of the Fall is ‘an exemplar of the aesthetic and moral ambivalence posed by “sweetness.” For like the tree itself, like the sweet apple (“malum”) it bears, “sweetness” is both *in bono et in malo*.<sup>37</sup> Both sin and salvation were associated with sweetness, which was considered to be seductive and misleading in the case of the former, but transcendent and divine in the case of the latter. It was precisely the paradoxical nature of sweetness that *demand*ed discernment in order to distinguish between its moral valences, which were so conflicting as to appear to ‘cancel themselves out.’<sup>38</sup> But as Newhauser demonstrates in his examination of sweetness in the works of the fourteenth-century English poet John Gower, that dangerous ambiguity could also be a tool for the *development* of discernment: ‘Gower instrumentalizes the potentially paradoxical nature of sweetness most consistently by making of it an expression of the deception utilized by evil or the self-deception of the sinner.’<sup>39</sup> By harnessing the ambiguity and ambivalence of sweetness for pedagogical purposes, Gower transforms a trap into a teachable moment.

While medieval texts make clear that sweetness required the exercise of *moral* discernment, they also often associated sweetness with matters of *aesthetic* judgment. Carruthers notes that terms related to sweetness regularly feature in appreciative discussions of aesthetic value. Piecing together the premodern history of what eighteenth-century thinkers such as Edmund Burke would eventually conceive of as ‘good taste,’ Carruthers explains that, while ‘judgement is not attributable to an appetite like *gustus* in pre-Enlightenment psychology,’ the medieval concept of ‘sweet taste’ anticipates the later lexical associations of aesthetic judgment with taste:

‘sweet taste’... was given great complexity and even a certain rational character, through its association with wisdom. As an aspect of *sapientia*, medieval sweetness has the qualities of educability and judgement that Burke deemed necessary to Taste. The source of this tradition is not in Aristotle or in classical rhetoric but in the Hebrew Bible. Medieval thinkers used to advantage the pun in Latin *sapiens* and *sapor*, linking taste, especially sweet tastes, with knowing God, *dulcedo Dei*. Often too, such ‘sweetness’ was associated as well with rhetorical eloquence, both divine (especially in the obscure parts of the Bible) and in human compositions.<sup>40</sup>

While many have argued that it was not until the seventeenth or eighteenth century that taste emerged ‘as a faculty of aesthetic, social, and commercial judgement,’ the classical and medieval discourse of sweetness suggests that good taste has a much longer history.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>36</sup> See Carruthers, ‘Sweetness,’ and Richard Newhauser, ‘Gower’s Sweet Tooth,’ *Review of English Studies* n.s. 64, no. 267 (2013), 752–69.

<sup>37</sup> Carruthers, ‘Sweetness,’ 1003.

<sup>38</sup> Newhauser, ‘Gower’s Sweet Tooth,’ 755.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.* <sup>40</sup> Carruthers, *The Experience of Beauty*, 125.

<sup>41</sup> Swann, *Taste and Knowledge*, 10.

In both the discourse of sweetness and theories of the physical sense of taste, medieval writers had access to gustatory terms that could help them to frame their discussions of good taste. At the same time, literary texts provided a space for imaginative explorations of both taste and good taste. In the second part of this chapter, I consider how one literary text in particular not only explores both concepts but brings them into conversation with one another.

### Savouring *The Miller's Tale*

*The Miller's Tale* is not a sweet story by any stretch of the imagination. One of several Chaucerian experiments with *fabliaux* (short, comic narratives often featuring illicit sex and trickery), the tale recounts the schemes of the clever clerk Nicholas and the attractive young wife Alison to cuckold Alison's husband and, later, to humiliate her *other* clerk-suitor, the fastidious Absolon. By the tale's conclusion, 'swyved was this carpenteris wyf... And Absolon hath kist hir nether ye, / And Nicholas is scalded in the towte' (*MilT* 3850–3).<sup>42</sup>

And yet, despite the bawdy nature of *The Miller's Tale*, sweetness ripples and resurfaces persistently throughout its carefully constructed plot. In fact, Chaucer uses the word *swete* more often in this tale than in any of the other *Canterbury Tales* (twelve times).<sup>43</sup> Nicholas is not merely referred to as a 'sweete clerk' (3219), but is described as being 'as sweete as is the roote / Of lycorys or any cetewale' (3206–7) and capable of singing '[s]o swetely that all the chambre rong' (3215), while Alison is 'propre and sweete and likerous' (3345) and her mouth as 'sweete as bragot or the meeth' (3261). Absolon, on the other hand, is never described as sweet, but merely aspires to sweetness: he courts Alison by sending her sweet wines ('pyment', 3378), and on the ill-fated night 'cheweth greyn and lycorys, / To smellen sweete' (3690–1). His preferred terms of endearment for Alison, meanwhile, are positively saccharine: she is his 'hony-comb, sweete Alisoun' (3698), 'sweete cynamone' (3699), 'my sweete leef' (3792), and 'sweete bryd' (3805).

Why might Chaucer make such liberal use of the language of sweetness in what is otherwise such a bawdy tale? One answer may lie in the ambiguity of sweetness,

<sup>42</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson et al., 3rd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008). All citations from *The Canterbury Tales* are taken from this edition and cited above by line number. *The Miller's Tale* is henceforth cited as *MilT* and *The Miller's Prologue* as *MilP*. While a comprehensive overview of scholarship on the style of *The Miller's Tale* would be impossible here, see, for example, Gregory Heyworth, 'Ineloquent Ends: *Simplicitas*, Proctolalia, and the Profane Vernacular in the Miller's Tale', *Speculum* 84, no. 4 (2009), 956–83; Peter G. Beidler, 'Art and Scatology in the Miller's Tale', *The Chaucer Review* 12, no. 2 (1977), 90–102; E. Talbot Donaldson, 'Idiom of Popular Poetry in the Miller's Tale', in *Speaking of Chaucer* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton, 1970), 13–29.

<sup>43</sup> See *A Complete Concordance to the Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. Akio Oizumi, 16 vols (Hildesheim: Olms-Weidmann, 1991–2017), I–III, *The Canterbury Tales*, s.v. *swete*.

an apparently desirable quality that requires discernment if it is to be enjoyed or interpreted responsibly. Sweetness is certainly bound up with desire and expectations in *The Miller's Tale*. For Absolon, sweetness reflects his misplaced hopes and expectations concerning how Alison will respond to his advances. For readers, sweetness serves as a kind of refrain that initially paints the two lovers in a relatively attractive light, though their behaviour is anything but sweet. But we should not overlook sweetness's other associations here, particularly its role as a key term of aesthetic value. As Carruthers observes, '[n]o word is used more often in the Middle Ages to make a positive judgment about the effects of works of art'.<sup>44</sup> In a famous passage that occurs just before *The Miller's Tale* begins, Chaucer makes it very clear that aesthetic judgment is at issue at this particular moment, warning readers that, if he wishes to be faithful to his fictitious pilgrim sources, he must record '[h]ir tales alle, be they bettre or werse' (*MilP* 3174). He alerts them to the fact that what follows is a 'cherles tale' (*MilP* 3169), and that if readers would prefer ('list', 3176) not to read or hear such a tale, they should '[t]urne over the leef and chese another tale' (3177). Should they choose something that is not to their liking, they have only themselves to blame (3181).

*The Miller's Prologue* locates literary taste at the intersection of desire (what readers 'list'/want) and freedom (the ability to 'chese another tale'). By insisting that readers 'chese', Chaucer identifies readers of *The Canterbury Tales* as the arbiters of literary taste—their desires and their judgment, not his, are on the line here.<sup>45</sup> The very word *chesen* (to choose) describes an act that requires discernment, and that confers exclusivity and even desirability; when used as a participle, *chesen* means 'excellent, fine, fair'.<sup>46</sup> Chaucer himself is responsible for creating the fictional world of the Canterbury pilgrims and their tale-telling competition, and he himself has selected and shaped the narratives that are about to be told. Nevertheless, his words place an important decision in the readers' hands.

Chaucer's disclaimer (or, viewed another way, his challenge) in *The Miller's Prologue* has been much discussed, as have the sensory terms in which he describes the characters of *The Miller's Tale*.<sup>47</sup> Yet as far as I am aware, the possibility of an epistemological link between the prologue's allusions to aesthetic judgment and the tale's allusions to sweet tastes (among others) has not been considered. Reading the

<sup>44</sup> Carruthers, 'Sweetness', 999.

<sup>45</sup> See *MED*, s.v. *chesen*: 'To select or choose... as suitable or agreeable'.

<sup>46</sup> See *MED*, s.v. *chesen*, definition 5 (*Ppl.*).

<sup>47</sup> The scholarly consensus is that Chaucer's disclaimer in *The Miller's Prologue* is disingenuous; see, for example, Holly A. Crocker, *Chaucer's Visions of Manhood* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 7; Karma Lochrie, *Covert Operations: The Medieval Uses of Secrecy* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 169–70; Helen Cooper, *The Oxford Guides to Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 93; Michael Alexander, *Macmillan Master Guides: The Miller's Tale by Geoffrey Chaucer* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1986), 13. For a sensory interpretation of how Absolon is offended in all five of his senses, see Beidler, 'Art and Scatology', esp. 98.

tale through the sensory lens of taste not only supports the idea that such a link is at play in these texts but also uncovers a new way of interpreting the language of taste (specifically, Chaucer's use of the word *savourly*) in one of the tale's most famous moments: Absolon's mistaken kissing of Alison's arse, the consequence of his blind desire and poor judgment.

The misplaced kiss occurs in the middle of the tryst between Nicholas and Alison, who have tricked Alison's carpenter husband, John, into sleeping in a kneading trough suspended from the ceiling while they cavort in the marital bedroom. Absolon is determined to get a kiss from Alison ('I shal nat mysse / That at the leeste wey I shal hire kisse' [*MilT* 3679–80]), and takes the fact that his mouth 'hath icched al this longe day' as 'a signe of kissyng atte leeste' (3682–3). Having dressed himself carefully and chewed cardamom and liquorice to sweeten his breath, he makes his way to the carpenter's house, and calls to Alison through the window:

What do ye, hony-comb, sweete Alisoun,  
 My faire bryd, my sweete cynamome?  
 Awaketh, lemman myn, and speketh to me!  
 Wel litel thynken ye upon my wo,  
 That for youre love I swete ther I go.  
 No wonder is thogh that I swelte and swete;  
 I moorne as dooth a lamb after the tete.  
 Ywis, lemman, I have swich love-longynge  
 That lik a turtel trewe is my moornyng.  
 I may nat ete na moore than a mayde. (*MilT* 3698–707)

Here, Absolon addresses Alison in comestible terms, and paints an absurd picture of himself as simultaneously hungering for her like a lamb longing to suckle and incapable of eating any more than a maiden can eat. If these images are ridiculous, the idea that his love causes him to 'swelte and swete' is distinctly off-putting. Ignoring Alison's vehement insistence that she loves someone else ('I love another – and elles I were to blame – / Wel bet than thee, by Jhesu, Absolon' [3710–11]), Absolon begs her to kiss him, which she agrees to do in order to get rid of him, though she then immediately whispers to Nicholas, '[n]ow hust, and thou shalt laughen al thy fille' (3722).

Given the context in which the subsequent episode of arse-kissing occurs, critical attention has focused primarily on the humiliation that Absolon experiences in its wake. If we focus on the misplaced kiss as a *sensory* experience, however, the event takes on additional significance as the moment when Absolon is confronted with his own lack of discernment, and when that discernment is abruptly, brutally granted. And it is worth noting that Chaucer frames the kiss in sensory terms. Absolon prepares his mouth for the longed-for kiss by wiping it dry (*MilT* 3730), a detail that both reflects his desire to make a good, genteel impression and suggests he may have been salivating with anticipation. Unaware that Alison has 'putte her hole' (3732) out of the window, rather than her head, Absolon eagerly springs into



action: 'And Absolon, hym fil no bet ne wers, / But with his mouth he kiste hir naked ers / Ful savourly, er he were war of this' (3733–5). Perhaps the most important word in this passage is *savourly*, a word that puts taste and its associations front and centre in this episode.<sup>48</sup> The Middle English verb *savouren* is a synonym for taste: it can refer to having a flavour or taste, or to the physical sense of taste. It can also describe the act of taking pleasure or delight in something, or in the taste of something. More figuratively, it can mean '[t]o know, comprehend, understand', a definition that harks back to the etymological roots of *savouren* in Latin *sapor*.<sup>49</sup>

*Savourly* points to the different kinds of savouring that are taking place: this is Absolon's first taste of Alison—his first sensory experience of her via the mouth, yes, but also his first opportunity to begin to gain direct knowledge of her through unmediated contact between their bodies.<sup>50</sup> In this latter respect in particular, *savouren* overlaps slightly with the meanings of the Middle English word *tasten*, which can refer not only to the physical sense of taste but also to taste as a form of knowing-through-testing: the acquisition of knowledge through direct contact. The word *savourly* is also, in this context, spectacularly cringe-inducing for the reader, who—unlike Absolon—is perfectly 'war' that he is not kissing her mouth. Precisely what or where he is kissing is not entirely clear, since 'naked ers' might refer to Alison's naked buttocks, and the 'hole' she puts out of the window might refer to either her anus or her vulva (though some fifteenth-century manuscripts of *The Canterbury Tales* specify her 'ers hole').<sup>51</sup> To some extent, the body part is irrelevant, since the reader knows it is not the sweet mouth Absolon was expecting, but an orifice situated in Alison's nether regions. As such, this kiss is deviant: it places Absolon in a position that is neither (1) appropriately masculine and potentially reproductive in the eyes of the Church, nor (2) part of the accepted lay culture of heterosexual courtship.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>48</sup> That writers like Chaucer were familiar with sensory terminology is evident in their use of medieval encyclopedias; see, for example, Beatrix Busse and Annette Kern-Stähler, 'Bleary Eyes: Middle English Constructions of Visual Disabilities', in Kern-Stähler, Busse, and de Boer, *The Five Senses in Medieval and Early Modern England*, 69–95; and Peter Brown, *Chaucer and the Making of Optical Space* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2007).

<sup>49</sup> See *MED*, s.v. *savouren*; *OED*, s.v. *savour*.

<sup>50</sup> See *MED*, s.v. *savouren*.

<sup>51</sup> See *The Text of the Canterbury Tales: Studied on the Basis of All Known Manuscripts*, ed. John M. Manly and Edith Rickert, 8 vols (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1940), V: 369.

<sup>52</sup> See Robert Mills, *Seeing Sodomy in the Middle Ages* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2015), on the medieval positioning of many forms of erotic activity within the framework of 'sodomy'. See also Tison Pugh, *Chaucer's (Anti-) Eroticism and the Queer Middle Ages* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2014), especially chapter 6 on *The Miller's Tale's* treatment of 'human eroticism and human spirituality, as well as their confused interplay' (185); and Elaine Tuttle Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986), 223–44, on Chaucer's depiction of Alison's prank as evidence of woman's 'amorality'.

If Absolon was not initially ‘war’ of what he was kissing, his dawning comprehension and horror are described in detail, with particular focus on his processing of sensory stimuli:

Abak he stirte, and thoughte it was amys,  
 For wel he wiste a womman hath no berd.  
 He felt a thyng al rough and long yherd,  
 And seyde, ‘Fy! allas! what have I do?’ (*MilT* 3736–9)

What Absolon feels disrupts the savouring he was so intent on and initiates a new series of reflections on what he has just experienced. His senses—specifically his sense of touch—alert him to the fact that something is ‘amys’. It is unclear precisely why Chaucer focuses explicitly on touch rather than on taste here (might it be where he draws the line in terms of what is and is not in good taste?). But while we might be tempted to distinguish Absolon’s tactile experience from taste, we should recall that the two were not so neatly separated in medieval theories of the senses, which often either categorized taste as a type of touch or incorporated the sense of touch into the physical processes of tasting. Nor is Absolon’s experience presented in a neat and orderly fashion: immediately after describing his sudden recoiling from the kiss, the passage seems to flash back momentarily to what he had felt: a nameless ‘thyng al rough and long yherd’, rather than the smooth lip and cheek of his beloved. By flipping swiftly back and forth from horrified physical reaction, to prior knowledge, to sensory flashback, to verbal expression of dismay, the passage evokes the confused stages of Absolon’s physical and mental processing of his experience. Absolon’s confusion is swiftly resolved by Alison’s ‘[t]ehee!’ (3740) and Nicholas’s exultant crowing (‘A berd! A berd!’ [3742]—in other words, ‘A trick!’).<sup>53</sup> After angrily vowing to avenge himself, Absolon takes pains to clean his mouth as best he can: ‘Who rubbeth now, who froteth now his lippes / With dust, with sond, with straw, with clooth, with chippes, / But Absolon’ (3747–9).

Despite the fact that the reader is in a privileged position here, able to see events unfold more clearly than poor Absolon, the reader has also, like Absolon, been treated to a vicarious sensory shock. Strung along by the tale’s terms and images of sweetness, and invited to imagine how Alison’s mouth might taste, the reader is ultimately invited to imagine how an entirely different part of her body might taste and feel. Even before the beginning of the tale, such knowledge is presented as out of bounds: the Miller advises those husbands who might suspect their wives that ‘[a]n housbonde shal nat been inquisityf / Of Goddes pryvetee, nor of his wyf’ (*MilP* 3163–4), grouping both divine *sapientia* and women’s secrets/secret places

<sup>53</sup> See the gloss of this line in *The Riverside Chaucer*, at 75.

into the same category of knowledge beyond the reach of most mortals.<sup>54</sup> At the same time, both Alison and her 'pryvetee' are presented as objects of desire, and both the tale's male characters and many readers find her desirable, which is why Alison's joke comes as a shock to both.<sup>55</sup> And while the reader may laugh, Absolon reacts with horror and violence, returning with a hot 'kultour' (ploughshare; *MilT* 3785) to punish the woman whose joke revealed him for the fool he was. As it turns out, it is Nicholas, rather than Alison, who receives a painful punishment at Absolon's hands. Hearing Absolon calling again for Alison, Nicholas sticks his own arse out of the window and, when Absolon calls out one last time for his 'sweete bryd' (3805), 'leet fle a fart / As greet as it had been a thonder-dent (3806–7), at which point Absolon smites him 'amydde the ers' with 'his iren hoot' (3809). And while I do not have the space here to tease out the gendered complexities of Nicholas's nasty joke and its comeuppance, I should note that Nicholas's joke relies *both* on Absolon's spectacular lack of discernment (which had resulted in the misplaced kiss) *and* on the tale's prior characterization of Absolon as a man of some sensory discernment: not only did he take particular care to taste and smell good, but he was 'somdeel squaymous / Of fartyng' (3337–8).<sup>56</sup> The Middle English word *squaymous* refers to one's propensity for being '[e]asily nauseated', 'fastidious', or 'disgusted or repelled [by something]'.<sup>57</sup> For all his fastidiousness concerning taste and smell, Absolon's eyes are only fully opened to his lack of true discernment by the revolting sensory experiences he has at the end of the tale. Within the *fabliau* structure, the physical disgust that he feels is fused with the humiliation of deception, implicitly linking his lack of sensory discernment with the tale's degradation of him as a man.

I would like to conclude by returning to the question of how the tale's engagement with the physical sense of taste might connect with the framing concerns of *good* taste raised in the tale's prologue. Absolon may not be an exact stand-in for the reader of Chaucer's tale, but both he and Chaucer's readers are engaging in a kind of savouring—testing/tasting something that they hope will bring them pleasure, though pleasure is far from a guarantee in either case. To be sure, in this respect *both* Absolon and the reader are explicitly warned that they may not find what they are looking for: while Alison clearly tells Absolon that she loves another, Chaucer reminds readers in *The Miller's Prologue* that they know what kind of tale a 'cherl' like the Miller will tell (*MilP* 3182), and that they should read no further if they 'list

<sup>54</sup> For *pryvetee* as both 'a secret' and 'genitalia', see *MED*, s.v. *privete*. On the link between the language of *pryvetee* and women's bodies, see Mary C. Flannery, *Practising Shame: Female Honour in Later Medieval England* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2019), 34–59.

<sup>55</sup> For examples of (male) scholars who have responded positively to the depiction of Alison in *The Miller's Tale*, see Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*, 224–5.

<sup>56</sup> For a useful if occasionally oversimplified reading of the gender dynamics of Absolon's mistaken assault of Nicholas (which Hansen describes as 'gender confusion and cross-undressing', at 231), see Hansen, *Chaucer and the Fictions of Gender*, 231–6.

<sup>57</sup> See *MED*, s.v. *squaimous*.

it nat yheere' (*MilP* 3176). In both cases, the message seems clear: *Proceed at your own risk*. At the same time, however, in both cases risk is presented as both avoidable and necessary. In Absolon's case, neither Alison's indifference nor her increasingly irritated rejections of his suit have had any effect on him; by contrast, after the kiss he has just experienced, '[h]is hoote love was coold and al yqueynt; / For fro that tyme that he hadde kist hir ers, / Of paramours he sette nat a kers' (*MilT* 3754–6). His sensory experience, his tasting/testing of Alison, effects a profound emotional (and perhaps even material) change in him that mere words could not. In the case of Chaucer's readers, only by reading the Miller's churlish tale will they be able to determine whether or not it is indeed offensive to their own sense of good taste. By inviting his audience to make the decision to read (or not to read), Chaucer invites them to 'taste and see'. The question of whether or not they do, and of what conclusions they draw from the experience, puts their discernment to the test.

Of course, this part of *The Canterbury Tales* is not only an opportunity to exercise judgment: it is also *about* the exercise of judgment. After following his desire to Alison's window and insisting upon a kiss she clearly does not want to give him, Absolon tastes something that reveals him to have had very poor judgment indeed. And in the aftermath of *The Miller's Tale*, Chaucer presents us with the literary judgment of the pilgrims. The tale provokes a good deal of laughter, which itself suggests that it has not been found to be entirely offensive: 'Diverse folk diversely they seyde, / But for the moore part they loughe and pleyde' (*The Reeve's Prologue* 3857–8). In the end, the only pilgrim to take offense is the Reeve, who, like the tale's cuckolded husband, is himself a carpenter and therefore offended not so much because the tale itself is in poor taste, but because he takes it as a personal insult. Once rendered acceptable within Chaucer's fictional world by the pilgrims' tolerance, the *fabliau* of *The Miller's Tale* leads to further examples of the genre, most immediately in the Reeve's riposte. Ultimately, by issuing a challenge to his audience's sense of good taste, Chaucer deftly manufactures the fictional application of this good taste that in turn enables him to continue telling the same kind of bawdy narrative over and over—as, indeed, he goes on to do: Chaucer experiments with *fabliau* more frequently than he does with any other genre in *The Canterbury Tales*.

*The Miller's Prologue* and *Tale* point suggestively to what can be brought to light by means of sensory readings of literary texts and attention to literary depictions of sensory experience. A deeper understanding of the medieval theories and discourses of taste can not only unearth new readings of familiar texts but also reveal how medieval authors like Chaucer believed aesthetic value worked. Like the physical sense of taste, good taste in literature was something to be honed and valued as a means of acquiring knowledge. By engaging in *savourly* reading, readers ran the risk of being confronted with something distasteful; but the laughter of the pilgrims reassures us that such risk is worthwhile. After all, nothing ventured, nothing gained.

## FURTHER READING

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## TASTELESSNESS

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### Lack and Loss of *Savour* in the Medieval Poetic Imagination

JAMIE C. FUMO

What can the opposite of taste tell us about taste? Or, to put it differently, is it possible to test (medieval notions of) taste by tracing its circulation in the negative, somewhat in the manner of the Cotton MS Nero A.X. poet's approaching hard-to-fathom virtues like *clannesse* and patience from the slant of their contraries? This chapter considers medieval paradigms and patterns of imagery relating to the notion of tastelessness, which in medieval discourse encompasses both pathological loss of taste and intrinsic lack of flavours. First it considers the slippery Middle English lexicon denoting blandness or absence of taste, identifying the coordinates of the idea in encyclopaedias and natural histories as well as biblical touchstones of the savoury. Concurrently, the chapter analyses select medieval English figurative manifestations of tastelessness in various literary genres, from love-vision to ecclesiastical satire to biblical narrative, illustrating how the privation of taste promotes acutely paradoxical types of expression. The vernacular literary apprehensions of the 'unsavoury' under examination, I suggest, expose and unsettle a fundamental ambivalence within the sense of taste itself, which in medieval classifications of the senses and the sins vacillated between an apparatus of lesser importance and one pivotal to the sentient being. Especially in literary representations, the privation of taste exposes structural tensions within medieval apprehensions of the sense's function and value.

*De gustibus non est disputandum*, it is said, but regarding the sense of taste itself, there was in fact much disputation among ancient and medieval intellectuals. According to Aristotle and his commentators, taste is a form of touch, and as such is classified among the so-called lower senses, proper to base animal nature. Disconnected from the higher processes of reason, taste involves direct bodily

contact with stimuli in a way that a more ‘spiritual’ sense like sight does not.<sup>1</sup> This proximity of sensory organ and object sensed diminished the value of the sense of taste, rendering it subjective and unreliable, a view that survived more than twenty centuries to resurface in Immanuel Kant’s marginalization of the physical sense in his aesthetic theory, which held that ‘the idea obtained from [taste] is more an idea of enjoyment, rather than the cognition of the external object.’<sup>2</sup> Yet there also emerged a contrasting apprehension of taste, one that held that taste alone can thoroughly inform us of the substance of things, precisely because it entails a commingling of taster with tasted.<sup>3</sup> According to Bartholomaeus Anglicus, flavour—or, to use the medieval term, *savour*—is ‘þe propretre of a þing and profreþ itself to þe dome of þe soule by þe way of tast.’<sup>4</sup> As Mary Flannery’s chapter in this volume (Chapter 14) demonstrates, taste was thus richly implicated in knowing and discernment in medieval intellectual discourse.<sup>5</sup> It is no accident that the Latin verb *sapere* means to taste or to perceive, that French *savour* is a lexical bedfellow of *savoir*, and that Middle English *tasten* also denotes ‘to examine’ or ‘to test’ (*Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. ‘tasten’ [v.] 2, 4). Practically, taste could serve as a diagnostic tool in medieval medicine: doctors, for example, were occasionally advised to assay the humoral composition of urine not only by visual examination but by gustation.<sup>6</sup> But the objects of taste were typically more sublime. Physiologically linked either to the brain or the heart, taste, according to Albert the Great, is a kind of ‘experiential

<sup>1</sup> Aristotle, ‘On the Soul’, in *On the Soul; Parva Naturalia; on Breath*, trans. W. S. Hett (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986), 2.10, 125, and, in the same volume, ‘On Sense and Sensible Objects’, 4.4, 239. For discussion, see Neil Campbell, ‘Aquinas’ Reasons for the Aesthetic Irrelevance of Tastes and Smells’, *British Journal of Aesthetics* 36, no. 2 (1996), 166–76; Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste: Food and Philosophy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 18–24; Viktoria von Hoffmann, *From Gluttony to Enlightenment: The World of Taste in Early Modern Europe* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 76–9.

<sup>2</sup> St Augustine and Gregory the Great influentially viewed taste as overly somatic to serve as a vehicle for knowing God: Gordon Rudy, *Mystical Language of Sensation in the Later Middle Ages* (London: Routledge, 2013), 4, 37. Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*, trans. Victor Lyle Dowdell (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978), 41.

<sup>3</sup> For specific examples, see Charles Burnett, ‘The Superiority of Taste’, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 54, no. 1 (1991), 230–8; Katie L. Walter, *Middle English Mouths: Late Medieval Medical, Religious, and Literary Traditions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 92–5; cf. Massimo Montanari, *Medieval Tastes: Food, Cooking, and the Table*, trans. Beth Archer Brombert (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012), 142.

<sup>4</sup> *On the Properties of Things: John Trevisa’s Translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus, De Proprietatibus Rerum*, ed. M. C. Seymour et al., 3 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 2:1304 (cited by volume and page number).

<sup>5</sup> See also Heather Webb, ‘Cardiosensory Impulses in Late Medieval Spirituality’, in Stephen G. Nichols, Andreas Kahlitz, and Alison Calhoun, eds, *Rethinking the Medieval Senses: Heritage, Fascinations, Frames* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 265–85 (278–9); Montanari, *Medieval Tastes*, 203–7.

<sup>6</sup> Faith Wallis, ‘Medicine and the Senses: Feeling the Pulse, Smelling the Plague, and Listening for the Cure’, in Richard G. Newhauser, ed., *A Cultural History of the Senses in the Middle Ages* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 133–52 (143).

knowing.<sup>7</sup> Affective devotion and mysticism found in taste a supple metaphoric for desired contact with the incarnate Godhead, whose taste is sweet, as Psalm 33 famously puts it.<sup>8</sup> Along these lines, Bernard of Clairvaux, interpreting the sensual imagery of the Song of Songs, extolled taste as a channel of suprainlectual knowledge precisely because of its experiential immediacy. As Gordon Rudy describes Bernard's position, "The transforming taste of grace is and imparts wisdom – which . . . exceeds hearing and sight."<sup>9</sup> Classifications of the seven deadly sins are also mixed in their evaluation of taste. Gluttony (*gula*) was often considered a less serious sin because it involved bodily necessity; Dante's *Inferno*, for instance, groups gluttony with sins of incontinence, distinguishing these from the more heinous categories of violence, fraud, and treachery. Despite this, the misgovernance of the 'proximity senses' of taste and touch posed a special threat, for these, according to the thirteenth-century Dominican William Perardus's *Summa de virtutibus*, aroused the most pleasure.<sup>10</sup> Gluttony was sometimes foregrounded as the 'gateway' sin, closely associated with various sins of the mouth and identified with Adam and Eve's pivotal transgression, which ruinously ushered in all the other sins.<sup>11</sup> Variations in the positioning of gluttony in hierarchies of the sins, deriving from the contrasting schemes established by John Cassian (c.360–435) and Gregory the Great (c.540–604), epitomized this irresolution: as Virginia Langum observes, gluttony is placed 'almost always first or nearly last'.<sup>12</sup>

Taste was thus a vector both for the viscerally carnal and for *sapientia*, or highest judgment. How, then, was the absence of taste conceived? Let us first clarify the vocabulary denoting *insipiditas* in Middle English: most commonly, the words used are 'unsavouri' or 'werish', or, less frequently, 'savourles'. In practice, these words lend themselves to paradoxical, sometimes oxymoronic, applications that suggest a conceptual instability in the construct of taste itself. For example, 'unsavouri' can mean 'lacking in taste, without appeal, insipid' (*MED*, s.v. 'unsavouri' [adj.]1[a]),

<sup>7</sup> Rudy, *Mystical Language*, 43.

<sup>8</sup> Mary Carruthers, 'Sweet Jesus', in Bonnie Wheeler, ed., *Mindful Spirit in Late Medieval Literature: Essays in Honor of Elizabeth D. Kirk* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 9–19; Rachel Fulton, "'Taste and See That the Lord Is Sweet" (Ps. 33:9): The Flavor of God in the Monastic West', *Journal of Religion* 86, no. 2 (2006), 169–204.

<sup>9</sup> Rudy, *Mystical Language*, 56–65, at 62.

<sup>10</sup> Richard Newhauser, 'Virtus regens animam: William Perardus on Guiding the Pleasures of the Senses', in Robin Macdonald, Emilie K. M. Murphy, and Elizabeth L. Swann, eds, *Sensing the Sacred in Medieval and Early Modern Culture* (London: Routledge, 2018), 39–59 (46).

<sup>11</sup> Morton W. Bloomfield, *The Seven Deadly Sins: An Introduction to the History of a Religious Concept, with Special Reference to Medieval English Literature* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1952), 70–2; for further discussion, see Susan E. Hill, "'The Ooze of Gluttony": Attitudes Towards Food, Eating, and Excess in the Middle Ages', in Richard Newhauser, ed., *The Seven Deadly Sins: From Communities to Individuals* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 57–70, and Virginia Langum, *Medicine and the Seven Deadly Sins in Late Medieval Literature and Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 159–76.

<sup>12</sup> Langum, *Medicine*, 159.



as in Bartholomaeus Anglicus's assertion, translated by John Trevisa, that 'wipoute salt neih alle mete is wer[i]sch and vnsauery'.<sup>13</sup> However, 'unsavouri' can also mean 'distasteful... having an unpleasant taste' (*MED*, s.v. 'unsavouri' [adj.]1[b]), as for example in Chaucer's Parson's account of the sin Envy, which provokes 'bitternesse of herte, thurgh which bitternesse every good dede of his neighebor semeth to hym bitter and unsavory' (*The Parson's Tale*, 510).<sup>14</sup> In both these instances, doublets ('werisch' in the former, 'bitter' in the latter) fix the word 'unsavouri' in distinct constellations of meaning.

Even more peculiar than these opposing connotations is the logic by which flavourlessness was sometimes classified as a variety of *flavour* in medieval dietetic paradigms. A finely tuned canon of the chief qualities of flavour, seminally outlined by Aristotle in his *De anima* and *De sensu*, was transmitted in the Middle Ages, with variations, from Greek to Arabic to Latin, owing especially to the translations of Constantine the African. These paradigms intricately positioned what were viewed as the eight chief permutations of flavour—sweet, greasy, bitter, salty, sharp, harsh, astringent, and acrid—in relation to the humours and the elements, as well as complexion (hot or cold) and consistency (thick or thin).<sup>15</sup> To this schema Avicenna added 'tasteless' (*insipidus*), and this extra flavour category was retained by Bartholomaeus Anglicus, who demurs at the classification. Trevisa translates: 'werisshnesse is [im]properliche ycleped sauour for it is sauourles'; later, Bartholomaeus states that it is by a 'mysvse' that this is called 'vnsauery sauour'.<sup>16</sup> (Adding to the perplexity here, in the former passage, is the reading 'properliche' in all eight MSS, emended by Trevisa's modern editor to '[im]properliche' to accord with Lat. 'abusiuē'.) Examples provided in Bartholomaeus's account of 'werisshnesse' are water and egg white, and the first of these opens onto still more paradox: as Aristotle observed, water is indeed flavourless, but it absorbs flavours from its microenvironment; rather confusingly, good water is often described as sweet and even, in at least one instance, 'sauory' (Lat. *sapida*).<sup>17</sup> What is more, moisture—that is, water—is necessary for the materialization of flavour. 'Nothing', according to Aristotle, 'can produce a perception of flavor without liquid; it must possess wetness

<sup>13</sup> *On the Properties of Things*, 2:876.

<sup>14</sup> All Chaucer references, by line number, are to *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

<sup>15</sup> Charles Burnett, 'Sapores Sunt Octo: The Medieval Latin Terminology for the Eight Flavours,' *I Cinque Sensi: The Five Senses, Micrologus* 10 (Florence: SISMEL, Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2002), 99–112; C. M. Woolgar, *The Senses in Late Medieval England* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 105–6.

<sup>16</sup> On Avicenna: Burnett, 'Sapores,' 106; *On the Properties of Things*, 2:1304, 1316.

<sup>17</sup> *On the Properties of Things*, 1:646–50 (on the properties of water); 2:1316 (on 'werisshnesse'); Aristotle, 'On Sense', 4.4 (239–41). Discussed in Montanari, *Medieval Tastes*, 123–4; C. M. Woolgar, *The Culture of Food in England, 1200–1500* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016), 45. Exodus 15:25 and James 3:11–12 are touchstones for the contrast between sweet and bitter water. Cf. *MED*, s.v. 'savouriness' (n.1): 'the freshness (or sweetness) of fresh water (as opposed to the saltiness of salt water)', a definition that is peculiar to Trevisa's chapter on water.

actually or potentially.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, water, of course, can have the opposite effect, by *diluting* flavour.

Tastelessness, then, was a somewhat vexed, even dissonant property of taste itself. But tastelessness could also manifest through artificial means, for example when those practising ascetic self-denial deliberately adulterated their food (e.g. by mixing it with ashes) to dull its flavour and prevent undue enjoyment,<sup>19</sup> or, rather differently, when illness caused foods that have flavour to *seem* flavourless. As an example of the latter, Bartholomaeus Anglicus, outlining the physiological indications of an 'akinge heed', connects these with a loss of taste: 'If it comeþ of fleume [phlegm], þere folewiþ ache þat greueþ, superfluitees comeþ out of þe nose and þe mouth, somtyme with coghe [and] heuy sichinge[s] and gronynge... þe y3en bep blered, þe mouþ is werisch and vnsauery.'<sup>20</sup> Elsewhere, Bartholomaeus, drawing from Galen on disorders of the tongue, indicates that a particular kind of 'postume', or abscess of the tongue, causes both speech and taste to be hindered by sticky ('gleymy') humours, such that 'þe wit of taast is corrupt and infect and ichaungid so þat swete þinges semen bittir and werische, and a3enward'.<sup>21</sup> Such medical ideas were common—or perhaps commonsensical—enough to invite figurative appropriation, for example in the anonymous late fourteenth-century *Speculum vitae*, a lengthy metrical work of spiritual instruction for the laity, which explains that those whose taste is 'englaymed' (*MED*, s.v. 'engleimen' v.1[a]: 'to cover with a sticky or viscous substance') with sin are unable fully to savour, or achieve experiential knowledge of, God, just as the 'seke man' cannot 'fele sauour / In gode mete or in gode lycour'.<sup>22</sup>

If these different manifestations of dull taste point in different directions, with insipidity serving variously as a prophylactic against sin and a metaphor for sin itself, literary figuration exploited the potential of such paradox within its own spheres of value. For instance, a particularly salient literary intervention in this discourse occurs in Chaucer's *Parliament of Fowls*, when Africanus makes clear that the dreamer is not an active lover, just a recorder of amatory material, by likening him to a sick man whose ability to distinguish flavours is impaired: 'For thow of love hast lost thy tast, I gesse, / As sek man hath of swete and bytternesse' (*PF* 160–1). As is often the case in matters of taste dysfunction, however, this image proves deconstructive the closer one considers it: for sickness is the figure par excellence of *lovers'* emotional turbulence, as when Troilus, in his Petrarchan *canticus* in Book 1 of Chaucer's Trojan epic, describes his experience of love as a kind of blissful fever ('wondre maladie') in which every 'torment and adversite' seems 'savory' to him (I.404–5, 419). In the *Parliament*, instead, it is the outsider to love, unable to discern savours, who is portrayed as infirm. The 'thought and busy hevynesse' (89) that

<sup>18</sup> Aristotle, 'On the Soul', 2.10, 125; Montanari, *Medieval Tastes*, 117–29.

<sup>19</sup> Montanari, *Medieval Tastes*, 121–2; Hoffmann, *From Gluttony to Enlightenment*, 49–50.

<sup>20</sup> *On the Properties of Things*, 1:343.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 1:207.

<sup>22</sup> *Speculum Vitae: A Reading Edition*, ed. Ralph Hanna EETS o.s. 331–2 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), ll. 14664, 14667–8; discussed in Walter, *Middle English Mouths*, 94.

frustrates the dreamer-narrator as he lies down to rest issues not from erotic love but from the challenge of intellectually apprehending its vicissitudes. His ‘felynge / Astonye[d] with [Love’s] wonderful werkyng’ (4–5), the dreamer is benumbed to the sensory experience of amatory pleasure: lacking a doctor’s disciplinary authority (in contrast with the dreamer’s role as healer in *Book of the Duchess*), he is instead an abject spectator. Rather than blunting taste, the paradoxically salubrious and baleful disease of lovesickness supercharges it, opening the senses, in the temple of Venus, to ‘a thousand savours [i.e. scents or tastes] sote’ (274). Illness that is immobilizing and insensate, meanwhile, afflicts those who insulate themselves from love’s stimuli.

The *Parliament of Fowls* thus experiments imaginatively with taste as a way of accessing higher knowledge—a concept which, as we have seen, figures importantly in medieval religious discourse pertaining to intimate communion with God. It is fitting, then, that in homiletic literature, the pathological effects of sin, especially gluttony, were sometimes linked to loss of taste. It was a medical commonplace—traceable to Aristotle and Plato, discussed by Aquinas, and circulated in pastoral discourse—that the fumes engendered by ill-regulated eating clouded the brain, making one ‘incapable of clear thinking.’<sup>23</sup> Some homilists took this a step further, claiming that gluttony sabotaged not only the locus of cognitive processing but, ironically, the physiological mechanism of taste itself. For example, a bilingual poem on the seven sins in John of Grimestone’s late fourteenth-century preaching book warns that ‘Glotonie schent [ruins] oure tast / And dulle makt oure wittes alle’. Against this failure of taste, both gustatory and cognitive, is proffered the remedy of Christ, who ‘drank þe bitter galle.’<sup>24</sup> Dullness of taste was also sometimes linked to drunkenness, a form of gluttony. For instance, in a sermon by John Wyclif on Jesus’s first miracle at the wedding at Cana, following the account in John’s Gospel, the steward compliments the bridegroom on having saved the better wine for late in the feast; by contrast, most hosts serve the best wine early on because, Wyclif elaborates, at that point diners’ ‘tast is freishe’. Inferior wine is opened later when ‘þei ben drunken’ [‘inebriati fuerint’; John 2:10] and thus, Wyclif adds, ‘þer taist failiþ.’<sup>25</sup> Taken together, these examples suggest that overstimulation of the sense of taste through undisciplined eating or drinking actually promoted a dulling of *savour* itself.

If depletion of taste due to excessive delight in the sense seems a cruel *contra-passo*, however, the ultimate irony is evinced in the early fifteenth-century debate poem *A Disputation between the Body and the Worms*, in which a female corpse recalls how she, as a courtly lady, experienced in ‘worldly pleasaunce gret delyte’

<sup>23</sup> Hill, ‘Ooze’, 63; cf. Langum, *Medicine*, 165, and Hoffmann, *From Gluttony to Enlightenment*, 41.

<sup>24</sup> Edward Wilson, *A Descriptive Index of the English Lyrics in John of Grimestone’s Preaching Book* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1973), no. 218, 57.

<sup>25</sup> *Select English Works of John Wyclif*, ed. Thomas Arnold, vol. 1 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1869), sermon 33, 87.

in contrast with her present state of inglorious decomposition in the grave (161).<sup>26</sup> Having pampered her flesh, she starved her soul and is now left to contemplate her fate as a feast for worms. Significantly, these worms gorge upon her with an ‘insa-ciabyll & gredy appetyte’ but lack entirely the ability to *taste* her: ‘Whilk may not sauour ne smell in no wyse / þine orrybyll flesche, rotyng & stynkyngē’ (47, 65–6). Unlike her, the worms, not true gluttons, are merely participating in the order of nature in service of God’s plan (her complaint that they are ‘vnkynde’ only reveals her naiveté [44]).<sup>27</sup> By contrast, the poem’s commitment to ‘humiliating our pretensions to worldly dominance and bodily integrity’ sets into relief the perversion of the courtly lifestyle of feasting and display.<sup>28</sup> Not only has the exquisite lady of taste lost the ability to savour ‘worldly pleasaunce’, but, as the main course in nature’s feast of inconspicuous consumption, she has become, in the only scheme of evaluation that now matters, quite literally tasteless.

Once again, the paradox intrinsic to this idea—taste neutralizing taste—invites figurative application, which we will consider here in an affective (rather than secular-erotic) register. In Bernard of Clairvaux’s sermons on the Song of Songs, losing one’s taste for the pleasures of the tongue is not simply a by-product of over-indulgence but instead a necessary condition for the recalibration of taste from the worldly to the spiritual, in which one transforms from a glutton to a gourmand of God, enjoying what Bernard elsewhere describes as ‘that sober intoxication of truth, not from overdrinking, not reeking with wine, but burning for God’ (cf. Cant. 5:10).<sup>29</sup> ‘Having tasted the spirit’, Bernard writes, one ‘necessarily has no taste for the flesh; having been affected by heavenly things, worldly things are distasteful [literally, have no taste: ‘terrena non sapient’]; having gazed upon eternal things, transitory things are loathsome.’<sup>30</sup> Anyone who does not appreciate this higher taste, which Bernard calls sweet knowing, does not, in his view, have a ‘healthy palate.’<sup>31</sup> God, in this pattern of imagery, is configured as an acquired taste, and gastronomic re-education sophisticates the ‘palate of the heart’. This re-education actually consists of a reparation of a *different* loss of taste: the ‘taste for goodness’, equated with wisdom, which humankind lost at the Fall (in the act that was often understood as the

<sup>26</sup> In *Middle English Debate Poetry: A Critical Anthology* ed. John W. Conlee (East Lansing, MI: Colleagues Press, 1991), 50–62, cited by line number. Lines 65–66, 161.

<sup>27</sup> Elizabeth Robertson, ‘Kissing the Worm: Sex and Gender in the Afterlife and the Poetic Posthuman Late Middle English “A Disputacion betwyx the Body and Wormes”’, in E. Jane Burns and Peggy McCracken, eds, *From Beasts to Souls: Gender and Embodiment in Medieval Europe* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), 121–54 (140, 143).

<sup>28</sup> Karl Steel, *How Not to Make a Human: Pets, Feral Children, Worms, Sky Burial, Oysters* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 76.

<sup>29</sup> ‘On Loving God’, in *Treatises II*, vol. 5 in *The Works of Bernard of Clairvaux* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1973), 11.33, 125.

<sup>30</sup> *Sancti Bernardi Opera: I, Corpus Epistolarum 1–180*, vol. 7, ed. Jean Leclercq (Rome: Ed. Cisterciensis, 1974), 285; quoted in Rudy, *Mystical Language*, 64.

<sup>31</sup> *Sancti Bernardi Opera*, 7:20; quoted in Rudy, *Mystical Language*, 64.

pivotal instance of gluttony), when ‘a depraved taste crept in’. This, however, can be expunged by the introduction of a superior taste: ‘When wisdom enters, it makes the carnal sense taste flat . . . when the palate is clean, it tastes the good, it tastes wisdom itself, and there is nothing better.’<sup>32</sup> Taste is therefore subject to distortions and must be modulated carefully: as the late medieval instructional work *A Deuout Treatyse Called the Tree and xii Frutes of the Holy Goost*, illustrating the reach of this idea, advises, when ‘worldly gladnes’ makes ‘vnsauoury . . . al þat longeth to god ward’, the ‘frute of Joye’ can restore a spiritually healthful palate.<sup>33</sup> In Bernard’s devotional model, rather than allowing sin to compromise our sense of taste, we must lose our taste for sin and learn to appreciate God like a finer wine—the kind the wise host, having taken the measure of his guests, saves for last. As a fifteenth-century commentary on the Ten Commandments succinctly puts it: ‘A lytel taast of heuen blisse turnyth al erthely ioy to byttrynesse.’<sup>34</sup>

The creative lexicon of the *unsavouri* in the Middle Ages, as Wyclif’s elaboration of John’s Gospel implies, emanates from key biblical passages relating to taste and seasoning. Two loci stand out as especially generative: (i) the contrast between water and wine in the Cana miracle, and (ii) the notion of salt imparting flavour, developed in the Book of Job and the Sermon on the Mount. Looking more closely at commentary on Jesus’s transformation of water into wine, we find a powerful metaphor for conversion grounded in a reformation of flavour.<sup>35</sup> St Augustine emphasizes that this is a miracle of *flavour*, in which, when water becomes wine, ‘what was tasteless acquires taste, what was not intoxicating intoxicates.’ In Augustine’s typological assessment, this realization of sapidity represents Christ’s fulfilment of the Old Law of the prophets, which is given flavour by the New Law, for Scripture ‘has no taste if Christ is not understood in it.’<sup>36</sup> Tropological interpretations of the Cana miracle also abounded in Latin as well as vernacular theology, configuring the image of water’s tastelessness as a metaphor for worldly knowledge, adversity, or a sinner’s unrepentant state. Nicholas Love’s *Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ* (c.1400), for example, speaks of Christ’s mercy and grace transforming the ‘vnsauory watere & colde of aduersite & penaunce’ into ‘confort & gostly likyng.’<sup>37</sup> Similarly, the anonymous *Ancrene Riwe* (early thirteenth century, here quoted from a late fourteenth-century version), describes how the heart that is

<sup>32</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *On the Song of Songs IV*, trans. Irene Edmonds, Cistercian Fathers Series 40 (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1980), Sermon 85, 204–5.

<sup>33</sup> *A Deuout Treatyse Called the Tree and Xii. Frutes of the Holy Goost*, ed. Johannes Vaissier (Groningen: J. B. Wolters, 1960), 49.

<sup>34</sup> *Dives and Pauper*, ed. Priscilla Heath Barnum, EETS o.s. 275 (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), precept X, 50.

<sup>35</sup> See Montanari’s detailed treatment of this concept in *Medieval Tastes*, 126, 142, 147.

<sup>36</sup> *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, 9:5:1–3, quoted in *John 1–10*, ed. Joel C. Elowsky, Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament IVa (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2006), 96.

<sup>37</sup> Nicholas Love, *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ: A Reading Text*, ed. Michael G. Sargent (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2004), 81.

‘werisch as watere’ is through ‘trauaile of penaunce & of gret biddinge’ turned by God into wine.<sup>38</sup> This imagery conformed as well to the contemplative as the penitential, as in the contrast drawn in Walter Hilton’s *Scale of Perfection* (late fourteenth century) between ‘knowynge aloone’, which like water is ‘unsavery and cold’, and ardent, wine-like wisdom endowed by the Holy Spirit.<sup>39</sup>

By comparison, the flavour imparted by salt was a fundamental principle of taste noted everywhere from medieval cookery books to natural histories. Bartholomaeus Anglicus, once again, provides a touchstone (in a passage partially noted earlier): ‘Salt is most nedeful, for wiþoute salt neih alle mete is wer[i]sch and vnsauery. Salt makeþ potage and oþer mete sauory and good appetit in alle mete. Wiþ salt alle mete is ymade sauory and likyng.’<sup>40</sup> In biblical literature, the salting of food to enhance flavour becomes a metaphor for discipleship and the cultivation of the soul. Job invokes unsalted meat as a figure of his indigestible sorrow (6:6), and Jesus famously likens his disciples to the ‘salt of the earth’ [‘sal terrae’], asking how the substance can be of any use if it were to lose its savour (Matt. 5:13). Here it is the preservative and purifying as well as gastronomic properties of salt that express the apostles’ duty to season souls, as it were, with their instruction. Patristic writers elaborated this image, discussing how original sin or, alternatively, apostasy render humankind, under the influence of the devil, tasteless or rotten, a condition that may be remedied by the zest imparted by the apostolic ministry.<sup>41</sup> For example, Cyril of Alexandria contends that if salt were to lose its savour, through deficiency in the apostles’ ‘understanding and instruction’ (just as salt can be contaminated by impurities), then ‘every soul’ would be ‘dull and unwholesome and unpleasant to God.’<sup>42</sup> According to Langland’s *Anima*, who quotes Matthew 5:13, without proper examples to follow, man’s soul is as ‘unsavoury’ as unsalted meat, no matter how much it is stewed or baked.<sup>43</sup> Incorporation of the Blessed Salt, often equated with

<sup>38</sup> *The English Text of the Ancrene Riwe*, ed. Arne Zettersten, EETS o.s. 274 (London: Oxford University Press, 1976), 163.

<sup>39</sup> Walter Hilton, *The Scale of Perfection*, ed. Thomas H. Bestul (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2000), 1.85–90.

<sup>40</sup> *On the Properties of Things*, 2:876. The widely disseminated *Regimen sanitatis Salernitanum* (c.1260–1300?) pithily observes that ‘Sal virus refugat et non sapidumque saporat, / Nam sapit esca male que datur abque sale’ [Salt wards off poison, and adds taste to a man’s food, / For food which is served without salt does not taste good]; *A Critical Edition of ‘Le Regime Tresutile et Tresproufitable Pour Conserver Et Garder La Santé Du Corps Humain’: With the Commentary of Arnoul De Villeneuve*, ed. Patricia Willett Cummins (Chapel Hill, NC: North Carolina Studies in the Romance Languages and Literatures, 1976), 232–3. Accordingly, a late medieval note on culinary best practices preserved in Bodleian MS Ashmole 1393, headed ‘For goud kokery & sotilteis & goud sawces’, advises simply to ‘cast salt in all pingē’: *Curye on Inglysch: English Culinary Manuscripts of the Fourteenth Century (including the Forme of Cury)*, ed. Constance B. Hieatt and Sharon Butler, EETS s.s. 8 (London, 1985), 148.

<sup>41</sup> For examples, see *Matthew 1–13*, ed. Manlio Simonetti, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: New Testament 1a* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2001), 92–3.

<sup>42</sup> Fragment 41; quoted in *ibid.*, 92.

<sup>43</sup> William Langland, *The Vision of Piers Plowman*, ed. A. V. C. Schmidt, 2nd edn (London: J. M. Dent, 1995), B.15.433.

wisdom, into the ritual of baptism, aimed to rectify this inherent insipidity. Taste as a vector of the relationship between human and divine was most powerfully expressed in the ritual consumption of the Eucharist, whose sweetness was sometimes observed.<sup>44</sup> The biblical metaphor of salinity and savour, in short, points to the notion of taste as a metaphoric of knowing, and being known by, the divine; as Bartholomaeus puts it, God ‘hath a prote and tast, for he hath likinge in oure riztful workes as hit were in likinge of taast.’<sup>45</sup> God’s capacity of taste is exact but generous: even when we may feel ‘vndisposede or vnsauoury’, he ‘receyue[s] [our] prayere.’<sup>46</sup> The imperative of our learning to taste well—as elucidated earlier, to adjust our taste ‘god ward’ and away from earthly pleasures—is thus in tension with our being the *object* of taste, souls pleasing or not to God’s superlative palate (and bodies de facto provender for indiscriminate worms).

This chapter concludes with a brief consideration of two literary instances in which orthodoxies regarding taste and its privation are tested or unsettled imaginatively, exposing the constitutive paradoxes we have been observing. The first involves a cluster of satirical appropriations of the *sal terrae* topos, which was polemically weaponized in the discourse of late medieval antifraternal critique and Lollard debate. In the last part of Chaucer’s *Summoner’s Tale*, the lord who welcomes the humiliated friar hails him as ‘the salt of the erthe and the savour’ (2196)—a slightly maladroit quotation from the Gospel that functions to remind us of the question posed trenchantly by Jesus: ‘If the salt lose its savour, wherewith shall it be salted?’ and, particularly, its answer: ‘It is good for nothing any more but to be cast out and to be trodden by men’ (Matt. 5:13). The egregiously corrupt Friar John, who has already been cast out and shamed by an outraged Thomas, exemplifies in his conduct the deficient apostolic guidance that patristic exegesis equated with unsavoury salt. Ironically, the savour that is lacking in this friar’s pastoral example is replaced by a different kind of ‘savour’: the ‘soun or savour [i.e. smell]’ of the fart whose division the lord then attempts to parse (2226). The implication is that when salt loses its savour, all that remains is an infernal mockery of the concept of spiritual instruction—doubly shameful since it is the friar himself who must be instructed, by the lord’s squire, no less.

Because it so lucidly communicated the hypocrisy of those charged with conveying God’s word to the people, through ministry and personal example, the *sal terrae* topos became a cornerstone of Lollard polemic, particularly against the friars, and

<sup>44</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 48–69.

<sup>45</sup> *On the Properties of Things*, 1:55.

<sup>46</sup> *The Booke of Gostlye Grace of Mechtild of Hackeborn*, ed. T. A. Halligan (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1979), 431/17.

was invoked in Wyclif's writings frequently.<sup>47</sup> The anonymous *Friar Daw's Reply* (c.1420), a point-by-point response to one such critique, engages with, and polemically recasts, the apocalyptic rhetoric and imagery marshalled to decry fraternal abuses in Lollard invective. The *Reply* deflects the unmistakable applicability of *sal terrae* to Friar Daw's brethren, who claim apostolic succession, by revamping the metaphor to express the dangers of heresy:

For Sathanas by your [i.e., Lollard] sawes is sent in to soulis  
That ben ful unsavery and saltid by synne:  
The bitternesse of your bacbityng brewith many bales (145–7).<sup>48</sup>

Instead of salt's cleansing and preservative qualities, what here prevail are associations with condemnation (cf. Mark 9:49) and torture (i.e. salting a wound: *MED*, s.v. 'salten' [v.]1[d]). God's stewards, i.e. Lollards who are actually in league with the Antichrist, have not merely become useless, savourless salt, but the seasoning they impart, rather than enhancing wisdom, *reduces* palatability, exacerbating humanity's 'unsavoury' nature and rubbing souls raw with sin. Heretical 'sawes', or teachings, are mere 'bacbityng', in a likely echo of the Parson's characterization of Envy, quoted earlier, and the 'unsavoury', worse than insipidity here, shades into 'bitternesse'. In the following lines, this complex of imagery segues into a description of the fallen star Wormwood (identified with Wyclif at line 150) from Revelation 8:10–11, which turns the waters bitter. In this anti-Lollard revision of the biblical figure of unsavoury salt, *Friar Daw's Reply* resists—or muddles, if we admit a satirical design in which the friar undercuts his own argument, as has been proposed<sup>49</sup>—conventional religious constructs of *savour* to establish heresy as the exact opposite of proper apostolic instruction. Not only does it fail to ameliorate undisciplined (savourless) souls, it actively 'infect[s]' and 'consum[es]' them, spreading bitterness (154, 155) fit only for infernal tastes. In the ultimate debasement of salt's salutary associations, the friar, in a series of closing maledictions, wishes upon his antagonist the 'sorowe of Sodome' (913), a fallen civilization that was monumentalized by Lot's wife refashioned as a pillar of salt.

This last image brings us to the late fourteenth-century alliterative poem *Cleanness*, which in its own manner deconstructs the savoury, provocatively embellishing the spare account in Genesis 19 when Lot's wife (who plays no part at this point in the biblical version) defies a prohibition on the use of salt when she cooks for the visiting angels, in a new rationale for her metamorphosis when she looks

<sup>47</sup> Alan J. Fletcher, 'The Summoner and the Abominable Anatomy of Antichrist', *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 18, no. 1 (1996), 91–117, esp. 105–7, which discerns early engagement with Lollard ideology in *The Summoner's Tale*.

<sup>48</sup> In *Six Ecclesiastical Satires*, ed. James Dean (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications, 1991), 145–200; cited by line number.

<sup>49</sup> See Theodore L. Steinberg, 'Jack Upland and a Fishy Friar', in David Lampe, ed., *The Fifteenth Century, Acta* 12 (1985), 41–50.



back on Sodom.<sup>50</sup> Deriding what she regards as the angels' poor taste in eschewing salt, she refers to them as 'vnsaueré hyne [fellows]' (822).<sup>51</sup> Although the MS here reads 'vnfauere', a reading retained by William Vantuono, who defends it as a coinage meaning 'ill-disposed', most editors have found 'vnsaueré' preferable for its play on the vocabulary of taste, which inevitably evokes notions of discernment and knowledge as an ironic backdrop to Mrs Lot's air of superiority.<sup>52</sup> 'Vnsaueré' here means more than simply 'disagreeable' (*MED*, s.v. 'unsavouri' [adj.][1][d]): it literally charges the angels with tastelessness, and it leaves appealingly ambiguous whether it is they, in her view, who are unable to taste accurately, or whether they themselves have an unpleasant taste (a point for consideration by the ravenous mob approaching Lot's door, whose sexually aggressive words, extending the digestive conceit, are likened to the filth of vomit [845–8]). Although Lot's wife's scepticism regarding the guests' dietary restriction—absent in Genesis, where they are simply served unleavened bread—is somewhat understandable, given salt's associations with savoury cooking, hospitality, and sacrificial offering (cf. Lev. 2:13), her apprehension of salt, ultimately, is worldly and selfish, informed by her *own* tastes. These in turn are burlesqued when Lot's wife is ossified into a salt lick for beasts (1000), becoming—like the body to the worms—a foodstuff. Sedimented in this image is the incompatibility of earthly standards of taste and the enigma of divine savour, reminding us that tasting always implies testing. In this counter-imagining of spiritual seasoning—which, like the other literary recastings of taste we have considered, evolves irony and obliquity into new structures—salt does not evoke the succulence of wisdom but rather the desolation of the Dead Sea, which in its barrenness is the nadir of savour and antithesis of God.

#### FURTHER READING

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<sup>50</sup> On the precedents of this narrative embellishment, see Daniel W. O'Bryan, 'Sodom and Gomorrah: The Use of the Vulgate in "Cleanness"', *Journal of Narrative Technique* 12, no. 1 (1982), 15–23; Ad Putter, 'Cleanness and the Tradition of Biblical Versification', in J. A. Burrow and Hoyt N. Duggan, eds, *Medieval Alliterative Poetry: Essays in Honour of Thorlac Turville-Petre* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2010), 166–84.

<sup>51</sup> *Cleanness*, in *The Poems of the Pearl Manuscript: Pearl, Cleanness, Patience, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, ed. Malcolm Andrew and Ronald Waldron (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 111–84, cited by line number.

<sup>52</sup> *The Pearl Poems: An Omnibus Edition*, ed. William Vantuono, 2 vols (New York: Garland, 1984), 1:318.

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# A TASTE OF ‘SWEET MUSIC’

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## Writing (through) the Senses in Early Modern England

SIMON SMITH

What does a sense like taste have to offer the study of early modern literary texts? Indeed, how can we best go about investigating this ephemeral sense’s contribution—as representation, figure, or evocation—to the work of writers like Shakespeare and Spenser from our perspective of historical and cultural distance? One productive means of approaching early modern literature’s engagement with the wider sensorium has been to consider readers’ and playgoers’ sensory apprehension of books and performances themselves. Adam Smyth has recently called for a more sensate approach to texts as material objects and begun to model some methods through which this might be achieved.<sup>1</sup> Elsewhere, there is already a long and fruitful tradition of scholarship considering sensory experience in the theatre, building substantially on Bruce R. Smith’s seminal *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England* (1999).<sup>2</sup> However, although often productive in relation to sight, hearing, touch, and even smell, it has generally been harder to get quite as much purchase on taste with these approaches.<sup>3</sup> Whilst as Elizabeth L. Swann has shown, there was a highly developed figurative ‘language of tasting’ through which the consumption and critical judgment of books was articulated, few readers’ encounters with the page are

<sup>1</sup> Adam Smyth, ‘The Senses and Material Texts’, in Simon Smith, ed., *Shakespeare/Sense: Contemporary Readings in Sensory Culture*, Arden Shakespeare Intersections (London: Bloomsbury, 2020), 352–68.

<sup>2</sup> Bruce R. Smith, *The Acoustic World of Early Modern England: Attending to the O-Factor* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

<sup>3</sup> Some influential examples include Holly Dugan, *The Ephemeral History of Perfume: Scent and Sense in Early Modern England* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011), 60–9; Allison K. Deutermann, *Listening for Theatrical Form in Early Modern England* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 140–72; John J. McGavin and Greg Walker, *Imagining Spectatorship: From the Mysteries to the Shakespearean Stage* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 1–42.

likely to have involved literal tasting.<sup>4</sup> Likewise, whilst accounts of playgoing regularly associated the consumption of food and drink with the commercial theatres, such gustatory experience would be unlikely to integrate systematically with the sensory experience of dramatic performance.<sup>5</sup> Whilst taste was very much part of the sensescape of the early modern theatre, and as such remains important to the study of theatre history, playgoers' gustatory experiences may not get us much closer to a precisely historicized understanding of the texts that Shakespeare and his contemporaries produced for commercial performance.

Another widespread approach has been to explore representations of sensation in texts and performances, investigating the literary and staging conventions through which fictional sensory experiences and imagined sensations were constructed, and considering the implications of these conventions for the period's wider sensory culture. This has been a productive method in relation to taste, with recent work by Lucy Munro and Elizabeth L. Swann contributing substantially to the history of the senses, even whilst enhancing our understanding of early modern literary texts and performances. As well as demonstrating the significance of taste to topics as varied as theological notions of temptation, theories of epistemology, critical judgment, and sexual pleasure, such work has also foregrounded the challenges for early modern writers and performers of conveying or evoking embodied gustatory experience through the sensorially indirect means of language and stage performance—'necessarily proxied' by 'the other senses,' as Munro aptly puts it.<sup>6</sup> As such, representations of taste have offered particularly helpful insights into the often complex, sometimes fraught, relationship between the senses and language, and the challenges this can raise for literary scholars encountering early modern texts today without the ephemeral sensory contexts in which they were conceived.

Yet the senses are not only relevant when writers represent sensation, or when we are considering the sensory experience of literary texts and performances. A crucial method, with perhaps the widest potential reach of all, is to examine a period's figurative language of the senses. Such an approach, taken up in in this chapter, can range beyond representations of literal tasting to consider how gustatory metaphor frames cultural experience in particular historical moments. This approach has particular value for a sense such as taste that was prominent in the cultural and linguistic imagination of early modern England, yet saw rather less fictional representation than, for instance, the sights and visual experiences presented in the

<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth L. Swann, *Taste and Knowledge in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 52.

<sup>5</sup> Farah Karim-Cooper, 'Touch and Taste in Shakespeare's Theatres,' in Farah Karim-Cooper and Tiffany Stern, eds, *Shakespeare's Theatres and the Effects of Performance* (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2013), 214–36 (231–6).

<sup>6</sup> Lucy Munro, 'Staging Taste,' in Simon Smith, Jackie Watson, and Amy Kenny, eds, *The Senses in Early Modern England, 1558–1660* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015), 19–38 (24); Swann, *Taste and Knowledge*, 37–70, 144–82.

period's literature, from Hamlet's encounter with the ghost of his father to the countless objectifying anatomizations of female bodies in blazon poetry. Metaphors of taste underpin numerous linguistic figures in early modern English, the period's distinct understandings of sensation shaping language and culture in far-reaching ways, as this chapter will explore. What is more—and crucially in the context of this volume's move to articulate the utility of sensory approaches to literary studies—by resituating gustatory language in its early contexts, it is possible to trace now-obscure meanings and open up freshly historicized readings of literary texts.

Elizabeth L. Swann has productively examined gustatory tropes and figures in early modern English texts, her investigation of taste and knowledge being the most extensive and significant study undertaken in this area to date.<sup>7</sup> Elsewhere, Jeffrey Masten's recent work on how the period's epistolary conventions of male friendship employ gustatory metaphors including sweetness further demonstrates the utility of such methods in relation to taste, and their potential to yield insights into wider practices of textual production.<sup>8</sup> With scholars such as Swann and Masten having charted the territory and demonstrated productive approaches, it is now possible to investigate the extensive and ubiquitous early modern figurative language of gustation further. We can turn, for instance, to one metaphor of taste that provided the single most common adjective for music in early modern England: 'sweet'. Whilst, as Swann has demonstrated, the term *sweet* was widely used to describe qualities beyond literal flavour, its specific use and resonances in relation to music in literary texts have yet to be examined systematically. Moreover, *sweet*'s signification was shifting at the turn of the sixteenth century; in particular, an earlier, more general sense of 'sweet' deliciousness was giving way to the specifically sugary sweetness that we are familiar with today. Meanings such as 'delicious', now obsolete and thus invisible to a modern reader without explicit historical investigation, in turn shaped now-overlooked nuances and resonances when literary texts referred to 'sweet music'. In our own cultural moment, centuries later, these details are no longer self-evident to readers and playgoers, but must instead be traced through careful consideration of historical language use and sensory culture. This chapter investigates the sensory history of 'sweet music' in early modern England, ranging across diverse texts and contexts to sketch out the full scope and associations of the term. Having established what it might have meant for music to be 'sweet' four centuries ago, the chapter then turns to Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* and Shakespeare's *The Tempest* in order to demonstrate how a historically precise grasp of gustatory language allows new readings of these familiar literary texts.

<sup>7</sup> Swann, *Taste and Knowledge*.

<sup>8</sup> Jeffrey Masten, "'Sweet Persuasion': The Taste of Letters and Male Friendship", in *Queer Philologies: Sex, Language and Affect in Shakespeare's Time* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 69–82.

## Tasting Sweet Music

To understand how and why writers like Shakespeare and Spenser drew on the 'sweet music' trope, it is crucial first to situate that trope in the full context of early modern understandings and usage. This can be achieved through a wider examination of the textual record, from the paratexts of printed music books to the compellingly contrarian writings of social commentators such as Philip Stubbes. It is worth noting at the outset that sweetness must be handled with care in reference to early modern England, for its prevalence was far from limited to discussions of music, or indeed to epistolary expressions of intimacy. As Swann reminds us, Shakespeare alone uses *sweet* almost 900 times, indicating a wide range of potential referents.<sup>9</sup> Neither was this prevalence a new phenomenon in the sixteenth century, Mary Carruthers having influentially explored the medieval European 'familiar[ity]' of 'sweetness', 'in Latin and all vernaculars'.<sup>10</sup> Yet ubiquity must not obscure a crucial point about the word's specific early modern significations when referring to music: whilst it is entirely conventional for something to be described as 'sweet' in the period, what is distinctive is how often this adjective, and no other, is applied to music. For Shakespeare and his English contemporaries, harmony was first and foremost sweet, just as its effect on listeners was above all 'delight', as I have traced elsewhere.<sup>11</sup>

Yet even if music was 'the food of Loue', it could not, of course, provide literal flavour to the tongues of playgoers past any more than it can for today's audiences.<sup>12</sup> Why, then, was the term *sweet* applied so universally to music? Sweetness is now primarily considered a gustatory quality, although alongside a dominant adjectival meaning of '[p]leasing to the sense of taste' ('sweet', *adj.* A.1.a), the *Oxford English Dictionary* also notes its regular use to mean '[p]leasing to the sense of smell' (A.2.a). Both usages were long-established in everyday language by the sixteenth century. Also current, though somewhat less common then (as indeed now), was *sweet* meaning '[p]leasing to the ear' (A.4.a) or pleasing 'to the sight' (A.5.b). Clearly sweetness could 'migrate... among the senses' to a significant extent, as Masten has noted, raising the question of how far the term's origins in gustation even registered

<sup>9</sup> Swann, *Taste and Knowledge*, 3.

<sup>10</sup> Mary Carruthers, 'Sweetness', *Speculum* 81, no. 4 (2006), 999–1013. Carruthers notes a medieval tendency for sweetness to include 'within itself its opposites: bitter, salt, and sour' (1000), and traces its significance 'as knowledge, as persuasion, [and] as medicine' (1003).

<sup>11</sup> Simon Smith, *Musical Response in the Early Modern Playhouse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 26–68.

<sup>12</sup> William Shakespeare, 'Twelfth Night, Or What You Will', in *Comedies, Histories and Tragedies* (London, 1623), TLN 5.

when it was being regularly applied to musical sound.<sup>13</sup> Since it was so conventional in the period to call music sweet, then, would the term have borne any sensory resonances or associations for writers and audiences?

In fact, early modern writers habitually refer to the tasting of sweet music in ways that seem determined to recall and foreground embodied sensory experience. This occurs with regularity in the paratexts of printed music books which take up figures of tasting to describe musical censure. This is often framed in ways that make it impossible to ignore the gustatory experiences being evoked, closely interweaving accounts of musical tasting with the expectation that music should be sweet. As Swann has explored in some detail, there is nothing remarkable about an early modern paratext using literal gustation (and digestion) as a metaphor for judging a book's contents.<sup>14</sup> Yet the proverbial sweetness of music even away from paratextual censure intersects with metaphors of gustatory tasting in distinct ways when books specifically containing music offer up their content to the judgmental tongues of bookstall patrons and readers.

The interweaving of judicious tasting and musical sweetness was a characteristic feature of printed paratexts during the late sixteenth-century explosion of music printing in England. William Barley's *New Book of Tablature* (1596) provides a representative example, offering consumers 'a tast of so rauishing a sweet Science as Musique is' and 'a taste of this sweet & commendable practise of musique' in the space of a single prefatory address. Thus, Barley twice asks his readers to 'taste' musical sweetness in a way that might evoke actual flavour, and which depends implicitly upon an intimate cultural association between music and gustatory sweetness.<sup>15</sup> Cultural familiarity with gustatory musical sweetness also underpins an earlier text, written in the 1580s from the other side of the debate about music's worth. With characteristic belligerence, Philip Stubbes complains that music 'is very il for yung heds...for as honie and such like sweet things receiued into y<sup>e</sup> stomach, dooth delight at the first, but afterward they make the stomach so quasie, nice and weake, that it is not able to admit meat of hard digesture...So sweet Musick, at the first delighteth the eares, but afterward corrupteth and depraueth the minde, making it weake, and quasie'.<sup>16</sup> This extended figure of tasting musical sweetness is echoed in music book paratexts throughout the period, Robert Jones wishing 'not [to] giue any distaste' with his *Musical Dream* of 1609, and Robert Dowland claiming the following year that 'like a carefull Confectionary, as neere as might be I haue fitted my [Musical] Banquet for all tastes'. Dowland even goes on to insist that anyone 'distasted' by the music 'shall not need to feare poysoning', and to wish

<sup>13</sup> Masten, 'Sweet Persuasion', 76. But note that, whilst music was primarily considered an aural phenomenon, its experience was nonetheless often considered to require visual and even tactile engagement. See Simon Smith, *Musical Response*, 72–9.

<sup>14</sup> See Swann, *Taste and Knowledge*, 37–70.

<sup>15</sup> William Barley, *A New Book of Tablature* (London, 1596), A2<sup>v</sup>; A3<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>16</sup> Philip Stubbes, *The Anatomy of Abuses* (London, 1583), O3<sup>v</sup>.

the 'lips' of those not inclined to partake of it 'such Lettuce as *Silenus Asse*, or their owne harts would desire'.<sup>17</sup> As late as 1638, Henry Lawes's psalm settings are prefaced by a praise poem that hopes 'you may tast' of his 'Sad Words and Notes, as [t]he pleasing Sorrow they impart, / Slides sweetly to the melting Heart'.<sup>18</sup>

For early modern subjects, the younger Dowland's lettuce would signify indigestible rather than necessarily unpleasant-tasting food, providing a slightly unexpected connection with Stubbes's complaint about the queasiness caused by honey and sweet music. Reflecting faith in the tongue's ability to act as effective gatekeeper for the stomach, digestibility is an archetypal concern when nasty taste is invoked in early modern texts, including musical paratexts: in 1597, Thomas Weelkes offered 'six dishes full of diuers Madrigalls, the first fruicts of my barren ground, vnripe, in regard of time, vnsaurie, in respect of others', and asked consumers to 'tast, and againe I pray you, if they lyke your appetite, spare not my Orchard: if they offend your stomack, laye them by to ripen, and you shall proue of my latter Vintage'.<sup>19</sup> When applied specifically to a book containing music—that if acceptable should indeed prove sweet—the paratextual metaphor of musical tasting carries a specific, potentially embodied, resonance. As enzymes including amylase ripen fruit and break down starch into simple sugars, the harvest of Weelkes's imagined orchard would sweeten (in the modern, sugary sense).<sup>20</sup> Both music and fruit will be sweet, then, when they are 'ripe', this extended metaphor yoking the quality of musical sweetness insistently and sustainedly to the literal sweetness of ready produce.

Paratextual flights of fancy like Weelkes's ripening madrigals and Dowland's banquet of musical confections, with their rather literal, extended insistence on tasting music, suggest that musical sweetness retained a capacity for gustatory evocation in the period that has perhaps waned in the ensuing centuries. Despite the ubiquity of *sweet* as an adjective, the evidence suggests that, on occasion at least, music did have clear gustatory associations that went beyond the basic figurative usage that *sweet* encompassed. To these paratextual requests to taste music that imply a wider gustatory understanding of musical sweetness we can add a song that even claims that its own 'noate so sweet . . . out-sauours wine, and . . . Perfume', and a rather strange passage in a rather strange play, the anonymous 'comicall historie' *The Costly Whore* (1633), in which Valentia, the title character, proposes 'a health', but—perhaps upon tasting the drink—swiftly calls, 'let Musique sound, / That what I taste, in Musique

<sup>17</sup> Robert Jones, *A Musical Dream; or, the Fourth Book of Ayres* (London, 1609), A2<sup>r</sup>; *A Musical Banquet*, ed. Robert Dowland (London, 1610), A2<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>18</sup> Henry Lawes and George Sandys, *A Paraphrase Upon the Divine Poems* (London, 1638), ★2<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>19</sup> Thomas Weelkes, *Madrigals to 3, 4, 5 & 6 Voices* (London, 1597), A2<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>20</sup> See M. Carrin, Liliana Ceci, and Jorge Lozano, 'Characterization of Starch in Apples and Its Degradation with Amylases', *Food Chemistry* 87 (2004), 173–8; Dapeng Zhang and Yongzhang Wang, 'Beta-Amylase in Developing Apple Fruits: Activities, Amounts and Subcellular Localization', *Science in China. Series C, Life Sciences* 45, no. 4 (2002), 429–40.



may be drown'd.<sup>21</sup> Even if somewhat hyperbolic, Valentiá's memorable exclamation offers the rather startling suggestion that sweet music could in its excess actually overwhelm gustatory flavours. It is often difficult to judge from brief references to 'sweet music' quite how the term operated on and through the embodied memories and sensory experiences of early modern subjects. However, more forthcoming examples such as these indicate that sweetness mattered as a specifically gustatory metaphor in musical contexts. This suggests, in turn, that the particularities of how early modern subjects understood sweet taste matter to the use of this term for music in the period's literary texts.

### Forms of Musical Sweetness

If *sweet* is early modern England's quintessential adjective for music, from the peculiar fantasies of harmonious tasting explored above to more succinct and straightforward descriptions of music's quality, then what exactly did *sweet* entail and evoke when applied to music as a metaphor of taste? Indeed, why did this association develop in the first place? The connection seems at least in part to derive from an etymological pun. The Greek μέλος (*melos*), meaning song or tune, is extremely close in spelling to μέλι (*meli*), meaning honey. Μέλος literally refers to a member or part (perhaps loosely comparable with the modern English phrase, 'a piece of music').<sup>22</sup> Yet whilst μέλος is not actually mellifluousness applied figuratively to sound, the closeness of the terms nonetheless appears to have invited a punning connection. The apparent (though erroneous) shared root is similarly tempting in post-classical Latin's *melodiosus* ('musical') and *mel* ('honey'), and indeed in most Latinate European languages, including French (*mélodieux/miel*). Randle Cotgrave's 1611 translation of *miel* as 'Honie; also, sweetness' indicates that sweetness was not just a quality of honey, moreover, but that *miel/mell/μέλος* could simply mean 'sweet', just as 'sugar' can today.<sup>23</sup>

With the very words for music in Greek, Latin, and French being so close to those for honey-sweetness, the pun appears to have been irresistible to early modern writers and lexicographers—and perhaps some writers even assumed a genuine etymological connection, 'going simply by the sound of words', as Martin Luther complained in another context.<sup>24</sup> Numerous dictionaries and lexicons translate or

<sup>21</sup> Philip Massinger and Nathan Field, *The Fatal Dowry* (London, 1632), A2; Anon., *The Costly Whore* (London, 1633), D1<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>22</sup> 'μέλι' and 'μέλος', in H. G. Liddell and R. Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon with a Revised Supplement*, rev. Henry Stuart Jones with Roderick McKenzie, ed. P. G. W. Glare (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 1097, 1099.

<sup>23</sup> Randle Cotgrave, 'Miel', in *A Dictionarie of the French and English Tongues* (London, 1611), 3G4<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>24</sup> Martin Luther, 'Pagan Servitude of the Church', in *Martin Luther: Selections from his Writings*, ed. John Dillenberger (New York: Anchor, 1962), 326.

gloss *melody* and *melodious* as ‘sweet music’ and ‘sweet-sounding’ respectively, where more literal readings would simply be ‘music’ and ‘musical’ (or perhaps ‘tune’ and ‘tuneful’). This added adjective apparently seeks to capture the honeyish implication of *melody* and *melodious*.<sup>25</sup> Early modern polyglots may even have felt that the μέλος–μέλι association was something of an opportunity missed in the English language, where both *melody* and *melodious* were relatively recent borrowings from French (*mélodie* and *mélodieux*, in the thirteenth and late fourteenth century respectively), and the vernacular tongue remained attached to the resolutely Germanic *honey*.<sup>26</sup> Melodiousness appears to have remained notably Latinate and a little obscure for vernacular speakers well into the seventeenth century, for Robert Cawdrey felt the need to include a definition of *melody* as ‘sweet sounding, or sweet musicke’ in his 1617 *Table Alphabetical, Containing and Teaching the Understanding of Hard Usual English Words*.<sup>27</sup> Perhaps one reason why Cawdrey—and many others—referenced sweet music, then, was to reinstate μέλος’s punning resonance in a culture of English usage firmly stuck to *honey*.<sup>28</sup>

If the sugar-sweetness of honey was one characteristic that subjects habitually associated with music, though, it was certainly not the only one, for the term *sweet* had a markedly wider range of usages four centuries ago. The sugariness that is today synonymous with sweet taste once sat among a whole set of competing meanings, many now obsolete, that *sweet* could evoke. Most of these meanings tend to pass unremarked in philological enquiries. For instance, when Masten brilliantly and provocatively explores ‘sweet persuasion’ (after *OED*, ‘sweet, *adj.* 5.c’), he concentrates on *sweet*’s use specifically as a ‘syrupy adjective’, tracing how, in the context of rhetorical composition, the term blurs distinctions between verbal figure, embodied experience, and cultural synaesthesia.<sup>29</sup> In fact, *sweet* had entirely separate meanings of ‘fresh’ (3.b), ‘nourishing’ (3.a), ‘delicious’ (1.a), and, biblically, ‘unleavened’ (3.c), all save the last potentially to be evoked by musical sweetness, as well as the sugariness that is the term’s normative literal referent today.

In a productive coincidence, even as the English music printing industry flourished in the final two decades of the sixteenth century, bringing with it countless paratextual references to musical sweetness including those discussed above, the term’s wider usage reveals a moment of transition, moving significantly towards the dominance of *sweet*’s sugary sense, yet still widely used to indicate non-specific

<sup>25</sup> See, for instance, ‘Melos lodis’ (‘Swete sounde’), in Geoffrey the Grammarian, *Promptorium Parvulorum* (London, 1499), q1<sup>r</sup>; ‘Melodie’ (‘sweet tune’), in L. H., *A Dictionarie French and English* (London, 1571), T2<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>26</sup> See *OED*, ‘melody, *n.*’, ‘melodious, *adj.*’, ‘honey, *n.*’

<sup>27</sup> Robert Cawdrey, ‘melody’, in *A Table Alphabetical, Containing and Teaching the Understanding of Hard Usual English Words* (London, 1617), F6<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>28</sup> Other instances include A., *The Passoinate [sic] Morrice* (London, 1593), E4<sup>r</sup>; Henry Shirley, *The Martyred Soldier* (London, 1638), H2<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>29</sup> Masten, ‘Sweet Persuasion’, 71.

lickerousness, or nourishing goodness.<sup>30</sup> In 1601, for instance, John Thorie describes the Jordan as '[a] river of Iudæa, the water whereof is most sweet', whilst a ballad bemoaning the destruction of Beccles by fire in 1586 recalls '[t]he fresh water River, so sweete running by'.<sup>31</sup> This kind of sweetness was also available metaphorically in early modern English, Thomas Forrest recalling with pleasure 'the taste and savour of those sweete waters issuing from the pure fountain of learning and knowledge' in a 1580 paratext.<sup>32</sup> Likewise, the 'sweete soile of Salop' (Shropshire) that 'nourished' Sir Thomas Bromley demonstrates another broadly sustaining or health-giving sense of *sweet* moving into figurative discourse, and potentially in operation when music sounds sweetly.<sup>33</sup>

Distinguishing delicious sugariness from non-specific tastiness can often be difficult, although, for instance, Samuel Bird's concerned reference to a 'dronken glutton' blasphemously praising 'sweete luscious meate and drinke' for its 'heauenlie tast' seems more likely to have broadly appealing food and drink in mind than any particularly specific flavour, sugary or otherwise.<sup>34</sup> Elsewhere, in a treatise on kidney stones, Walter Cary discusses the effects of eating 'Ueale, Pigge, Lambe, Ling, Gréenefish, Eeles, Chéese, Milke: and generallie, all verie grosse, slimie, swéete, & fat meates'.<sup>35</sup> Whilst somewhat ambiguous in its capaciousness, this list seems to be alluding to rich, fatty foods rather than sugary-tasting ones, not only suggesting the currency of a lickerous sense of *sweet* but also, importantly, indicating that this could be understood from context without the clarification that Samuel Bird provides through the additional term 'luscious' to exclude sugary overtones.

There is another, figurative sense of *sweet*, not noted by the *OED* yet seemingly current in early modern England, of particular significance to this investigation. One kind of music that is labelled sweet with more regularity than any other is celestial or supernatural harmony, and in particular Neoplatonic 'music of the spheres'. References to 'sweet-voicd sp[h]ears', 'sweete Musique' as 'heauens rethorique', and the 'sweet harmony' of 'the spheares' are typical of this tradition.<sup>36</sup> Perhaps most tellingly, in Dekker and Middleton's city comedy *The Roaring Girl*

<sup>30</sup> On the practical, cultural, and economic factors underlying the explosion of music publishing in London, most notably from 1588 onward, see Jeremy L. Smith, *Thomas East and Music Publishing in Renaissance England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Donald William Krummel, *English Music Printing 1553–1700* (London: Bibliographical Society, 1975).

<sup>31</sup> John Thorie, 'Jordanis', in *The Theatre of the Earth* (London, 1599), Q1<sup>r</sup>; Anon., 'A Briefe Sonet Declaring the Lamentation of Beckles' (1586), Huntington Library, Britwell 18342 (EBBA 32522).

<sup>32</sup> Thomas Forrest, 'Epistle Dedicatory', in Isocrates, *A Perfite Looking Glasse for All Estates*, trans. Thomas Forrest (London, 1580), B1<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>33</sup> Thomas Churchyard, *A Pleasunte Laborinth Called Churchyardes Chance* (London, 1580), a4<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>34</sup> Samuel Bird, *A Friendlie Communication or Dialogue between Paule and Damas* (London, 1580), A4<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>35</sup> Walter Cary, *The Hammer for the Stone* (London, 1580), A8<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>36</sup> Thomas Dekker and John Ford, *The Sun's Darling* (London, 1656), B1<sup>r</sup>; John Day, George Wilkins, and William Rowley, *The Travels of the Three English Brothers* (London, 1607), F2<sup>r</sup>; Thomas Middleton, *The Family of Love* (London, 1608), D2<sup>r</sup>.

(1611), Openwork the seamster remarks that '[t]he musique of the spheares sounds not more sweete' than does the meeting of friends, his comparison alluding casually to a widespread early modern view that the sweetest music of all is that of Neoplatonic harmony.<sup>37</sup> Whilst the obvious explanation for this is simply that the music associated most strongly with heavenly forces is considered the best and therefore the sweetest, in fact there appears to be a closer connection. Away from musical contexts, 'sweet' is a characteristic adjective for God, Christ, and other heavenly figures. As Carruthers observes, "'sweetness" is one of God's own names, an essential predicate.<sup>38</sup> Thus, when the 1598 lamentation ballad of condemned criminal Luke Hutton asks Jesus to '[r]eceive O sweet saviour my spirit unto thee', he is not simply articulating his love for the addressee, but also acknowledging Christ's heavenly power to save souls through his archetypal sweetness.<sup>39</sup> It is likewise striking that, of the *OED*'s twelve examples given from the thirteenth to seventeenth centuries of *sweet*'s usage as '[d]early loved or prized' (8.a), six are applied to Jesus, God, or a 'Martir of our Lorde'.<sup>40</sup> Even Bird's drunken glutton who proclaims 'sweete luscious meate and drinke' to 'have an heauenlie tast' appears to be punning upon a godly meaning of *sweet*, mischievously suggesting that food is not just lickerosus-sweet but heavenly-sweet, the latter implication subsequently made explicit as 'heauenlie tast'.<sup>41</sup>

This specific sense of heavenly sweetness, coupled with ubiquitous mentions of sweet music of the spheres, suggests strongly that certain more partial references to 'sweet harmony' are in fact intended quite directly to evoke heavenliness, and often specifically Neoplatonic ideas of celestial music. Examples include the 'sacred touch of sweetest harmony' described by Barnabe Barnes, the 'sweet Harmony' that Apollo plays upon his harp in *The Careless Shepherdess*, and the rather evocative—if somewhat sentimental—declaration in Edward Sharpham's *The Fleir*, '[y]ou make my soule sweet harmony'.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, when George Eastland writes an acrostic poem to the Countess of Bedford in praise of John Dowland's lute, he first evokes the implicitly celestial 'sweetest Harmonie' expressed by the lute and Bedford's 'spirit' alike, then makes entirely explicit that both soul and music please ear and heart through their earthly echoes of 'heavenly measure'.<sup>43</sup>

At times this heavenly sweetness carries with it more general notions of concordance and agreement, as in an oft-quoted song by Thomas Tomkins:

<sup>37</sup> Thomas Dekker and Thomas Middleton, *The Roaring Girl, or, Moll Cutpurse* (London, 1611), I2<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>38</sup> Carruthers, 'Sweetness', 1003.

<sup>39</sup> 'Luke Huttons Lamentation' (1598), Huntington Library, Britwell 18307 (EBBA 32346).

<sup>40</sup> Henry Howard, *A Defensative against the Poyson of Supposed Prophetes* (London, 1583), 2P4<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>41</sup> Bird, *A Friendlie Communication*, A4<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>42</sup> Barnabe Barnes, *The Devil's Charter* (London, 1607), A4<sup>r</sup>; Thomas Goffe[?], *The Careless Shepherdess* (London, 1656), E4<sup>r</sup>; Edward Sharpham, *The Fleir* (London, 1607), E3<sup>r</sup>.

<sup>43</sup> George Eastland, 'To J. Dowlands Lute', in John Dowland, *The Second Book of Songs or Ayres, of Two, Four and Five Parts* (London, 1600), A2<sup>r</sup>.

Musicke deuine, proceeding from aboue,  
 Whose sacred subiect often times is loue,  
 In this appeares her heauenly Harmony,  
 Where tunefull concords sweetly doe agree.<sup>44</sup>

The connection is even made in the pre-Christian dramatic world of John Marston's *Tragedy of Sophonisba* (1606), set during the Roman–Carthaginian war. In characteristically colourful language, Marston's witch Erictho contrasts 'holy *Flamins*' (i.e. priests) singing 'Sweet Hymns to heauen' with the squawking of 'the [jack]daw and crow, / The ill voic'de Rauens, and still chattering [mag]Pie'.<sup>45</sup> In light of these representative examples, we can extend Christopher R. Wilson and Michela Calore's important observation that *sweet* 'impl[ies] concord and harmony' when applied to music: when it is 'sweet', it is not just delicious, appealing, nourishing, and honeyish but also potentially heavenly, whether explicitly said to be so or not.<sup>46</sup>

Careful attention to *sweet*'s usage reveals resonances and associations that would be evoked for early modern readers and audiences when the term is applied to music, yet which are absent today when *sweet*'s gustatory meaning has largely narrowed to sugariness, and when in any case the term's capacity to evoke taste through figurative use is less readily apparent. Early modern 'sweet' music not only was more flavoursome (in a sugary sense) than its later counterparts but could evoke fresh, nourishing, or just generally delicious flavour, as well as implying heavenliness or celestial harmony together with its gustatory implications. This sensory richness is not merely a matter of historical curiosity, moreover, but shapes the period's literary texts that habitually reference 'sweet music'. Much subtlety and nuance are evoked by writers through the term, and this would have been recognized with ease by early readers and audiences who shared the writers' cultural familiarity with far more varied and flavoursome tastes of sweetness.

Having traced the wider sensory life of this chapter's key gustatory term, we can now turn to look in some detail at how two literary works of the period—Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* Book III and Shakespeare's *The Tempest*—draw upon the full sensory richness of musical sweetness, with interpretive significance. Tracing the 'sweetness' of the music that accompanies the Masque of Cupid in the House of Busirane, and the 'noyses, / Sounds, and sweet aires' of *The Tempest*'s island, what follows explores the sensory resonances and now-lost implications first of Spenser's sense-dazzling masque music, and then of Shakespeare's celestial and nourishing musical imagery. In each case, this facilitates a fresh reading of a key moment at the denouement of the work's narrative, demonstrating how the more precisely histori-

<sup>44</sup> Repetitions for musical purposes have been removed. Thomas Tomkins, *Songs of 3. 4. 5. & 6. Parts* (London, 1622), D2<sup>r</sup>. Christopher R. Wilson and Michela Calore cite this passage in relation to sweet musical concordance rather than explicitly heavenly musical sweetness. *Music in Shakespeare: A Dictionary* (London: Continuum, 2005; repr. Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2014), 412–13.

<sup>45</sup> John Marston, *The Wonder of Women or The Tragedie of Sophonisba* (London, 1606). E4<sup>v</sup>.

<sup>46</sup> 'Sweet', in Wilson and Calore, *Music in Shakespeare*, 412.

cized picture of figurative sensory language that this chapter has pursued can illuminate the period's literary texts anew.

### Writing (through) the Senses

In Book III of *The Faerie Queene*, the female knight Britomart seeks to rescue Amoret from the clutches of the 'vile Enchaunter' Busirane, who has abducted Amoret during her wedding to Scudamour.<sup>47</sup> In the House of Busirane, where Amoret is captive, Britomart encounters a series of artistic representations—including tapestries and a statue—that culminates in a Masque of Cupid, performed in the second room of the House. The masque, the description of which takes up much of the twelfth canto, features many allegorical figures and centres on a visceral image of Amoret tortured by Love, her anatomized heart in a silver basin, pierced with Cupid's arrow.

We are told that the masque is accompanied throughout by sweet music, punctuated by the contrasting sound of 'shrill trumpets' (III.xii.6.6). Where the music is coming from—or indeed who might be playing it—is never clarified, but the narrator leaves no room for doubt as to its sweet characteristics and their effects:

The whiles a most delitious harmony,  
 In full straunge notes was sweetly heard to sound,  
 That the rare sweetnesse of the melody  
 The feeble sences wholly did confound,  
 And the frayle soule in deepe delight nigh drownd. (III.xii.6.1–5)

Clearly the reader is being encouraged to note the music's sweetness, the term mentioned twice in the space of two lines. Perhaps this insistent emphasis is a hint, too, that the reader should keep the music in mind throughout the extensive ensuing description of the masquers.

Why might musical sweetness be an important element of the Masque of Cupid? Understandably, scholarly attention has tended to focus on the dense stanzas that follow rather than the import of the music, critics examining everything from the descriptions of particular masquers to the precise numerical arrangement of the procession. Quite how the masque is to be interpreted remains a matter of ongoing scholarly debate, explanations having ranged from a representation of 'desire as an unpleasant codified game' amongst the 'erotic delusions' of Busirane's 'bizarre house' to a manifestation (or exploitation) of Amoret's own anxieties and fears about intimacy with her new husband Scudamour, and from Busirane's misreading

<sup>47</sup> Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. A. C. Hamilton with Hiroshi Yamashita, Toshiyukui Suzuki, and Shohachi Fukuda, rev. 2nd edn, Longman Annotated English Poets (Harlow: Pearson, 2007), III.xii.31.1. All further references are to this edition and cited in the text.

of Amoret's adherence to the reformed Christian ideal of married chastity as a coded willingness to participate in the promiscuous games of courtly love, to an idolatrous temptation that necessitates 'acts of iconoclasm against Cupid' from Spenser himself.<sup>48</sup>

With early modern usage in mind, two forms of musical sweetness seem particularly significant here. Firstly, the stanza's opening reference to 'delicious harmony' points crucially towards the delicious sense of *sweet*. Spenser's spelling of 'delicious' is itself apt, reminding us that 'delicious' and 'delight' share a common Latin root, perhaps suggesting one reason why 'sweet' music was ubiquitously expected to 'delight' in early modern England. Moreover, this opening insistence on flavour-some music suggests that the lickerous sense of 'sweet' obtains throughout the stanza, with Britomart encouraged or even compelled to consume this musical 'sweetness'. Indeed, the oddly passive phrasing of how the music 'was sweetly heard to sound', without specifying who is doing the hearing, suggests the wider purchase of the response, and perhaps even seeks to align the reader with Britomart's experience of the music.

The passage emphasizes the sensory excess of overwhelming musical sweetness when 'the melody / The feeble senses wholly did confound', in turn almost drowning 'the fraile soule'. Jane Kingsley-Smith suggests that this experience of excessive sweetness may be 'potentially erotic', like the Cupid statue encountered previously in the House that similarly 'dazd' Britomart's 'fraile senses' (III.xi.49.9).<sup>49</sup> This may be true if the masque's deliciously sweet music indeed bore gustatory associations, given the well-established connection between eroticism and tasting in the period.<sup>50</sup> As the Longman editors of the poem note, too, the music seems to recall the similarly 'sweet' sounds heard much earlier in Book III when 'Danzels' and 'Squyres' were 'swimming deepe in sensuall desyres' in Castle Joyeous (III.i.39.6–8), offering a further link with sensuality. Whilst the editors' claim that '[t]he same enervating music' plays in both locations is arguable (in fact the Castle Joyeous music includes the sound of 'sweet birdes' [III.i.40.3], where no avian performers are mentioned in the canto xii description),<sup>51</sup> the similarity between the two musical descriptions does nonetheless appear to be deliberate, suggesting a concomitant association between the taste of sweet music and sexual pleasure during the Masque of Cupid.

<sup>48</sup> Elizabeth Heale, *The Faerie Queene: A Reader's Guide*, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 75, 78; Chih-Hsin Lin, 'Amoret's Sacred Suffering: The Protestant Modification of Courtly Love in Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*', *Studies in Philology* 106, no. 3 (2009), 354–77; A. C. Hamilton, *The Structure of Allegory in 'The Faerie Queene'* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1961), 145–6; Harry Berger, Jr, 'Busirane and the War Between the Sexes', *English Literary Renaissance* 1 (1971), 99–121; Jane Kingsley-Smith, *Cupid in Early Modern Literature and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 57–9.

<sup>49</sup> Kingsley-Smith, *Cupid*, 55.

<sup>50</sup> See Munro, 'Staging Taste', 29–30; Swann, *Taste and Knowledge*, 183–222.

<sup>51</sup> Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. Hamilton et al., III.xii.6.1–5n.

Just as important as the nature of this pleasure, though, is the idea of bodily disruption through excessive sensory stimulation that Spenser's musical 'confound[ing]' entails, bringing to mind Philip Stubbes's warnings against too much sweet music: just as excessive consumption of sweet 'hony' upsets the stomach, so 'sweet Musick, at the first delighteth the eares, but afterward corrupteth and depraueth the minde, making it weake, and quasie'.<sup>52</sup> If a reader keeps in mind the masque music's sickly-sweet potential throughout the ensuing description, then the representation of Pleasaunce, carrying 'an hony-lady Bee' in a jar as she marches (III.xii.18.8), becomes particularly compelling. Pleasaunce marches almost in the middle of the procession, immediately in front of Despight and Cruelty as they remove Amoret's 'trembling hart' from her chest (III.xii.21.1). Pleasaunce at first glance appears to contrast straightforwardly with her cantankerous partner Displeasure, who carries '[a]n angry Waspe' in 'a viall' (III.xii.18.7). Yet the *OED* notes that 'pleasance' could mean 'pleasure' or 'enjoyment' in the period ('pleasance', *n.*<sup>1</sup> 3), as well as having the more familiar sense of courtesy or politeness (*n.*<sup>1</sup> 1.a). With honeybee in hand, and overwhelmingly sweet music resounding through the room, perhaps the queasiness of excessive sensory pleasure and indulgence lurks beneath the surface of Spenser's scene, then, destabilizing Pleasaunce's 'chearfull' and 'fresh' demeanour (and her lack of sorrow or fear) with associations of sensual excess and a little too much sweetness, and complicating any entirely straightforward dichotomy between her and Displeasure (III.xii.18.4).

The celestial associations of sweet music may also be relevant here, given that the masque music's location and performers are unclear. The music is after all part of a masque honouring a god (albeit a classical one), and its 'delituous harmony' disappears into thin air (together with the masquers) the moment Britomart passes through the 'brasen dore' into the next chamber (III.xii.29.7). Music of unknown origins, or at least where the performers cannot be seen, was closely associated both with the supernatural and with heaven in early modern England: in numerous dramatic representations, characters immediately respond to hidden music by asking where it is coming from, and whether it is sounding with benevolent or malevolent intentions.<sup>53</sup> By describing the music insistently as sweet, *The Faerie Queene's* narrator thus encourages early modern readers towards a heavenly interpretation, even whilst making clear that this Masque of Cupid is anything but a Christian ceremony. As such, the spectre of celestial musical sweetness recalls the Cupid statue encountered in the previous room, which apparently educed 'fowle Idolatree' from many people in 'that ample hous' before 'daz[ing]' Britomart's 'fraile sences' (III.xi.49.3–9). Just as the statue invited inappropriate engagements, so Britomart—and the reader—are encouraged to misread the sweet music as heavenly, with implications for the seductive appeal of the masque as a whole. This sweet music

<sup>52</sup> Stubbes, *Anatomy*, O3v.

<sup>53</sup> See Simon Smith, *Musical Response*, 81–3, 93–102.



appears to be as compelling to the senses as the Cupid statue, then, and from a post-Reformation perspective, potentially just as problematic.

Spenser's complex evocation of music's celestial sweetness also recalls one of the period's best-known references to sweet music, in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Given the connection between sweetness and celestial music traced above, perhaps Caliban's delightful 'noyses, / Sounds, and sweet aires' similarly evoked sphere-like music for early audiences where they merely sound pleasant to twenty-first-century ears. Caliban's account of musical experience on the island develops from this phrase through insubstantial yet eternally present clouds, dreams, sounds, air(s), and disembodied voices, all of which hint towards—yet tantalizingly refuse to name—the ever-present inaudible celestial harmony that 'sweet aires' may imply.<sup>54</sup> For Shakespeare's first audiences, this powerful, elusive, and evocative speech and its musical sweetness are likely to have resonated strongly with the wider network of references to celestial music that saturate *The Tempest's* imagery. These references range from Prospero's explicit call for 'heavenly Musicke' to 'worke mine end' upon the other characters' 'Sences' (TLN 2003–4), through to Ferdinand's eagerness to establish whether the invisible music that has 'drawne' him across the island is 'T'th aire', and thus celestial, or in 'thearth' (TLN 530–7), and thus nefarious or even infernal.<sup>55</sup>

Yet as David Lindley and Joseph M. Ortiz have both noted, despite the ubiquity of these references the play's relationship with such rarefied notions of musical heavenliness is at best ambivalent, particularly in performance.<sup>56</sup> This is equally true, I would suggest, of the celestial sweetness that Caliban evokes. Even though Caliban's speech is often anthologized or extracted as if it were Shakespeare's personal account of music's affective power, or even his paean to the 'Isle' of Britain (TLN 1492), when considered in its full dramatic context it is far less clear that this sweet music is as harmless as Caliban suggests, or indeed that his account of the music is even accurate.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>54</sup> William Shakespeare, 'The Tempest', in *Comedies, Histories and Tragedies* (London, 1623), TLN 1492–500. All further references are to this edition and cited in the text using through-line numbering.

<sup>55</sup> For influential discussions of the significance of *The Tempest's* music, see John P. Cutts, 'Music and the Supernatural in *The Tempest*: A Study in Interpretation', *Music & Letters* 39, no. 4 (1958), 347–58; Pierre Iselin, "'My Music for Nothing": Musical Negotiations in *The Tempest*', in Stanley Wells, ed., *Shakespeare Survey* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 135–46. For up-to-date accounts of early modern understandings of celestial music and its relationship to Neoplatonic thought, see David Lindley, *Shakespeare and Music* (London: Thomson, 2006), 13–18; Christopher Marsh, *Music and Society in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 36–50.

<sup>56</sup> Lindley, *Shakespeare and Music*, 218–19; Joseph M. Ortiz, *Broken Harmony: Shakespeare and the Politics of Music* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2011), 143.

<sup>57</sup> For a recent example from the speech's long history of cultural repurposing, see Colette Gordon's account of the 2012 London Olympics opening ceremony in "'Mind the Gap': Globalism, Postcolonialism and Making Up Africa in the Cultural Olympiad', in Paul Prescott and Erin Sullivan, eds, *Shakespeare on the Global Stage: Performance and Festivity in the Olympic Year* (London: Bloomsbury Arden Shakespeare, 2015), 191–226 (193–5).

Caliban claims that the ‘sweet aires’ of the island ‘giue delight and hurt not’ (TLN 1493), able to charm him to sleep and cause dreams of heavenly riches. Yet this praise of benevolent and implicitly celestial music is at odds with the practical music that actually prompts the speech: Ariel, invisible and carrying out Prospero’s command to foil the assassination plot of Caliban, Trinculo, and Stephano, plays a popular catch-tune on a tabor and pipe in order to distract the trio from their purpose (TLN 1477–86). This music, played by an invisible sprite, may be supernatural, but is some distance from being heavenly, let alone a manifestation of the celestial music of the spheres. Within the play, the island’s music is often referred to as sweet, whether Ariel’s songs to Ferdinand in act I, scene ii, whose ‘sweet ayre[s]’ allay the hearer’s misery and draw him across the island to facilitate his eventual match with Miranda (TLN 519–50), or the ‘[s]olemne and strange Musicke’ prefacing the vanishing banquet and Ariel’s appearance as a harpy in act III, scene iii, which Gonzalo considers to be ‘[m]aruellous sweet Musicke’ (TLN 1535–41). Whilst Caliban’s remarks, just like Ferdinand’s and Gonzago’s responses to musical charming (or, less charitably, deception), may well have evoked ideas of celestial harmony for early playgoers, they do so precisely to provide an ironic contrast with the musical manipulation that is actually taking place, intended to consolidate and re-establish Prospero’s political power, both on the island and in Italy. Just as in the House of Busirane, here audiences and readers are invited—even tempted—to hear music as celestial-sweet, even as they are being reminded that within the fictional world, it is nothing of the sort.

When considered in the full context of the play, there is a further sense of musical sweetness suggested by Caliban’s ‘sweet aires’, of relevance to survival and rule on the island. Chief among the grievances against Prospero that Caliban lists in act I, scene ii is that he taught Prospero ‘all the qualities o’th’Isle’, including its ‘fertill’ places and ‘fresh Springs’, yet is now under his rule and prevented from benefiting from ‘[t]he rest o’th’Island’, after his attempt to rape Miranda (TLN 476–83). Patricia Akhimié has recently explored *The Tempest*’s participation in early modern colonial discourse through its intersection with ‘New World promotional literature, which transports the English ideology of cultivation overseas’. This is an ideology of working the land, but indirectly and exploitatively so: it is contingent upon the subjugation and control of those forced to work on that land. Yet as Akhimié notes, whilst Prospero is generally ‘unwilling to acknowledge’ the ‘qualities o’th’Isle’ he now benefits from, ‘Caliban, by contrast’—and crucially for this investigation—‘covets it and sees it as fertile and full of wonders.’<sup>58</sup>

In the context of Caliban’s struggle to reclaim the island from Prospero, and Prospero’s efforts, via Ariel’s pipe and tabor, to prevent this, the possibility that the

<sup>58</sup> Patricia Akhimié, ‘“Fill Our Skins with Pinches”’: Cultivating the Colonial Body in *The Tempest*, in *Shakespeare and the Cultivation of Difference: Race and Conduct in the Early Modern World* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 151–86 (155, 160).

island's 'aires' that delight Caliban are sweet in the sense of nourishing or fresh would be particularly appealing. This sense of sweet music would resonate with Caliban's 'fresh Springs' (TLN 477), given the wider early modern convention (explored above) of describing fresh water as 'sweet'. Likewise, the period's widespread references to 'sweet' fertile ground, such as the 'sweete soile of Salop', suggest a further connection between Caliban's knowledge of 'barren place and fertill' on the island (TLN 477) and these 'sweet aires'.<sup>59</sup>

Caliban's speech therefore has the effect of joining 'sweet aires, that giue delight' to the island's fresh sweet water and nourishing sweet earth, the control of which he frustratedly craves (TLN 1493). This time, music's fresh sweetness offers a kind of affective or even spiritual nourishment that is elusive and, ultimately, illusory, yet desired so strongly by the disenfranchised Caliban that, upon waking from his musical dream of riches, he 'cri[es] to dreame againe' (TLN 1500). To early modern audiences, attuned to *sweet's* full usage and cultural associations, the sweetness of the island's music would be another of its nourishing qualities systematically appropriated by Prospero, and desired by Caliban. As such, sweet music is central both to the play's dramatic conflict and its engagement with colonial discourse, putting gustatory language at the heart of how early modern subjects could make meaning of the play, on the page and especially on the stage.

These explorations of *The Tempest* and *The Faerie Queene* have sought to demonstrate how historicized attention to figurative sensory language can bring a long-past context into better focus, revealing Spenser and Shakespeare drawing upon contemporary cultures of taste to evoke sweet music. As we have seen, language and sensory culture are ever shifting and contingent, requiring careful investigation of the textual record in order to recover some of the now-unfamiliar resonances and associations that would have been second nature, not just for early modern poets and dramatists themselves but also for the readers and playgoers for whom they wrote. A sense like taste may be relatively overlooked and even maligned, both within early modern culture and by scholars investigating that culture, and it is also true that gustation remains an elusive sense to study historically. Yet the evidence that survives nonetheless allows us glimpses of the figurative life of taste—in this case through the many forms of sweetness applied to music—and its implications for both literary and sensory culture. As the examples of Caliban's 'aires' and Cupid's masque have shown, wider sensory culture was important to those like Shakespeare and Spenser who set out to write—and write through—the senses, even as their texts participated profoundly in that culture. *The Tempest* and *The Faerie Queene* are crucial to our understanding of the sensory world of early modern England, just as sensory methods are in turn vital to our investigations of literary texts.

<sup>59</sup> Churchyard, *Churchyardes Chance*, a4<sup>r</sup>.

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TASTING WITH WORDS IN BEN  
OKRI'S *THE FAMISHED ROAD*  
AND CHIMAMANDA NGOZI  
ADICHIE'S *HALF OF A  
YELLOW SUN*

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VANESSA GUIGNERY

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who emphasized the pivotal role the body plays in perception, opens his seminal study *Phenomenology of Perception* with the following statement: 'In beginning the study of perception, we find in *language* the seemingly clear and straightforward notion of sensation.' However, he immediately adds: 'this is the most confused notion there is,' thereby acknowledging that the relationship between language and perception is problematic.<sup>1</sup> Philosopher Michel Serres, who expressed reservations about Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, proves even more adamant in his rejection of the idea that language can in any way approach sensation.<sup>2</sup> Considering the substitution of experience with language as 'an abuse and a violence',<sup>3</sup> Serres recoils from linguistic tools, which he sees as 'petrif[y]ing one's skin', 'empt[y]ing one's mouth of taste', and 'alienat[ing] us from sensation'.<sup>4</sup> In *The Five Senses*, he describes the mouth as performing two different actions: while speech passes through what he calls 'the first mouth', food and drink are ingested through what he names 'the second mouth'. He adds that speech and language can neither smell nor taste, and that, as a consequence, 'one mouth kills the other': '[speech and language]

<sup>1</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* [1945], trans. Donald A. Landes (London: Routledge, 2012), 3; my emphasis.

<sup>2</sup> Michel Serres with Bruno Latour, *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*, trans. Roxanne Lapidus (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 132.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Steven Connor, 'Michel Serres's *Les Cinq Sens*', in Niran Abbas, ed., *Mapping Michel Serres* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 165.

anæsthetize the [second] mouth, which finds the zestiest conversation tasteless... Neither acidic nor astringent, sentences refrain from awakening our tongue to anything but themselves.<sup>5</sup> Serres thereby argues that words are unable to represent what senses provoke in our bodies and adds that taste, in particular, 'is rarely conveyed well' through language: '[taste] is often expressed in language that provokes mirth – our mouth laughs at it – as though in this place language allowed it no voice. One mouth chases the other, the mouth of discourse excludes the mouth of taste, expels it from discourse.'<sup>6</sup>

It is, however, through the means of language that writers (Serres included) give shape and texture to the senses, and a growing number of literary scholars, including the contributors to this volume, are paying increasing attention to the types of techniques literature deploys to communicate the senses. While drawing on some fundamental insights of Merleau-Ponty concerning embodiment and acknowledging the force of Serres's position in general, I will ask whether literary language is capable of at least approaching the ultimately ineffable experience of sensation, and more specifically that of taste. Taste has largely been neglected in studies of the senses, maybe because of a reluctance towards 'its seemingly primitive nature', which, according to Kelli C. Rudolph in her introduction to *Taste and the Ancient Senses*, has led it to be relegated 'to the bottom of the sensory hierarchy'.<sup>7</sup> And yet, the literary means used by writers to evoke the gustatory sensation deserve attention and, in addition to Serres and Merleau-Ponty, I will rely on Mikhail Bakhtin's theories of the grotesque body to show how literature may convey sensory experiences.

The literary texts I will consider here, Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991) and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* (2006), illuminate the particular perspectives literature offers through its use of metaphor, accumulation, hyperbole, dialogue, and other features to reproduce and comment on the human experience of sensation such as its memorial function, its role in the formation of communities and hierarchies, and its ability to form new communities. I have selected these novels in order to investigate the sense of taste because they foreground the symbolic function of food in West African cultures, conveying to the reader its flavours and transcribing the various reactions it provokes in its consumers. Both of these books oscillate between the description of tasty meals that elicit sensory pleasure in the characters and an insistence on the scarcity or blandness of food in times of war or due to poverty, when taste buds tend to be dulled. While each novel develops a different aesthetics to foreground the tension between an enhanced sense of taste and its blunted counterpart, they both suggest that language, contrary to what Serres argues, may have the capacity to evoke a sensual experience or its absence.

<sup>5</sup> Michel Serres, *The Five Senses. A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies* [1985], trans. Margaret Sankey and Peter Cowley (London: Continuum, 2008), 153.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Kelli C. Rudolph, ed., *Taste and the Ancient Senses* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 1.

These works are also illuminating for the way in which they reveal the effects of colonialism, war, poverty, and forced migration on perception.

*The Famished Road*, which won the Booker Prize in 1991, focuses on a spirit child, a magical figure invented by Ben Okri, which is a transformed incarnation of the *abiku* in Yoruba or the *ogbanje* in Igbo. This well-known figure in West African mythology follows an endless cycle of birth, death, and rebirth to the same mother. In Okri's novel, however, the narrator Azaro decides to remain in the palpable world of the living with his parents (simply named Mum and Dad) and to resist the repeated attempts of his spirit companions to take him back to the world of the dead. The book depicts his constant hovering between the dismal reality of a compound inhabited by famished people struggling with poverty in an unnamed West African country (resembling Nigeria) on the verge of independence, and the spiritual world peopled with fantastic creatures. Published fifteen years later, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, winner of the Orange Prize for Fiction, abides by realist conventions to follow the trajectory of several characters before and during the Biafran War of 1967–70, whose fortunes and misfortunes can be gauged by the type and amount of food they swallow, and the sense of pleasure or pain that experience generates. While Jenni Ramone has examined *Half of a Yellow Sun* and other Nigerian novels through the lens of the relationship between food and resistance,<sup>8</sup> and several scholars have analysed the trope of hunger, the food metaphors, and the social symbolism of food in *The Famished Road*,<sup>9</sup> they have not specifically focused on the literary representation of the sensory perception of taste in the novels.

This chapter aims to examine the ways in which taste may be given an apprehensible form in language in Okri's and Adichie's novels so as to probe whether, as suggested by Serres, 'the mouth of discourse excludes the mouth of taste', or, on the contrary, the two mouths can feed on each other so that language may be able to communicate the sense of taste (or its absence).<sup>10</sup> I will first compare the two authors' literary strategies as they appear in the opening pages of the novels so as to explore the means each of them deploys to evoke sensual experiences. While *Half of a Yellow Sun* is set in a specific historical context and relies on realistic and concrete details to convey the sense of taste, *The Famished Road* mixes realism and a mythopoeic aesthetics within a poetic and inventive prose that sometimes proposes more abstract and indirect paths to sensory perception. This study will then exam-

<sup>8</sup> Jenni Ramone, 'Transforming Hunger into Power. Food and Resistance in Nigerian Literature', in Lorna Piatti-Farnell and Donna Lee Brien, eds, *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Food* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 184–93.

<sup>9</sup> See Mariaconcetta Costantini, 'Hunger and Food Metaphors in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*', in Vanessa Guignery, ed., *The Famished Road: Ben Okri's Imaginary Homelands* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 92–108; Gerd Bayer, 'The Spirit of Conviviality and the Demons of the Marketplace in Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*', in Guignery, ed., *The Famished Road*, 77–91.

<sup>10</sup> Serres, *The Five Senses*, 153.

ine in more detail the diverse literary techniques employed by Okri and Adichie to communicate a variety of tastes and to evoke sensory pleasure or disgust, such as diction and the use of adjectives, plurals, compound nouns, sonorities, anaphora, metaphors, or tropes of aggrandizement. I will then analyse the variations in sensory reactions to food depending on the social class to which the characters belong and the geographical origin of the protagonists themselves (whether they are West African or British) and of the food and drink they ingest (which can be typically West African or imported from Europe or the United States). I will finally explore the ways in which the representation of taste is affected by the emotions of those who experience it and how the loss of taste in times of war and deprivation is inscribed within the very language of Okri's and Adichie's novels.

### Okri's Poetic and Metaphorical Approach to Taste

Both *The Famished Road* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* oscillate between a relish for a multiplicity of tastes and an absence of gustatory pleasure in times of privation, but they communicate this tension through different literary modalities. Food deprivation is mythically evoked in the liminal paratext of Ben Okri's book, its title, and in the first (brief) paragraph, which ends with the adjective 'hungry': 'In the beginning there was a river. The river became a road and the road branched out to the whole world. And because the road was once a river it was always hungry.'<sup>11</sup> The novel thus opens in a mythopoeic mode through a reference to the common trope of the road in Yoruba mythology, bringing to mind both the Yoruba prayer '[m]ay you never walk when the road waits, famished' and the parable of the hungry and insatiable King of the Road, who devours the people who do not bring him sufficient food and eventually ends up eating himself, a story which is related in *The Famished Road* (298–301).<sup>12</sup> Okri's novel is characterized by an extensive deployment of the lexical field of hunger, which is both literal (the inhabitants of the compound suffer from starvation) and metaphorical (the hunger is also spiritual), and exposes the characters' vulnerability in the face of food deprivation. The adjective 'hungry' is thus repeated seventy-two times and the noun 'hunger' sixty times in the novel. People are 'famished', 'ravenous', and 'starving', drowning in a 'world of famine, famishment, and drought' (373).

However, the second paragraph of *The Famished Road* moves away from the focus on hunger to introduce a mysterious plural narrative voice which joyfully

<sup>11</sup> Ben Okri, *The Famished Road* [1991] (London: Vintage, 2003), 3. References are henceforth given in parentheses to the page numbers of this edition.

<sup>12</sup> On the symbolism of the hungry road, see Vanessa Guignery, *Seeing and Being: Ben Okri's The Famished Road* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2012), 33–46; quotations are from this edition, with page numbers in brackets.



celebrates the spirit world: 'In that land of beginnings spirits mingled with the unborn. We could assume numerous forms. Many of us were birds. We knew no boundaries. There was much feasting, playing and sorrowing. We feasted much because of the beautiful terrors of eternity' (3). The spirit world is significantly marked by activities of gustatory revelry—emphasized by the chiasmus '[t]here was much feasting . . . We feasted much' (3)—and the hybrid beings later indicate that they make their vows of returning to the spiritual realm (after a foray into the land of the living) 'in fields of intense flowers and in the sweet-tasting moonlight of that world' (4). The compound adjective 'sweet-tasting' qualifies what can be seen and simultaneously enhances sight (the moonlight), initiating an unexpected combination of the senses or synaesthesia. This mixture or fusion is furthered by the melting echo in the /t/ sonority, which almost turns the compound adjective into a portmanteau word (sounding like 'sweetasting'), thereby also blurring linguistic boundaries (echoing the spirits' knowing 'no boundaries'). From its very opening, *The Famished Road* thus proposes an effective literary technique and a powerful poetic answer to the challenge of giving an apprehensible form to sensory experiences in a literary text. Such an interplay of senses announces an aesthetics which is essentially poetic and not shackled to a conventional (Western) form of realism. It relies on a phenomenological approach to the world, which favours sensation over rationality (as encouraged by Merleau-Ponty). Okri's literary device may thus be considered as an example of the way a writer can communicate mixed sensations through language without excluding 'the mouth of taste' (as feared by Serres). This poetic and imaginative response founded on a circulation of and communication between senses had already been formulated by Shakespeare in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* through Bottom's cue 'I see a voice',<sup>13</sup> and by Baudelaire in his famous poem 'Correspondences': 'There are perfumes as cool as the flesh of children / Sweet as oboes, green as meadows.'<sup>14</sup> These 'inter-sensory correspondences'<sup>15</sup> are here conveyed through poetic language but can also be communicated through other artistic forms, such as painting, as suggested by Cézanne's claim, taken up by Merleau-Ponty, that 'you should be able to paint the smell of trees.'<sup>16</sup> 'Synaesthetic perception is the rule', Merleau-Ponty insists, arguing that we can 'see sounds' and 'hear colors'.<sup>17</sup> The specific challenge of writers is to find ways of transmitting such complex sensory experiences through the linguistic tools at their disposal, and Okri attempts to do so through a poetic, rather than strictly realistic, approach.

<sup>13</sup> William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* [1600] (London: Penguin, 1967), 5.1.189.

<sup>14</sup> Charles Baudelaire, 'Correspondences', *The Flowers of Evil*, trans. William Aggeler (Fresno, CA: Academy Library Guild, 1954), ll. 9–10.

<sup>15</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 341.

<sup>16</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The World of Perception*, trans. Oliver David (London: Routledge, 2004), 62.

<sup>17</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 238, 243.

*The Famished Road* is also replete with poetic images that suggest a sensory connection between nature and human beings, for instance when Azaro sees ‘the air drinking palm-wine’ (72), or when his father announces, ‘I drank the moon tonight’ (386) and is able to signal ‘how sweet the black rocks of the moon tasted, and how he drank of the golden elixir of the sun’ (466).<sup>18</sup> In his essay ‘Food, Ritual, Death,’ Okri notes how the ‘plants and animals from which we derive our nourishment’ are all contingent on the four elements so that food ‘is a repository of the magic of sunlight, the mystery of water, the omnipresence of air, and the steadfastness of the earth.’<sup>19</sup> Okri’s poetic and metaphorical approach to the senses therefore invites us to acknowledge the range of sensual experience that lies behind the sense of taste and to broaden our modes of perception in order to embrace the variety of sensations that produce that one moment of encounter.

As announced by the spirit child Azaro in the opening pages of *The Famished Road*, one of the reasons why he decided to stop his coming and going between the worlds of the living and of the dead is that he ‘wanted to taste of this world’ (6). Soon after, Azaro is separated from his mother, abducted, and then rescued, and the women who accompany his mother after he is brought home ‘too became reasons for staying on this earth, to sometimes taste the joys of homecoming’ (34). In both cases here, taste is related to knowledge (the verb ‘know’ could replace ‘taste’ in the quotations above) as well as to emotions, and Azaro later notes that spirits sometimes borrow ‘bits of human beings to partake of human reality’ because they ‘want to taste human things, pain, drunkenness, laughter, and sex’ (161). The spirits’ relation to the world of the living thus resonates with Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological approach, according to which the world is known through the organs of perception, which are fundamentally corporeal. Indeed, the spirits need to be embodied in order to perform these expansive encounters, know of the world, and feel human emotions. This also brings to mind Serres’s statement that ‘knowledge cannot come to those who have neither tasted nor smelled.’<sup>20</sup> As noted by William Cohen in his chapter on ‘Embodiment and the Senses’ in Victorian literature, ‘the subject mingles with the world through processes of sensory apprehension, and this is what *The Famished Road* repeatedly emphasizes, including for spirit children.’<sup>21</sup> Throughout the novel, taste is thus presented as a sensory experience rooted in the body, which is stimulated by concrete components such as food or drink but can also metaphorically give access to a variety of human emotions. Okri’s aesthetics is one which mixes the corporeal and the emotional, and intertwines realist, poetic, and metaphorical modes to communicate sensory perceptions.

<sup>18</sup> In *The Five Senses*, Michel Serres opens the second chapter with the indication, ‘[f]or the last two hours this morning I have been tasting the sun in the theatre at Epidaurus’ (85).

<sup>19</sup> Ben Okri, ‘Food, Ritual, Death,’ *Callaloo* 38, no. 5 (Fall 2015), 1034–6 (1034).

<sup>20</sup> Serres, *The Five Senses*, 153.

<sup>21</sup> William A. Cohen, *Embodied: Victorian Literature and the Senses* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 17.

## Adichie's Realistic Route to Taste

By comparison with Okri's hybrid novel, Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* relies more clearly on the tools of realism. In its very first pages, *Half of a Yellow Sun* emphasizes a tension between food and taste deprivation, on the one hand, and a sudden opening of the doors of perception on the other. Indeed, as the young Ugwu is about to be employed as houseboy by the university lecturer Odenigbo, his aunt tells him: 'as long as you work well, you will eat well. You will even eat meat every day', thus suggesting that such rich nourishment is lacking at his family home.<sup>22</sup> After exchanging a few words with the young boy, Odenigbo significantly tells Ugwu: 'Ngwa, go to the kitchen; there should be something you can eat in the fridge' (5). Ugwu gasps as he sees '[o]ranges, bread, beer, soft drinks' and 'a roasted, shimmering chicken', off which he yanks a leg that he eats ravenously 'until he had only the cracked, sucked pieces of bones left in his hand' (6), the chicken and chunk of bread he devours afterwards lying 'balmy in his stomach' (6). In keeping with Merleau-Ponty's suggestion, rephrased by Clive Cazeaux, that 'the body becomes experience-of-a-world' as 'one sense [is] finding a correlation in another', the senses of taste, sight ('shimmering'), and touch ('in his hand') combine to convey the character's relish in consuming such a choice dish, the sonorities in plosives ('cracked, sucked pieces of bones') seemingly reproducing the sounds made by Ugwu's eating.<sup>23</sup>

This first experience of luscious food points to essential social differences. Indeed, when thinking of his family, Ugwu pictures them having their modest evening meal of *akpu* (a wet paste made from cassava) and 'watery soup', the children 'struggl[ing] over the strips of dried fish in the soup' (7), while he himself can enjoy 'more bread and chicken, quickly stuffing the food in his mouth' (8). As suggested by the words 'quickly stuffing', on his first day at Odenigbo's, Ugwu cannot fully experience the pleasure of taste as he is not yet used to such a great quantity of flavoursome food.<sup>24</sup> The comparison between the two households points to a significant contrast between boiled and roasted food, mirroring an opposition along the lines of social class and gender, which is also explored in *The Famished Road*.<sup>25</sup> According to Claude Lévi-Strauss, boiled food, cooked within a receptacle, is associated with the intimate and feminine sphere; it is often ascribed to 'endo-cuisine' in that it is 'prepared for domestic use, destined to a small closed group'. As it 'entirely conserves the meat and its juices', it 'connotes economy' and is 'plebeian', while roasted food, cooked from the outside and usually served to guests (in banquets, for instance), is

<sup>22</sup> Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun* (London: Harper Perennial, 2007), 3. References are henceforth given in parentheses to the page numbers of this edition.

<sup>23</sup> Clive Cazeaux, *Art, Research, Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2017), 130.

<sup>24</sup> This may be compared to the attitude of the hungry beggars in *The Famished Road*: 'The beggars fell on the food, rushed it, dismembered the chicken, and ate like famished beasts' (479).

<sup>25</sup> Costantini, 'Hunger and Food Metaphors', 95.

linked to ‘prodigality’ and to a masculine world.<sup>26</sup> In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, the succulent roast chicken significantly originates from the lecturer’s (mostly male) staff club. When moving to Odenigbo’s middle-class circle, Ugwu graduates to more diverse types of food which he will learn to cook and whose varied tastes he will come to distinguish.

Both *The Famished Road* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* thus open with references to food and taste, each writer deploying different literary means to capture sensory experiences through which to connect corporeally and emotionally with the world. While Okri exploits the full poetic and metaphorical potential of language, Adichie sets her novel more firmly within a realistic frame and gives palpable form to the sense of taste by emphasizing the body’s materiality and inscribing food within a specific social context. Both writers thereby suggest from the start of their books that different literary techniques can be available to convey sensory perception, of which more diverse and intricate manifestations will be examined below.

### **Taste as a Corporeal, Mnemonic, and Convivial Experience**

Nigerian literature often includes detailed descriptions of food and drink, and of the physical and emotional sensations their ingestion provokes. In novels written in a realist mode, food and drink feature as symbols of conviviality and hospitality or, in diasporic contexts, as sensual and nostalgic memories of home or childhood. As noted by Jenni Ramone, ‘[i]n Nigerian literature and culture, . . . food and eating is indicative of belonging; it is a conduit for community and collective identity, and a means of structuring interactions.’<sup>27</sup> Both Okri (who moved to London at the age of 19) and Adichie (who left Nigeria for the United States at the same age and now splits her time between Lagos and Washington DC) have commented on their emotional relationship to Nigerian food. Okri was born in the Nigerian town of Minna, which he left at the age of 2, but his early memories of the place are associated with food: ‘Minna is a groundnut town and I remember seeing these piles – pyramids – of groundnuts.’ If this memory is related to the sense of sight (‘I remember seeing’), Okri also recalls the taste of the food he liked as a child in his native country: ‘fried plantain, stewed black-eyed beans, yam potage and omelettes.’<sup>28</sup> Adichie, on the other hand, admits to her dislike of *garri* (a popular staple food made from corn, cassava, or yams) and all varieties of soups from an early age, and her preference for

<sup>26</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, ‘The Culinary Triangle’ [1966], in Carole Counihan and Penny Van Esterik, eds, *Food and Culture: A Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 40–7 (42–3).

<sup>27</sup> Ramone, ‘Transforming Hunger’, 184.

<sup>28</sup> John Hind, ‘Ben Okri: “If You’re Hungry, Books Seem Full of Feasts”’, *The Guardian*, 19 January 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/jan/19/life-on-a-plate-ben-okri-books-seem-full-of-feasts>.

boiled yams dipped in palm oil, *jollof* rice, and warm *okpa*.<sup>29</sup> It might be because of what Yannis Hamilakis, in *Archaeology and the Senses: Human Experience, Memory, and Affect*, calls the ‘mnemonic force of food, the links between eating, bodily senses, and memory’,<sup>30</sup> that Okri and Adichie regularly refer to Nigerian food in their work, a fundamental feature of many novels. One famous example of this ‘mnemonic force of food’ is the madeleine the narrator of Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time* remembers eating with his mother, which involuntarily brings back memories of his Aunt Léonie. As mentioned by Hamilakis, ‘[l]ong forgotten tastes and smells conjure up in a combined, synaesthetic mode past experiences suddenly and unexpectedly.’<sup>31</sup>

In *The Famished Road* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*, eating Nigerian (or foreign) food is shown to provoke sensations of pleasure or discomfort, which are conveyed to the reader through a variety of literary devices and bespeak contrasted relations with one’s community. First of all, Okri and Adichie deploy literary means to suggest, in the wake of Merleau-Ponty, that ‘we experience our own sensory states not merely as states of *mind*, but as states of our bodies and our bodily behaviors.’<sup>32</sup> Indeed, as established by the Aristotelian model, ‘[n]othing is in the intellect that was not first in the senses.’<sup>33</sup> Serres himself concurs (‘our intellect knows nothing that has not first passed through the senses’), but he also asks: ‘How can you taste a pear, using the chattering tongue rather than the sapient tongue?’<sup>34</sup> How can a reader feel a pear melting in a character’s mouth? I argue that Okri and Adichie attempt to communicate such sensations vicariously by using adjectives that evoke a pleasant taste (‘delicious’, ‘savoury’, ‘tasty’, ‘sweet’), a disagreeable one (‘nauseating’, ‘stale’, ‘awful’, ‘unpalatable’), or the lack of it (‘bland’, ‘tasteless’). In their novels, spicy food is positively connoted as it enhances taste, and ‘bitter herbs’ add a rich flavour to pepper soup, while the bitterness of medicine provokes revulsion. In *The Famished Road*, Mum contorts her face when the herbalist has her drink ‘from a bowl of bitter liquid’ (73)—the alliteration in /b/ seemingly mimicking the aggressive taste—while the ‘infernal bitterness’ of the ‘dongoyaro’ drunk by Azaro to cure his illness makes him shake ‘in disgust’ and no ‘cube of sugar’ can sweeten his mouth (142). These examples show how taste directly affects the body, and the reader may experience that sensation vicariously through language. Merleau-Ponty rightly notes that

<sup>29</sup> She explains that *okpa* is ‘a simple, orange-colored, steamed pie of white beans and palm oil that tastes best cooked in banana leaves’. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, ‘Real Food: Writer’s Childhood Dislike of Garri, a Nigerian Staple’, *The New Yorker*, 27 August 2007, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/09/03/real-food>.

<sup>30</sup> Yannis Hamilakis, *Archaeology and the Senses: Human Experience, Memory, and Affect* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 84.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Taylor Cayman, ‘Foreword’, in Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, xiv.

<sup>33</sup> Elio Franzini, ‘Rendering the Sensory World Semantic’, in Francesca Bacci and David Melcher, eds, *Art and the Senses* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 117.

<sup>34</sup> Serres, *The Five Senses*, 162.

‘the heat that I sense by reading the word “*chaud*” [hot] is not an actual heat. It is merely my body that prepares itself for the heat, and that, so to speak, sketches out its form.’<sup>35</sup> In the same way, when coming across such adjectives as ‘bland’ or ‘spicy’ in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, the reader will not taste the food directly but can ‘prepare’ their body for the difference in taste between ‘the bland food Master brought back from the staff club’ and the stews lifted with ‘the spicy sharpness of *arigbe*’ (16)—the equivalent of basil—which Ugwu cooks for him.

Contrary to what Serres argues, the reader may therefore experience what Merleau-Ponty calls a ‘quasi-sensation’ of taste through the consumption of words.<sup>36</sup> This is the case in *The Famished Road* when Azaro describes the dishes he is presented with after being taken to the house of a police officer whose son recently died: ‘We ate a wonderful dish of stew flavoured with shrimps and meat. The rice had a faint aroma of cinnamon. The fried plantain smelt of wild herbs. The fried chicken tasted of delicious spells’ (23). The senses of smell and taste mix in these juxtaposed sentences that communicate the richness of the meal through the literary means of enumeration and the regular rhythm of the last three sentences, all placing a different dish as subject (‘The rice,’ ‘[t]he fried plantain,’ ‘[t]he fried chicken’) followed by a reference to taste or smell (‘aroma of,’ ‘smelt of,’ ‘tasted of’). However, the reference to the taste of ‘spells’ is unsettling, and when Azaro realizes that the house is inhabited by the ghost of the dead son and the spirits of the people for whose deaths the police officer was responsible, he loses his appetite and stops eating. Even when, ‘crazed with hunger,’ ‘[m]esmerized by hunger,’ he is given a plate filled with ‘generous quantities of pounded yam, choice selections of goat meat, and soup rich in vegetables’ (30), he cannot bring himself to eat because he has seen the ghosts ‘play with the food with their bloodied hands’ (31). The conviviality of sharing food, positively connoted through such words as ‘generous,’ ‘choice,’ and ‘rich,’ followed by plural forms, is thus inverted into deadly images which make the food nauseating to the child and, possibly, to the reader.

The spirits, whom only Azaro can see, therefore complicate the phenomenology of tastes by disrupting the festive scene with their eerie appearances. They significantly sport truncated bodies, thereby maybe suggesting a correlation between corporeal and sensorial deficiencies as it is through the entire body that perception occurs. Thus, one spirit has ‘eight fingers and a single twinkling eye,’ another ‘an amputated foot,’ a third one exists ‘only as a pair of milk-white legs, balanced on the head of a woman’ (30), while the ghost of the dead son ‘had lost both his arms, one side of his face was squashed, and both his eyes had burst’ (31). The view of such maimed bodies disturbs Azaro’s sensory perception, and the spirits who are only partly embodied are intent on preventing the boy from enjoying the taste of worldly dishes.

<sup>35</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 245.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

Such inversions are not rare in *The Famished Road*, where the most coveted and varied tastes in scenes of what Osmund Anigbo<sup>37</sup> and other anthropologists and critics such as Jenni Ramone call ‘commensality’ (‘a code of symbolic practices associated with food and eating which determines social interactions and community regulations’) can lead to frustration when the pleasure of their appreciation is taken away from guests.<sup>38</sup> After Azaro is rescued from the policeman’s house and reunited with his parents in their single-room home, Dad kills a boar and the women prepare a ritualistic feast to celebrate the boy’s homecoming: ‘The whole compound smelt of aromatic stew, peppers, onions, wild earthy herbs, and frying bushmeat’ and ‘everyone was salivating in anticipation’ (49). Smell is presented throughout the scene as the foreshadowing (or foretaste) of taste. Although Mum and Dad are riddled with debts, they organize this convivial feast which, according to Gerd Bayer, forms ‘a counterweight to moments that are more confrontational’ and thus presents ‘a possible path for conciliation.’<sup>39</sup> This conviviality is expressed through an offering of succulent food to guests, even if some of them are strangers or were once enemies or will become so again after the meal. As noted by Okri in *A Time for New Dreams*, hospitality is indeed ‘something we should be able to extend not just to our friends, but even to our enemies.’<sup>40</sup> In *The Infinite Conversation* (1993), Maurice Blanchot refers to the scene in the *Iliad* when Achilles, having wept with his enemy Priam, will not rest until the old man has eaten: ‘Hospitality consists less in nourishing the guest than in restoring in him a taste for food by recalling him to the level of need, to a life where one can say and stand hearing said: “And now, let us not forget to eat”.’<sup>41</sup> Julia Kristeva also evokes this scene of encounter between host and guest in *Strangers to Ourselves* (1991): ‘The meeting often begins with a food fest: bread, salt and wine. A meal, a nutritive communion. The one confesses he is a famished baby, the other welcomes the greedy child; for an instant, they merge within the hospitality ritual.’<sup>42</sup> As suggested by Kristeva and as shown by the banqueting scenes in *The Famished Road*, this response to hospitality is only temporary (‘for an instant’).

In the homecoming feast in *The Famished Road*, the anticipation of tasty food is conveyed via accumulation and hyperbole. The women bring in ‘a great steaming pot of stew’ and ‘basins of jollof rice, yams, beans, eba, and fried plantains’, while ‘large quantities of ogogoro and palm-wine’, stout, and soft drinks are distributed to people ‘sweating with thirst’. As the ‘aroma of the marvellous cooking’ overpowers

<sup>37</sup> Osmund Anigbo, *Commensality and Human Relationships among the Igbo* (Nsukka: University of Nigeria Press, 1987).

<sup>38</sup> Ramone, ‘Transforming Hunger’, 184.

<sup>39</sup> Bayer, ‘The Spirit of Conviviality’, 78.

<sup>40</sup> Okri, *A Time for New Dreams*, 52.

<sup>41</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation* [1969], trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 95.

<sup>42</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 11.

the room, expectant faces are 'bright with aroused appetites', the guests hoping 'for a feast of abundant cooking' and talking 'to disguise the flood of their salivation' (50–1). Such hyperbolic descriptions peppered with appreciative adjectives emphasize the intensity of expectation, 'the smell of food, sumptuous and throat-tickling' preceding the satisfaction of taste, but when food is eventually served and '[p]lates of rice and bushmeat passed before gluttonous faces', discontent spreads as there is not enough food to satiate the guests: 'The rice was swiftly consumed, the boar disappeared into the capacious stomachs of the ravenous gathering, the stew dried out in the pots' (53). What had been anticipated with relish and captured through a wealth of nouns and adjectives leaves the guests even 'hungrier', angry at 'the betrayed promise of an abundant feast' (54). The scene is emblematic of the persisting tension in *The Famished Road* between relishing the prospect of delicious food and convivial sharing and the nagging persistence of hunger. This tension might reflect the expectations of abundance and convivial sharing after independence and the frustrations when corrupt politicians took charge of the country, letting selfishness and greed prevail.<sup>43</sup>

The sensual appeal of the literary language itself is furthered by Okri's Bakhtinian use of excess as his novel often relies on tropes of aggrandizement to convey sensory experiences. The 'grotesque realism' of Rabelaisian carnivalesque scenes, when the eating- and drinking-inflated body is presented as 'grandiose, exaggerated, immeasurable', is another literary means deployed by Okri to give a palpable form to the sense of taste.<sup>44</sup> Although Mum and Dad earn little money and are often unable to buy enough food, Dad is recurrently noted for his 'mighty' (63), 'wonderful' (116), 'tremendous' (362), 'large' (402, 489), and 'legendary' (418) appetite, and is shown devouring vast quantities of food while Azaro and his mother starve:

Not only did he swallow such death-defying dollops of eba, he ate gargantuan quantities as well. He ate as if his body were some sort of abyss. And he ate fast, as if he were attacking the food, ranging counter-gulps and eating-combinations on the massive portion. He ate so much that Mum became very lean indeed and I lost appetite for food. Dad did all our eating for us. And at the end of every meal he always complained about how the eba was never enough and how he could have done with more stew. He never spoke of the taste of the cooking. (419)

Dad's gluttony indicates a psychological as well as physical hunger and echoes that of the mythical King of the Road, who is never satiated. This voracity is conveyed through the use of plurals, compound nouns, and such adjectives as 'gargantuan' and 'massive', as well as the anaphora of 'he ate' and the alliteration in /d/ ('death-defying dollops') which saturate the passage, thus reflecting Dad's

<sup>43</sup> A similar scene occurs near the end of the novel when Dad organizes another party but the 'small chicken pieces' and 'small quantities of beer' are too little for the crowd, who grumble 'that the quantity was an insult to their saliva' (479).

<sup>44</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1936), 18–19.



greed. Significantly, however, this excessive consumption of food, deprived of Rabelais's positive and joyful celebration, eventually seems to cancel all sense of taste, as suggested by the last sentence and the absence of appreciative adjectives connoting the dishes. As rightly noted by Serres, 'without taste, we risk abnegating our human state and returning to that of animals. . . . Animals wolf down their food, man tastes it.'<sup>45</sup> In scenes where his appetite overpowers sensation, Dad appears indeed to let his bestiality prevail and language itself, now pared down, faithfully conveys this disappearance or negation of taste. The reader may feel disgust when reading such passages but probably not any sense of taste.

In the quotation above, the only indication as to the specific type of food ingested by Dad is the reference to *eba* (which consists of cassava flour combined with hot water) and stew, thus pointing to the staple food eaten by the poor family. If this passage features common food, in Okri's and Adichie's novels a contrast is often suggested between a 'plebeian'—to use Lévi-Strauss's term—type of food (which is nevertheless tasty and nutritious) and more sophisticated dishes, often borrowed from the West, a sign of colonial or neocolonial imprint.

### Taste, Culture, and Class

In *The Five Senses*, Serres notes that taste is 'prone to recurrence and stability; its habits are continuous with a culture.'<sup>46</sup> One of the recurrent dishes referred to in both *The Famished Road* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* is pepper soup, a nutritive dish of Nigerian popular cuisine made of pepper, greens, spices, and meat or fish. According to Okri, '[a]ll meals in Nigerian restaurants should be prefixed with pepper soup. Otherwise it's like setting off on a journey without a suitcase, or on seduction without foreplay. It awakens all the taste buds, pores and senses. You inhale differently and feel differently.'<sup>47</sup> In *The Famished Road*, Mum and the formidable bar owner Madame Koto are depicted as nurturers and providers of deliciously flavoured pepper soups, 'hot and spiced with bitter herbs' (141). Clients ask Madame Koto for her 'famous peppersoup' (122, 126), whose scent is as enticing as its taste: 'The aroma of her rich-scented peppersoup floated in from the backyard' (102). When Azaro is sick, she brings out to him 'a bowl steaming with goat-meat peppersoup,' which he eats ravenously: 'It tasted better than the soup she served her customers. I drank it all down and ate all the meat and fish and my stomach bulged' (143). Azaro is nevertheless suspicious of some of the ingredients she puts in her soup after she tells him there were demons in it and he heard the soup make 'a curious hiss' (120) and saw the bubbles 'a little monstrous and glutinous' (121), thereby combining evocations of sight, sound, and taste (and reminding one of the witches' cauldron in

<sup>45</sup> Serres, *The Five Senses*, 154.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>47</sup> Hind, 'Ben Okri'.

*Macbeth*). When Madame Koto makes Azaro eat the chicken's head he found in her soup, she transforms his relish into disgust: 'I cracked the chicken's head with my teeth. I broke its beak. I swallowed down its red comb. . . . I sucked out the eyes and chewed them' (101). The sonorous verbs and juxtaposed sentences have replaced adjectives connoting taste and flowing syntax to focus on a mechanical action in an effort to ignore the unpleasant experience. In the paradoxical world of *The Famished Road*, an enjoyable sensory experience is thus often inverted into an unpalatable one, and this shift is reflected in lexical and syntactic changes, as well as in sound effects.

In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Richard Churchill, a British man who has settled in Nigeria and wishes to fit in by learning Igbo and writing a book about Igbo-Ukwu art, delights in Nigerian pepper soup and the 'delicious burning on his tongue' it provokes (108). During the war, he also enjoys the sherry locally made in Biafra, which provides physical pleasure: 'The pink liquid spread a pleasant warmth through his body' (304). A similar type of bodily sensation is experienced by Olanna when she is 'drinking chilled rice milk, laughing at the delicious cold trickle down her throat, at the stickiness on her lips' (146). The 'delicious burning', 'pleasant warmth', and 'delicious cold trickle' all foreground the body's reactions to the sense of taste. While Richard appreciates local food, his Nigerian houseboy Harrison, who used to work for an Irish priest and an American professor, spurns Nigerian dishes and insists on cooking sophisticated foreign food, not knowing how much Richard 'had disliked the food of his childhood, the sharp-tasting kippers full of bones, the porridge with the appalling thick skin on top like a waterproof lining, the overcooked roast beef with fat around the edges drenched in gravy' (73).<sup>48</sup> The precise description marked by the harsh sonorities of plosives mixes evocations of sight and taste to convey Richard's aversion to such typically British food, thereby subverting what might be called a colonial hierarchy of taste according to which the dishes of the Western world are judged more palatable than local food in the colonies (or former colonies).

Both *The Famished Road* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* also show how taste may vary depending on social class. In Adichie's novel, the fried rice Ugwu makes the first time Olanna visits Odenigbo is 'tasteless' and too full of oil (23), but he slowly learns to use less oil, to shred greens with his hands instead of slicing them so that 'they retained more of their vitamins' (86) and 'nutrients' (96), and to boil the yam with butter (121). When Ugwu returns to his mother in the village, he finds her food 'unpalatable. The vegetables were overcooked, the cornmeal was too lumpy, the soup too watery, and the yam slices coarse from being boiled without a dollop of

<sup>48</sup> Harrison prepares such dishes as 'beet salad' (73), 'finger chops', 'sausage rolls', '[s]tuffed garden eggs' (108), 'German chocolate cake', 'rhubarb crumble' (166), and 'meringue pie' (209); one evening, he prepares 'a complicated meal: a bean and mushroom soup, a pawpaw medley, chicken in a cream sauce speckled with greens, and a lemon tart as pudding' (255).

butter' (119). The young man has become used to more refined food (his sister mocks his British accent and his superior ways by referring to his taste for 'boh-tah', 121), and that is also the reason why he resents Odenigbo's mother's 'strong-smelling soups' (212, 239, 299). This change of taste reflects Ugwu's shift in social status and estranges him from his family.

In *The Famished Road*, local people become the victims of a global capitalism which impacts the food they eat. As noted by Jonathan Highfield, deforestation signals a shift in the economy of the region, robbing 'the local community of sources for potential food'.<sup>49</sup> As Madame Koto's capitalist greed develops and her bar becomes the hangout of corrupt politicians and thugs, American drinks come to replace Nigerian ones: 'a Coca-Cola poster' appears on the wall (250) and she 'graduate[s] from palm-wine to beer' because '[t]here was more money in beer' (438). Dad, who used to drink ogogoro, a local distilled spirit extracted from palm trees, moves to 'a steady consumption of beer' because '[l]ife gets better' (472). Boiled pepper soup is replaced by the roast meat of more diverse animals: 'spit-roasted goat-meat and rams' meat and antelopes' flesh' (516), the sense of accumulation being suggested by the polysyndeton. The division of the population along social lines is marked by their access (or lack of access) to these choice dishes: 'The delicious aroma of goat-meat and antelopes' flesh, of bean-cakes, fried plantains and rich stews made us salivate, made us curse with greater bitterness the poverty and outer darkness to which we seemed for ever consigned' (517). While the first part of the sentence is marked by an abundance of food, the pleasure of smell and a craving for taste, the second part relegates the poor population to their 'bitter' condition, a significant polysemic term which evokes the acrid taste of resentment.<sup>50</sup> Barred from the consumption of sophisticated dishes, the poor population of the compound may find comfort in simpler food when it is prepared with love, while others suffer from ageusia (or loss of taste) when confronted with painful experiences. Such reactions involve both body and mind participating in cognitive and affective processes. When writers communicate the sense of taste in their literary texts, they therefore convey not only a bodily experience which the reader may experience vicariously through language but also an emotional one.

## Taste and Affective Processes

If language cannot directly reproduce the sense of taste, words can prepare the reader's body for its effect (as suggested by Merleau-Ponty) as well as point to the

<sup>49</sup> Jonathan Highfield, *Food and Foodways in African Narratives* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 133.

<sup>50</sup> Okri depicts a similar division in his *stoku* (a combination of story and haiku) 'The Mysterious Anxiety of Them and Us,' where the people seated at a table are enjoying a feast of abundant food while the people standing behind them are watching them eat: 'you were at the table, and you began to eat. They weren't at table, and they didn't eat.' Ben Okri, *Tales of Freedom* (London: Rider, 2010), 120.

affects and emotions to which gustatory sensations are intimately related. The sense of taste may indeed provoke affects which, according to Michel Morel, are 'sudden, brutal responses from our reptilian brain,' 'quasi immediate somatic reaction[s]'; as well as emotions which imply more conscious and 'vigilant procedures'.<sup>51</sup> In an interview, Okri pointed to the 'acute relationship between the taste of food and the state of mind of the person cooking it', a connection which may be perceived in *The Famished Road* when Mum spends 'much love creating for [Azaro] the most ravishing dishes' after he stopped eating for two weeks and nearly died (392).<sup>52</sup> Azaro's return to life after an episode of fasting is marked by the restoration of taste for the succulent dishes his loving mother prepares for him and which he enumerates with gusto, accumulating plural forms: 'delicious soups of goat-meat and stockfish, the peppercoup full of new yams, the vegetable dishes, the stews with aromatic peppers and bright-red lobsters' (392). What is perceived in this description is not only the taste ('delicious'), smell ('aromatic'), and sight ('bright-red') of the dishes but also the impalpable maternal tenderness and warmth with which such a feast was prepared. Likewise, when Mum, Dad, and Azaro are united by their shared love, this radiance is conveyed through the flavourful food they eat together despite their lack of means: 'Dad kept plying me with choice bits of crayfish and chicken, while Mum carefully took out the bones from the spiky freshfish and fed me juicy morsels' (81–2). The taste experience or sapidity, suggested by the adjective 'juicy' and furthered by the sound echoes and alliterations ('crayfish and chicken,' 'freshfish and fed'), is part of the emotional bond between the characters. On the other hand, when Mum is venting her anger after a catastrophic party, the food she cooks is 'quite tasteless' (489). Such examples show how emotions can shape sensory reactions, exacerbating or numbing them.

In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, taste is related to sensuality and to one's feelings towards another. For instance, when Odenigbo presses his lips to Olanna's, the young woman notes that '[h]e tasted of marmalade' (26). The reference to this imported product from the former colonizing country, here associated with a sensual gesture between people who love each other, is ironical as Odenigbo is systematically critical of the colonial heritage. The houseboy Ugwu, who cherishes Olanna, also relishes the sensuality of sucking the chicken bones the young woman only lightly chewed: 'He sucked languidly, one bone after another' (83); 'The cold marrow was tart on his tongue' (84); 'He had sucked all the bones, and he imagined that the taste of Olanna's mouth was in his' (84). Ugwu's affection and repressed desire for his mistress can be perceived in the languid movement of his tongue and mouth, the tartness of taste being reflective of the excitement he feels at imagining himself so close to Olanna as to sense the taste of her mouth.

<sup>51</sup> Michel Morel, 'Last Orders: An Anatomy of Emotion,' *Études britanniques contemporaines* 41 (December 2011), 61–72 (61).

<sup>52</sup> Hind, 'Ben Okri'.

In more tense circumstances when emotions prove incapacitating, food can become repulsive, for example when Olanna is having dinner at her parents' and knows that she is being used as sex bait for the finance minister so her father can get a contract: 'She usually liked her avocado without salt, but it was bland now, almost nauseating' (31). The smell, sight, and taste of food become offensive when Ugwu hears about the massacres of Igbos in the north of the country: 'The smell of spices nauseated him, as did the sight of soup, of food' (143). Both affects and emotions thus have an effect on bodily reactions and on the senses, and can transform taste, intensify it, or cancel it altogether. When taste becomes bland or absent, the style of Okri's and Adichie's narration also changes, recording the loss of taste in pared-down language.

### The Loss of Taste

In *The Famished Road* and *Half of a Yellow Sun*, food deprivation in specific circumstances and the simultaneous disappearance of taste have a disruptive effect on body and mind. In some cases, however, starvation can lead to a greater awareness of one's surroundings. Okri thus said in an interview that fasting 'can cleanse the appetite and return one's senses to zero', and he noted that his fifth novel, *Astonishing The Gods*, was written while fasting.<sup>53</sup> In *The Famished Road*, Azaro reconnects with the world of spirits when he stops eating for two weeks after being beaten by his father: a three-headed spirit appears to lure him back to the world of the dead, enticing him with the promise of 'a truly wonderful feast awaiting [his] homecoming' (375). In the meantime, Azaro only feeds on his hunger, on the diet of 'a world of famine, famishment, and drought' (373) and on 'the air of famine': 'I drank in the evils of history. I drank in the food of suffering' (374). Such metaphorical images couched in simple language and syntax point to Azaro's enhanced sensory and cognitive perception of the misery and suffering of the world when fasting, but he is significantly brought back to life by his father's words of love—'His words offered me water and food' (386)—and by 'the smell of superb cooking in the air' (391). The restoration of life through the emotion of love is thus symbolized by the return of one's senses. Most of the time, however, *The Famished Road* emphasizes the pangs of literal and metaphorical hunger which the main population suffers from. Starvation deprives them of the sense of taste, and the uneven distribution of food in the novel is emblematic of the division of the unnamed African country between the greedy capitalist elite and the famished majority, as well as a more global separation along colonial or neocolonial lines between the North and the South.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Okri still drew attention to this inequality in poems dating from the late 1990s: 'The hungry nations are hungry still. / The starving people dream of food,' adding '[a] basic pre-condition of civilisation / Is a world free of hunger.' Okri, *Mental Fight*, 23 (ll. 14–15), 41 (ll. 12–13).

In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, several characters lose their appetite or sense of taste—and along with them their connections with the other—after having experienced, provoked, or heard of painful scenes during the war. Olanna can no longer eat after having witnessed the carnage of Igbo people in the north ('except for the chalky pills, she had been unable to taste anything in so long,' 161); Odenigbo stops eating after hearing of his mother's death (300), and when he starts drinking, it neither 'sharpen[s] his mind' nor 'distill[s] his ideas and his confidence' as it used to before the war, but 'silence[s] him' (382), depriving him of both the mouth of speech and that of taste. Adichie noted in an essay that when she wrote *Half of a Yellow Sun*, she was 'concerned with questions about what it means to be *human*': 'when you go from eating sandwiches to eating lizards, how does this change your relationship, your sense of self, your idea of self-confidence, your relationship with the people you love?'<sup>55</sup> The novel traces the deterioration of living and eating conditions during the war, which causes the characters to sip 'weak tea made from a reused tea bag' (262), eat 'thin, meatless soup' (327) and unpalatable relief food: 'The rice was puffy, nothing like the slender grains in Nsukka, and the cornmeal never emerged smooth after being stirred in hot water, and the powdered milk ended up as stubborn clumps at the bottom of teacups' (283). Not only is the sight disgraceful ('The dried egg yolk, fried in red palm oil, looked soggy and unnervingly bright-coloured on the plate' 267), but the taste is also either bland or unpleasant. Olanna refers to 'the awful plastic taste of the dried egg yolk' (270), while a friend mentions that his people only make *chin-chin* (a crunchy deep-fried snack) with flour: 'every day is *chin-chin*, *chin-chin*, and it is the hard kind with no taste!' (284). The adjectives which used to evoke the luscious smell and taste of various types of food in times of peace have disappeared, and descriptions (as well as social communications) are now stripped to the minimum: 'They ate in silence for a while, moulding their *garri* into balls, dipping in soup, swallowing' (324); 'They ate *garri* and water once a day now instead of twice' (389). Harrison, who used to pride himself on his sophisticated European dishes, is now hoping to catch a bush rat for dinner and his new specialty is 'roasted crickets' (402) until he concedes one day that 'there was nothing to eat' (411). Language itself has thus been deprived of its flesh and sensuous components, thereby mimicking the disappearance of taste. In addition, the inability of characters to share luscious meals in times of war and deprivation leads to the disintegration of all sense of commensality and conviviality.

*The Famished Road* and *Half of a Yellow Sun* cover the whole spectrum, from an exacerbated sense of taste shared by individuals of the same community to its obliteration due to food deprivation or emotional shocks. Both novels show how taste manifests one's engagement with the world and the other through bodily responsiveness, and they communicate sensations through a variety of literary devices in

<sup>55</sup> Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, 'African "Authenticity" and the Biafran Experience', *Transition* 99 (2008), 42–53 (51).

an attempt to belie Serres's statement that 'the mouth of discourse excludes the mouth of taste'.<sup>56</sup> It may be argued that Okri and Adichie do not allow 'the speaking tongue' to kill 'the tasting tongue'<sup>57</sup> because, as recommended by Serres, they start from the sensory experience, from the luscious taste of spicy pepper soup and aromatic stews, 'form[ing] their words through the senses' and 'build[ing] their language through the given'.<sup>58</sup> They do not let language and concepts precede the given, as such a process would not grant any access to the senses: 'We could not know how to inhale or smell the idea of the scent of the concept of rose.... The name of the rose has no fragrance', Serres notes. By starting instead from 'the exploding, fragrant bouquet of shapes and hues', writers can retain the vitality of both senses and language, and give, in their novels, an apprehensible form to senses which the reader may experience as a quasi-sensation.<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Serres, *The Five Senses*, 153.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

# THE TASTE OF REVOLUTION

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ZOË SKOULDING

For a few days in the summer of 2021 I lost my senses of taste and smell as a symptom of Covid-19. In the pandemic's vast scale of suffering, my experience was far from serious, but I felt oddly remote and disjointed, not only separated from everything around me but also cut off from time, whether through missing the daily punctuation of coffee to the complex of memories activated by roast potatoes or a ripe peach. Because I could not taste it, time stopped. Étienne Bonnot de Condillac, in his treatise on the senses, imagines a statue-like being sealed off from the world, whose senses are opened one by one: he begins with olfaction, the scent of roses, and it is with the sense of smell that attention first becomes possible.<sup>1</sup> Condillac's interest is in the formation of knowledge through the senses and the extent to which they can be scientifically isolated, but Michel Serres later returns to this same statue, describing it as a deathly 'marble automaton'. Condillac's hypothetical invention fails, in his view, because one cannot reduce the multiplicity of the world to linguistic categories: 'The automaton fills up on words. The name of the rose has no fragrance.'<sup>2</sup> The tension between sensory experience and language is, for me, central to the process, at once impossible and compelling, of writing poetry, which I experience and practise as a social form, passed from mouth or through the mouth to the ear, or from one inner ear to another via hand and eye: it connects, resists, and produces friction.<sup>3</sup> In contrast to this circulation, the statue is isolated from both human and non-human relationships, from its environment, from air, food, and other people. The pandemic, in sharpening awareness of senses that might previously have been overlooked, including our reliance on touch and presence in social interactions, indicates the need for new forms of sociality, an opening of the senses to a world

<sup>1</sup> Etienne Bonnot de Condillac, *Traité des sensations, Traité des animaux* [1754] (Paris: Fayard, 1984).

<sup>2</sup> Michel Serres, *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies*, trans. Margaret Sankey and Peter Cowley (London: Continuum, 2008), 191.

<sup>3</sup> Zoë Skoulding, *Poetry & Listening: The Noise of Lyric* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020).



that includes but extends beyond the human. The loss of familiar sensations foregrounded what is usually unconscious and in the background; we were distanced, masked and sanitized, from the commons of breathing and touch. The availability of food, normally taken for granted, became precarious as supply chains stretched and snapped. While Condillac described the acquisition of knowledge through the senses in terms of the individual, the pandemic revealed that we are anything but statues, that everything about us is collectively shaped and mingled with the world.

In this chapter I want to think about the interplay between language and the senses in my practice as a poet, looking back on one particular project with a focus on the linked senses of taste and smell. It was not a response to the pandemic; for several years previously, I had been writing a sequence of poems in response to a different period of change at the time of the French Revolution. *A Revolutionary Calendar* is a sequence of 360 poems based on the plants, animals, and agricultural implements to which each day was dedicated in the French Republican Calendar. I had begun it with a historical curiosity that became increasingly culinary and botanical as I searched out scents and tastes that were constantly on the point of vanishing, either into the past or into the gap between French and English. On its publication in 2020, the book seemed to take on unexpected contextual meanings, and it also led me into new ways of performing poetry.

Poetry makes time sensory, drawing attention to the sensuality of language noticed by Marx: ‘The element of thought itself – the element of thought’s living expression – *language* – is of a sensuous nature.’<sup>4</sup> The recovery of the senses is at the heart of the revolutionary modernisms of the twentieth century, following Marx’s observation that ‘[i]n the place of *all* physical and mental senses there has therefore come the sheer estrangement of *all* these senses, the sense of *having*’. Private ownership overrides and diminishes the other senses: in the relentless pursuit of capital, the senses are degraded, and can only be emancipated through a shift away from private property to the commons of public ownership. Furthermore, Marx makes the point that the senses are both social and constructed:

the *senses* of the social man *differ* from those of the non-social man. Only through the objectively unfolded richness of man’s essential being is the richness of subjective *human* sensibility (a musical ear, an eye for beauty of form – in short, *senses* capable of human gratification, senses affirming themselves as essential powers of *man*) either cultivated or brought into being. . . . The *forming* of the five senses is a labour of the entire history of the world down to the present.<sup>5</sup>

While asserting this singular, masculine, humanist sensibility, Marx’s materialism locates the human body within a history of interactions that includes all other human bodies, and a formation of senses in response to the non-human external

<sup>4</sup> Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (New York: Dover Books, 2012) 111.

<sup>5</sup> Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, 107–8.

world. The Calendar is arranged around human use, whether of plants or objects, and makes a fascinating record of taste formation. Skirret and two kinds of salsify make an appearance in a late autumn that would have involved cold and muddy scrabbling for roots then familiar for centuries, but which are now unknown, while potatoes and tomatoes are among the plants listed that reflect the routes of European colonialism. The senses, recognized as mutable rather than innate, connect humans with everything around them, and it is this outward movement that I have pursued in imagining the Calendar as a document of human agriculture that foregrounds the presence of the more-than-human. The reawakening of the senses must include others, not just ‘the *other* human being’ that Marx recognizes as ‘the greatest wealth’, but a commons that makes room for non-extractive relations with other entities.

### The Republican Calendar

The French Republican Calendar, devised by Fabre d’Églantine and Gilbert Romme, was an attempt to break the hierarchical power of the Church by restructuring time according to principles of nature and reason. It was used from 1793 to 1805 and subsequently revived for eighteen days in 1871 during the Paris Commune. Its aim was to recentre time on the agricultural worker, so the months were renamed seasonally, and each one was organized into three ten-day *décades* in which days were given numerical names, from *primidi* to *décadi*. Instead of being dedicated to saints in the Church year, each day was also a feast day in a new secular schema: each fifth day was named after a domestic animal (or a wild one that is eaten), and each tenth day after an agricultural implement. In all but one of the months, the remaining days were named after trees, flowers, and plants.

The rationale was that the abstract regime of the Church would be replaced with a more direct experience of the natural world and its abundance, with the intention of recognizing agriculture as the foundation of human existence. D’Églantine, in presenting his plan to the National Convention, argued its purpose as follows:

When at each instant of the year, of the month, the decade, and the day, the thoughts of the citizen shall be directed towards an agricultural image, towards a benefit of nature, or towards an object of the rural economy, you cannot doubt, since, for ages, the people have nourished an affection for fantastic objects, for pretended saints they did not see, and whom they knew still less – you cannot doubt, I say, but that it will lead the nation a great way towards the agricultural system, and that each citizen will conceive an equal affection for the real and effectual gifts of nature he enjoys.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> John Lawrence, ed. and trans., *The Patriot’s Calendar, for the Year 1794, Containing the Usual English Almanack, the Decree of the French National Convention for the Alteration of the Style. The Interesting Report of Fabre D’Églantine on that Subject, Translated at Length* (London: Bew, 1793), 10.

D'Églantine was influenced by thinkers such as Condillac, who, following John Locke, argued that all knowledge stems from sensory experience. In the light of such theories, D'Églantine believed, as Sanja Perovic notes, that 'a new collective memory could be constructed ex nihilo and quickly through an affective immersion in images.'<sup>7</sup> The idea of the Calendar was not new, and followed a prototype designed by Sylvain Maréchal in 1788, but the psychological and educational approaches that Condillac derived from his belief gave D'Églantine a means of building on previous almanacs and calendars to restructure conceptions of time more persuasively.

D'Églantine was already well aware of the power of names; born Philippe-François Fabre, he had changed his name to suggest, falsely, that he had won a poetry award, the Églantine d'Or. Understood in this light, the project of the Calendar can be recognized as a work of rhetoric, calculated in its designs to unite the interests of city with the countryside, where the peasant struggle against the lords was, as John Markoff observes, 'emancipatory and egalitarian in its consequences', but required sustained and targeted resistance long after the end of the feudal regime had been announced in 1789.<sup>8</sup> While the naming of days after implements such as a wine press or grindstone may seem whimsical from a contemporary perspective, they are reminders of the seigneurial monopolies on such objects and the dues extracted from labourers for their use. Sensory apprehension of 'the gifts of nature' was, by the 1780s, heavily mediated by this punitive and oppressive system.

The naming of the months relates time to the body and its sensory experience of weather. In French, time and weather are both indicated by *temps*; in English the association between temporality and temperature is more subtle, but D'Églantine's composition of the months—*Vendémiaire*, *Brumaire*, *Frimaire*, *Nivôse*, *Pluviôse*, *Ventôse*, *Germinal*, *Floréal*, *Prairial*, *Messidor*, *Thermidor*, *Fructidor*—was conceived in terms of seasonal tempo, or audible time: 'the names of the months which compose the autumn have a grave sound and a medium measure, those of winter a heavy sound and a long measure, those of spring a sprightly sound and a short measure, and those of summer a sonorous expression and a large measure.'<sup>9</sup> In the visual representations of the months, such as 'Frimaire' in the Musée Carnavalet in Paris, the female figures personifying each month create a single visual identity for each one, but they are also created to run together as a rhyming poetic text.<sup>10</sup> In turn, the plant, animal, and object names listed as typical of any given month invite

<sup>7</sup> Sanja Perovic, *The Calendar in Revolutionary France: Perceptions of Time in Literature, Culture, Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 120.

<sup>8</sup> John Markoff, 'Violence, Emancipation, and Democracy: The Countryside and the French Revolution', *American Historical Review* 100, no. 2 (April 1995), 360–86 (362).

<sup>9</sup> Lawrence, *The Patriot's Calendar*, 14.

<sup>10</sup> Salvatore Tresca, 'Frimaire', after Louis Lafitte, 1792–4, engraving, 349 × 268 mm, Musée Carnavalet, Paris.

sequential reading, and in the light of twentieth-century innovation, they can be read as poems, as for example the first few days of Frimaire: *Raiponce, Turneps, Chicorée, Nèfle, Cochon, Mâche, Chou-fleur*. The syntactical plainness of the list foregrounds the texture of the language, with its subtle alliteration and hints of internal rhyme; it draws attention to the mouth as the location of both linguistic and gustatory pleasure. This foregrounding of the signifier connects the list with incantatory repetition, even though what is signified—rampion, flat turnip, chicory, medlar, pig, lamb's lettuce, cauliflower—is prosaic and earthy. This effect is even more pronounced in English, and the shift in registers between the languages, derived from a long history of francophone class dominance, adds to the strangeness of the Calendar in English translation. Although the plants in question are not all edible, there are runs of days that read like recipes, such as the apple, celery, pear, and beetroot celebrated in the first few days of Brumaire, month of fog. They have a sensory effect as poetry, but also evoke the anticipatory pleasures of a cookery book, such as Menon's *La Cuisinière Bourgeoise* (1746),<sup>11</sup> which is arranged according to what is available in season, and which was popular with the literate, urban middle classes of the late eighteenth century.

D'Églantine's adopted name, perhaps because of its botanical appropriateness, is the one most closely associated with the construction of the Calendar. However, the detailed listing of plants for each of the days relied on the knowledge of André Thouin, the Head Gardener of the Jardin des Plantes. Initially, a committee of botanists was asked by questionnaire, beginning with the month of Vendémiaire, to name the six most beautiful trees or fruits produced in the countryside of the Parisian region in that month; the most beautiful flower of this month in Egypt; the most beautiful tree or fruit in Provence, Africa, China, Vivarais, Holland, and Judea.<sup>12</sup> However, this geographical range was abandoned in favour of a focus on those plants that grew in France, and which were within sensory reach of its citizens. Thouin sent a list of plants under different headings such as vegetables, animal feed, medicinal herbs, and plants with significance for the arts. He presented it to the Committee with the note that its members could 'faire choix des noms qui lui agréeront le plus', or choose the names they found most agreeable. Rather than the plant being beautiful, as in the original questionnaire, the implication is that the name matters more than the plant itself. However, names are inevitably associatively tangled with things, and this is what enabled the Calendar to become a medium for the performative inhabiting of revolutionary time. Wanting to prove their commitment to the Revolution, some of its key figures adopted new names from the Calendar, among them Cumin Milhaud, Pervenche (Periwinkle) Doppet, Myrthe (Myrtle) Peyron, and Peuplier (Poplar) Lamare, though Bultingaire notices

<sup>11</sup> Menon, *La Cuisinière Bourgeoise* (1746) 25 May 2023, <https://wellcomecollection.org/works/dxka7rem>.

<sup>12</sup> Léon Bultingaire, *André Thouin, professeur de culture au Muséum et sa participation au calendrier républicain : conférence fait le 19 février 1944 à la Montagne Sainte Geneviève, comité d'études historiques et artistiques des V et XIII arrondissements* (Paris: 1944).

that, while this worked well in the case of flowers, ‘Fumier’ (Manure) might not be such an appealing name, and a woman named Catherine after the saint’s day might not be inclined to change her name to ‘Cochon’ (Pig), the Republican Calendar’s replacement.<sup>13</sup>

D’Églantine and his colleagues selected day names for the appropriate months, which were drafted in consultation with Thouin. As far as possible, in line with D’Églantine’s aims, ‘[s]eeds, pasturages, trees, roots, flowers, fruits, and plants, are so disposed that the place and the proportion occupied by each production, are precisely the time and the day when nature presents them to us.’<sup>14</sup> However, the many corrections made to the Calendar show how arbitrary these temporal categorizations can be: sensory apprehension does not follow strictly seasonal rules. Nevertheless, in working with these historical markers of the seasons I noticed the surprising extent to which they still coincide with the points at which particular plants make their presence felt. The force of this seasonal rhythm makes aberrations all the more concerning, so it has also been a means of registering the unseasonal events induced by climate change.

The result is a calendar that has resonances with numerous more ancient conceptualizations of time, such as the Mayan calendar, or other calendars that used plant cycles to measure human time, for example in Vanuatu, where the flowering of *Melanthera biflora* marks the time at which sea turtles may be harvested.<sup>15</sup> The Republican Calendar’s evocation of past systems is paradoxical, given its context within a new decimal system based on reason, a progressive and rational break with the past. Perovic comments on the ‘double-sided aspect’ of time that turns both to the cyclical past and to a linear path forward, asking:

how did a Revolution that first staged itself as regeneration, that is, as a restoration of a better past, come to think of itself under the symbol of rupture? In other words, how did a Revolution that had turned to a new calendar in order to reintegrate history into the natural and cyclical time of the planetary revolutions come to define itself as an irreversible and linear change? And what was the process by which these many ostensibly ‘natural revolutions’ came to be reduced to the one Revolution that now moved in the linear and homogeneous time of History?<sup>16</sup>

Perovic’s observations are relevant to the current ecological crisis, in which fear of apocalypse leads either to paralysis or a faith in the redemptive power of technological solutions. The Calendar’s temporalities are all the more intriguing given that it coincides with the Industrial Revolution, a defining point for the Anthropocene. The only month that is not full of olfactory suggestiveness is

<sup>13</sup> Bultingaire, *André Thouin*.

<sup>14</sup> Lawrence, *The Patriot’s Calendar*, 19.

<sup>15</sup> Michael J. Balick and Gregory M. Plunkett, ‘Plants as Calendars’, *Science Talk Archive*, 13 March 2018, <https://www.nybg.org/blogs/science-talk/2018/03/plants-as-calendars>.

<sup>16</sup> Perovic, *The Calendar in Revolutionary France*, 7.

Nivôse, which lists rocks and minerals instead. D'Églantine chose 'the substances of the animal and mineral kingdoms absolutely and immediately useful to agriculture', since, he argued, '[i]t appeared to us that nothing which is valuable in rural economy, should lose the respect and meditation of everyone who wishes to be useful to his country'.<sup>17</sup>

*Tourbe Peat*

bogged down in what you might need to know  
for tomorrow but don't at least not yet  
you toast the coming day in phenols  
soak up the flood as life under pressure

...

grass moss lichen mice roots human compacted<sup>18</sup>

In layering places and times, I have allowed my own sensory associations (in this case with whisky) to collide with the Calendar as a historical document. Geological time underlies the seasonal rotations of vegetable life in the other months, and the temporality of earth is also evident to the senses, whether in the tactile qualities of slate, sandstone, or flint. In the current ecological crisis, the coincidence of 'time' and 'weather' being the same word seems inevitable in any language. Sedimentary, underground thinking reveals time as extraction; what was once a speeding up of transport and industry enabled by minerals is now a rush towards deeper and deeper climate emergency. In responding to the Calendar, I wanted to mark time, and register its relation to the body in a handspan sensorium of five typed lines. Every month has its own punctuation mark (apart from the first, which has spaces instead): for Nivôse, the ellipsis was suggested by the geological layer of human impact, but also by the idea of poetry as a different experience of time and duration, a form of pausing.

In a political system predicated on expansion, the pause is a form of resistance. Taste is caught up in this dynamic, since in responding to availability and novelty it is shaped by the stimulation of desire on which a capitalist economy depends. As observed in the Communist Manifesto: 'In place of the old wants, satisfied by the productions of the country, we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands and climes.'<sup>19</sup> Capitalist time is assumed to travel towards a future of infinite expansion: our tastes are formed by this expectation. Poetry might be an education in other desires: I think of Lorine Niedecker's work of 'condensery', in which the labour of writing is an exercise in taking up less and less

<sup>17</sup> Lawrence, *The Patriot's Calendar*, 20.

<sup>18</sup> Zoë Skoulding, *A Revolutionary Calendar* (Bristol: Shearsman Books, 2020), 39.

<sup>19</sup> Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, trans. Samuel Moore with Andy Blunden (Marks/Engels Selected Works I), <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/>.

space, but observing the world more minutely.<sup>20</sup> The artist Sharon Kivland, whose own work has engaged substantially and incisively with the French Revolution and its legacies, collaborated with me on a ‘non-Advent’ calendar for *Frimaire*. In contrast with the framing of Advent as a time of waiting not just for Christmas, but the promised redemptions of the Old and New Testament, this was a calendar with no end point. Instead of chocolate, the windows open on poems; each one ends with a semicolon; vegetable time simply continues.<sup>21</sup>

As I spent time with the Calendar, I learned tastes, scents, and patterns of use and seasonal observation, tuning my senses not only to agricultural rhythms of food production but also to the turning of the year through the biodiversity of my surroundings and the looming threat of shifting seasons. Having lived for years in the endless summer of supermarket produce, I began a subscription to a weekly box of vegetables from a local farm, and cooked with its succession of muddy autumnal roots. This kind of consumer choice has nothing to do with revolution, and eating local produce does not solve global problems of food production. Nevertheless, the Calendar has changed my relation to what I eat, revealing my body as seasonally modified, produced by plants as well as the networks of consumption that make them available to me. The Calendar drew attention to a social and human construction of the senses and the division of seasons, but it also led me to a sense of the body as it is produced by non-human agents. What might poetry have to do with this altered sense of being an eating as well as a speaking subject?

For Michel Serres, ‘speech and language... anaesthetise the mouth, which finds the zestiest conversation tasteless... Neither acidic nor astringent, sentences refrain from awakening our tongue to anything but themselves.’<sup>22</sup> His investigation of the ‘second tongue’, the subtlety of taste awakened by an exquisite wine, leads him to draw out the etymological connection between taste and knowledge in sapidity and sapience, reminding the reader that ‘*homo sapiens* refers to those who react to sapidity, appreciate it and seek it out’.

The faculty of distinguishing taste is intimately connected with wisdom; through this linguistic history, Serres provides a new perspective on Tristan Tzara’s phrase ‘[t]hought is made in the mouth’, not focused on the performance of orality but through bodily sensation and the mingling of bodies.<sup>23</sup> Smell and taste cannot be extricated from each other; this was another lesson of Covid-19, when taste was possible for a few days, in its elemental salty, sharp, bitter, sweet, hot, and umami facets, but without the nuancing difference of smell, which had not yet returned. For Serres, ‘smell and taste differentiate, whereas language, like sight and hearing, integrates’, because ‘smells and tastes are transitory, evanescent, ephemeral’: time is

<sup>20</sup> Lorine Niedecker, ‘Poet’s work’, in *Collected Works*, ed. Jenny Penberthy (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 194 (l. 9).

<sup>21</sup> Zoë Skoulding, *Frimaire* (Santiago: Crater Press, 2018).

<sup>22</sup> Serres, *The Five Senses*, 153.

<sup>23</sup> Tristan Tzara, ‘Dada manifeste sur l’amour faible et l’amour amer’, *La Vie des Lettres* 4 (1921).

what marks the difference. The dominant first tongue of language tends to override the second tongue of taste, which needs time and silence in which to emerge, and yet it is through language that Serres evokes, simultaneously, the unfolding taste of the fabled wine Château d'Yquem and the terroir from which it emerges. He mentions the revolutionary summer month of *Messidor*, but the whole passage is reminiscent of the Calendar's feast days; the graduations of taste and scent suggest space but they are registered in the temporality of a list:

Here are spring flowers, dog rose or lilac, clematis, the fruits of *Messidor*, including peaches (autumn or winter ones), pears, apples, grapes, walnuts, some hazelnuts trailing in their wake, in dark, fern-covered undergrowth, here are truffles in the greyish humus, bark sticky with resin, then rare mineral fragrances, flint, gunflint, and animal fragrances, musk or amber, damp fur or the scent of copulation, and here, behind the second and first bouquets, the first one floral, the next bestial and mineral, comes the third bouquet, so difficult, like pizzicato heard beneath an orchestral storm, like cross-hatching through floral-print fabric, aromas as ethereal as acetone, try to pick them out: aromatics – mint, geranium; ambrosias – jasmine, vanilla, lime; balms like benzoin, carnation, camphor; empyreumata like coffee, tobacco; the Yquem bears traces of the persistent forest, remembers distant Armagnac, cites its neighbour, Graves.<sup>24</sup>

Wine is formed by 'the time of mixtures', the vintage of particular wines created by the conjunction of time and weather.<sup>25</sup> Serres's focus on mixtures and confusions places the human sensing body among other bodies; knowledge is embodied rather than aloof and autonomous. His comment that animals simply wolf down their food without tasting it is, however, an incorrect generalization. Herbivores and omnivores, in particular, can distinguish between the precise tastes of plants, and need to do so in order to avoid being poisoned, while plants have evolved certain tastes and smells to facilitate seed dispersal. The mouths and tastes of many creatures have evolved in conjunction with plants. Human taste is often imagined as being a stable and unchanging aspect of personhood, but it changes throughout life. The human gene TAS2R38, for example, makes some people more sensitive to bitter compounds; children, who have more taste buds than adults, experience bitterness more intensely. Serres's claim for the human facility of taste belies his larger project, which is, as Steven Connor writes, 'a way of being amidst rather than standing before the world'.<sup>26</sup>

In the process of writing poems, I became aware of the effects of translation as part of a continuous process of renaming, particularly in cases where the etymologies of plant names reflect the migrations of plants. Some of the poems trace these journeys, as for example the first day of the sequence 'Prairial', which is dedicated to *Luzerne*.

<sup>24</sup> Serres, *The Five Senses*, 157.

<sup>25</sup> Serres, *The Five Senses*, 158.

<sup>26</sup> Steven Connor, 'Michel Serres's Five Senses' (1999), <http://www.stevenconnor.com/5senses.htm>



*Luzerne Alfafa*

a field of vision bleeding at the edge  
rolls through the season / purple  
medic from the Medes or *al-fasfasah* from  
elsewhere turning on the tongue / it grows  
you cut it back / a nation is this haze<sup>27</sup>

The Iranian and Arabic histories of this plant reveal that there is no originating point for either a plant or a name; language and plants alike are glimpsed momentarily in the course of long migrations. The organizing effort of the Calendar is doomed to failure, since time cannot be fixed in linguistic or spatial containers; the seasonal months only apply to part of France, not even the whole country. The very act of renaming, like the Linnaean system on which it drew, was a product of a distinct form of European knowledge underpinned by colonial power; Linnaeus's *Imperium Naturae* extracts and subordinates the animal, vegetable, and mineral to the categorizations of kingdom, class, and order as well as genus and species; in elevating human reason, it perpetuates hierarchical forms and structures. My inhabiting of this French calendar, anachronistically and in another country, is critical, depending on the gap between sensory experience and abstractions such as nation, since neither the languages nor the plants will stay put. Etymologies wander across borders; sense associations, far from creating a unified collective memory as D'Églantine hoped, proliferate in multiple directions. It is precisely because I am not French that I was able to write in response to a calendar created as part of a national project; its egalitarian aims were visionary, but it is also emblematic of a centralizing tendency that persists in France to this day, despite efforts to distribute power away from the metropolis. As a foreigner, I am on the outside of this history and able to make different connections. I might return to a revolutionary past in order to imagine a future, but it is a past entangled with other dimensions. As Donna Haraway suggests, a relationship with our 'mixed-up times' might be seen more helpfully in terms of 'tentacular thinking' that might enable us 'to make kin in lines of inventive connection as a practice of learning to live and die well with each other in a thick present.'<sup>28</sup>

## Sensory Performance

My performance of the poems has been a means of thinking through human and non-human relationships, particularly under the pressure of the pandemic, which threw so many interdependencies and vulnerabilities into relief. In the absence of any venue for a launch event, I gave outdoor readings between 2020 and 2022 at the

<sup>27</sup> Skoulding, *A Revolutionary Calendar*, 89.

<sup>28</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *Staying With the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 1.

Treborth Botanic Garden in Bangor. These loosely structured walking events were an invitation to reflect on sensory experiences of the gardens as much as to listen to poems. By addressing poems to specific plants, I wanted to reflect the ritual and celebratory aspect of the Calendar, which was designed to replace saints with plants. However, rather than anthropomorphizing trees, I was interested in how humans might develop different sensory frameworks for encountering objects. I began each event by naming participants, according to their birthday, with their particular plant, animal, or implement, offering choices where two alternatives were possible, since there are slightly different ways of calculating the calendar conversion. In addition, I offered participants labels on which to note their own sensory responses to the garden as we walked, which we afterwards hung, temporarily, on trees. The label, used to identify and distinguish, is a paradoxical vehicle for imparting sensory information, particularly the diffuse and ephemeral experience of touch, taste, and smell. It was exactly this paradox that interested me in the context of the Botanic Garden, a horticultural space in which plants are gathered for study. Sharing food and drink, while observing Covid restrictions, was a means of extending the poetry reading into ritual. On the first day of Vendémiaire, Day of the Grape, we ate grapes and drank wine on the anniversary of the beginning of the Republic, noticing how this act echoed both Christian communion and the Jewish Rosh Hashanah, a New Year that begins a few days later, and which is celebrated with sweet fruit. Despite these ironies I hoped to create a sense of sociality between humans that might extend to plants, animals, and objects, imagining each event as an interaction with the gardens rather than the gardens being a passive receptacle for human activity.

A contrasting situation was the online reading I gave. I created a performance for 'Language is à Virus', a year-long series of weekly meetings between Chile and Europe, organized by Felipe Cussen and Martín Bakero, during which an international assemblage of sound poets tested the possibility of virtual collective sound poetry.<sup>29</sup> Despite the potential of this new medium, both technically, for collaborative performance, and in enabling new transatlantic conversations, I missed cooking for my friends from close by and far away, sitting down at a table with them, talking and eating. To perform 'Vendémiaire', I collected as many of the fruits and vegetables from that month as I could: grapes, carrots, potatoes, squash, pumpkin, potatoes, peaches, peppers, and sunflowers. I gathered them on my dining table in front of my laptop, and made as much sound out of them as I could, while reading poems. I chopped, chewed, slurped, and sang, playing with the noises of sociality, those that are normally excluded or minimized, as sound sources. Reading one's own poems and crunching noisily are behaviours that are equally discouraged at a shared dining table, but I used an electronic looper to chop and mix them into layers and textures—a process not unlike cooking. I would not describe my

<sup>29</sup> 'Language is à Virus', 24; [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QUGij4g-Iqs&t=3385s&ab\\_channel=MartinBakeroFelipeCussen](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QUGij4g-Iqs&t=3385s&ab_channel=MartinBakeroFelipeCussen).

approach in terms of ‘extended vocal techniques,’ a term which describes a virtuosity that I respect but do not possess.

Although I spent some time researching the ways in which sounds can be made out of vegetables for horror movie and video game soundtracks, I did not try to form instruments out of them, as has been done by the Vegetable Orchestra from Vienna. Rather, I was interested in discovering sounds and hearing them differently, crossing the boundary between language and non-language, exploring the limits of what might be defined as ‘vocal’ performance. Bob Cobbing’s sound poetry, a key influence on ‘Language is à Virus,’ is concerned with rediscovering the possibilities of the human voice in making a sound poetry that ‘dances, tastes, has shape.’<sup>30</sup> The taste of vocalization, for Cobbing, is the intensity of texture and vibration; his work is grounded in a particular working-class, male body and its powerful sonorities. My own voice does not have that kind of force, but like him I am interested in what Henri Chopin has described as ‘vocal-micro-particles,’ that is, the kind of detail audible when the recording of a voice can be slowed down or manipulated.<sup>31</sup> At this point, the phenomenon of ‘voice,’ as in the expression of an individual human being, dissolves into things: air, tongue, saliva, teeth. This approach removes the hierarchy between voice as a production of the human body and the sounds produced by other objects.

However, unlike sound poetry that pushes speech into its sounded aspects, there is a separation in my performance between a written text, which I read, and the creation of non-verbal sound textures. I cut an aubergine in two, and held it up to the camera:

*Aubergine Aubergine*

yes but can you read what it says  
                   not the pale flesh  
 tracing round the seed like faint letters  
 but the tissues of knowledge  
 not your own<sup>32</sup>

While a logical development from sound poetry might be to perform the text of the aubergine, taking its markings as a visual score for vocal performance, the video call as a medium allows a different set of possibilities. Building on previous work combining field recordings with poetry, I am interested in how repeated loops separate sound from my body, while simultaneously placing the verbal material of the poem in a continuum with the body and its surroundings. Although this can result in a loss of clarity for the listener intent on catching every word, I am drawn to exploration of the point at which language dissolves into noise, or where sound

<sup>30</sup> Steve McCaffery and bpNichol, *Sound Poetry: A Catalogue for the Eleventh International Sound Poetry Festival, Toronto, Canada, October 14 to 21 1978* (Toronto: Underwhich Editions, 1978), 39.

<sup>31</sup> McCaffery and bpNichol, *Sound Poetry*, 39.

<sup>32</sup> Skoulding, *A Revolutionary Calendar*, 15.

distracts from semantic meaning rather than underpinning it. Poetry demands a sensory response, to be tasted rather than swallowed, or in Jean-Luc Nancy's terms, it invites a listening (*écoute*) rather than a hearing-understanding (*entendre*).<sup>33</sup> This is a matter of attention, but attention is always in flux, caught between language and the senses; this is the crux of Serres's distinction between the first and second mouth.

Breathing is the rhythmic base of poetry and song, the length of a line or a note, the activity that keeps going during speaking and eating alike. Emanuele Coccia's 'metaphysics of mixture' reveals the centrality of plants to 'the breath of the world'; in his account, plants are originators of the atmosphere in which all of life mingles. 'Everything is a repetition, intensification, and variation of what takes place in breath.'<sup>34</sup> Serres describes the air as a sensorial baseline, 'the medium for every signal that reaches our senses. This neutral state or base line is not determined through sensation, but remains a thing to be sensed, at the very limit of the sensible.'<sup>35</sup> This is what is missing in an online performance: the use of an audio interface enables sound to be mixed directly into the virtual meeting, where the air we breathe is digital time, the slight lag in the space between continents. In preparing my performance, I had in mind Cecilia Vicuña's session in the same series. In initiating a group improvisation at the end, she invited everyone in the call to lean into the camera and microphone, and breathe together.<sup>36</sup> This feeling of shared space was in fact a synchronicity mediated by the slight delay of the video interface; the air we breathed was digital time. Despite taking place simultaneously in Europe and the Americas, Vicuña's approach also illustrated the potential for a degree of intimacy that would be difficult to achieve in other performance situations. If conveniently overlooked lines of slavery and economic exploitation have enabled food to traverse the Atlantic Ocean, it is also necessary to ask what is supporting our lines of communication in the present. What energy resources? What minerals for my laptop? What inequalities? What mysteries are being concealed in the apparent magic of this meeting across continents? Whose power? I imagine a new calendar with days dedicated to lithium and fibre-optic cables that might place the material conditions of virtual existence within the realm of everyone's understanding. What revolution might then be possible?

If the Republican Calendar was, historically, a project that put the senses to work for defined political ends, it also suggests a line of thinking that invites us, in the present and no less unstable world, to come to our senses. Against the contemporary rush of digital misinformation and manipulation, the visual saturation of consciousness by invisible forces, it asserts the need for collective understanding of the ways in which bodies are connected with the material world that sustains them, and

<sup>33</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening*, trans. Charlotte Mandell (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007).

<sup>34</sup> Emanuele Coccia, *The Life of Plants: A Metaphysics of Mixture*, trans. Dylan J. Montanari (Cambridge: Polity, 2019), 55.

<sup>35</sup> Serres, *The Five Senses*, 169.

<sup>36</sup> 'Language is à Virus', 15; [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RXcEF0AMYE&t=6075s&ab\\_channel=MartinBakeroFelipeCussen](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RXcEF0AMYE&t=6075s&ab_channel=MartinBakeroFelipeCussen).

for collective ownership of an imagination drawn from these relationships. Taste and smell, as senses with the most elusive connection to language, locate the body in its time, and in the eating and breathing that make one body part of every other.

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v

TOUCH



# CONTACT, CONDUCT, AND TACTILE NETWORKS

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## Touch and its Social Functions in Middle English Verse Romance

HANNAH PIERCY

Kepe fete and fyngers and hondys styll in pese.  
 [Keep feet and fingers and hands still, in peace.]  
 Crache not thi fleche for ought that may befall.  
 [Scratch not your flesh for anything that might happen.]  
 Ete thou not mete with thi unwasche hondys.  
 [Do not eat food with your unwashed hands.]<sup>1</sup>

When thi better take thee the coppe,  
 Drinke thi selffe and sett it uppe;  
 Take the coppe with thi hondys.  
 [When your better gives you the cup,  
 Drink for yourself and set it upright;  
 Take the cup with your hands.]<sup>2</sup>

These instructions, from two conduct texts for children included in the fifteenth-century manuscript Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Ashmole 61 (*Stans Puer ad Mensam* and *Dame Courtesy*), establish rules for what children are and are not allowed to do with their hands. They set out what children may touch, the requirements for them to engage in touch (such as cleanliness), and how their touch should be modified in the presence of their social superiors. Medieval and early modern conduct literature regulates sensory experiences and proscribes tactile

<sup>1</sup> 'Item 7, Stans Puer ad Mensam', in *Codex Ashmole 61: A Compilation of Popular Middle English Verse*, ed. George Shuffelton (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2008), 60–7 (ll. 55, 62, 72). Translations are my own.

<sup>2</sup> 'Item 8, Dame Courtesy', in *Codex Ashmole 61*, 67–70 (ll. 133–5). Translations are my own.



behaviour as part of its programme of education, so this focus on appropriate touch is not surprising. What is more unexpected is that this preoccupation with regulating touch permeates the less explicitly didactic genre of Middle English verse romance as well.<sup>3</sup>

In *The Book of Touch*, Constance Classen asks, '[d]o we learn a "mother touch" along with a mother tongue? A tactile code of communication that underpins the ways in which we engage with other people and the world?'<sup>4</sup> Conduct texts explicitly taught medieval people contemporary codes of touch, but imaginative literature had a role in this tactile education too. Indeed, Classen's suggestion that 'touch has what could be called a vocabulary and a grammar' applies particularly well to Middle English romance. Although Classen cautiously reflects that 'language seems too formal and linear a model for tactile communication', in the romances I discuss touch *is* formal and to some extent linear; it is governed by precise rules and expectations; and different forms of touch serve distinct functions in a manner akin to the different parts of speech in grammar.<sup>5</sup> Given that touch and romance are often associated with the bodily and carnal, in contrast to the refinement of sight or the morality of religious and didactic literature, this may seem surprising. However, as I shall demonstrate, the portrayal of touch in romance is often restrained, codified, and ordered, revealing the surprising affinities between portrayals of the senses in imaginative fiction, conduct literature, and religious writing.

I focus in this chapter on four romances written in Britain, primarily in Middle English.<sup>6</sup> These works range in date from the thirteenth to the late fifteenth century, but they share a focus on hands or tactile behaviour that draws particular attention to their representations of touch. In *Havelok* (c.1280–90), the eponymous hero cuts off the traitor Godrich's hand in battle; in *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle* (c.1400), Gawain's tactile conduct with the Carle's wife is carefully policed; *Eger and Grime* (c.1450) features a severed finger and a dismembered hand; and *Sir Degaré* (early fourteenth century) includes a magical pair of gloves that will fit only Degaré's mother. These representations of hands are not necessarily the focus of this chapter, but they form the background to the romances' carefully constructed representations of touch as a social and communicative sense. The romances I discuss, written for a non-courtly audience, do not describe tactile or indeed other sensory experi-

<sup>3</sup> Romances are included alongside the conduct texts in Ashmole 61, although these particular romances are not my focus in this chapter. While these conduct texts are explicitly addressed to children, romances too have been argued to appeal to a young readership: see Phillipa Hardman, 'Popular Romances and Young Readers', in Raluca L. Radulescu and Cory James Rushton, eds, *A Companion to Medieval Popular Romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2009), 150–64.

<sup>4</sup> Constance Classen, 'Contact', in Classen, ed., *The Book of Touch* (Oxford: Berg, 2005), 13–15 (13).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> *Eger and Grime* was probably written in Scotland (the first reference to it is a record of the performance of 'Graysteil' before James IV of Scotland in 1497), but it survives in an anglicized form and context in the version in London, British Library, MS Additional 27879 (the Percy Folio), and I therefore include it amongst my discussion of Middle English romances here (in keeping with common critical practice).

ences in detail, as they focus primarily upon action and plot rather than description and reflection. Their lack of extended sensory description is perhaps why Middle English romances have been somewhat under-represented in scholarship on the senses. However, in this chapter I explore the ways in which brief references to touch, of the kind found in the romances on which I focus, can help us to uncover the everyday ways in which touch was understood to operate. Mark Smith, following Alain Corbin, has argued that historians of the senses ‘must understand the actual ways in which people understood the senses, their relation, and their social meaning, and to do that demands that we listen to multiple voices from multiple contexts and discourses.’<sup>7</sup> Clarifying that these multiple voices should include everything ‘from the quotidian and everyday to the abstract and rarefied’, Mark Paterson describes touch itself ‘[a]s a reprehensibly under-examined component of everyday, embodied experience.’<sup>8</sup> The ways in which touch functions in Middle English romance indicate its place in everyday experience. Romances offer an alternative to medieval scientific understandings of the senses: while they sometimes draw upon scientific ideas, they were familiar to a more representative (but still predominantly middle- to upper-class) audience, revealing how the senses were understood outside of intellectual and medical circles.<sup>9</sup> In my discussion of tactile actions and their functions in romance writing, I build upon previous work by J. A. Burrow, Gerd Althoff, and Barry Windeatt, which has explored the importance of gesture in medieval narratives, including romances.<sup>10</sup> But while these scholars consider gestures that involve touch (Althoff emphasizing the binding function of the *Handgang*, for example), they focus on the sensory experience of gestures only tangentially; in contrast, I attend to the particular meaning of touch within tactile gestures, exploring how romances’ use of tactile gestures aligns with treatments of touch in conduct literature and religious writing.

To set out how medieval romance may have educated its readers about tactile conduct, I begin by addressing the ways in which romances eschew eroticism and

<sup>7</sup> Mark M. Smith, *Sensing the Past: Seeing, Hearing, Smelling, Tasting, and Touching in History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 15.

<sup>8</sup> Mark Paterson, *The Senses of Touch: Haptics, Affects, and Technologies* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), 2.

<sup>9</sup> On romances’ engagement with scientific understanding, see Corinne Saunders, ‘Thinking Fantasies: Visions and Voices in Medieval English Secular Writing’, in Hilary Powell and Corinne Saunders, eds, *Visions and Voice-Hearing in Medieval and Early Modern Contexts* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 91–116.

<sup>10</sup> J. A. Burrow, *Gestures and Looks in Medieval Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002); Barry Windeatt, ‘Towards a Gestural Lexicon of Medieval English Romance’, in Elizabeth Archibald, Megan G. Leitch, and Corinne Saunders, eds, *Romance Rewritten: The Evolution of Middle English Romance* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2018), 133–51; Gerd Althoff, *Rules and Rituals in Medieval Power Games: A German Perspective* (Leiden: Brill, 2020); see especially ‘Symbolic Communication and Medieval Order: Strengths and Weaknesses of Ambiguous Signs’, 159–69, and see ‘Do Poets Play with the Rules of Society?’, 217–33, for Althoff’s application of his theories of symbolic communication and *Spielregeln* (implicit, unwritten societal rules) to medieval literature (including Middle High German romance).

carnality in their representation of touch. Assigned by Aristotle to the bottom of the sensory hierarchy, touch was most often described as a base and carnal sense.<sup>11</sup> Yet the romances I discuss reorient eroticism away from touch, sometimes linking it to a different sense, and sometimes controlling or avoiding erotic touch altogether. The dissociation of eroticism and touch in these romances elevates touch and its functions, challenging its place at the bottom of the sensory hierarchy. If touch is not carnal and erotic in romance, then, what functions might it serve in this genre? In the second section, I argue that romances use touch to represent and mediate social relationships, attending to the precise social nuances of different forms of contact, and revealing how tactile practices are used to form and regulate communities and social connections. In the final section, I explore how these tactile networks can work in a more subversive manner, arguing that they reveal a counter-narrative beneath the primary storyline in *Sir Degaré*. In doing so, I suggest that reading touch in medieval romance can provide new insights into individual romances like *Sir Degaré*, as well as a different view of the elevated social functions of touch, allowing us to reconsider the medieval hierarchy of the senses.

### **Carnality or Restraint? Controlling Erotic Touch in Middle English Romance**

The romances I discuss contain a rape, sex both outside of and within marriage, and men and women socializing in private, intimate locations. They therefore provide opportunities for depicting lust, love, and eroticism, but whereas Elizabeth D. Harvey argues that '[t]he judgment about where touch belongs in the sensory echelon has much to do . . . with definitions of love and lust, the value of eroticism, and the place of the material or the fleshly,'<sup>12</sup> in Middle English romance the erotic potential of touch is restrained despite the genre's apparent 'sensationalist taste for sex and violence.'<sup>13</sup> Instead, romance values touch for the social and political meanings it conveys, attending to the nuances of different forms of contact. This redirection of touch away from eroticism and towards a communicative social function is clearly shown in *Havelok*. Two examples of touch in this work occur in a context where we might anticipate eroticism: a kiss between the eponymous hero Havelok and his wife Goldeborw, and an embrace between this couple while they lie naked in bed. Other romances emphasize a couple's sexual pleasure upon marriage, yet in *Havelok*

<sup>11</sup> See Robert Jütte, *A History of the Senses: From Antiquity to Cyberspace*, trans. James Lynn (Cambridge: Polity, 2005), 61–71.

<sup>12</sup> Elizabeth D. Harvey, 'Introduction: The "Sense of All Senses"', in Harvey, ed., *Sensible Flesh: On Touch in Early Modern Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 1–21 (4).

<sup>13</sup> Nicola McDonald, 'A polemical introduction', in McDonald, ed., *Pulp fictions of medieval England: Essays in popular romance* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), 1–21 (1).

touch is dissociated from eroticism. The only time Goldeborw kisses Havelok is when she discovers, through the revelation of an angel, that her husband is not the low-status man he appears to be. At this news, '[s]he was so fele sipes bliþe / Þat she ne mithe hire ioie mythe, / But Hauelok sone anon she kiste' [she was so very glad / that she could not hide her joy / but kissed Havelok immediately].<sup>14</sup> The kiss is explicitly an expression of Goldeborw's 'ioie' rather than of sexual or erotic desire. Nor is there any eroticized description: as Windeatt has argued of romances more generally, here kissing forms 'part of [the] emotional texture', but it 'remains noticeably undescribed and functional'.<sup>15</sup> The kiss conveys Goldeborw's emotional reaction to the news that her husband is the rightful king of Denmark, rather than expressing erotic desire.

Goldeborw's kiss has a further communicative social function, which becomes especially evident in comparison with another moment of kissing in the romance. When Ubbe, the Danish earl, kisses Havelok's feet upon discovering that this is his rightful king, the kiss again expresses joy at an unexpected revelation. However, the location of Ubbe's kiss also indicates the way that romances are alive to the precise social nuances of particular forms of contact, as well as illuminating connections between touch in romance and religious writing. The location of Goldeborw's kiss is not specified, which, as Burrow observes, is common in medieval writing. However, Burrow notes that 'where writers do specify, kisses are said to be given mouth to mouth', suggesting this may be how we should read Goldeborw's kiss.<sup>16</sup> In contrast, Ubbe kisses '[h]ise fet... / Þe tos, þe nayles, and þe liþes' [his feet... / the toes, the nails, and the tips, lines 2163–4]. Ubbe kissing Havelok's feet may recall Mary (conflated with Mary Magdalene by Pope Gregory the Great) wiping Christ's feet with her hair after anointing them (John 12:3), or Christ washing the disciples' feet (John 13:5–14), adding to the Christological associations Kimberly Bell identifies in this romance.<sup>17</sup> But while Bell suggests Ubbe 'behave[s] as if... worshipping a statue or image of a saint', his kiss and the posture he adopts, as '[h]e fellen sone [straightaway] at hise fet [feet]' (line 2159), also takes on social significance, embodying his new, subordinate relationship to Havelok.<sup>18</sup> Burrow notes that 'the more you lower your body, the more humbly you submit', highlighting the deferential nature of Ubbe's posture.<sup>19</sup> This contrasts with Goldeborw's unspecified kiss, which may not just express relief at Havelok's refined social status but may physically manifest her new sense of their equality if she is read as kissing Havelok on the face. These two instances of touching by kissing in *Havelok* are not described in

<sup>14</sup> *Havelok*, ed. G. V. Smithers (Oxford: Clarendon, 1987), ll. 1278–80. All translations are my own.

<sup>15</sup> Windeatt, 'Towards a Gestural Lexicon', 143. <sup>16</sup> Burrow, *Gestures and Looks*, 33.

<sup>17</sup> Kimberly K. Bell, 'Resituating Romance: The Dialectics of Sanctity in MS Laud Misc. 108's *Havelok the Dane* and *Royal Vitae*', *Parergon* 25, no. 1 (2008), 27–51 (42–51). I would like to thank Rachel Fennell for encouraging me to think about this, and for her comments on an early draft of this chapter.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 49. <sup>19</sup> Burrow, *Gestures and Looks*, 18.

erotic terms; instead, they demarcate the specific social relationships of the people involved in this contact.

A second example of potentially erotic contact in *Havelok* more directly challenges the hierarchy of the senses that positions touch as a lower, carnal sense, relocating eroticism to the sense of sight (traditionally placed at the top of this hierarchy). When Ubbe recognizes Havelok as his king, Havelok is sleeping in bed, '[j]n his armes his brithre [radiant] bride: / Bi þe pappes he [down to the breast they] leyen naked' (lines 2132–3). However, it is not Havelok and Goldeborw's embrace that is erotic in this scene: it is the fact that there are observers of this embrace that creates vicarious erotic pleasure. The watching knights see the nudity of this pair and 'þouth of hem god gamen, / Hem for to shewe and loken to' [thought it was a good sport / to look and gaze upon them, lines 2136–7]. The 'gamen' (a word elsewhere used for sexual intercourse, for example in 'þe prive love game' of *William of Palerne*) is looking at their entwined bodies, not feeling an embrace.<sup>20</sup> Sight, not touch, is the more carnal and erotic sense here, an unexpected correlation that inverts the conventional hierarchy of the senses.

*Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle* does not challenge the association between the erotic and touch, but it does model the restraint of carnal touch through the interactions between Gawain, the Carle, and the Carle's wife. As part of the way this romance tests the limits of obedience to social codes of hospitality, Gawain is instructed by the Carle to 'take my wyfe in thi armus tweyne [between your arms] / And kys her in my syghte'.<sup>21</sup> However, the Carle carefully governs which forms of touch are permitted: when Gawain gets carried away '[f]or softnis of that Ladys syde' (line 463) and 'wolde have doun the prevey far' [wanted to do the private act, line 466], he is swiftly prevented. Touch can be tempting, and the 'softnis' of the lady's skin briefly evokes this tactile pleasure for the reader, but touch is also carefully controlled here. The restraint of tactile pleasures in *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle* aligns it with its manuscript context in Aberystwyth, National Library of Wales, MS Brogyntyn ii.1 (formerly MS Porkington 10), where it is accompanied by 'quite humorous moral stories', such as 'The Friar and the Boy', and 'might be experienced by a reader more in terms of its moral lessons when read from this manuscript than it might otherwise have been if viewed in isolation'.<sup>22</sup> This moral yet humorous focus upon regulating touch is even continued when Gawain is permitted to have sex with the Carle's daughter, as their tactile engagement and pleasure are not described. Instead, sight comes to the fore, as the lady is described as

<sup>20</sup> *William of Palerne: An alliterative romance*, ed. G. H. V. Bunt (Groningen: Bouma, 1985), l. 1020.

<sup>21</sup> 'Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle', in *Sir Gawain: Eleven Romances and Tales*, ed. Thomas Hahn (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995), 85–103 (ll. 455–6). All translations are my own. This romance survives in a unique copy, although a different version of the same story is preserved in the Percy Folio ballad *The Carle of Carlisle*.

<sup>22</sup> Elisabeth Salter, *Popular Reading in English c. 1400–1600* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), 196, 197.

'bryght(e)' (lines 489, 493, 507, 508), 'feyr' [fair, line 491], and 'cler' [beautiful or bright, line 507], and wonders '[w]her I schall se enny mor [see any more] this knyght / That hathe ley [laid] my body so ner [near]?' (lines 509–10). The lady's primary desire is to see Gawain, again moving away from the erotic associations of touch.

The moral restraint of touch in the Scottish romance of *Eger and Grime* is less explicit, but *Eger and Grime* may advocate restraining erotic touch by modelling opportunities for eroticism that are ultimately avoided. The importance of space, particularly the chamber, to *Eger and Grime*'s representation of touch reveals the necessity of considering sensory experiences within their precise spatial contexts, as *Eger and Grime* illustrates what Hollie Morgan describes as the 'cultural understanding that women had a degree of power in the chamber, which they did not have elsewhere.'<sup>23</sup> This power provokes questions about 'the nature of women's secrecy', as the lady Loosepaine is able to attend to the men she wishes in her chamber, which appears to be entirely isolated from the control of the patriarchal head of the household.<sup>24</sup> Yet the form of touch in which Loosepaine engages is healing, not loving, modelling a restrained non-erotic mode of contact. The moments where she tends to Eger's wounds are the most detailed descriptions of tactile sensation in the romance, as Eger describes how she 'searched my wounds full soone' and 'with her white hands shee did wash mine', before

all my bloodye tents* out shee drew,	*dressings	
again shee tented* my wounds anew:	*dressed	
wott* yee well itt was noe threede,*	*know	*thread
the tents* that into my wounds yeede,*	*dressings	*went
they were neither of lake* nor Line,*	*cambric	*linen
but they were silke both good & fine. <sup>25</sup>		

Sensory experience is attended to here in the 'warme water' (line 250) in which Loosepaine washes Eger's injured hands, as well as the silk she uses to dress his wounds, but this intimate touch is not an erotic experience. *Eger and Grime* engages less explicitly with erotic touch than *Havelok* and *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle*, but creating the opportunity for erotic touch only to reorient it towards healing touch continues the emphasis upon restrained tactile contact in the other romances I have discussed.

Touch in these romances, then, is not primarily an erotic sense. Sight rather than touch facilitates erotic experience in *Havelok*, tactile temptation in *Sir Gawain and*

<sup>23</sup> Hollie L. S. Morgan, *Beds and Chambers in Late Medieval England: Readings, Representations and Realities* (York: York Medieval Press, 2017), 188.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 189.

<sup>25</sup> *Eger and Grime: A parallel-text edition of the Percy and the Huntington-Laing Versions of the Romance*, ed. James Ralston Caldwell (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933), Percy, ll. 244, 252, 277–82. All citations are to the line numbers of this edition, and to the Percy Folio version unless otherwise stated. All translations are my own. I discuss the relationship between the two versions later.

*the Carle of Carlisle* is carefully controlled, and *Eger and Grime* avoids erotic touch entirely. Instead of conveying erotic experience, these romances use touch to construct social relationships; while I have begun to explore this already in *Havelok*, the next section more comprehensively examines the way in which touch emerges not as a carnal sense but as ‘a sense of communication’ in medieval English romance.<sup>26</sup>

### **Making Contact: Constructing Relationships through Tactile Networks**

Touch in Middle English romance forms and regulates communities, expressing social relationships to those immediately involved in moments of contact, to characters observing this contact, and to the romance’s readers. In this light, romances not only recommend the restraint of erotic touch but go further in positing a social and even at times quasi-legal function for touch that again shifts it away from its carnal associations. In *Havelok*, touch creates and signals social relationships and binding agreements of trust, as the most direct reference to two people touching in the early stages of the romance is when King Birkabeyn of Denmark entrusts his children to Godard (who later betrays them). When he asks Godard to care for them, Birkabeyn ‘on Godard handes leyde, / And seyde “Here biteche [entrust] I þe [to you] / Mine children alle þre” [three]’ (lines 383–5). This is a highly formalized act which endows the recipient of the king’s touch, Godard, with both power and responsibility, indicating the social, political, and even legal functions touch could serve. *Havelok* here aptly attests Classen’s contention that ‘[t]ouch is not just a private act. It is a fundamental medium for the expression, experience and contestation of social values and hierarchies.’<sup>27</sup> The king’s active instigation of touch expresses his power as ruler. His touch formalizes a relationship and agreement between the two men, making this visible (or tangible) to the people witnessing this exchange of contact and contract, as well as impressing this responsibility directly upon Godard. This moment is not present in either of the sources for the Middle English *Havelok* (Geffrei Gaimar’s *Estoire des Engleis* and the *Lai d’Havelok*), suggesting touch may have had particular meaning for the Middle English redactor or in the context in which they were working.

Touch also acts as a medium for expressing relationships in *Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle*, where the focus on tactile restraint in Gawain’s encounter with the Carle’s wife is accompanied by the Carle’s use of contact to express approval or disapproval of his guests’ conduct. When the Carle finds Kay’s and Baldwin’s obedience wanting, he strikes them down. In contrast, when he is pleased by Gawain’s

<sup>26</sup> Paterson, *The Senses of Touch*, 1.

<sup>27</sup> Constance Classen, ‘Fingerprints: Writing about Touch’, in *The Book of Touch*, 1–9 (1).

deference, the Carle not only praises him but ‘be the honde hyme hente [took]’ (line 402). This accords with Burrow’s discussion of leading by the hand as ‘an act of courtesy by which the leader bestows honour on the led’, as touch accompanies and affirms the Carle’s praise.<sup>28</sup> The Carle taking Gawain by the hand also signals the closer relationship these men will develop, as Gawain eventually marries the Carle’s daughter. Different forms of touch convey the Carle’s approval or disapproval of his guests, revealing the social relationship in which each stands to the other, but touch also signals the development of these relationships and the formation of new communities and social bonds. These patterns of tactile contact are even more pronounced in the later ballad *The Carle of Carlisle*, preserved in the Percy Folio (London, British Library, MS Additional 27879) and not thought to derive directly from the romance discussed here, further revealing the signifying potential of touch in short literary works without extensive descriptions.

Individual moments of touch mediate and represent particular relationships, but some romances construct more comprehensive tactile networks, which reveal how the grammar of touch reflects broader aspects of social identity like gender and status. *Eger and Grime* offers this more comprehensive picture of tactile communication. This romance survives in two different versions, one in the Percy Folio, and the other (the Huntington-Laing redaction) in three Scottish prints. Each version presents its tactile networks differently, but in ways that internally cohere; as I will argue, this suggests that tactile networks were used to signal social relationships to medieval readers. In the Percy Folio text, two primary kinds of touch indicate the social relationship of one person to another: touching hands and kissing. Those whose hands touch in the Percy version (listing the initiator of touch first) are Loosepaine and Eger; Winglayne’s father and Eger; Grime and Loosepaine; Loosepaine’s father and Grime; and Grime and Eger. Meanwhile, Winglayne’s mother kisses Eger when he is said to be leaving on adventure, Loosepaine kisses Grime in greeting, and Loosepaine kisses Grime multiple times when he returns from battle victorious. Even this brief overview suggests that forms of touch differ depending on gender and status: men and women touch hands, but only women kiss men—even though men kissing is normal in other romances.<sup>29</sup> The women who kiss Eger and Grime in this romance are also their social superiors: Winglayne’s mother is a countess, while Loosepaine is not only Grime’s host but also an earl’s daughter. Tactile agency correlates with status here, and this is consistent with the manual contact of Winglayne’s father and Eger, Loosepaine’s father and Grime, and Grime and Eger, all of which are repeated gestures. In each case, the person who takes the other’s hand is their social superior, suggesting the touching of hands is a hierarchical gesture that takes into account and expresses differences of status and agency by distinguishing active and passive touch. These hierarchical patterns of touch as instigated by the person of higher social status are sometimes supported by

<sup>28</sup> Burrow, *Gestures and Looks*, 48.

<sup>29</sup> Windeatt, ‘Towards a Gestural Lexicon’, 143.



the surrounding actions, as the taking of another's hand may be followed by a line that gives a command (for example, 'the Erle tooke Gryme by the hand, / & said, "gentle Knight, doe thou vpp stand!"' [lines 1243–4]), or by one person taking control over the other's behaviour, as when Grime dresses Eger in fine robes before informing the earl that Eger will be reconciled with Winglayne (his former lover). Forms of touch depend on and indicate gender and status in *Eger and Grime*.

Tactile networks of this kind also chart changes in individual relationships across a romance. Forms of touch signal the changing status of Loosepaine and Grime's relationship: Loosepaine kisses Grime in greeting when she believes he is Eger come to visit her, but she casts the jewels he gives her away when she discovers his pretence. To apologize to her and re-form their relationship, Grime takes Loosepaine by the hand, and she picks the jewels back up when she accepts his apology. These shifts in their tactile engagement indicate changes in their relationship. This includes touch that is mediated by objects or gifts, which we could call 'vicarious touch', akin to the 'vicarious kissing' Burrow identifies in both romance and sacred contexts.<sup>30</sup> The numerous kisses Loosepaine gives Grime upon his return from fighting Gray-Steel may also chart their evolving relationship as she starts to consider becoming his wife, according with Windeatt's observation that '[w]hat the romances ignore in not particularising the physical activity of kissing, they sometimes make up for by emphasising how kisses recur in time on the same occasion.'<sup>31</sup> Loosepaine's numerous kisses, more than the manner of the kisses (which, as with Goldeborw, is unspecified), express her emotional involvement with Grime at this stage of the romance. These shifts in tactile engagement as Loosepaine and Grime touch or avoid touch according to their feelings for and trust in one another again evidence touch's nuanced social functions. We may be missing an important signal of changes in social relationships when we read romances without attending to their representation of sensory connections and communities.

The social networks highlighted by touch, and particularly touching hands, overall align with perceptions of *Eger and Grime* as more interested in relationships between men than in those between men and women, as men repeatedly take each other's hands, engaging in more tactile contact than men and women. This suggests that tactile networks can offer an accurate map of the narrative and emotional interests of medieval romances. However, there is a difference here between the Huntington-Laing and Percy Folio texts. Whereas patriarchal figures of power (Winglayne's and Loosepaine's fathers) repeatedly take the hands of more subordinate men (Eger and Grime) in the Percy Folio text, in the Huntington-Laing redaction both earls take their wives by the hand, not Eger or Grime. In place of the Percy Folio's 'the Erle tooke Egars hand in his fist, / the countesse comlye [elegantly] cold him Kisse' (lines 633–4), in Huntington-Laing Eger 'could the Countess kiss. / The Earl then took her hand in his' (lines 979–80). Again, with Grime, instead of the

<sup>30</sup> Burrow, *Gestures and Looks*, 53–4.

<sup>31</sup> Windeatt, 'Towards a Gestural Lexicon', 143.

moment when ‘the Erle tooke Gryme by the hand’ (line 1251), in Huntington-Laing ‘[t]he Earl.../ took the Countess by the hand’ (lines 2083–4). Such variation may seem to imply that who touches whom is not regulated so specifically, but each version does construct a network of touch that is internally consistent. In the Percy Folio, the earls take the hands of the younger men who seek their daughters’ hands in marriage, ratifying and endorsing their developing relationship. In Huntington-Laing, the earls do not touch the younger men, forming a different kind of tactile network that indicates already existing bonds rather than the development of new ones. The consistent nature of this shift suggests that touch does not change because it is insignificant, but because touch signifies differently in each version of the romance. This may indicate a change in understandings of appropriate touch on the part of the redactor or audience of each version. Unfortunately, as which version is the earlier is unknown, it is difficult to offer any specific conclusions from this about the development of practices of touch over time. The social functions of touch and the way in which it creates and maintains communities changes according to very localized customs, and the way touch is represented in fictional narratives responds to and perhaps also shapes such changes.

*Havelok, Sir Gawain and the Carle of Carlisle, and Eger and Grime* are sensitive to how touch mediates relationships between people, both within each romance and to each romance’s readers. Medieval authors and readers were carefully attuned to the social and political meanings of tactile networks and the nuances of individual moments of touch, able to recognize the implications of affirmation, hierarchy, and trust that different forms of touch encode. Touch creates and maintains relationships and communities in romance writing, and extensive tactile networks, like those in *Eger and Grime*, can accurately chart the emotional interests and priorities of romance narratives, indicating which characters and relationships are the primary focus of a particular text. In the final stage of my argument, I want to turn to *Sir Degaré* to explore how its tactile networks might uncover counter-narratives that go against the grain of the dominant storyline.

### **Tactile Networks and Counter-Narratives in *Sir Degaré***

*Sir Degaré* recounts how Degaré is conceived when his mother is raped by a fairy, is separated from his mother and raised by a hermit, sets out to seek his family, and narrowly avoids committing incest with his mother and killing his father. The text survives in substantial form in four manuscripts and three early prints: Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, Advocates’ MS 19.2.1 (the Auchinleck manuscript); Cambridge University Library, MS Ff.2.38; Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Rawl. poet. 34 (henceforth Rawlinson); and the Percy Folio; the printed texts are by Wynkyn de Worde (c.1512–15), John King (1560), and William Copland (1565).

Two fragmentary manuscripts also survive, in London, British Library, MS Egerton 2862 (olim Tretham-Sutherland) and Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 261, as well as a fragmentary print by an unknown printer (c.1535). These surviving witnesses can be grouped into two distinct versions, as I will discuss shortly. In both versions, the motif of incest averted relies upon a pair of gloves, which both invite and prevent Degaré from committing incest. He is instructed to 'lovie no womman in londe / But this gloves willen [will fit] on hire honde', as well as being informed that the only person they will fit is his mother.<sup>32</sup> The role of the gloves invites us to consider whose hands are permitted to touch, as gloves prevent skin-to-skin contact through the part of the body most commonly associated with active touch, the hand.

While Margaret Robson has commented that 'Degarré's mother has her hands covered before she is allowed to touch her son' at the moment of their reunion, reading this as part of the concern with mother-son incest, I want to explore the regulation of their tactile intimacy at an earlier stage of the romance.<sup>33</sup> After the princess has given birth to Degaré,

The maiden servede here at wille,*	*according to her desire
Wond* that child in clothes stille,*	*wound      *quickly
And laid hit in a cradel anon,*	*immediately
And was al prest* tharwith to gon.	*ready
Yhit is moder was him hold:*	*faithful
Four pound she tok of gold,	
And ten of selver also;	
Under his fote she laid hit tho, -	
For swich thing hit mighte hove;*	*benefit
And seththen* she tok a paire glove	*then
That here lemman* here sente of* fairi londe,	*lover <sup>34</sup> *from
That nolde* on no manne honde,	*would not [fit]
Ne on child ne on womman yhe nolde,*	*they would not [fit]
But on hire selve wel yhe wolde.*	*they would [fit]
Tho gloven* she put under his hade,*	*gloves      *head
And siththen* a letter she wrot and made,	*then
And knit hit with a selkene* thred	*silken
Aboute his nekke wel gon sped.*	*in good time (lines 185–202)

<sup>32</sup> 'Sir Degaré', in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, ed. Anne Laskaya and Eve Salisbury (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995), 101–29 (ll. 215–6). All translations are my own. This edition is based on the Auchinleck manuscript with the ending of the Rawlinson text; I primarily refer to this edition but note significant variations.

<sup>33</sup> Margaret Robson, 'How's Your Father? Sex and the Adolescent Girl in *Sir Degarré*', in Amanda Hopkins and Cory James Rushton, eds, *The Erotic in the Literature of Medieval Britain* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2007), 82–93 (91).

<sup>34</sup> 'Lemman' can be translated as 'lover' or 'sweetheart'. The fairy tells the princess she will be his 'lemman' '[w]ether the liketh wel or wo' (ll. 107–8) before he rapes her; it is unambiguous, however, that this is rape. I have translated 'lemman' as 'lover', but I want to note the disturbing use of this term for a rapist.

There is an intriguing absence of direct touch between mother and child here. It is the princess's maid and confidante, the only person she has told of her pregnancy and rape at this point, who wraps up the child and makes him comfortable; the mother plays no role in this tactile act of care, whereas the mother in *Lay le Freine* wraps her baby up in cloth herself.<sup>35</sup> Degaré's mother does place items around the baby (which will help the child to be cared for by others), but direct touch is never clearly indicated even as she places the money '[u]nder his fote', the gloves 'under his hade', and ties the letter '[a]boutte his nekke'. Presumably she must touch the child to do these things, but this is not mentioned directly. That 'hold' is used for 'faithful', when this does often denote tactile engagement, may foreground the lack of direct touch in this scene. The Rawlinson manuscript uniquely revises this line so that the mother 'bygan yt hold' [began to hold it], but this is the only one of the seven substantial witnesses of *Sir Degaré* to include explicit touch between mother and child.<sup>36</sup> The other texts get close to but ultimately avoid describing direct touch between mother and child, delegating this instead to the maid.

This may obliquely suggest the emotional difficulty of the princess's situation, forced to send her child away to strangers. In the Auchinleck manuscript and Ff.2.38, this is supported by the direct attention paid to the princess's emotions when the maid returns from the hermitage. We are told that she 'fond the levedi al drupni, / Sore wepinde, and was sori' [found the lady all wretched, / sorely weeping, and was sad, lines 231–2]; the princess has a clear emotional response to the loss of her child here. This interest in her emotions is absent from the Rawlinson and Percy manuscripts and the printed texts, which omit these lines, supporting William Stokoe's argument that there are two distinct versions of *Sir Degaré*: AC (the Auchinleck and Cambridge manuscripts) and the later Z redaction (the Rawlinson manuscript, MS Douce 261, the Percy Folio, and the printed texts).<sup>37</sup> In the AC version, I suggest that we can map the princess's emotional response after the loss of her child back onto the avoidance of direct touch after Degaré's birth. The absence of or ambiguity concerning her tactile relationship with her baby may imply her reluctance to develop any connection with him, because she knows she cannot

<sup>35</sup> 'Lay le Freine', in *The Middle English Breton Lays*, ed. Laskaya and Salisbury, 68–75 (ll. 137–9).

<sup>36</sup> 'Sir Degaré', in *The Breton Lays in Middle English*, ed. Thomas C. Rumble (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1965), 45–78 (l. 173). This is the only edition based on the Rawlinson manuscript.

<sup>37</sup> William C. Stokoe, Jr., 'The Double Problem of *Sir Degaré*', *PMLA* 70, no. 3 (1955), 518–34. Like much of the other material in the Percy Folio manuscript, *Sir Degaré* was probably copied into the manuscript from a printed edition. See John W. Hales and Frederick J. Furnivall, 'Sir Degree', in *Bishop Percy's Folio Manuscript: Ballads and Romances*, ed. Hales and Furnivall, 3 vols (London: Trübner, 1868), III, 16–48 (17); Raluca L. Radulescu, 'Percy Folio', in Siân Echard, Robert Rouse, et al., eds, *The Encyclopedia of Medieval Literature in Britain*, 4 vols (Chichester: Wiley, 2017), IV, 1512–5 (1514). MS Douce 261 was also copied from a printed text: see Maldwyn Mills, 'EB and his Two Books: Visual Impact and the Power of Meaningful Suggestion. "Reading" the Illustrations in MSS Douce 261 and Egerton 3132A', in Stephen Kelly and John J. Thompson, eds, *Imagining the Book* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005), 173–91 (173).

maintain contact—in every sense of that word—with him. Touch (or its avoidance) conveys emotional complexity here, and this function recurs in the lead-up to and ultimate reunion of mother and child.

When Degaré and his mother meet again, it is when they are about to be married, and touch again seems to be avoided here. The king does declare to Degaré, '[m]i douwter I take the bi the hond, / And seise the her in al mi lond' [my daughter I give you by the hand, / and endow her to you with all my land, lines 603–4], but if this indicates that the king physically places his daughter's hands in Degaré's, rather than suggesting a metaphorical exchange of hands in marriage, it is a very indirect reference. Physical contact through the hands, however, would be expected during a marriage ceremony based on the Sarum rite of marriage in the later Middle Ages: this manual contact was sometimes called 'handfasting', although handfasting also occurred in the context of betrothal and other legal or quasi-legal contexts in which oaths and pledges were required.<sup>38</sup> Two illustrations that accompany *Sir Degaré*, a woodcut of the marriage in the de Worde print (Figure 19.1), and an illustration in MS Douce 261 (Figure 19.2), accord with this expectation.



**Figure 19.1** *Syr Degore* (London: Wynkyn de Worde, c.1512–15), sig b2v. The Morgan Library & Museum, New York; PML 21135. Photographic credit: The Morgan Library & Museum, New York.

<sup>38</sup> See Shannon McSheffrey, *Marriage, Sex, and Civic Culture in Late Medieval London* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 43–6; Burrow, *Gestures and Looks*, 15; Windeatt, 'Towards a Gestural Lexicon', 139–40.



**Figure 19.2** Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 261, *Sir Degore* (1564), fol. 009v. © The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford; CC-BY-NC4.0. <https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/8e01260b-1455-4048-bb69-332600cfd631/surfaces/695ddcf5-18e9-4c5f-861e-77453503a095/>.

In both images, Degaré and his mother appear to be holding hands, even though the text itself gives no indication that they touch during the ceremony. As the woodcut in the de Worde print was not custom-made (Edward Hodnett notes it was previously used by de Worde in Stephen Hawes's *Pastyme of Pleasure*, in *Generides*,

and in *Kynge Ponthus*), and the Douce illustration is probably based on this woodcut, these images seem to be generic illustrations of a typical marriage scene.<sup>39</sup> This generic status, further suggested by the similarity of a second marriage scene in the Douce manuscript (Figure 19.3), may draw attention to usual marital practice and the text's divergence from this. Indeed, *Sir Degaré* highlights this deviation, partly by encouraging consideration of touch and its avoidance through the symbol of the gloves, but also by reminding us that the couple who are to be married are mother and son. The narrator insists that 'God, that alle thingge mai stere, [guide] / Wolde nowt [did not want] that thai sinned ifere [together]' (lines 627–8), foregrounding the danger of incest, and in doing so suggesting a reason for the absence of touch.<sup>40</sup> The determination to avert the ultimate sinful touch of mother and son in incest perhaps makes the romance cautious about other forms of touch between them in a romantic or marital context; only when Degaré remembers the gloves and his mother puts them on are they finally allowed to form an appropriate tactile relationship.

The moment of their mutual recognition and reunion is a rare expression of tactile intimacy and love in this romance, which overall tends to prioritize violent touch—the first act of touch between two people is when the fairy rapes the princess. In this context, the embrace of Degaré and his mother stands out, as

Sire Degarre tok his moder tho*	*then	
And helde here in his armes two.		
Keste and clepte* here mani a sithe;*	*embraced	*time
That hit was sche, he was ful blithe.*	*very glad (lines 673–6)	

The affectionate tactility of their reunion here (emphasized in its emotional intensity by the cumulative embraces and kisses, as Windeatt has argued) contrasts with Degaré's aggressive tactile reunion with his father.<sup>41</sup> This is first mediated by violence, as they fight before recognizing each other, engaging with dints and blows rather than embraces and kisses. Even when they do recognize each other, they do not embrace. Instead, Degaré's father, recognizing the sword his son uses by its missing point,

tok the point and set therto;*	*[it to the sword]	
Degarre fel iswone* tho,*	*in a swoon	*then
And his fader, sikerli,*	*truly	
Also he gan swony;*	*swooned	
And whan he of swone arisen were,		
The sone cride merci* there	*apologized	
His owen fader of his misdede.	(lines 1062–8)	

<sup>39</sup> Edward Hodnett, *English Woodcuts 1480–1535* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973), 305 (no. 1241); Jordi Sánchez-Martí, 'Illustrating the printed Middle English verse romances, c.1500–c.1535', *Word & Image* 27, no. 1 (2011), 90–102 (95–7).

<sup>40</sup> Only the Percy Folio and Ff.2.38 do not contain lines that refer to God in this way, but Ff.2.38 finishes abruptly just before this point.

<sup>41</sup> Windeatt, 'Towards a Gestural Lexicon', 143.



**Figure 19.3** Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 261, *Sir Eglamour of Artois* (1564), fol. 44r. © The Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford; CC-BY-NC4.0. <https://digital.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/objects/8e01260b-1455-4048-bb69-332600cfd631/surfaces/9c63609c-3392-450a-a71a-d5115703c6a8/>.



This scene has often been identified as the narrative climax: in 1975 Bruce Rosenberg suggested that ‘the story is not resolved until the father is found: that reconciliation provides the climax of the narrative’, while Rachel Moss argued in 2016 that ‘[t]his scene has a far greater emotional and physical intensity than Degaré’s romantic scenes. *This* is the climactic moment of the romance, far more than Degaré’s brief love affair.’<sup>42</sup> Implicit in these statements is the assumption that Degaré’s reunion with his father is not just more intense and climactic than his love affairs, but also than his reunion with his mother. However, from the perspective of the tactile networks formed in this romance—networks that I have argued have representative power in other romances, like *Eger and Grime*—Dégare’s reunion with his mother offers more of an emotional climax than has been acknowledged previously. Moreover, while emotional intensity is expressed by swooning in Degaré’s reunion with his father, this intensity is in fact erased from the Z redaction, which opts for a more prosaic description:

He toke the poynt and sette it to  
 And they accorded bothe two  
 So longe they haue spoke togyder  
 Bothe the sone and the fader  
 That they be ryght well at one\*.<sup>43</sup>      \*accorded

Swooning and its corresponding emotional intensity are absent here, making the tactile affection and joy of the maternal reunion even more striking in this version. Nonetheless, tactility is significant in Degaré’s reunion with his mother in a way that it is not with his father across all the extant witnesses. This emphasis on their embrace stands out within a romance that is concerned with policing touch and that emphasizes violent and inappropriate touch over tactile affection, and this indicates, I suggest, an emotional and perhaps even climactic significance to their reunion. Reading tactile networks in *Sir Degaré* therefore opens up a counter-narrative that challenges previous understandings of this romance’s emotional interests and narrative emphases. In this counter-narrative, the princess is given more prominence and more capacity to express her emotions, revealing the fruitful nature of critical approaches that combine sensory history and feminist criticism. Uncovering touch and tactile networks in medieval romance not only helps us to understand the medieval sensorium of touch but can reveal new perspectives on these romances.

<sup>42</sup> Bruce A. Rosenberg, ‘The Three Tales of *Sir Degaré*’, *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 76, no. 1 (1975), 39–51 (41–2); Rachel E. Moss, ‘“And much more I am sorryat for my good knyghts”: Fainting, Homosociality, and Elite Male Culture in Middle English Romance’, *Historical Reflections / Réflexions Historiques* 42, no. 1 (2016), 101–13 (108).

<sup>43</sup> *Syr Degore* (London: Wynkyn de Worde, c.1512–15), EEBO [no pag.]; King and Copland differ only in spelling, and Percy contains only a minor variation.

## Conclusion

In the romances discussed in this chapter, touch is not a carnal sense but a communicative and social one. Of course, touch is erotic in some romances, such as *Partonope of Blois*, but even here Partonope's desire to see his lover Melior (who is magically invisible to him but whom he is allowed to touch as he pleases) to some extent overturns the idea of touch as carnal, erotic, and immoral, as sight is more strongly associated with desire and disruption. More often than facilitating eroticism, touch in Middle English romance mediates and expresses the relationships between individuals, and (re-)forms and regulates wider communities. Touch takes into account, reflects, and thereby reinforces social differences such as gender and status. These hierarchical functions of touch, and the restraint of erotic touch modelled by these romances, align the imaginative fictions of medieval romance with the portrayals of the senses in conduct literature and religious writing. '[M]edieval pastoral theology was driven by the need to educate and control the senses,' but romance also serves this purpose by modelling restraint and avoiding eroticism.<sup>44</sup> This is a more implicit approach than the explicit rules and guidance offered by conduct literature and pastoral works, but romances are perhaps no less effective as 'a form of courtesy text' for this.<sup>45</sup> The implicit education in restraining touch and engaging in practices of touch appropriate to gender, social status, and specific communities—the focus on 'the "tact" within *contact*', as Abbie Garrington puts it—points to an important function of literary representations of the senses: literature does not just record but also actively shapes, creates, and changes the ways in which people experience and interpret sensory stimuli.<sup>46</sup> The tactile practices modelled in the romances I have discussed may have encouraged their readers to moderate their own sensory engagements, changing the ways in which people deployed and interpreted touch. Returning to Classen's question with which I began—'do we learn a "mother touch" along with a mother tongue?'—I suggest not only that we learn a communicative code of touch but that imaginative literature offers one means by which we do so.<sup>47</sup> Yet the nuanced communicative functions of touch in romance can also teach us something about this genre itself, opening up space for both conservative and subversive readings of the tactile networks formed within individual romances.

<sup>44</sup> Annette Kern-Stähler and Kathrin Scheuchzer, 'Introduction', in Annette Kern-Stähler, Beatrix Busse, and Wietse de Boer, eds, *The Five Senses in Medieval and Early Modern England* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 1–17 (9). See also Richard G. Newhauser, 'Introduction: The Sensual Middle Ages', in Newhauser, ed., *A Cultural History of the Senses*, 1–22.

<sup>45</sup> Felicity Riddy, 'Middle English romance: family, marriage, intimacy', in Roberta L. Krueger, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 235–52 (242).

<sup>46</sup> Abbie Garrington, *Haptic Modernism: Touch and the Tactile in Modernist Writing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 3.

<sup>47</sup> Classen, 'Contact', 13.

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# TOUCH AND THE SENSIBLE IN THE *PLAY OF MARY MAGDALENE*

MARK AMSLER

Literary and material arts can reveal aspects of feeling and sensation otherwise inchoate in society. In this chapter, I propose a historicized biocultural reading of late medieval sensation, and especially touch, as it informs and emerges in the Middle English *Play of Mary Magdalene* (Oxford, Bodleian Library, Digby MS 133, probably late fifteenth century). Drama instantiates feeling and sensation as part of a semiotics of embodied speech, movement, and object relations within a culturally conditioned space of imagined performance. In Christianity's core narrative, the apostle Thomas is the most prominent 'toucher'. However, in late medieval England Mary Magdalene was central to a complex aesthetic and religious understanding of embodiment, flesh, and sensation, especially touch.<sup>1</sup> How the play performs, not just represents, sensation and different touch experiences can give us more detail about what touch signifies and how the medieval sensorium was configured as embodied experience.

It is important to contextualize performative representation as one semiotic code among many. Dramatic performances complicate any analysis of human sensation, perception, and emotion, because theatre remakes speech, movement, and objects as embodied fiction or ritual or symbolism. Stage speech, movement, and objects are not simple reproductions of everyday experience or things, or even imagined or interior ones. Stage space reframes objects and embodied action, language, and emotion as physically present but also symbolic, expressive, or transcendent. Onstage, a thing is not itself even if it looks so. Aesthetic imagination and spiritual imagination are especially entangled in religious drama. The *Play of Mary Magdalene* enacts these semiotic transpositions in biblical and sacramental representations of

<sup>1</sup> On the English Magdalene tradition, see Theresa Coletti, *Mary Magdalene and the Drama of Saints: Theater, Gender, and Religion in Late Medieval England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

Mary's and other characters' sensory and sensible experience, which relate dialogically with biocultural ideas about sensation, cognition, and language.

## Sensation Discourse

Among human senses, touch is most associated with the body as a whole rather than with a particular organ. Touch also overlaps with taste and speech when all three are associated with the mouth. In medieval culture, especially after 1200, any idea of touch was also closely connected with the status of flesh and Jesus's body in a dialectic of sacred and secular, spiritual and physical, pleasure and pain. Medieval and many modern biophilosophies situate flesh not only in the container/contained model for matter but also in a more Deleuzian or neuroscience context, whereby flesh is constituted as layers of sensate skin and tissue which collate for the brain ever deeper levels of sensation and self-awareness in the body.

In the late Middle Ages, the senses were described and moralized in various discourses. Philosophical and theological writing examined sensation, perception, and knowledge in the theory of mind, while some medical texts explained the relation between external sense organs and the internal or mental apparatus which produced concepts from sense data. Aristotelian approaches to language and being, after 1150 motivated by newly available texts such as *De anima*, increased scholars' attention to Arabic and Greek science and kick-started a more interactive model of the senses. Sensations became thought of not as passively received from objects but as actively involved in producing embodied knowledge with the Common Sense. Encyclopaedias such as Bartholomaeus Anglicus's *De proprietatibus rerum* (c.1240; Trevisa's translation, c.1398) codified this new knowledge in widely distributed Latin and vernacular versions. Aquinas and other theologians combined philosophical approaches to the senses and mind with explicitly moral ideas about perception, cognition, and truth. How one perceives became entangled with what one perceives.

In medieval preaching and devotional literature, some of the most significant and widely distributed descriptions of sensory knowledge and especially touch are found in representations of Jesus's life and Passion. Following the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), the Church's revitalized penitential discourse focused on the five canonical senses and how they could lead a person to sin (vices) or be disciplined to attain salvation (virtues). English devotional texts such as *Ancrene Wisse* (c.1225–40) and *Fyve Wyttes* (c.1400) advised readers to beware of everyday sensory experiences which could lead them to sin and to guard their bodily senses (windows, gates) against worldly temptations. Friars and other clergy developed strong moral critiques of the senses, which needed penitential discipline because they mediated the world with the soul. Late medieval religious drama affords us other perspectives on relations between sense perception and spiritual knowing. However, dramatic

performativity complicates representations of biblical narrative in that what is being performed overlaps with who and what is doing the performing. Semiotically, dramatic speech and action are always enfolded and therefore double, a likeness or index of the thing but not the thing itself. A sign of a sign to someone, dramatic performance constitutes an intersubjective phenomenological network of what Peirce called ‘dynamical’ objects, ‘forced upon the mind in perception...[to become] object[s] of actual Experience.’<sup>2</sup> Experience is more than perception. The semiotic and phenomenological implications of performing biblical and sacramental narrative give us further insights as to how multisensory experience was understood in both religious and naturalized contexts. The Digby play provocatively explores how Mary and other characters construct their sensory experience and especially Mary’s relation with Jesus’s body.

### Mary Magdalene and Touch

The *Play of Mary Magdalene* is a remarkable text, not only for its audacious staging but also when read in relation to medieval ideas about the senses. The saint play is associated with the vibrant East Anglian dramatic tradition of the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. But unlike the four English cycles and other biblical plays, the *Play of Mary Magdalene* decentres spectacular dramatizations of Jesus’s violent suffering and death. Instead, it depicts Jesus, Mary, and other characters with more colloquial and sacramental episodes, for example, Lazarus’s death and resurrection.

The play divides roughly into two parts. The first (1–924)<sup>3</sup> embellishes the biblical account of Mary Magdalene with Jacobus de Voragine’s *Legenda Aurea* (c.1266) and, following tradition, amalgamates Mary Magdalene with Mary, sister of Martha and Lazarus, and the unnamed women in Simon the Pharisee’s house. The second part (925–2143) further embellishes the *Legenda Aurea* account of Mary’s discovery of the empty tomb, her preaching and good works in Marseille, and her asceticism, death, and elevation to Heaven. The first part focuses on Mary’s sin, conversion, and discipleship. The second, post-Resurrection part treats Mary and the senses in more sacramental contexts.

The active bodies of Jesus and Mary and the status of Jesus’s body are central to the dramatic action and representation of sensation in the play. Touch is indexed in biblical and moral contexts, but not isolated from the other senses. Rather, the play reveals through gesture, staging, and dialogue how touch, in Aristotle’s words, is ‘not a single sense but many’ and why touch is fundamental to our sense of exist-

<sup>2</sup> Charles Hardwick and James Cook, eds, *Semiotic and Significs. The Correspondence Between Charles S. Peirce & Victoria Lady Welby* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), 197.

<sup>3</sup> Citations are to lines from the play in *The Digby Mary Magdalene Play*, ed. Theresa Coletti (Kalamazoo, MI: TEAMS/Medieval Institute, 2018).

ence because ‘without the sense of touch none of the other senses is present.’<sup>4</sup> The play concretizes medieval ideas of embodied knowledge and the senses as active mediators of external experience, similar to the explanations in Bartholomaeus Anglicus’s *De proprietatibus rerum* and adapted from Avicenna and Al-Haytham’s quasi-constructivist theories of optics.<sup>5</sup> Bartholomaeus repeats Al-Haytham’s and others’ account of the relationship between the exterior senses and the interior or Common Sense, which integrates sensations of external objects as likenesses (*similitudines, species*) and feeds them to the brain, where they are conceptualized or judged by reason as thought. Because touch is located not in a specific organ but distributed throughout the body in flesh, skin is phenomenologically not a surface but layers of sensate tissue. The Middle English term ‘feeling’ brings together the meanings ‘emotion’ and ‘bodily touch,’ an internally as well as externally oriented sense. If touch and flesh become inactive, says Bartholomaeus, the other senses do not function, and the creature is no longer alive: ‘zif þe wit of gropinge [touching] is al ilost þe subiect of al þe beest is idistroyed.’<sup>6</sup> Without touch or feeling, a person does not recognize they are alive.

### Staging Touch

In the *Play of Mary Magdalene* sensations and bodily feeling are foregrounded in relation to several characters, especially Jesus, Mary, Lazarus, and the King of Marseille. Most of these sensory experiences derive from the biblical subtext which structures the play text, but their dramatic signification depends on the theatrical staging, dialogue, and context. Theatrically, touch can be manifested in gestures of the hands, feet, or mouth. This accords with Aristotle, the encyclopaedists, and penitential preachers, all of whom say the flesh and the body manifest surface and deep touch and that the hand is the paradigm for active touching: ‘þeiȝ [although] his wit [i.e., touch] be in alle þe parties of þe body he [this sense] is principalliche in þe palmes of þe hondes and in þe soles of þe feete.’<sup>7</sup> Theatrically, hands are significant for touch gestures, in part because the touch or attempted touch of a hand can be highlighted on stage as an index of affect and the acting body. However, the play establishes a broader context of touch as en fleshed being. Theatrical touch, speech, and movement include not only active and receptive contact but also immediate and proximate positioning, movement toward or away from an object or another—in other words,

<sup>4</sup> Aristotle, *De Anima (On the Soul)*, trans. Hugh Lawson-Tancred (London: Penguin, 1986) 2.11, 2.3.

<sup>5</sup> See John Trevisa, *On the Properties of Things: John Trevisa’s Translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus, De Proprietatibus Rerum*, ed. M. C. Seymour et al., 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975–88); Mark Smith, ed., *Alhacen’s Theory of Visual Perception (First Three Books of Alhacen’s De Aspectibus, 2 vols (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 2001).*

<sup>6</sup> John Trevisa, *On the Properties of Things*, 3.21.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

stage action. Touch interacts with other senses and enacted multisensory and emotional experiences to provoke contact or distance.

In this respect, the *Play of Mary Magdalene* suggests its affinities with modern phenomenology. In his groundbreaking work *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty takes touch and the experience of seeing an object and then reaching toward the object as a paradigm of what he calls 'grasping', perception leading to knowledge: 'The body is our general means of having a world.'<sup>8</sup> The play text includes various kinds of touch events, both sacred and secular: violent touching, soothing touching, honorific or devotional touching, erotic touching, communal touching, and interoceptive touching. Many of these experiential forms of touch reflect medieval ideas about social order (who can touch whom) or about embodied experience as opposed to reason as pathways to knowledge. The play enacts Mary's reaching hand in two especially significant scenes: when she silently washes Jesus's feet (stage direction [henceforth s.d.] after 640) and then at the Resurrection (1057–95).

As I said, because the play text backgrounds most of the Passion events, the diegetic focus is not so much on Jesus *in extremis* as on characters' intersubjective sensory and emotional experiences, principally Mary's life, as sinner, disciple, preacher, and contemplative. Performatively, Mary Magdalene's sensory experience is represented with different semiotic codes: allegory, realism, and spiritual imagination.

### Mary's Touch and Walking Concepts

The play depicts Mary falling into sin and her early relation with Jesus with a combination of allegorical and realist modes of dramatic representation. The contrast between the two modes highlights medieval theatre's semio-cognitive conventions for characterizing physical sensations (vision, hearing, touch, etc.) and internal ('gostly') processes generating meaning from perception.

Mary Magdalene's luxurious lifestyle (starting at 298) is represented in both realist and allegorical modes. Mourning her father, Mary is depicted as a good-timing heiress surrounded by sensuous, luxurious worldly experiences. Her psychosomatic experiences and sensations are dramatized as external personifications of her behaviour. As she welcomes her brother and sister to Magdalene Castle, Satan immediately enters a different stage with his entourage of King World, King Flesh, and the Deadly Sins most associated with the flesh: Lechery, Gluttony, and Sloth. Flesh is gendered masculine, in contrast to other medieval characterizations of flesh as feminine. He and Lechery, the 'flowyr fayrest of femynyte' (423), immediately embrace: 'I am ful of lost to halse yow this tyde' [I am full of lust to embrace you

<sup>8</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald Landes (London: Routledge, 2012), 40–1, 147.



now] (357). In penitential discourse, Lechery is not an end in itself but a pathway to sin. So the allegorical Lechery seduces the sorrowing Mary by suggesting she assuage her grief with bodily pleasures ‘whych best doth yow plesse’ [which please you best] (459). Allegorically, Flesh is not the cause or source of sexual desire but is activated by sexual desire. Performatively, the dialogue between Mary and personified Lechery constitutes Mary’s attitudinal change. Mary promptly gives up the Castle to her brother and sister and heads to Jerusalem, where on a different stage she and Lechery enter a tavern.

Dramatic personifications can be considered as walking concepts. We imagine personifications as dramatic characters when we perceive their physical bodies on the stage, which phenomenologically affords them ‘object status’. Fictively, personifications gather together within a body-object behaviours, attitudes, and affects identified by the character’s type-name. On stage, embodied Lechery is a sign of the mental concept ‘lechery’, which refers to the thing itself, the fact of lechery in the world. Flesh and Lechery may well be touching each other desirously (‘I am ful of lost to halse yow this tyde’). Their physical proximity on stage is more immediate and suggestive than an indirect verbal description and more available to the audience’s visual imagination. Their performative touch is a likeness of desire.

Lechery’s textual status changes when she stands next to Mary on the tavern stage. She becomes a psychosomatic sign of pleasure. Lechery in costume is a kind of externalized field of sensation and emotion referred to in the dialogue as ‘Lechery’. Her closeness to Mary projects or externalizes Mary’s sensory and emotional attitude for theatrical display. She is Mary’s desire for touch.

As a walking concept, personified Lechery cognitively exists as a ready-made mediation of sensory input and linguistic reference. Reflecting penitential discourse, Lechery the concept is externalized into the physical world as a sensible object. Once objectified in the world, Lechery behaves in a more realist, recognizably human way. She orders drinks from the bar (481–4) and spots a new ‘galaunt’ [gallant] (491) to excite Mary’s passion. In this more realist mode, Lechery facilitates and defines Mary’s pleasure-seeking.

More than Lechery, it is the *galaunt*, the character Curiosity, who motivates the dramatic action and Mary’s sinning. The hybrid natural/personified Curiosity animates the concept ‘lechery’ intersubjectively. Standing outside the tavern, Curiosity’s opening speech suggests the character is flashily dressed and very much on the make for a ‘seme [young] thyng’: ‘Wyth here ayen the here I love mych pleyyng’ [I really love playing with hair against hair] (503–4). Perhaps the actor performed this speech with exaggerated gestures and suggestive body postures *à la* John Turturro’s Jesus Quintana character in *The Big Lebowski* or a character in medieval farces.

Mary and Curiosity exemplify penitential discourse’s account of sinful touch and other senses. Lustful desire and curiosity go hand in hand: first, ‘fool lookynge’, leading to ‘vileyngs touchynge in wikkede manere’ (fondling), then ‘foule wordes that...brenneth the herte’, and finally ‘the kissynge’ and ‘the stynkyng dede of

Leccherie.<sup>9</sup> How much the audience might respond to this scene as familiar bar flirtation, how much they might be excited by or enjoy the *galaunt* as a character, whether they might read the scene penitentially or respond to the scene in more than one way depends on the moral and social situation of audience members. Dramatic response is not homogeneous. What we perceive is constructed within a dialogic context of what we see, hear, and/or touch and what we believe we are sensing within a psychosomatic matrix of cultural values and body–mind ideologies. Sensation and cognition do not happen in a vacuum.

The performative relation between allegorical and realist characters generates a multilevel semantic field of representation. As Mary Magdalene falls in love with Curiosity, her bodily affect and speech begin to shift Curiosity's performative status, such that he is both walking concept and naturalized figure. As the two talk and drink in the tavern, she says to him in everyday speech, 'I am ryth glad that met be we; / My love in yow gynnyt to close' [I am really glad we have met / My love for you is coming on strong] (538–9). Their physical (touching?) proximity signals mutual desire. Exiting the stage, presumably to dance, drink, and have sex, the couple's dialogue suggests they walk arm in arm, touching each other as intimately as the fifteenth-century stage would allow.

However, despite the scene's naturalizing force, Curiosity is still a walking concept: the lover. And Mary's sensory and emotional experience continues to be expressed in signifying accoutrements, both realist and allegorical. When she retires to a bower, Mary dozes off and dreams of 'valentynys' [lovers] (564). The plural form indicates that Curiosity is a condition of her soul and her physical desire. Mary is distressed her lovers are not with her, and she waits 'Amons thes bamys precyus of pryse [Among these priceless balms], / Tyll som lovyr wol apere / That me is wont to halse and kysse' (569–71). Lying down and surrounded by sensuous scents ('bamys'), Mary is steeped in sexual desire. Her last line echoes Flesh's earlier speech with Lechery. As the scene ends, the sense of touch is somatic and direct.

### Sensory Realism: Mary Magdalene and Jesus

In the next set of scenes (572–924), allegory gives way to complex and more problematic spiritual histories. Set in Magdalene Castle and the house of Simon ("Symont") Leprous (so named in s.d. after 563), the scenes constitute a significant turning point in the dramatic action, especially with respect to Mary's sensory experience and Jesus's body. Aesthetically, they also mark the dismissal of the personified Deadly Sins from the stage space in favour of more historio-biblical dramatic representations.

<sup>9</sup> Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Parson's Tale*, in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry Benson, 3rd edn (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987), ll. 851–5, 861.

Mary's conversion as she dreams in her bower (588–609) immediately instantiates a different object for her emotional and physical desire:

I shal porsue the Prophett wherso he be,  
 For he is the welle of perfyth charyte.  
 Be the oyl of mercy he shal me relyff.  
 With swete balmys, I wyl seken hym this syth [this moment],  
 And sadly [soberly] follow hys lordshep in eche degree [in every way]. (610–14)

This speech, not part of the gospel subtext, reveals the continuity of Mary's desire. She just shifts between different objects of intimacy. Her new devotion to Jesus prompts her to want to touch (but not necessarily kiss) and honour him with 'swete balmys'. In return, she hopes, Jesus will touch her metaphorically with the 'oyl of mercy'. Mary's language entangles her religious conversion with her ongoing desire for physical and emotional intimacy.

In Simon the Leprous's house, Mary achieves her intention to close the gap between her body and Jesus's. The scene is entirely touch-focused and theatrically intense as partly a mime. Mary first abjectly addresses Jesus about her spiritual state and then silently bends down and washes his feet 'with the terrys of hur yys [eyes]', dries them with her hair, 'and than anonyt hym with a precyus noyttment' (s.d. after 640). The stage direction says nothing about Mary kissing Jesus's feet, a gesture marked in scripture (Luke 7:38–9, 45).

While not explicitly erotic, Mary's silent action foregrounds her loving touch of Jesus's body. Her gestures express her desire for Jesus's manhood and 'Godhood', the whole Jesus, but the theatrical focus is on the human body of Jesus. The play action associates a woman's touch simultaneously with soothing physical pleasure and religious devotion. Before her conversion, Mary's physical desires were represented as seeking bodily pleasures, especially wine and sexual intimacy with Curiosity. After her conversion, she desires to perform what for medieval audiences would be a biblically sanctioned affective act of humility and honour. Physically, the stage gestures can seem very similar. Performatively, they are different. Moreover, her washing Jesus's feet in silence amplifies the devotional affect by foregrounding touch and vision alone. The point of difference is driven home when Jesus judges Mary's touching behaviour favourably against Simon's perceived lack of hospitality. She honoured him, he says, 'wyth good entent' (670). Jesus then forgives Mary's sins and declares her 'hol in sowle' [whole in soul] (677). In scripture, Jesus uses touch to heal the blind (John 9:6–7) and the leprous (Luke 5:12–13). Rather than emphasizing Jesus's divine status, Mary's silent touching of Jesus's feet suggests a more familiar comparison between the two of them. The action is highly emotive yet colloquial and realistic. The play text then contrasts Mary's devotional intensity with the devils' wild exit from her body and the stage (s.d. after 691). On stage, the contrast between silent devotion and noisy, chaotic exorcism sharpens the significance of Mary's touch.

## Can't Touch This

The play's most elaborate representation of touch, bodily feeling, and perception occurs after Jesus's Resurrection (993–1132). Mary's earlier intimacy with Jesus's body in Simon's house undergoes extraordinary change as she encounters the empty tomb, the risen Jesus, and the perceptual crisis of what Jesus's newly constituted being on earth means. The sequence of scenes signifies the centrality of the play's representations of sensory experience to the themes of belief and devotion. However, touch becomes more problematic between Mary and Jesus.

The scene unfolds in five parts: the three Marys, lamenting Jesus's Crucifixion, approach the tomb and discover it is empty, and the angel tells them Jesus is risen; the Marys tell Peter and John what they have seen and heard and bring them to the tomb; Mary stands aside, questions a gardener nearby about Jesus's disappearance, whereupon Jesus makes himself known, Mary reaches for him but is rebuffed, and they discuss appearances, sensation, and bodily versus spiritual signification; and finally Jesus comes and goes among the Marys, almost like a stage manager, and dispatches them to meet his disciples and himself in Galilee.

The dramatic sequence, closely following gospel accounts, subtly examines how we go about constructing truth from sensory perception. But the staging and performance problematize a metaphysical account of the action. Moreover, the sequence is different to other Resurrection plays in which Jesus rises and presents himself to the soldiers or is greeted by the Virgin. In the Digby play, characters debate at some length the truth of what they perceive visually and tactilely. Further, the scenes are complicated by the temporal diegesis. The characters' perceptions are interlaced with the audience's anachronistic perceptions framed by orthodox Christian doctrine. On the surface, the human and divine Jesus are hard to distinguish. The embodied performance of Jesus in human form is followed by his absence and reappearance in what he declares is a new spiritual form, but very much looking alive and human on stage. How might audiences (have) construct(ed) their understanding of the play at this moment? The play elaborates a phenomenological question about performance and perception: what did Mary and the other disciples sense, know, and feel when they encountered the empty tomb and the risen Jesus? What do we see and hear and know?

When the three Marys arrive at the tomb, they initiate a sweeping examination of sensory understanding. Expecting to find the dead body, they affectively express their sorrow and display its cause in that they are already wearing signs of the *arma Christi* and recalling Jesus's physical torment before and during the Crucifixion. The women empathize with Jesus's 'blyssyd body' and imagine his 'gracyus woundys' and the pain which 'Nevyr creature was borne upon gronddys [upon the earth] / That mygth sofer [suffer] so hediows a peyne at onys' (1016, 1019, 1021–2). Copying Mary's earlier physical acts of touching Jesus with honour and devotion, the women carry oils 'To anoynt hym, body and bone, / To make amendys for

ower trespas' (1013–14). The women's dress and speech destabilize the common-sense notion that our senses give us real-time data. They articulate a complex temporality, combining past events, the present situation, and a future Christian doctrine of salvation by way of the Cross. Their costumes and verbalized affect combine the violent touch which wounds Jesus with their intention to touch, soothe, and honour Jesus's body with ointments.

The absent body projects an objectified emptiness in the space and elicits various sensory inferences. The women react with horror and fear that Jesus's body has been stolen. The disciples Peter and John (probably on another stage) rush to the tomb and articulate two different kinds of vision, empirical and spiritual, and so two different modes of verifying the truth of sense experience.

Peter speaks the positivist language of truth. He desires to see the tomb for himself, to verify with his own eyes what Mary has told him. Seeing the empty tomb, he says, 'A, now I se and know the sothe! [...] Here is nothyng left butt a sudare cloth [shroud]' (1047, 1049). The dialogue suggests Peter might point to or even pick up the shroud. For Peter, truth is what is distributed to the senses, immediately there, visible, hearable, touchable. He is dismayed at the visual truth of the absent body, the body he can't see.

John's response, on the other hand, is more constructivist and psychosomatic. He promptly recalls what he saw and how he felt at the Crucifixion. He says his 'inward sowle' is 'in dystresse' when he recalls Jesus's 'woundys wyde' on the Cross (1039, 1042). The syntax of John's speech is difficult but critical to the sensory, cognitive, and experiential thematics of the play. John's body, his immediate sensory contact with the world, is guided by 'myn inward sowle [...] The weche of my body xuld have a gyde' (1039–40). When he recalls Jesus's suffering and dying on the cross, he again feels psychic pain because he believes Jesus in fact did die. Looking into the empty tomb, John, unlike Peter, says he does not know exactly what has happened ('Where he is becum, it can natt be devysyd'). What he does know is that Jesus had promised 'after the third day he shuld have resurrexon' (1052–3). John's judgment of what he sees at the tomb conflicts with what he saw at the Cross and heard from Jesus's mouth. In this situation, speech and vision are not in synch, and touch can only verify the space as empty.

John's psychological response to his visual and auditory sense data is complex. First, he activates a mental image of the past crucifixion, effectively bringing Jesus back into virtual being as a mental or contemplative likeness. Then at the tomb he withholds judgment about the truth of what has occurred (the absent body) and adds a further perceptual context, that Jesus had said 'he shuld have resurrexon.' John's memories enwrap his visual experience. Remembering Jesus crucified causes him renewed pain and sorrow, while recalling what Jesus promised gives him hope. For fifteenth-century audiences, John's responses proleptically legitimize contemplative affect and empathetic devotion, 'styrryngys', ignited by mentally imagining being physically near the suffering, dying, or risen Jesus, perhaps in the position of

the Virgin or Mary Magdalene. The dialogue and actions around the empty tomb embed anachronistic Christian doctrine, the penitential and salvation codes, in the biblical narrative. This temporal amalgam effectively overrides the disciples' more inferential phenomenological experience of trying to work out exactly what has happened and the truth of what they have seen, heard, and perhaps touched.

These early scenes prepare for the climax of the play's complex representation of experience, touch, and understanding at the empty tomb—Mary's encounter with the risen Jesus (1057–1132). The scene replays earlier figural and actual resurrections (Lazarus), characters' sensations and perceptions, and Mary's desire for physical intimacy with Jesus through touch. Performatively, the encounter presupposes the audience's continued attention to the stage performance, while it effectively demands that Mary Magdalene and the audience shift their intention from physical sensation to spiritual sensation. However, the performance context destabilizes the dramatic representation because the risen Jesus continues to be played by a living actor who moves and speaks with human aspect. The audience's 'proper' perception of Jesus's different spiritual being presupposes an act of dramatic and spiritual imagination, perceiving the virtual as sensorially physical. But the object of that sensory experience is available only in enfolded, living form. Earlier (802–10), Jesus had said that neither death nor heavenly joy can be explained by reason or authority ('counnyng of clerke' [806]). The Resurrection can only be grasped experientially through fully embodied understanding which perceives beyond appearances. Devotional texts advised people to discipline their actual or imagined physical or sensible desire for the profit of their souls. The writer of the *Fyve Wyttes* (c.1400) cautions readers to avoid 'bodyly felynge' such as illicit kissing and other things that 'nedeþ nou3t to be touched ne handled'. Instead, the penitent should actively use her spiritual imagination and embody 'felynge þat was principaly touched, þat is muche gostly and lytel or nou3t bodily'. Even though such transcendent moments can't be sustained on earth, the penitent should endeavour to reform her sensory input and spiritual disposition, so 'þat it putteþ out of þe soule al bodily images and alle sensible þinges for þe tyme'.<sup>10</sup> In the play, the aesthetic imagination is engaged so as to perceive the spiritual reality embodied in a flesh-and-blood actor in the here and now. A sign of a sign. The play's embodied performativity runs past orthodox penitential discourse even as it endorses a spiritually imagined understanding of Jesus's risen character.

Mary's sensory and perceptual responses to the empty tomb deepen the play's representation of modes of perception and examine more closely sense and perception in affective spiritual terms. As she turns aside from the tomb, the angel asks her the biblical and liturgical question: 'W[h]om sekest thou with dolare [doulour] thus?' (1058). The adverbial 'dolare' is the concept word for feeling sorrow. When

<sup>10</sup> *The Fyve Wyttes: A Late Middle English Devotional Treatise Edited from BL MS Harley 2398 with Introduction, Commentary, and Gloss*, ed. Rolf H. Bremmer (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1987), 28–9.

Jesus, dressed as a gardener, suddenly appears onstage and asks her the same question but without the adverbial, she addresses him as 'Sir' and asks if he's taken away the body of

my Lord Jhesus,  
 For I have porposyd in eche degre  
 To have hym with me, verely  
 The w[h]yche my specyall Lord hath be,  
 And I hys lovyr and cause wyll phy [undertake]. (1064–8)

Mary's speech stresses her sense of her 'specyall', intimate relation with Jesus and her desire ('hys lovyr') to still be physically and emotionally close to him, 'To have hym with me'. Mary's grieving speech does not quite reach the erotic level of the solitary woman speaker in the *Song of Songs* or the Magdalene character in the late fifteenth-century *Burial and Resurrection* play (Oxford, Bodleian Library, Bodley MS E MUS.160):

Schew my best love that I was here,  
 Telle hym, os he may prove,  
 That I am dedly seke,  
 And alle is for his love.<sup>11</sup>

Still, Mary's speech approximates that of a lover desperately desiring to be near her absent beloved.

Sense and emotion are entangled in the performance. The intimacy of touch is central to the scene. Jesus reveals himself by calling, 'O, O, Mari', (1069), using what classical and medieval rhetoric handbooks referred to as *exciting* or *desiring* ('optantis') O, an interjection connoting strong positive emotion.<sup>12</sup> Hearing her name (or Jesus's voice), Mary immediately recognizes the Jesus she desires and explodes in a dramatic rush to hold him, touch his body with 'bamys sote' and oils, and 'kesse thou for my hartys bote' (1071, 1073). Performatively, the play text implies the actor simultaneously speaks and reaches for Jesus, reducing stage space between the two. Mary manifests her earlier intimacy with Jesus and his body with an even more physical, natural gesture, closing the distance between them. Touch is somatic deixis. Touch is to be in bodily contact, and to reach.

But the scene and its transcendent presupposition do not allow her gesture to be completed. Jesus resists the approach and keeps his body at a distance, perhaps even stepping back as he firmly replies, 'Towche me natt, Mary. I ded natt asend / To my Father in Deyyte [Deity] and onto yowers [yours]' (1074–5). All is not as it seems. We realize the scene at the empty tomb has a double somatic climax: the absent

<sup>11</sup> 'Burial and Resurrection', ll. 597–601; cited in Rosemary Woolf, *The English Mystery Plays* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), 334.

<sup>12</sup> E.g. Donatus, *Ars maior*, 2.17, in Louis Holtz, *Donat et la Tradition de l'Enseignement grammatical* (Paris: Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, 1981), 65.

body and the touch that does not happen. This doubled somatic withholding distributes touch into an imagined spiritual ontology, a sign of a sign. The play text adds a significant amount of dialogue and context beyond the narrative in John 20. Jesus's embodied accessibility, which features so much in late medieval affective imaginations and devotional practices, is challenged by Jesus himself. Mary's touching hands, which Jesus had praised in Simon's house, are no longer allowed contact with the risen Jesus. At this point, the enacted play, the performance, clashes with its epistemic representation. Jesus's body is present but not what it appears to be onstage. 'Bodyly felynge' and 'gostly felynge' are competing for dramatic attention. The dialogue implies that our commonsensical and empirical understanding of what our senses tell us is not adequate to the changed religious world of objects following Jesus's Resurrection. The phenomenological problem of the Incarnation and Resurrection is the problem with the theatrical imagination. How can perceptibles signify different sensibles? Jesus's death and rising remake and redistribute what is said to be the knowable 'real' in a Christian world view founded on the instituted Church. The play's alleged representation derives from religious ideology, but the theatrical materiality and sensory situations destabilize that suturing ground.

Jesus and Mary's ensuing conversation highlights the play's multisensory thematics and the problem of perceptual presuppositions about appearance, reality, and meaning. Like Peter, Mary at first commonsensically says she saw who she saw: Simon the gardener. Jesus replies, 'So I am, for sothe, Mary' (1080). His colloquial, pragmatic reply brings the two in touch discursively, if not skin to skin, while implying Jesus's dual nature and multiple appearances, not his perceived absence in the tomb. Jesus uses figural correspondences or analogy to account for multiplicity: the human heart is his garden, virtue are the seeds he sows, devotional tears water the ground, and so forth (1081–5). Mary's limited recognition, her confidence in her sensory contact with appearances, gives way to Jesus's account of enhanced external and internal sense perception.

The scene also reveals how much the *Play of Mary Magdalene* depends on a somatic-cognitive rather than mechanical model of sensation. That is, sensory stimuli do not simply cause data to be conveyed directly to the brain and grasped individually as meanings. Rather, sensory perceptions are conveyed to the brain, connected contextually by the Common Sense with memories, habits, mental concepts, and language, and ultimately judged as knowledge, as Al-Haytham claimed. Jesus's pastoral explanation of his literal/metaphoric appearance derives from the medieval model of the outer and inner senses and its correlate, the relation between literal and spiritual meanings for a given experience, sense, or word. Jesus resignifies his appearances as versions of experienced sensation and meaning: 'bodyly' and 'gostly' existences are both possible. Jesus's speech implicitly connects the play's diegesis with metatheatrical experience. Dramatically, the enacting body inhabits two perceptual and cognitive spaces. Perceptually, the audience engages in psychosomatic cognition.



Jesus's account of different perceptual and cognitive modes, 'bodily' and 'gostly', also subtly introduces the question of doubt into the play text. Dispatching the three Marys to his disciples, he tells them:

Goo ye to my brethryn, and sey to hem ther,  
That they procede and go into Gallelye,  
And there shall they se me, as I seyde before,  
Bodyly, wyth here [their] carnall yye. (1121–4)

The passage alludes to the disciples' doubt (Luke 24:38–9). Jesus's reference to '[b]odyly, wyth here carnall yye' seemingly contradicts his earlier explanation of the duality of bodily and spiritual sense perception. However, the play does not depict Jesus actually meeting the disciples in Galilee nor Thomas's doubt about the truth of Jesus's Resurrection. Rather, this brief passage keeps active the play's epistemic tension between natural and spiritual senses or modes of perceiving. The gospels refer several times to the disciples' initial scepticism about the Resurrection (Matthew 28:17; Luke 24:11, 37, 41; John 20:25–9). Although the play adopts a fairly orthodox view of spiritual truth, it also implicitly acknowledges that people, even the apostles Peter and John, can be genuinely sceptical about beliefs which challenge what they empirically sense or understand from appearances as well as their habitual experience with things in the 'real world'. The dead don't rise later in the week. Why shouldn't I believe what I see in front of me? Don't our senses and experience tell us what is true? Are personal experience and authority compatible? In other words, the play text presents Jesus as recognizing people's different capacities to grasp the miracle that has occurred. For some, belief and trust in promises alone are sufficient. Others require more direct, physical evidence. Still others experience a metaphysical shift in how they understand perception itself.

All three standpoints are relevant to Mary's subsequent experience as a preaching disciple and then ascetic contemplative. Although Mary desires to continue her physical intimacy with the risen Jesus, he puts her off, keeps her at a distance, something he does not do with doubting Thomas. In the remainder of the play, Jesus's refusal of Mary's touch and his sensory pedagogy around the significance of 'gostly' perception, especially seeing, touching, and tasting, establish the performative ground for scenes depicting her exemplary life of evangelical preaching and ascetic devotion centred on the Eucharist rather than on Jesus's body.

### **Touch: A Sacramental Experience?**

The second half of the *Play of Mary Magdalene* (1133–2143) shifts the experiential performative frame and depicts touch and sensation in explicitly evangelical and

sacramental, rather than biblical, terms. Touch is enacted as bodily experience, taste, and speech, foregrounding the importance of individual psychosomatic experience for sustaining one's faith. Physical and spiritual experience are correlated especially in Mary's ascetic life in the desert, where she is nourished solely by the 'heavenly bred'. I will briefly discuss two scenes which bring together touch with other senses and emotions as embodied knowing.

Touch as embodied, experiential knowing is foregrounded in the King of Marseille's pilgrimage to the Holy Land. In Jerusalem, the King meets Peter. Acting as a catechumen, the King recites a brief creed and asks to be baptized. Peter's proto-papal hand touches him indirectly by asperging him and reciting the baptismal formula. When the King asks Peter to explain the 'sentens' [meaning] of the profession of faith he has just made (1811–62), Peter counsels him to go and experience the sacred places for himself:

Syr, dayly ye shall lobar [labour] more and more,  
 Tyll that ye have very experyens [experience].  
 Wyth me shall ye d wall to have more eloquens,  
 And goo vesyte [visit] the stacyons [stations, sites], by and by,  
 To Nazareth and Bedlem, goo wyth delygens,  
 And be yower own inspeccyon, yower feyth to edyfy. (1845–50)

Peter legitimizes immediate bodily 'experyens' and doctrinal 'eloquens'. If the King touches the ground ('stacyons') and sees the places where Jesus walked and spoke, he will gain 'experiential' knowledge and faith over time ('dayly ye shall lobar more and more'). Bodily touch and vision accumulate experiential knowledge and habit. Peter's use of Middle English *inspeccyon* (n.) implies careful ('wyth delygens') examination, a connotation also found in fifteenth-century medical texts advocating visual and tactile investigation of the body.<sup>13</sup> Peter's advice accords with Bartholomaeus's description of the cognitive power of touch: 'And so it appeareth, that the sense (Trevisa: "wit") of touching, is the ground and the foundation of all the other sens. Also the other foure wittis haveþ propre þinges. [...] Þe wit of gropinge inprentiþ his felinge in alle þe lymes of oþir wittis and so doþ none of þe oþir wittis.'<sup>14</sup> Touch is the receptor and conveyor of sensory likenesses. The scene validates pilgrimage and personal tactile knowledge for strengthening Christian belief. Touching relics and other sacred objects may restore one's health, but 'being there' is a full-body, enfleshed sensory experience, like death and joy.

<sup>13</sup> Rafael Mandressi, 'Dissections et anatomie', in Alain Corbin, Jean-Jacques Courtine, Georges Vigarello, eds, *Histoire du Corps*, 3 vols (Paris: Seuil, 2005), 1:311–33 (317–19).

<sup>14</sup> Bartholomaeus Anglicus, *De Proprietatibus Rerum*, 3.21.

## Mary, Jesus, and the Host

The sense of touch focused on both the mouth and the whole body pervades the last scene, Mary's contemplative life and her Eucharistic experience. Mary's body is sustained only by the holy bread ('manna', 'bred') she eats daily (2000–2). Her food is both physical and spiritual. The play text weaves together her bodily and spiritual nourishment with the 'gostly fode' 'that commyt from heven on hye' (2005, 2001), emphasizing the overlapping of touch and taste in the medieval sensorium. When Mary is spectacularly lifted up to a suspended Host with angels singing 'awyth reverent song' (s.d. after 2030), her earlier desire to touch Jesus's body is replaced by her mediated touch of the Host and spiritual, affective joy ('Byd hur injoye with all hur afyawns', 2009).

The status of the Host is an unstable complex of identity and difference, materially and imaginatively. Mary's desire for physical intimacy with Jesus is sublimated as mediated desire in the Church's sacrament. Jesus reinforces the orthodox opinion when he says:

Now shall Mary have possessyon  
Be ryth enirytauns a crown to bere  
...  
Now, angelys, lythly that ye were ther.  
Onto the prystys sell apere this tyde.  
My body in forme of bred that he bere,  
Hur for to hossell, byd hym provide. (2073–4, 2077–80)

Given that Mary has been receiving the heavenly bread for thirty years, Jesus's use of the scholastic formula to explain the status of Host, '[m]y body in forme of bred', seems redundant. But the sensible status of the Host, like the risen Jesus, was a persistent phenomenological and spiritual question in the later Middle Ages and Reformation. Jesus's English *forme* translates Latin *species*, likeness or appearance. Likenesses are fundamental to medieval theories of sensation, especially vision and touch. But the posited difference between immaterial, incorruptible form and substantial, corruptible body creates a perceptual problem with respect to the Christian's sensory experience of contacting the Host. Spiritual objects demand a semiotic reorientation of sensory experience and the sensible. In just one line, the play text evokes the controversy over the ontological and sacramental status of the bread and wine as experiential objects. Can we sense things bodily and 'gostly' simultaneously? Mary's mediated desire does not renounce the object's materiality, but it destabilizes its 'thing-ness'.

Jesus's reiteration of the orthodox formula also implicitly evokes theatrical signification. The stage is an assemblage of signs. Likenesses, symbolic, allegorical or realist, are fundamental to theatrical performativity. The Host onstage is probably painted fabric or wood. The 'clowdyys' are painted wood suspended by rope. The visible hoist lifts Mary to 'heven' above the stage. The enacted Jesus is not the real

Jesus. The aesthetic phenomenology of the Host is the phenomenology of all performance and sensible sensation. The play text presents Mary's thirty years in the desert as replaying her intimate desire to kiss and touch Jesus's body in mediated desire as if there is no difference. But the dramatic representation itself cannot reproduce spiritual sensation or identity.

The final stage positions of Mary and Jesus are significant with respect to the play's performativity and sensory thematics. Mary receives the Host and is lifted to 'heaven' above the stage with angels. But it is unclear whether or not Jesus has already exited the stage. The play text regularly gives explicit stage directions as to Jesus's appearances and disappearances ('Hic aparuit Jhesus'; 'Here Jhesus devoydytt[h] ayen'). However, no stage direction indicates whether he leaves or remains after he sends the hermit to Mary with the Host (2080). If the lack of a stage direction is not a scribal omission, then the final stage action of Jesus's performing body is unresolved. After initiating Mary's last Eucharist, does he just disappear? If we see the Host, do we see Jesus? The last scene ambiguously continues the performative somatic withholding of Jesus's body onstage. Mary's final mediated touch of the Host brings her to heaven, but Jesus perhaps remains on the earthly stage. A double mediation. It is a fitting, if perhaps unintended, performance of the mystery—how the Eucharist might be experienced when it touches the tongue. As Merleau-Ponty writes, 'Things and instants can only be linked together to form a world through this ambiguous being that we call "subjectivity".'<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 348.

# HISTORIES OF THE HUMAN HAND

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## Huxley and Isherwood's *Jacob's Hands* and Modernist Manual Culture

ABBIE GARRINGTON

Aldous Huxley and Christopher Isherwood's co-written screen treatment *Jacob's Hands*, completed in 1944, has often been overlooked by scholars of either author, but affords the opportunity to explore the place of the human hand within wider debates regarding the senses in the first half of the twentieth century. Never taken up by the studios, it languished amongst Huxley's papers for decades, before being published, with an introduction by David Bradshaw, in 1998. Telling the story of Jacob Ericson, a returning US veteran of the Great War who has gained a mysterious power of healing through the hands, the text at first glance appears at odds with 1940s mores, and after several months of fruitless waiting for approval and payment, Isherwood gave up the project as a failure, recording in his diary that 'either they [the studios] thought it was too goody-goody, or that it was superstitious, or both. Nevertheless, I still think it really had something.'<sup>1</sup> Isherwood's speculations about rejection echo the criticisms that Jacob himself faces, being seen as at once too morally good to survive the market-driven show-business environments of Los Angeles, where his gift comes to be exploited, and as truly 'ha[ving] something' to which one struggles to put a name. Huxley, for his part, thought the treatment's negative representation of conventional medicine, both baffled by and dismissive of Jacob's abilities, might have riled what he calls 'the medical Ku Klux Klan.'<sup>2</sup> In mulling over their rejections, the authors ascribe to their treatment qualities of

<sup>1</sup> Christopher Isherwood, *Diaries Vol. I 1939–1960*, ed. Katherine Bucknell (London: Methuen, 1996), 600.

<sup>2</sup> Aldous Huxley, *Letters of Aldous Huxley*, ed. Grover Smith (London: Chatto & Windus, 1969), 511.

didacticism, spiritualism, doctor-baiting, and the wider issue that, as Isherwood told Gilbert Adair, ‘mystic doings were highly unfashionable in California at that period.’<sup>3</sup> These interests are, it is suggested, anathema to contemporary, commercial Hollywood. *Jacob’s Hands* is therefore as hands are to the body: peripheral, out on a limb.

Yet placing the text within what we might term modernist manual cultures, or modes of reading and understanding the human hands in the early decades of the twentieth century, reveals that in another sense the focus on Jacob’s *hands* puts the treatment right in the thick of several debates, spreading out like fingers from the palm: the damage of the Great War (as, most obviously, with its near namesake, Virginia Woolf’s *Jacob’s Room* of 1922);<sup>4</sup> healing practices within medicine-adjacent or pseudo-medical frameworks; regimes of hand-dependent knowledge, including the religious and the spiritual (particularly the Pentecostal, where Black religious leaders of the Azusa Street revival prove crucial in reimagining the sensing body as a contested site, subject to forces); and the haptic aspects of film spectatorship itself, newly understood in this period as creating affective audience experience beyond the realms of the visual. While mixed in its motivations, peculiar in tone, and written in a mode—the screen treatment—which makes a distinctive call upon the reader and their imaginative capacities, this esoteric text can usefully be reincorporated into both authors’ bodies of work.<sup>5</sup> Such a move makes clear Isherwood’s long-term investment in spiritual texts and practices, draws out and chimes with the tactile politics of Huxley’s much more well-known *Brave New World* (1932), and emphasizes the role of the hands as a kind of flash-point for wider debates about body, sense, and spirit in the modernist years.<sup>6</sup>

Isherwood visited Huxley at home in Llano, in the Mojave Desert of Southern California, in early March 1944, where they established the scaffolding of the treatment, to be developed in the coming months. Isherwood, who had written for the movie industry throughout the Second World War, arrived in Llano having recently completed a new edition of the *Bhagavad Gita*, co-translated with his guru,

<sup>3</sup> Gilbert Adair, ‘In the Picture: Isherwood in Hollywood’, *Sight and Sound* 46 (Winter 1976–7), 25.

<sup>4</sup> While *Jacob’s Room* indicates the Great War, the biblical story of Jacob’s ladder proposes a bridge between the realms of heaven and earth, and we should also remember that when Jacob asked God to bless his sons Ephraim and Manasseh, he laid his hands upon them (Genesis 48:14).

<sup>5</sup> A screen treatment was wearying to write, too, with Huxley noting that ‘this telling a story in purely pictorial terms doesn’t allow any of the experimentation with words in their relation to things, events and ideas, which is *au fond* my business’; Huxley, *Letters*, 437. I use the terms ‘reader’ and ‘audience’ interchangeably here in recognition of the strange status of the screen treatment, and the peculiar state of suspension in which one finds oneself as at once reader of a present text and imagined consumer of a future cinematic production. The specific demands of the treatment form are further discussed at the close of this chapter.

<sup>6</sup> For an account of Huxley’s imbrication of touch and the political in *Brave New World*, see Abbie Garrington, *Haptic Modernism: Touch and the Tactile in Modernist Writing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 33–47.

the Hindu Swami Prabhavananda.<sup>7</sup> Isherwood had been introduced to the Swami by Gerald Heard, whom he had known in London in the early 1930s, while Huxley had first arrived in the US with Heard when the latter took up a chair in historical anthropology at Duke University. Heard later settled in California and established Trabuco College, a centre for the study of comparative religion.<sup>8</sup> A swirl of these spiritual interests, alongside the landscapes of the desert and of Los Angeles, are taken up in *Jacob's Hands*. Adair claims that a fellow resident of the Mojave was known to Huxley and influenced the screen treatment's titular character, grounding the story's more preposterous elements in real-life anecdote, and explaining the credulous tone of the treatment, whatever its would-be Hollywood-appealing humorous moments.<sup>9</sup> The two authors worked independently to develop their contributions (a process also deployed by Isherwood in his verse drama collaborations with W. H. Auden<sup>10</sup>), Huxley finishing his work by April 1944, Isherwood by June of the same year, and the text was sent off to the studios, leading to silence or disinterest from prospective production teams, and thence the archiving of the work.<sup>11</sup> Huxley was no stranger to the tangled process of bringing writing to the screen, lamenting that '[b]y the time they are ready to shoot it [a treatment] may have been through twenty pairs of hands. What will be left? One shudders to think.'<sup>12</sup> The synecdochic function of the 'pairs of hands' here emphasizes agency and personhood, while the sully of too much manual engagement leads to a visceral response, as Huxley 'shudders' to contemplate the attenuation of his vision. Despite the fate of *Jacob's Hands*, lost to Hollywood, the treatment aimed to impart a tale of some urgency to its authors, keen to draw attention to the place of the sensory in modern life as both a site of power (healing; spiritual; recouped after the trauma of war) and of resistance, and yet also a potential zone of control by capitalism (or its show-business wing), conventional medicine, and all those keen to exploit and corrupt moral goodness. It is Jacob that is caught amidst these forces as they clash on the terrain of his palms, and we might ultimately read him as at once an outsider (a recluse in desert spaces, distanced from fellow humans by traumatic experience)

<sup>7</sup> For Isherwood's 1980 account of working with Prabhavananda, see Christopher Isherwood, *My Guru and His Disciple* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001).

<sup>8</sup> For an outline of Isherwood's movie work, see Brian Finney, *Christopher Isherwood: A Critical Biography* (London: Faber, 1979). Huxley's *The Perennial Philosophy*, published in the US in 1945 and the UK in 1946, draws together extracts from Eastern and Western spiritual texts to create a comparative and relational study, inspired in part by Heard's work. See Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1946).

<sup>9</sup> Adair, 'In the Picture', 25.

<sup>10</sup> See Edward Mendelson, 'The Auden–Isherwood Collaboration', *Twentieth-Century Literature* 22, no. 3 (October 1976), 276–85.

<sup>11</sup> David Bradshaw, 'Introduction', in Aldous Huxley and Christopher Isherwood, *Jacob's Hands* (London: Bloomsbury, 1998), xiv.

<sup>12</sup> Huxley, *Letters*, 437.

and as a significant and symbolically resonant figure, a talisman of sensory power and peril in the interwar years.

### ‘Hands That War’

*Jacob's Hands* is bookended by a ‘Prologue’ and ‘Epilogue’ that take place in the present, i.e. the 1940s, when Jacob is said to be ‘in his fifties’ and living with a male companion in the Mojave.<sup>13</sup> Thus from the first scenes the prospective cinematic audience is aware that he will ultimately choose self-exile to the desert, although his extraordinary abilities mean he cannot remain removed from the clamour of the modern world for long.<sup>14</sup> The ‘Prologue’ brings Allan and Mary, the owners of a Pomeranian called Topsy, to Jacob’s remote smallholding (‘We certainly had a time finding you!’ [5]) to seek a cure for Topsy’s unspecified illness. They are greeted by the companion, unnamed and disguised by a beekeeper’s veil and gloves, as well as ‘[b]ees...crawling all over him’ (3), at this stage to be taken as an indicator of bucolic peace, now interrupted by Topsy et al. (the bees reappear, and are reread, below). Jacob’s reputation precedes him, since he has healed the automobile accident injuries of a cocker spaniel belonging to Mr Hilton of the National Bank (‘*The Mr Hilton*’, clarifies Mary [5]). Jacob specifies sardonically that ‘I remember the dog’ (5), commencing an allegiance with and affinity for animals, and an indifference to hierarchies of social class, that is reiterated throughout the treatment. Mary, gushing now, reports ‘They say you did a miracle’ (5), an odd phrasing that replaces the more conventional ‘performed’, the latter emphasizing the status of the healer as conduit for powers beyond himself. Accordingly, Jacob later points out that ‘It’s not anything *I* do... It just comes into me, somehow. It’s as if I can feel it, going out through my hands’ (20). To ‘do’ a miracle smacks of the transactional, or the heal-on-demand (while transactions and demands smack of the National Bank). Jacob’s *gift*, thought of as such, is instead explicitly removed from the financial and drawn into the realms of spiritual channelling, as well as remaining incompletely corralled by those channels (as the uncertainty of that ‘somehow’ makes clear). Mary, shifting her terminology, declares that ‘It must be just too wonderful to have the gift of healing’, to which Jacob responds, ‘You think so?’ (6). While ‘too wonderful’ primarily illustrates the excess of Mary’s modern parlance, it also indicates the excessive or

<sup>13</sup> I take the title of this section from Rebecca West’s newspaper column of the same name. See, for example, ‘Hands That War: The Night Shift’, in Jane Marcus, ed., *The Young Rebecca: Writings of Rebecca West, 1911–1917* (London: Virago, 1983), 387–90. West shares Lawrence’s, Huxley’s, and Isherwood’s interest in the specifically *manual* impacts of Great War experience, most conspicuously in her *The Return of the Soldier* (1918).

<sup>14</sup> Aldous Huxley and Christopher Isherwood, *Jacob's Hands*, ed. David Bradshaw (London: Bloomsbury, 1998), 5. Henceforth, page numbers are given in parentheses.



burdensome weight of the gift itself, which the audience now expects will lie behind Jacob's retreat from city spaces to the 'foothills of the San Gabriel mountains' (3).

Willed seclusion from urban bustle; an affinity with the beasts; a rejection of the transactional world; a need for peace—all are aspects of Jacob's existence that hint toward his Great War experience, and while that war remains a subtle presence in the text, the authors consistently ascribe Jacob's gift of healing to his experience of trauma. In this, they take up the notion of compensatory powers following the physical and psychological damage of battle, and in doing so emphasize specifically tactile realms of experience, linking them to other writers of the period including, most significantly, D. H. Lawrence. The main body of the treatment commences in 1920, not long after Armistice therefore, when Jacob is working at the Mojave ranch of Professor Carter, an academic philologist who is 'pathologically touchy and cantankerous' (11). 'Touchy' labels his unbalanced temper but also, paradoxically, a marked retreat from sensory experience, since he knocks offered flowers from his daughter Sharon's hands; turns up his coat's collar; requires the door to be shut against an alleged draught; and stuffs his ears with cotton wool so as not to be disturbed by Sharon's singing (17). He is therefore a sensory refusenik (rejecting touch, scent, skin exposure, ambient temperature, and sound), an attitude that anticipates his suspicion and attempted regulation of Jacob's laying on of hands. The latter is introduced as 'moody', 'taciturn', 'withdrawn', and (once again) 'thoroughly at home only with animals', and the text is explicit about the source of these characteristics: 'It seems that his experiences during the war, from which he has returned shell-shocked and wounded, have somehow isolated him from the world of men' (12). We can usefully compare this portrayal with Lawrence's 'The Blind Man' of 1920, in which Great War veteran Maurice Pervin finds a soothing affinity with horses, and is shown to contrast in spirit with visiting lawyer Bertie Reid, just as Jacob contrasts with the learned Carter. Maurice, like Jacob, is at once turned inward and yet attuned to the world in a new way, a gift or compensation ('There is something... I couldn't tell you what it is'<sup>15</sup>), in his case after being blinded and facially scarred by what the reader presumes to be an exploding shell.<sup>16</sup> When Jacob is later asked, by bed-bound patient Earl Medwin, 'what was the worst part of [the War]?', he replies, 'the noise, I guess' (62), indicating that he too has been close to the explosions of mechanized warfare. War service might result in the loss of limbs or their sensory capacities, in blinding, or in deafness brought about by excess noise in battle contexts: 'Modern warfare exercises its evil influence more on the hearing organ than on any other special sense', suggested a letter to *The Lancet* in 1917.<sup>17</sup> For Lawrence,

<sup>15</sup> D. H. Lawrence, 'The Blind Man', *English Review* (July 1920), 22–41 (36).

<sup>16</sup> Julian Huxley referred to his brother Aldous's own temporary blindness, a result of punctate keratitis rather than battle, as 'a blessing in disguise' since it allowed him to 'take all knowledge for his province'. Sensory restriction, in this reading as in Lawrence's, is an enlargement of powers. See Julian Huxley, *Aldous Huxley 1894–1963: A Memorial Volume* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1965), 22.

<sup>17</sup> D. Mackenzie, 'Letter to the Editor: War Deafness', *Lancet* 190, no. 4898 (July 1917), 729.

as for Huxley and Isherwood, this recalibration of the human sensorium shifts focus toward the hands and related haptic experiences, not only in the former's 'The Blind Man' but also in his *The Ladybird* of 1923. Strategies in common in the use of manual matters to consider the losses and compensations of war make plausible a claim of Lawrence's substantial influence upon *Jacob's Hands*, in turn bringing that text into a canon of haptically attuned war writings of the period.<sup>18</sup>

That claim is supported by the fact that, following early scepticism, Huxley was substantially familiar with and admiring of Lawrence's work, and John 'the Savage' of *Brave New World*, who battles to retain control of his sensory experiences in resistance against a World State determined to engineer them, is frequently read as a Lawrence proxy.<sup>19</sup> Lawrence will have been in his mind when Huxley wrote to his widow, Frieda, about *Jacob's Hands* in April 1944, sounding a note of doubt about its prospects with the phrase 'I hope we shall be able to sell it.'<sup>20</sup> But he is also summoned as Huxley and Isherwood work toward linking specifically hand-related powers and experiences with the rigours of the War. Lawrence's *The Ladybird* does much to bring wider stories of war experience, intimate relationships, and economies of power to bear on the hands, and is therefore a further likely source of influence on the screen treatment. In this novella, interned veteran Count Dionys (a captured 'Bohemian' from Dresden) exclaims, 'The continual explosion of guns and shells! It seems to have driven my soul out of me like a bird frightened away at last,' recalling Jacob's own horror of war's sonic assaults, and speculates that he holds the recollection of noise within his hands: 'They [my hands] hurt me. I don't know what it is. I think it is all the gun explosions.'<sup>21</sup> While such pain might easily be read as nerve damage caused by the vibrations of bombardment, it also implies that, just as Lawrence mingles damage with the granting of new capacities, so he is also interested in sensory crossmodality as a consequence of war's overwhelming of the faculties, with noise 'felt' in the hands. This recalls vivid accounts of sensory attunement in soldier experience, such as that recorded in Wilfred Owen's letter to his mother of 1917: 'I have not seen any dead. I have done worse. In the dank air, I have perceived it, and in the darkness, felt.'<sup>22</sup> In an exchange that echoes Maurice's begging

<sup>18</sup> For more on noise and hearing in the Great War, see K. Conroy and V. Malik, 'Hearing Loss in the Trenches: A Hidden Morbidity of World War I', in *Journal of Laryngology and Otology* 1, no. 132 (2018), 952–5.

<sup>19</sup> See Brad Buchanan, 'Oedipus in Dystopia: Freud and Lawrence in Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*', *Journal of Modern Literature* 25, no. 3/4 (Summer 2002), 75–89 (86); Peter Firchow, 'Wells and Lawrence in Huxley's *Brave New World*', *Journal of Modern Literature* 5, no. 2 (April 1976), 260–78 (272).

<sup>20</sup> Huxley, *Letters*, 502.

<sup>21</sup> D. H. Lawrence, *The Ladybird*, in *The Fox, The Captain's Doll, The Ladybird*, ed. Paul Poplawski (London: Penguin, 2006), 157–221 (171).

<sup>22</sup> Wilfred Owen, 'Letter to Susan Owen, 19 January 1917', *The Collected Letters of Wilfred Owen*, ed. Harold Owen and John Bell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), 429. Underlining in original.

Bertie to ‘Touch my eyes, will you? – Touch my scar’,<sup>23</sup> Dionys begs his charitable visitor and later lover Daphne: ‘let me wrap your hair round my hands, will you? . . . That will soothe my hands.’<sup>24</sup> There is in this scene a further faint echo of Mary of Bethany, sister of Lazarus, who anoints Christ’s feet with spikenard ‘and wipe[s] his feet with her hair’ (John 12:3), a gesture of care and abasement that salves His skin, simultaneously reiterating, and anticipating the loss of, his earthly incarnation. Biblical sources also appear when Daphne’s husband, Basil, another wounded veteran, instructs her to ‘Touch me not, I am not yet ascended unto the Father’,<sup>25</sup> or *noli me tangere*,<sup>26</sup> repeating Christ’s words to Mary Magdalene following his crucifixion (John 20:17).<sup>27</sup> For Basil, the plea is for the cessation of marital intimacy, while Christ seems to beg Mary not to underscore his fleshly existence by means of tactile contact, before he might truly be considered risen. Thus Lawrence, like Huxley and Isherwood, turns to biblical models for his exploration of the senses when characters, tried in the fire of battle, rise again, perhaps with damage (like Dionys), and/or with enhanced abilities (like Maurice and Jacob).

In *The Ladybird*, Lawrence emphasizes once again the role of the hand as the sensory organ of greatest duress and change in war, when he emblematically represents with a thimble the prohibition against touch. That thimble is an heirloom of Dionys’s family, which he gives to Daphne as a gift. Functioning primarily as a form of digital prophylaxis or armour (*noli me tangere*), it might also be read to indicate her eventual co-option into that family, to hint at future marital seamstress servitude, or to highlight her solicitous domestic care in sewing shirts for Dionys at present. In addition, the thimble holds the status of what Steven Connor has called a ‘fidgetable’, an object with an appeal to and affordance for the hand, a category in which we find other denizens of the sewing room including needles and pins.<sup>28</sup> In Lawrence’s story context, the thimble is also associated with ‘pins and needles’ in a further sense, i.e. the skin and nerve tingling of paraesthesia, a possible symptom of shell shock or what is now termed PTSD, or of anxiety. The golden thimble, like Daphne’s golden hair, might calm Dionys’s paraesthetic hands, but the manual prickle also indicates brooked power, which may flow out through the hands, making the returning soldier that channel of forces, as Jacob comes to know. In this way, while the War’s noises and horrors might be seen in Huxley and Isherwood, and in

<sup>23</sup> Lawrence, ‘The Blind Man’, 40.

<sup>24</sup> Lawrence, *The Ladybird*, 171.

<sup>25</sup> Lawrence, *The Ladybird*, 192.

<sup>26</sup> In the Latin, the phrase provides a title for a poem of Lawrence’s. See D. H. Lawrence, *The Complete Poems of D. H. Lawrence Vol. I*, ed. Vivian de Sola Pinto and Warren Roberts (London: Heinemann, 1972), 468.

<sup>27</sup> For a more expansive discussion of the Marys of the Bible, embodiment, and the senses, see Abbie Garrington, *Haptic Modernism: Touch and the Tactile in Modernist Writing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 7–8. See also Didier Anzieu, *The Skin Ego*, trans. Chris Turner (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), 144.

<sup>28</sup> Steven Connor, ‘Introduction: Speaking of Objects’, *Paraphernalia: The Curious Life of Magical Things* (London: Profile Books, 2013), 1–13 (4).

Lawrence, to register in the hands, those hands are also the site of compensatory gifts and routes to rehabilitation (through healing others or forging new intimacies), while continuing to thrum in ill-understood ways.<sup>29</sup> Jacob's 'It just comes into me, somehow' and Dionys's 'I don't know what it is' retain an element of mystery within feelings and capacities that might otherwise be easily attributed to war service, leaving room for readings that do not merely link to biblical stories of touch but also allow these characters to accrue genuine spiritual power. It is via this Lawrence-influenced route that Huxley and Isherwood move to associate Jacob with the manual manifestations of the spirit experienced within the Pentecostal movement, further discussed below.

Jacob's hands are most conspicuously represented as instruments of healing, but over the course of the screen treatment their additional operation as locus of trauma becomes clear. Attempting to cure a Carter Ranch calf which has become infected with black quarter, and whose consequently swollen limbs may recall the battlefield, his hands at first tremble, then clench in fists to reassert control, and finally are laid on the calf alongside the reiterated verbal reassurance, or perhaps incantation, 'I won't let you die', repeated 'again and again' (19). This scene serves as the first revelation to the audience of Jacob's gift, and it is notable that when first his hands begin to quake they are described as 'the hands', before becoming 'his fists' in the act of clenching, and thereafter remain 'his' as he heals (19). The use of the definite article may attempt to throw emphasis upon 'the' hands as they begin to move across the calf's body. Or, in true screen treatment mode, it might identify 'the hands' as those that are likely to be in close-up in the anticipated film. In the latter reading it is cinematic technique that disaggregates the hands from the body, even as, from an audience perspective, their bringing-close might encourage a greater imaginative bond with Jacob's tactile experiences. However, with Lawrentian intertexts of the Great War in mind, this phrasing also estranges Jacob from his own hands as they tremble with a combination of nervous damage and a mysterious, newly acquired power, echoing the numbness of limb that may attend paraesthesia which similarly renders body parts as those that do not belong.

The War, its noise, and its terrible effects have one further influence upon Jacob: his choice of locations for dwelling, ultimately leading toward retreat from both the potential exacerbation of his trauma and the exploitation of his peculiar manual gift. The reader is told he was born into a Kansas farming family, and Sharon describes him as having moved, therefore, 'From the prairie to the desert', while her own aspirations for singing stardom have her recommend 'Frisco [San Francisco] or Los Angeles' instead (14). Like the Lawrence of New Mexico, Jacob favours the lateral extension of a flat, uninterrupted landscape, albeit with 'foothills' in one

<sup>29</sup> For an account of rehabilitation through manual craft practices, see Ana Carden-Coyne, 'Butterfly Touch: Rehabilitation, Nature and the Haptic Arts in the First World War', *Critical Military Studies* 6, no. 2 (2020), 176–203.

direction (and his creators might be seen to do so too, since Llano, the place of writing, can be translated as 'plain', via the Spanish *la llanura*).<sup>30</sup> During the War he has been on furlough in New York and Paris, neither of which he likes. The latter is described as a 'noisy, stinking city' (15). After the unmanageable volume of the battlefield, and the disorientation of its shells, urban spaces appear to exacerbate trauma, while flatness reassures with its long purview seeming to permit unaroused emotions in the provision of soothing vistas.<sup>31</sup> After Jacob reluctantly follows Sharon to Los Angeles, she eventually concedes that 'You ought to go right back to the desert', because '[Los Angeles] is no place for you' (39). Later, she asks again, 'Why don't you go back to where you belong?' (51). In the city, Jacob's capacities, born in trauma, are exploited while being thought of by some audiences (particularly the medical) as a con; in retreat, in flat landscapes, his gift is unbesmirched by market forces or by showmanship, and he is seen to be, in two senses, 'on the level'. Throughout the treatment, Huxley and Isherwood allow the reader to wonder about the authenticity of Jacob's gift; his choice to remove himself from opportunities for money, fame, and multiple human connections finally asserts his moral goodness and underscores the veracity of his powers. Attributing new and untapped capacities to the human hands might open the treatment to accusations of those unfashionably 'mystic doings', and yet, rather than a retreat to earlier, more overtly spiritual times, such attribution links not only to the recent experience of the Great War but also to the very latest thinking in pseudo-medical realms: the 'science' of hand-reading.

## Hand-Reading

Invested in the psychological dimensions of Jacob's war trauma and resultant powers, *Jacob's Hands* is also interested in the scientific and pseudoscientific frameworks through which these might be known. In the un-flat fleshpots of Los Angeles and its neighbouring Beverly Hills, Jacob is eventually persuaded to take on the case of the aforementioned Earl, a young man diagnosed with mitral stenosis (a narrowing of a valve of the heart) but also suspected of malingering in response to a suffocating level of attention from his mother. Further, Earl is troubled by a recurring hallucination, waking dream, or symptom of sleep paralysis, in which a shadowed figure stands behind the light curtains at his window ('Something waiting, hovering on the threshold of the visible world' [104]). While that figure operates primarily as an intimation of mortality, it also represents the mysteries of illness itself, 'sensing'

<sup>30</sup> 'New Mexico was the greatest experience from the outside world that I have ever had,' writes Lawrence. Cited in Peter L. Irvine and Anne Kiley, 'D. H. Lawrence and Frieda Lawrence: Letters to Dorothy Brett', *D. H. Lawrence Review* 9, no. 1 (Spring 1976), 1–116 (4).

<sup>31</sup> Forthcoming work from Noreen Masud will consider flatness in connection to affects and emotions in early to mid-twentieth-century modernist writing. Our conversations have influenced my reading here.

beyond the visual, and a peripheral space beyond the exactitude of conventional medicine, bringing Earl's and Jacob's experiences into parallel. Dr Krebs, attending, 'insinuates that he has seen a good deal of these so-called "faith cures"', but considers them merely 'a psychological shot in the arm' that causes a patient to rally temporarily, the energy of apparent access to a new cure waning over time (73). Two elements of the treatment will have prepared the audience to approach Krebs with scepticism, whatever his qualifications: the scenes of Jacob's successful healings to which we have been witness; and the presentation of Dr Ignatius Waldo, an obvious quack ("Ethical" and "scientific" are [his] favorite words. They keep recurring as a sort of leitmotiv in his conversation' [36], thereby undermining faith in him through the emptiness of his language and the insistent reiteration of his credentials and approach). It is just such questions raised of the medical establishment that Huxley saw as the cause of the treatment's rejection by the studios, imagined to be subject to a physicians' lobby, and the authors' commitment to questioning conventional medicine may therefore seem like a wilful act of self-sabotage.

Yet Huxley had reason to understand the mysterious significance of the human hands against the grain of standard scientific principles, not only via his engagement with Lawrence's work but also due to a friendship with the sexologist and 'chirologist' or hand-reader Charlotte 'Lotte' Wolff. A Jewish émigré from West Prussia with conventional medical training in addition to studies in literature and philosophy, Wolff's itinerant life (at first chosen, then enforced by Nazi control of Berlin) eventually led her to England in 1935, where she soon settled until her death, acquiring a British passport. For a time she lived with the Huxleys in their London flat, where she both paid her way and expanded her chirological studies by examining the hands of the modernist great and good, including Virginia Woolf (who recorded that she 'spent 2 hours over their [the Huxleys'] Dutch writing table under the black lamp being analysed'<sup>32</sup>), André Breton, George Bernard Shaw, Lady Ottoline Morrell, T. S. Eliot, and Julian Huxley (who also supplied access to the 'hands' of the monkeys at London Zoo<sup>33</sup>)—'no-one escaped', recalled Sybille Bedford.<sup>34</sup> Chiromy, as explained in Wolff's *Studies in Hand-Reading* of 1936, which presents her analyses of the foregoing figures as well as anonymous participants, makes some claims, as with palmistry, to the divination of the future, but in addition aims to provide insights into both past experience and present temperament and capacities. Wolff was associated with the Surrealists at this time, as the presence of Breton on the list above might indicate. Breton and his collaborators understood hand-reading not as anti-scientific, but as a kind of 'outsider' practice peripheral to scientific realms, and that might ultimately become institutionalized;

<sup>32</sup> Virginia Woolf, '11 December 1935', *The Diary of Virginia Woolf Vol. 2*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie (London: Penguin, 1988), 59.

<sup>33</sup> Sybille Bedford, *Aldous Huxley Vol. 1* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1973), 314.

<sup>34</sup> Bedford, *Aldous Huxley Vol. 1*, 285.

Wolff, in this reading, is simply ahead of her time.<sup>35</sup> It fell to Huxley to offer a bolstering preface to *Studies in Hand-Reading* and, as with the fictional Krebs's anticipatory denial of the actual efficacy of faith healing, Huxley leads with the likely objections to Wolff's methods and claims. In fact, the concerns of that preface seem to have been ported over to the screen treatment of the following decade. The assumption of Huxley and Isherwood's reliance on specifically Eastern spiritual traditions, encouraged by their publishing endeavours around the time of writing (see note 8), is made more nuanced by a consideration of Wolff's work, as much as of Lawrence's; manual cultures at the time of the treatment's creation included the intriguing possibility of 'reading' the hand.<sup>36</sup>

Huxley's strategy in the 'Preface', then, is to foreground the uncertainties of chiromagical practice, in turn emphasizing the limitations of conventional scientific understanding:

Here are two sets of given facts. First, a pair of hands, with their peculiar shape, colour, consistency and markings; and, second, the character, medical history and general biography of the person to whom the hands belong. Why should there be any connexion between the two sets of facts? And what, if such a connexion exists, is the mechanism by which one of them exerts an influence on the other? Why, for example, should an accident, an organic defect, a painful emotional experience leave symbolic traces upon the hands? And by what means are the traces left?<sup>37</sup>

Having probed the unclear nature of such a 'connexion' with these rhetorical questions, he goes on to claim that scepticism regarding this new field of study echoes the shape of other areas of incomplete knowledge in the medical arena, since 'in reality, the mind-body correlation is just as inexplicable, just as irrational, as the hand-life relation. It must be accepted as a brute fact of experience.'<sup>38</sup> Experience is what Wolff is able to provide, having made the most of *social* connections to access the hands of numerous subjects of study, human and primate. Eliot, for one, was sceptical regarding Wolff's analytic practice, believing that reputational information about her subjects was being incorporated in her readings. Writing to his older brother Henry, he declares: 'I was not much impressed by Mrs Wolff's diagnosis: even if she knew nothing of me, still she has some very strong prejudices

<sup>35</sup> M. E. Warlick, 'Palmistry as Portraiture: Dr Charlotte Wolff and the Surrealists', in Tessel M. Bauduin, Victoria Ferentinou, and Daniel Zamani, eds, *Surrealism, Occultism and Politics: In Search of the Marvellous* (London: Routledge, 2018), 57–72 (61).

<sup>36</sup> In the 1930s, the Surrealists were influenced by Émile-Jules Grillot de Givry's *Le Musée des Sorciers, Mages et Alchimistes* (1929), an illustrated history of the occult that included a chapter on 'Chiromancy' or hand analysis, and included images associated with earlier phases of palmistry. It is plausible that Wolff knew the book and discussed it with Huxley.

<sup>37</sup> Aldous Huxley, 'Preface', in Charlotte Wolff, *Studies in Hand-Reading*, trans. O. M. Cook (London: Chatto & Windus, 1936), vii–xiv (vii).

<sup>38</sup> Huxley, 'Preface', xiii.

I should say.<sup>39</sup> Yet Huxley obliquely indicates the failures of conventional medicine in declining to fully investigate the claims of the chirologist, a position implied to be one of strategic ignorance, when he writes that ‘the sort of people who might be expected to answer the question [of how the hand–life correlation is effected] don’t believe that the correlation really exists.’<sup>40</sup> The true neglect here is a lack of scientific curiosity, and just such a charge is put to all those doctors who respond to Jacob’s gift. Wolff’s *The Human Hand* (1942) carries a note from the publisher which takes a different tack to Huxley’s preface to the earlier work, not accusing medics of neglect but, rather, insisting upon Wolff’s place amongst their number, as against the crackpot and the quack: ‘A clear distinction should be drawn at the outset between the activities of the author of this book, a professional psychologist and physician who interprets hands with a scientific aim, and the activities of people who read hands and dabble in psychology.’<sup>41</sup> The paratextual apparatus of Wolff’s output might be a case of ‘protesting too much’, akin to Dr Waldo’s repeated invocation of the terms ‘ethical’ and ‘scientific’, but Huxley’s complicity in disseminating Wolff’s work indicates that, far from seeing her as a Waldo figure, he felt that chiromancy might be a path to understanding human lives and trajectories—a credulous response that has also shaped the presentation of Jacob’s tale. Wolff returned Huxley’s esteem, as indicated in her reading of his hand, which calls the rectitude of his digits ‘a symbol of creative work which aims at intellectual, artistic and ethical perfection, and has no practical purpose.’<sup>42</sup> Spinning Jacob through spiritual, religious, medical, financial, and show-business environments permits Huxley and Isherwood to view his hands through many epistemological frameworks, while foregrounding this question of the ethical deployment of an uncomfortably inexplicable gift. Wolff’s influence upon the screen treatment, subtle though it is, serves to emphasize the hands as the location where an assessment of character might best be formed. It also suggests that, in manual matters, conventional science might currently run behind the ‘discoveries’ of the chirologist. Jacob’s hands cannot truly be read, since the source of their power is unknown (what, after all, ‘comes into [them]?’), but the text suggests that by their fruits shall ye know them.

<sup>39</sup> T. S. Eliot, ‘Letter to Henry W. Eliot, 4 February 1938’, *Letters of T. S. Eliot Vol. VIII: 1936–1938*, ed. Valerie Eliot and John Haffenden (London: Faber, 2019), 787–8 (788). Eliot does not reject chiromancy completely, however, as he promises to send his brother’s palm prints to the allegedly superior Noel Jaquin, palmist and hand-reader, for an opinion. Eliot’s Faber had published Jaquin’s *The Hand of Man* in 1933.

<sup>40</sup> Huxley, ‘Preface’, xiii.

<sup>41</sup> Anonymous, ‘Publisher’s Note’, in Charlotte Wolff, *The Human Hand* (London: Methuen, 1942), xi–xii (xi).

<sup>42</sup> Wolff, *Studies in Hand-Reading*, 75–6.



## Spiritual Touch

The treatment's engagement with science and pseudoscience is supplemented by a further framework by which bodily experience might be interpreted: that of the Pentecostal Church. When Sharon eventually runs away from the family ranch to pursue her dreams of a singing career in Los Angeles, and Jacob follows, the treatment's second act meets him using his manual healing abilities within the environs of the 'Church of the Primitive Pentecostal Brotherhood'. At first, this seems merely a place where a man with a gift that could plausibly be read as a form of faith healing might feel most at home. Yet Huxley and Isherwood's depiction of the specifically Pentecostal Church of the early 1920s is selected with care, as that faith had particular resonances at the time of writing. The authors draw on a recent Los Angeles-based faith revival to explore the parallels between Jacob's scenes of healing and Pentecostalism's embodiment of the Holy Spirit in instances of speaking in tongues, which might be brought about by a laying on of hands. They also use representation of the Black-led Church to emphasize Jacob's affinity with Black friends and acquaintances, distinguishing him from the wider racist attitudes of the period, sketched in brief in the text. In turn, the portrayal of Black figures on-screen is proposed by the treatment in order to make a particular form of sensory appeal to the prospective audience—in this, the authors are influenced by racialized film theory of their own contemporary moment, which reads Black actors on-screen as markedly haptic. En route to mining this alleged sensory power of the Black body, Huxley and Isherwood also glancingly acknowledge the little-discussed importance of the early twentieth-century Pentecostal Church as, first, a cultural coordinate for writing that takes the contested ground of the body as its subject, and second, a radical space of interracial solidarity, emphasized by physical proximity in the act of worship, in the rapidly industrializing, immigrant-staffed cities of the United States.

The treatment connects Pentecostalism and Black bodies from the first of the church scenes. That church is presided over by a Black minister, Reverend Wood, whose 'earnest eloquence is at once touching in its sincerity; absurd because of his queer locutions and quaintly applied texts' (31). While his 'touching' words reach the congregation, who are moved to interjections and statements of praise, it is clear that the authors here attempt to specify a future actor's performance that will emphasize the alleged eccentricities and interpretative strategies (in which sacred texts are 'quaintly applied') of Pentecostal worship. The term 'queer' has appeared once before, when Professor Carter responds furiously to Jacob's healing of Sharon's disability (which has her walk with a limp, intermittently implied to be a psychosomatic hobbling), decides upon firing him from employment at the ranch, and states in his absence that 'He is queer and undesirable and not to be trusted with girls' (27). Most conspicuously, the Professor rails against his own waning control over his daughter, as well as naming Jacob as (socially) 'undesirable' at the moment

when his (sexual) desirability first arises as a problem to be tackled. Yet, in addition, the attempt to sexualize the spiritual practice of laying on of hands and to establish Jacob's queer peripherality pre-empts his later association with the Pentecostal Church, outlining the contours of potential public objections to such a church and its conceptualization of and engagement with the body.<sup>43</sup> Other aspects of Jacob's life, including his biblical contemplations and his mooted sainthood, link him more straightforwardly to a worship environment. In the 'Epilogue' he murmurs, 'Take up thy bed and walk' (recalling John 5:8–16), going on to ask, 'how many can tell when it's right to say it? How many can tell where the sick man's going, when he gets up...? How many know what the sickness meant?' (119). The questions raise the issue of being in a fit spiritual state to both justify and enable the healing, much in mind in Pentecostal practice. Further, Jacob replaces the 'who should we kill?' question that has marked the Great War with an interwar 'who should we cure?'. Earl, who eventually becomes Jacob's rival for Sharon's affections, says of him, 'Maybe he's a kind of saint or something', an argument that seeks to undermine his capacity for the frivolity that Sharon craves, even as it reasserts his special status. When Topsy the dog's bickering owners close the 'Epilogue' as lovers once again, as Hollywood demands, Mary says of Jacob: 'there's something about that guy. Something wonderful. Just being with him – it did something to me' (121). Saint Jacob, with the power to '[do] something', and a whickering sense of the moral rightness of the performance of miracles, seems absolutely at home in this church (called 'Brother' by Rev. Wood [32], both 'in Christ' and 'of the congregation', but also perhaps connoting fealty across racial lines), foregrounding by his presence there both his own queer and controversial capacities, and those of Pentecostalism's miraculous summonings of the Holy Spirit. Huxley and Isherwood therefore play their part in identifying the laying on of hands (or laying over, in Jacob's case, since contact is not confirmed) as central to Pentecostal notions of the body as a site of revelation—a reading that pre-empts today's scholarship regarding the faith.

Jacob's insistence that '[i]t's not anything I do . . . . It just comes into me, somehow' (20) should therefore be reread in a Pentecostal context. 'I' or the healer may not 'do' the healing but, it is implied by the italic-denoted emphasis on the first person pronoun, some other force or entity is at work. As Andrew Singleton explains, 'in the Pentecostal movement, the body becomes the conduit through which an encounter of an otherworldly kind is experienced and manifested'.<sup>44</sup> This might

<sup>43</sup> The *Los Angeles Herald* reported on Azusa Street in the following terms: 'There were all ages, sexes, colors, nationalities and previous conditions of servitude. . . . It was evident that nine out of every ten persons present were there for the purpose of new thrills. This was a new kind of show in which admission was free.' Cited in Cecil M. Robeck, *The Azusa Street Mission and Revival: The Birth of the Global Pentecostal Movement* (Nashville, TN: Robert Nelson, 2006), 1.

<sup>44</sup> Andrew Singleton, 'The Rise and Fall of the Pentecostals: The Role and Significance of the Body in Pentecostal Spirituality', *Religion and the Body* 23 (2011), 381–99 (388).

occur when, in response to a laying on of hands from a minister, a congregation member comes to speak in tongues, one of a possible set of ‘charisms’, which should be understood as ‘a corporeal manifestation of, and therefore affirmation of, the reality of the all-encompassing presence of God’s spirit.’<sup>45</sup> Thus Jacob’s hands can be seen as a form of spiritual real estate, where forces from beyond the material world find their path into quotidian existence. In David Lyon’s formulation, which neatly underscores the role assigned to Jacob by his creators, the Pentecostal body becomes the ‘setting for the drama.’<sup>46</sup> The dramatic aspects of a congregation member affected by the Holy Spirit were one source of fascination in journalistic accounts of Pentecostalism at this time.<sup>47</sup> Further, reading Pentecostalism in the context of *Jacob’s Hands*’ other engagements with manual cultures makes clear that, beyond prurient press interest, that faith sits comfortably amidst contemporary debates regarding the relationship between body and mind. For Lawrence, it was once again at the site of the hands that such a relationship might best be contemplated. His essay ‘Why the Novel Matters’ of 1925 finds him pondering the power of the beasts at the ends of his arms: ‘Why should I look at my hand, as it so cleverly writes these words, and decide that it is a mere nothing compared to the mind that directs it? . . . My hand is alive, it flickers with a life of its own.’<sup>48</sup> Jacob’s experiences chime with Lawrence’s, although as conduit or channel for external forces his hands have, rather than their ‘own’ life, the status of a site for the appearance of unknown powers. In deciding that such explorations should best take place on the cinema screen, Huxley and Isherwood agree with another author of 1925, the artist Fernand Léger, whose *Functions of Painting* contains the claim that ‘[b]efore I saw it in the cinema, I did not know what a hand was!’<sup>49</sup>

For the authors, then, Pentecostalism also provides the chance to think about the role of the hand in instances of spectacle on-screen. Even imagining Rev. Wood’s peculiarly affecting locutions seems to have shifted the authors’ own manner of expression, as the screen treatment slips into a kind of free indirect discourse in depictions of the church scenes. One phrase, associated with the Reverend himself in the throes of crowd control as the congregation vies for Jacob’s healing attentions, reiterates the performance qualities of the enterprise when he issues the instruction

<sup>45</sup> Stephen Shapiro and Philip Barnard, *Pentecostal Modernism: Lovecraft, Los Angeles and World-Systems Culture* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 51.

<sup>46</sup> David Lyon, ‘Wheels within Wheels: Globalization and Contemporary Religion’, in Mark Hutchinson and Olga Kalu, eds, *A Global Faith: Essays on Evangelicalism and Globalization* (Sydney: Centre for the Study of Australian Christianity, 1998), 47–68.

<sup>47</sup> ‘When public journalism reported on Pentecostals, it was not only to mock, but also to stir up moral panic over its racial mixtures, often suggesting that whites, especially female whites, were degraded through association with Blacks.’ Shapiro and Barnard, *Pentecostal Modernism*, 87.

<sup>48</sup> D. H. Lawrence, ‘Why the Novel Matters’, in Bruce Steele, ed., *Study of Thomas Hardy and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 193–8 (193).

<sup>49</sup> Fernand Léger, ‘The Machine Aesthetic: Geometric Order and Truth’, in Edward F. Fry, ed., *Functions of Painting*, trans. Alexandra Anderson (London: Thames & Hudson, 1973), 62–6 (65).

to 'Remember that this is God's house, not the circus' (32). The phrase reprimands unbecoming behaviour, reattributes healing power to the Holy Spirit, making Jacob a mere fortunate channel, and pushes against any assumption on the part of the crowd that this is merely a diverting but frivolous show. Yet with the future cinematic audience of *Jacob's Hands* in mind, it might be said that Rev. Wood issues this reminder precisely because the church scenes will have a circus quality, and in so doing anticipate the shabby theatrics of Jacob's later locations, the 'Main Street Art Theater' (with its 'nonstop performance of vaudeville and burlesque' [35]) and the 'Psycho-Magnetic Medical Centre' (involving more theatrics than the theatre). Finally, 'not the circus' obliquely implies an ethnographic gaze as well as a touristic impulse, recalling Lawrence's essay 'The Hopi Snake Dance', which depicts large numbers of tourists watching a 'native' ceremony precisely as if it is a 'circus performance'.<sup>50</sup> In parallel to the scene of Jacob's healing of the calf, Huxley and Isherwood play with a vividly imagined cinematic presentation that has all the appeal of a show, and attempt to reiterate the authentically miraculous nature of the work of the hands which is being depicted. Rev. Wood is not shown as undertaking the laying on of hands, although his 'touching' sermon hints in the direction of a notably affective mode of address. However, such a practice would be part of worship at his church, making Jacob's particular manner of healing familiar in form or process, if not in results (the latter neither explicitly invokes nor attributes healing to the Holy Spirit, and no charisms attend his efforts). Jacob, Wolff, and the Pentecostals now stack up as a series of hand-dependent healers and summoners due for topical consideration by any audience of 1944.

The appearance of Pentecostal worship practices in the pages of *Jacob's Hands* may simply indicate the wider significance of the faith in American culture of the 1940s.<sup>51</sup> However, the authors can also be read as responding in particular to the Azusa Street revival which took place in Los Angeles on 9 April 1906, instigated by Black minister William J. Seymour. Attention to this specific development of the faith both flags up the role of the hand in Pentecostal practice and suggests that Huxley and Isherwood were ahead of their peers in recognizing the significance of the revival, and its potential for depiction on screen. In fact, Stephen Shapiro and Philip Barnard have referred to this revival as a 'second major Californian "earthquake"', preceding San Francisco's Great Earthquake of 18 April 1906 by a

<sup>50</sup> D. H. Lawrence, 'The Hopi Snake Dance', in *Mornings in Mexico* (London: Secker, 1927), 136–69 (138).

<sup>51</sup> For the Azusa Street revivalists, the Book of Acts had particular significance, dealing as it does with the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost or Whitsun, and more widely the work of the Apostles after the death and ascension of Christ: 'When the day of Pentecost had come they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were sitting' (Acts 2:2). The wind against which Professor Carter turns his collar (noted above) might therefore be read not only as the first intimation that family relationships will shift with the commencement of Jacob's healing acts but also as the first inkling of a Pentecostal presence in the text.

matter of days. Further, the latter quake was read as ‘evidence of the onset of dispensational signs concerning end times and Christ’s imminent return,’ seeming to cement the church’s bona fides.<sup>52</sup> The place of worship in which Jacob is healing echoes the modest premises at 312 Azusa Street which, having been in the past a First African Episcopal Church, had fallen into disrepair after a period in which it was ‘rented by various enterprises, including, recently, a horse stable.’<sup>53</sup> Huxley and Isherwood’s description hints at such shabbiness, but also emphasizes the race and ethnicity of the worshippers present: ‘The church is a small bare hall with a raised platform at one end and rows of benches for the congregation. The place is crowded. There are Ne[\*\*\*\*]s, Mexicans, Chinese, and a sprinkling of Caucasians; all poor, simple, devout people’ (32). Azusa Street was located in a then Black-dominated business district of the city, and its congregation predominantly made up of the Black, white, and Mexican faithful. While newspaper reportage focused on the upper room, where men and women lay down together to receive laying on of hands, and experienced a variety of charisms, it was Azusa’s racial ecumenicalism that marked it as a new departure. For Shapiro and Barnard, Azusa was catalysed by ‘the intersection of the particular conditions of [industrial] modernism with a social ecology of post-emancipation racial equality’, to such an extent that instances of speaking in tongues may be mapped to ‘locales that combined new industrial development with immigrant-driven population growth.’<sup>54</sup> As early as 1910, Los Angeles had one of the largest Black populations in the US, and the largest west of Houston, as a result of the importation of labour to service companies such as Pacific Electric.<sup>55</sup> Seymour’s vision was therefore one of racial equality as much as access to spiritual realms, and the Azusa Street revival and its prominent Black ministers suggested that the two were intertwined, just as Huxley and Isherwood would go on to do.

The authors stage Jacob’s commitment to Black friends not only in the church but also amongst the service staff of the Medwin family’s Beverly Hills estate, one of whom (the chauffeur George Hamilton) is eventually revealed to be the companion at the Mojave smallholding whom we have met in the ‘Epilogue.’ In doing so, they shift the interracial solidarity of Pentecostal spiritual practice into other domains and connect the religious ‘quake’ to a flattening of social hierarchies, which finds its echo in the geographies of the plain to which Jacob has been shown to be drawn: ‘George...has always wanted to get away from the big city, into an atmosphere

<sup>52</sup> Shapiro and Barnard, *Pentecostal Modernism*, 84. The date of Azusa Street’s beginnings has been debated. I rely upon Shapiro and Barnard here.

<sup>53</sup> Shapiro and Barnard, *Pentecostal Modernism*, 81.

<sup>54</sup> Shapiro and Barnard, *Pentecostal Modernism*, 63–4. For more on the class coordinates of the Pentecostal revivals of the early twentieth century, see Vivian E. Deno, ‘Holy Ghost Nation: Race, Gender, and Working-Class Pentecostalism, 1906–1912,’ PhD Thesis, University of California, Irvine, 2002.

<sup>55</sup> Quintard Taylor, ‘Urban Black Labor in the West, 1849–1949: Reconceptualizing the Image of a Region,’ in Joe W. Trotter with Earl Lewis and Tera W. Hunter, eds, *African American Urban Experience: From the Colonial Period to the Present* (London: Palgrave, 2004), 99–120 (105).

where racial and class distinctions don't count. Jacob describes the beauties of the Mojave' (89). Therefore, although there are pragmatic aspects to Huxley and Isherwood selecting Los Angeles as a location, given the facilities available in what was in the 1940s a major movie industry hub, it cannot be a coincidence that it is also the site of California's second major seismic shift of the early part of the twentieth century, reframing the body as a space where spiritual forces manifested, and were witnessed and interpreted rather than fully known or measured. In the screen treatment, Jacob finds his place at the Pentecostal Church not only as a man of 'queer' powers accessed through laying on of hands but also as a 'brother' in faith and participant in an interracial community of equals. Where newspaper and cinema audiences might be encouraged to see a 'circus', Jacob sees a second Great Earthquake, this time of social relations, resulting in a space of worship where his moral rectitude and sense of justice can be appeased.

For the authors, the Church therefore provides one framework for understanding Jacob's gift and enables an exploration of particular forms of embodiment, drawing parallels between Jacob's healing/channelling and manifestations of the Holy Spirit via the witnessed charisms of Pentecostal worship. Yet in formulating that parallel, they tangle with the notion of a particular tactile appeal (peculiarly 'touching', as Rev. Wood is said to be) that was at this time attributed to Black figures on screen. Jacob's affinity with Black friends, inflected by his 'saintly' and war-honed sense of brotherhood, and built through communal worship and (in the Medwin home) shared spaces of labour, is also subtly ascribed to his own embodied and haptic mode of being. At this time, Black actors were subject to racialized readings in which they were said not only to reach the sensorium of the cinema audience in an especially affective way but also to flag up the haptic capacities of the cinematic form itself. That a Black body might be distinctive in its ability to be *felt* by an audience was discussed at some length in the August 1929 edition of the film magazine *Close Up*, put together by the Pool Group, including H. D., Kenneth Macpherson, and Bryher. On the theme of 'The N[\*\*\*\*] in Film', it drew together the work of major African American commentators from the world of film and beyond, alongside white writers with interests in the issue of race in cinema. Geraldyn Dismond (Gerri Major), in a piece tackling 'The N[\*\*\*\*] Actor and the American Movies', laments the range of roles given to Black players, restricted to 'fools and servants' whatever their talents—traditions that remain in place in *Jacob's Hands*, Rev. Wood excepted.<sup>56</sup> Meanwhile, Harry A. Potamkin refers to the casting of Black actors as a 'photogenic opportunity', in which the 'plastic' qualities of Black bodies, their alleged capacity to be rendered more fully in three dimensions on the flat plane of the cinematic screen, brings affective advantages that permit an audience to feel with the eyes: 'He should be black so that the sweat may glisten the more and

<sup>56</sup> Geraldyn Dismond, 'The N[\*\*\*\*] Actor and the American Movies', *Close Up* 5 (August 1929), 90–7 (96).

the skin be apprehended more keenly.<sup>57</sup> To apprehend is both to know and to grasp, and thus Black actors on screen are perceived to have ‘reach’, to appeal to the sensorium of the viewer in a distinctive way.<sup>58</sup>

Primed to attend to tactile matters by the central premise of healing through the hands, the prospective audience of *Jacob’s Hands* itself might therefore read Rev. Wood and his ‘queer’ and ‘touching’ sermons, or George and his second, mobile and vibrant skin of bees, as an appeal to their own bodily response beyond the visual. Such a reading recalls the multisensory overwhelm of Huxley’s Feelies in *Brave New World*. There, it is ‘a gigantic N[\*\*\*\*]’ who is depicted as the central star of *Three Weeks in a Helicopter*,<sup>59</sup> conveyed via a cinematic contraption involving galvanic knobs to be clutched by audience members, transmitting the titillating sensations of whatever is shown on screen, to a point of ‘almost intolerable . . . pleasure.’<sup>60</sup> Thus while Jacob’s allegiance to his Black brothers is sociopolitical and justice-oriented in origin, made manifest through the egalitarianism of the Pentecostal Church, Huxley and Isherwood promote a further affinity by linking this hands-based healer to Black bodies thought in this period to be provocatively haptic in appeal. Further, both Jacob himself and his Black acquaintances are written in such a way as to contribute to, and to emphasize, cinema’s own attempts at a ‘laying on of hands’—the effort to engage holistically with the bodies of its audience. While this exploration reaches its ludicrous end point in the fictional logic of Huxley’s Feelies, cinema’s haptic aspects were recognized in the era, particularly by those with an interest in the phenomenology of film spectatorship. Walter Benjamin calls modernist cinema itself ‘primarily tactile, being based on changes of place and focus which periodically assail the spectator’, a reading that indicates the embodied nature of film spectatorship, from the earliest decades of the form’s establishment.<sup>61</sup> Dorothy Richardson, writing of life in ‘The Front Rows’ in 1928, describes not so much being assailed, as a mode of engagement that involves the tactile creep of eye across screen: ‘Of the whole as something to hold in the eye he [the spectator] can have no more idea than has the proverbial fly on the statue over which he crawls.’<sup>62</sup> But it is Virginia Woolf

<sup>57</sup> Harry A. Potamkin, ‘The Aframerican Cinema’, *Close Up* 5 (August 1929), 107–17 (109). My thanks to Bryony Armstrong and Polly Hember for drawing my attention to this article. For an extended discussion of Black skin and visual culture in the early twentieth century, see Anne Anlin Cheng, *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>58</sup> Erica Fretwell has recently drawn attention to the work of pseudoscientist Lorenz Oken, who reworks the Aristotelian hierarchy of the senses so that the ‘white eye-man’ predominates over the ‘Black skin-man’. Lorenz Oken, *Elements of Physiophilosophy* (London: Ray Society, 1847), 653. Cited in Fretwell, *Sensory Experiments: Psychophysics, Race, and the Aesthetics of Feeling* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 32–3.

<sup>59</sup> Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (London: Flamingo, 1994), 151.

<sup>60</sup> Huxley, *Brave New World*, 52.

<sup>61</sup> Walter Benjamin, ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’, in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Pimlico, 1999), 211–44 (231).

<sup>62</sup> Dorothy Richardson, ‘Continuous Performance (series)’, in James Donald, Anne Friedberg, and Laura Marcus, eds, *Close Up 1927–1933: Cinema and Modernism* (London: Cassell, 1998), 150–209 (172).

who makes the most explicit connection between the visual spectacle of the cinema and a haptic form of engagement, writing in ‘The Cinema’ (1926): ‘The eye licks it [the film scenario] all up instantaneously, and the brain, agreeably titillated, settles down to watch.’<sup>63</sup> If cinema at the time of Huxley and Isherwood’s writing was flexing these capacities to convey to its audience tactile experience, and breaching the limits of the two-dimensional screen to prompt lick-touch haptic responses, the mode in which the authors were working—the screen treatment—can be understood to make allied attempts. Such a treatment, as distinct from the screenplay, storyboard, or script, records scenes and vital props, sketches characters and their affects or orientations, offers dialogue of particular importance, and occasionally slips into more conventional fictional narrative, some of it (as noted above) in free indirect discourse. Therefore this mode of writing, while it seems to rebut conventional close reading practices (perhaps explaining the text’s relative neglect in the scholarship), performs a kind of conjuring of its own. The challenge for the authors is to not merely describe the depicted events but convey how it might *feel* to witness them, once projected onto a cinema screen. The reader’s task, in turn, is to summon the sensations of the mooted viewing, all the more powerful because of the haptic concerns of the film proposed.

Read with attention to the place of the hands amidst psychological, pseudo-medical, and spiritual frameworks, *Jacob’s Hands* is far from a squib or a failure, for all its faults, inelegant shifts between interests, and grudging capitulations to some of Hollywood’s most commercially driven expectations. Indeed, it should be re-evaluated as an important attempt to tackle the histories of the human hand: a mid-century rendering of the Great War that turns to manual matters to think through damage and blessing, as do others, Lawrence included; a spiritual exploration, sketching the limits of medical knowledge, and engaging with chirolgy’s claims for the hand as itself a readable text; an attempt to track Pentecostalism’s body cultures and seismic shifts in racial ecumenicalism; and a hand-focused screen treatment that imagines a haptic cinema, with Black figures to the fore. While Huxley and Isherwood’s Heard- and Swami Prabhavananda-influenced interests in Eastern spiritual texts undoubtedly shape their thinking, consideration of the influence of Lawrence, Wolff, Azusa Street, and haptic cinematics makes further sense of the treatment and its engagement with modernist manual cultures. In turn, the strands of influence coming to bear on Huxley and Isherwood as they prepared the screen treatment emerge more clearly, all of them converging on the real estate of the palm. Jacob’s healing hands can be identified retrospectively as pointing, like a manuscript’s marginal manicule, toward vital debates within sensory studies in the early twentieth century.

<sup>63</sup> Virginia Woolf, ‘The Cinema’, in *The Captain’s Death Bed and Other Essays*, ed. Leonard Woolf (London: Hogarth Press, 1950), 166–71 (166).



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# TOUCHING WOUNDS

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## Violence and the Art of ‘Feeling’

SANTANU DAS

A month before his death on the Western Front in 1918, the First World War poet Wilfred Owen wrote to fellow soldier-poet Siegfried Sassoon about his ‘excellent little servant Jones’:

the boy on my side, shot through the head, lay on top of me, soaking my shoulder, for half an hour.

Catalogue? Photograph? Can you photograph the crimson-hot iron as it cools from the smelting? This is what Jones’s blood looked like and felt like. My senses are charred.<sup>1</sup>

Once read, always startled. Even a hundred years on, the shock of the passage remains undimmed, with its combination of sensory overload and metaphoric density, or in its fusion and confusion of half-realized emotions—horror, pity, vulnerability, diffuse eroticism, and a certain visceral thrill. Equally fascinating is the representational crisis it at once acknowledges and tries to circumvent: how can one communicate such ‘limit-experiences’, especially when they involve the most intimate and elusive of the human senses?<sup>2</sup>

Having ‘catalogued’ the raw facts through the iteration of commas, Owen invokes and throws away the reference to photography and instead elaborates on the power of the eye, as if it would communicate and preserve the moment more fully than the tips of his fingers. Speaking of the ‘double and crossed situating of the visible and the tangible’, Merleau-Ponty notes how ‘every vision takes place somewhere in the tactile space’ just as ‘the tangible itself is not a nothingness of visibility, is not without

<sup>1</sup> *Wilfred Owen: Collected Letters*, ed. Harold Owen and John Bell (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 581.

<sup>2</sup> Martin Jay, ‘The Limits of Limit-Experience: Bataille and Foucault’, in *Cultural Semantics: Keywords Of Our Time* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998), 62–78.

visual existence.<sup>3</sup> Owen takes us from the grey of theory to the ‘crimson-hot’ of experience: his metaphor, picking up the traces of colour and heat in its sibilant wake, at once showing how the haptic suffuses the visual and how imagined contact, touching at a distance, can sometimes be more powerful than touch itself. ‘Looked like and felt like’: sight and touch are here at once distinct and contiguous. In *De anima*, Aristotle wondered whether flesh itself was the organ of touch or just the medium, with the ‘real organ situated further inward’; for Lucretius, a materialist, ‘it is touch that is the bodily sense, whether when a thing penetrates from without, or when hurt comes from something within.’<sup>4</sup> Owen’s admission that ‘my senses are charred’ works on that fine threshold, for it is the body’s capacity for pleasure or pain, rather than the body itself, that is imagined as ‘charred’. The moment is recalled differently to his mother: ‘Of whose blood lies yet crimson on my shoulder where his head was – and where so lately yours was.’<sup>5</sup>

The passage calls to mind two analogous moments in First World War poetry. The first is from Ivor Gurney’s elegy ‘To His Love’ (1917), as the narrator tries to remember his friend without remembering the circumstances of his death—‘Hide that red wet / Thing I must somehow forget’; the second is a moment of horror from Isaac Rosenberg’s ‘Dead Man’s Dump’ (1917)—‘A man’s brain splattered on / A stretcher-bearer’s face.’<sup>6</sup> Both use poetic enjambment for maximum affect: ‘wet’ hovers formlessly at the end of the line in search of an object, at once adjective and noun, evoking sight and touch till we reach the next line, while, in Rosenberg, ‘splattered on’ prolongs the moment of spillage, testing the limits of both sense experience and conventional syntax. However, what distinguishes Owen’s letter from the above examples from Gurney and Rosenberg is his conviction of the value of experiences. Unlike Gurney’s attempts to ‘forget’, Owen tries to remember, revive, and even relish the moment: we witness a remarkable decadent imagination pouring itself out on the page as Jones’s blood is imagined as lying ‘yet crimson’ on his shoulder, which is at once flesh and archive, alive with its memories of contact—that of Jones’s head and his mother’s. Mother, son, and wounded boy-servant are here a trinity become one; the figuration is also, rather confusingly, an inversion of the Pietà image, with the son cradling the mother, as the contorted syntax and shifting pronouns reveal a bodily continuum.

In *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature* (2003), I argued that touch became central to the experience of the Western Front and to its literary representation

<sup>3</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, ed. Claude Lefort and trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 134.

<sup>4</sup> Aristotle, ‘On the Soul (De Anima)’, in *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), 422b–423a; Lucretius, *On the Nature of Things*, trans. W. H. D. Rouse (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1924; repr. 1992), II. 434. Both quotes are extracted in the excellent introduction to Elizabeth D. Harvey, ed., *Sensible Flesh: On Touch in Early Modern Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 1–21 (4).

<sup>5</sup> Wilfred Owen: *Collected Letters*, 580.

<sup>6</sup> Ivor Gurney, ‘To His Love’, and Isaac Rosenberg, ‘Dead Man’s Dump’, in *In Flanders Fields: Poetry of the First World War*, ed. George Walter (London: Penguin, 2004), 97 (ll. 19–20), 146–8 (ll. 48–9).

by British trench poets and nurses.<sup>7</sup> Starting with a revisitation of the sensuous world of the trenches, with a focus on Wilfred Owen—a writer whose work has continued to yield fresh intensities of meaning for me over the years—I shall here investigate how the processes of ‘touch and intimacy’ reverberate, beyond the trench writings of British soldier-poets and nurses, in world literature and in post-war civilian contexts. With what new meaning—epistemological, erotic, political—do such moments get invested when they migrate out of the reality of the trenches and hospitals and are imagined afresh in the realm of fiction, whether it be in colonial, African American, or modernist contexts? How do they affect literary form and does the sensuousness and interiority of form itself make possible a more intimate investigation of the senses?

A good starting point is the earliest and still one of the most acute thinkers on the senses—Aristotle. In *De sensu*, he hesitates over whether the visual or the auditory should be given primacy in the hierarchy of senses, but, in *De anima*, he concedes that ‘the primary form is touch, which belongs to all animals’. His account prompts these questions among others: is taste, a proximate sense like touch, separate from it or continuous with it? Is touch a single sense or a group of senses? Is touch limited to the skin or spread all across the body? Aristotle examines the ineluctability of touch, its mystery, in ways which would continue to absorb and baffle writers, philosophers, and scientists for centuries. He writes, ‘[e]very sense seems to be concerned with a single pair of contraries, white and black for sight, sharp and flat for hearing, bitter and sweet for taste; but in the field of what is tangible we find several such pairs, hot cold, dry moist, hard soft, & c.’<sup>8</sup> His metaphor of an ‘air-envelope growing around the body’ resonates with Didier Anzieu’s recent account of the skin ego as a psychic ‘envelope’ which develops as a phantasmatic counterpart to the body.<sup>9</sup> The immediate impetus for Anzieu’s work was Sigmund Freud, for whom the human ego ‘may be regarded as a mental projection of the surface of the body.’<sup>10</sup> In recent years, touch has invited commentary from phenomenologists, psychoanalysts, and feminists alike; accounts by Jacques Derrida, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Luce Irigaray have been particularly influential.<sup>11</sup> It is the one sense without which we cannot live

<sup>7</sup> Here I draw upon some of the material used in *Touch and Intimacy* in the section on ‘Owen’s perverse pleasure’, though framed in a different context, before extending the thesis to international and civilian writers not covered in the book.

<sup>8</sup> Aristotle, ‘On the Soul (De Anima)’, 413b, 533.

<sup>9</sup> Didier Anzieu, *The Skin Ego*, trans. Chris Turner (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989).

<sup>10</sup> Sigmund Freud, ‘The Ego and the Id’, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, ed. and trans. James Strachey et al. (London: Hogarth Press, 1960), XIX. 26.

<sup>11</sup> Some major works to address the issue of touch and human subjectivity are Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* [1945], trans. Donald A. Landes (London: Routledge, 2012); Ashley Montagu, *Touching: The Human Significance of the Skin* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1971); Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985); Anzieu, *The Skin Ego*; Morton A. Heller, *Touch, Representation and Blindness* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Claudia Benthien, *Skin: On the Cultural Border between Self and the World*, trans. Thomas Dunlap (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002); Laura U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 2002); Constance

or make meaning of ourselves and the world, as if life hovered on the corpuscles of our skin. It is also the most expansive and intractable, which is why the entry under 'touch' is one of the longest in the dictionary. One is reminded of Denis Diderot's blind man who famously said that, if he were granted a wish, it would not be for eyesight but for a pair of arms that would be long enough to reach out to the moon.<sup>12</sup>

Both war and art are deeply connected to processes of touch. Discussing the nature of art about two decades after the First World War, in which he had served as a private, David Jones wrote: 'Ars [art] is adamant about one thing: she compels you to do an infantryman's job. She insists on the *tactile*.'<sup>13</sup> For Albert Camus, writing in the middle of the Second World War, the artist is 'freedom's witness' in that he 'testifies not to the Law, but to the body.'<sup>14</sup> Indeed, from Thucydides's account of the Peloponnesian War to the images from Ukraine that now haunt us daily, there has been one constant in the nature of warfare: its aim and capacity to damage the body. Yet wars, whether ancient or modern, also foster moments of rare intimacy. In times of crisis or wounding, as words fail, the body rushes in to fill in the gap left by language—a hug, a pat, an embrace. The depiction of Achilles tending to the wounds of Patroclus on the red-figure kylix from 500 BC finds its contemporary echoes in moments of touch and intimacy that animate the extraordinary images of the great war photographer Don McCullin taken in conflicts in Asia, Africa, and Europe across the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

### Owen's Perverse Poetics

After three weeks at the front, Wilfred Owen wrote to his mother, 'I have not seen any dead. I have done worse. In the dank air I have perceived it and, in the darkness, felt.'<sup>15</sup> The hand underlines the word as it both remembers and represses the object. As I have noted elsewhere, in the trenches of the First World War the everyday visual world was replaced by a strange haptic, subterranean geography where men

Classen, ed., *The Book of Touch* (Oxford: Berg, 2005); Jacques Derrida, *On Touching—Jean-Luc Nancy*, trans. Christine Irizarry (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005). Studies more focused upon literature include Steven Connor, *The Book of Skin* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004); Santanu Das, *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Abbie Garrington, *Haptic Modernism: Touch and the Tactile in Modernist Writing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013); and Sarah Jackson, *Tactile Poetics* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015).

<sup>12</sup> Denis Diderot, 'Letter on the Blind for the use of Those who See', in *Thoughts on the Interpretation of Nature and Other Philosophical Works* (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 1999), 153.

<sup>13</sup> David Jones, 'The Utile', in *Epoch and Artist: Selected Writings*, ed. Harman Grisewood (London: Faber, 1959), 183.

<sup>14</sup> Albert Camus, 'Actuelles I', in *Oeuvres complètes d'Albert Camus*, 9 vols (Paris: Gallimard and Club de L'Honnête Homme, 1983), V, 188, 191, quoted in Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing, Psychoanalysis and History* (London: Routledge, 1992), 108.

<sup>15</sup> *Wilfred Owen: Collected Letters*, 429. The two words are underlined in the original letter.

navigated distance not through the distance of their gaze but the immediacy of their bodies: 'burrow', 'crawl', 'creep', and 'worm' are recurring verbs in trench narratives as soldiers recall their movement through the notorious trench mud, showing the shift from the verticality of the human gait to the horizontality of the beast. The war brutalized the human sensorium on an unprecedented scale, but it also resulted in rare moments of touch and intensity.<sup>16</sup> Consider the following letter from Lance Corporal Fenton to the mother of a close comrade who has just been killed:

I suddenly saw Jim reel to the left and fall with a choking sob. I did what I could for him, but his stout heart had already almost ceased to beat and death must have been mercifully instantaneous. I held him in my arms to the end, and when his soul had departed, I kissed him twice where I knew you would have kissed him – on the brow – once for his mother and once for myself.<sup>17</sup>

The writing from the trenches, I suggested, obsessively circles around such moments of bodily intimacy, from Rupert Brooke's 'linked beauty of bodies' to Siegfried Sassoon's 'my fingers touch his face' to Robert Nichols's more sentimental '[m]y comrade, that you could rest / Your tired body on mine'.<sup>18</sup>

Wilfred Owen was the central figure in this literary drama of touch and intimacy. The power of his poetry, as *poetry*, lies not just in his celebrated cult of 'pity' or anti-war sentiment but in an extraordinary ability to empathize with bodies in pain and evoke them with exquisite precision through paroxysms of sound and touch. Repressed homoeroticism, loathing of war, and a decadent sensibility were all responsible, but the form that the representation of such moments of bodily violation takes is singular. Through the most seductive of lyric voices, he draws us into moments of extreme violence, weaving linguistic-tactile fantasies around moments when the body is broken ('slashed bones bare', 'shaved us with his scythe'), the flesh gets torn ('shatter of flying muscles', '[r]ipped from my own back / In scarlet shreds', 'limped on, blood-shod'), or the mouth gets bruised ('I saw his round mouth's crimson deepen as it fell').<sup>19</sup>

Consider how subtly he evokes the mutilated body in the opening lines of 'Disabled' (1917–18): 'He sat in a wheeled chair, waiting for dark, / And shivered in his ghastly suit of grey, / Legless, sewn short at elbow.'<sup>20</sup> The sibilance sends a shiver

<sup>16</sup> See *Touch and Intimacy*, particularly the chapters 'Slimescapes' (35–72) and 'Wilfred Owen and the sense of touch' (137–74).

<sup>17</sup> Lance Corporal D. H. Fenton, 'Papers', Imperial War Museum Archives, 87/13/1, 26.

<sup>18</sup> Rupert Brooke, 'Fragment', in *The Collected Poems* [1929] (London: Papermac, 1987), 318 (l. 11); Siegfried Sassoon, 'The Last Meeting', typescript, Add 7973 S51–end, Cambridge University Library; Nichols, 'Casualty', in *Aurelia and Other Poems* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1920), 75 (ll. 10–11).

<sup>19</sup> Wilfred Owen, 'Apologia Pro Poemate Meo', 124–5 (l. 7); 'The Next War', 165 (l. 8); 'Mental Cases', 169–70 (l. 16); 'A Terre', 178–80 (ll. 9–10); 'Dulce Et Decorum Est', 140–1 (l. 6); '[I saw his round mouth's crimson deepen]', 123 (l. 1): all in *The Complete Poems and Fragments, I: The Poems*, ed. Jon Stallworthy (London: Chatto & Windus, Hogarth Press, and Oxford University Press, 1983), henceforth *CP&F*.

<sup>20</sup> 'Disabled', *CP&F*, 175–7 (ll. 1–3).

down this single sentence, especially when combined with the imagery of clothing, with 'sewn' being a ghastly trace of 'suit'. Owen brings us up so 'short' to this sewn-up body that we wince. The comma in the final line makes us pause after 'legless', but the alliteration carries us forward so that only when we reach the end of the line do we realize that the man has lost not just his legs, as we had previously thought, but also his hands. 'Sewn' pulls us in opposite directions, visually and aurally (whether combined with 'legless' or 'short'), but both importune, through the close-up vision and close listening, the haptic. One is reminded of similar clothing imagery in a diary entry of Virginia Woolf's for 18 February 1921, as she sees some badly mutilated soldiers:

The most significant sign of peace this year is the sales; just over; the shops have been flooded with cheap clothes. . . . And I found a street market in Soho where I buy stockings at 1/ a pair: silk ones (flawed slightly) at 1/10. . . . It is just perceptible too that there are very few wounded soldiers abroad in blue, though stiff legs, single legs, sticks shod with rubber, & empty sleeves are common enough. Also at Waterloo I sometimes see dreadful looking spiders propelling themselves along the platform – men all body – legs trimmed off close to the body. There are few soldiers about.<sup>21</sup>

The movement from 'silk stockings' to 'empty sleeves' is shocking and acute, with the linguistic trace carried forward in the metaphor of 'legs *trimmed* off close to the body', somewhat like Owen's 'sewn short'. Woolf's anti-war protest and revulsion are conveyed in the grisly image of 'spiders', of the limbless men—though seen at a distance—being almost felt as 'all body'. Another similarly devastating visual depiction, in the midst of the next war, occurs in 'Vergissmeinnicht' by Keith Douglas (1943):

But she would weep to see today  
how on his skin the swart flies move;  
the dust upon the paper eye  
and the burst stomach like a cave.<sup>22</sup>

This is the world of what Julia Kristeva calls the 'abject': the powers of horror are evoked, as in Woolf, through haptic vision.<sup>23</sup> In Owen, by contrast, there is a certain tactile intimacy; instead of horror, there is a language of desire as there is a sudden erotic eruption of colour and touch— 'And leap of purple spurted from his thigh'— as if to take up the place of women's 'subtle hands' which now 'touch him like some queer disease'.<sup>24</sup> The body that cannot be touched, legally and morally, can only be mutilated in Owen.

<sup>21</sup> Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell, 5 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 1978), II, 92–3.

<sup>22</sup> Keith Douglas, 'Vergissmeinnicht', in *Poetry of the Second World War*, ed. Desmond Graham (London: Pimlico, 1998), 91–2 (ll. 17–20).

<sup>23</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

<sup>24</sup> 'Disabled', *CP&F*, ll. 20, 13.

Owen's mentor was John Keats. After reading W. M. Rossetti's *Life and Writings of John Keats*, Owen felt that 'Rossetti guided my groping hand right into the wound, and I touched, for one moment, the incandescent Heart of Keats'.<sup>25</sup> Owen often relocates Keatsian sensuousness to the grim landscape of the trenches without wholly letting go of the pleasure principle so that we lurch confusedly between horror and desire, as in 'Exposure' (1917–18): 'Our brains ache, in the merciless iced east wind that knife us... / Pale flakes with fingering stealth come feeling for our faces.'<sup>26</sup> However, in his mature works, as in the imagining of the gas attack in 'Dulce Et Decorum Est' (1917–18) where he comes into his own, he rewrites Keatsian sensuousness as taste, as Keats's description of how the 'strenuous tongue / Can burst Joy's grape against his palate fine' becomes 'obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud / Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues'.<sup>27</sup> The hypochondriac Owen who thought he suffered, like his mentor, from consumption here goes beyond the surface of the body to evoke pain as inner touch. The testimony of the gas attack accordingly moves from visual impressions to guttural processes; from external sounds—fumbling, stumbling, flound'ring, drowning—to sounds within the body: guttering, choking, writhing, gargling. While war protest is habitually written through a language of wounds, Owen's visceral imagination takes it a step further, a movement horrifically apt for our own times of biological and chemical warfare.

At the same time, words can also function as a salve, or even try to resuscitate the body when everything else has failed:

Move him into the sun –  
 Gently its touch awoke him once,  
 At home, whispering of fields half-sown,  
 Always it woke him, even in France,  
 Until this morning and this snow.  
 If anything might rouse him now  
 The kind old sun will know.  
 Think how it wakes the seeds –  
 Woke once the clays of a cold star.  
 Are limbs, so dear achieved, are sides  
 Full-nerved, still warm, too hard to stir?  
 Was it for this the clay grew tall?  
 – O what made the fatuous sunbeam toil  
 To break earth's sleep at all?<sup>28</sup>

<sup>25</sup> *Wilfred Owen: Collected Letters*, 161.

<sup>26</sup> 'Exposure', *CP&F*, 185–7 (ll. 1, 21).

<sup>27</sup> John Keats, 'Ode on Melancholy', in *The Poetical Works of John Keats*, ed. H. W. Garrod, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), 274–5 (ll. 27–8); Owen, 'Dulce Et Decorum Est', *CP&F*, ll. 23–4.

<sup>28</sup> 'Futility', *CP&F*, 158.



'Futility' is Owen's most expansive imagining of touch, both literal and figurative, as 'wake' expands in scope from contact and consciousness to germination and genesis under Keats's 'maturing sun'. By contrast, there lies the one inert body which does not reciprocate the gesture. Owen first tries to caress it with the lightest of materials—light—and then plays on the relationship between light and heat, and finally falls back on the resources of his craft: the rustle of language—assonance (sown/snow), pararhymes (sun/sown), or rhyme (snow/now)—is like the auditory equivalent of the mutuality of the embrace whose denial forms the desolate centre of the poem. The moment of attempted resurrection is also informed by certain age-old narratives, such as Christ restoring eyesight through touch or Pygmalion making the statue 'move'.

### **Across the Colour Line: Anglo-Indian Fiction to Harlem Renaissance**

If Owen's poetry provides insights into the intimate and complex negotiation between touch and poetic form, it was during the war years that we also have some of its politically charged representations. Four million soldiers of colour were recruited into armies of the European nation states, with their sprawling empires, and the United States, including one and a half million South Asians and two million black troops from Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States.<sup>29</sup> Let us consider, for a change, a couple of images to examine the politics of gestures. In a striking photograph from the Imperial War Museum archives (Figure 22.1), one sees a white uniformed hand pressing down an Indian soldier's hand for a thumb impression on a piece of paper (the caption reads, '[a]n Indian, unable to write, is putting his thumb-impression to get his pay'). Insurgent under this touch is not just the body of the nameless Indian sepoy or the story of wartime recruitment but the whole history of colonial subjugation and racial inequality. One can read it alongside another image from the same archives (Figure 22.2). Here, a wounded and wheelchair-bound Indian sepoy dictates a letter to his comrade and leans across to pat him affectionately on his shoulder—thank you for writing the letter for me, the hand seems to say, the body filling in the gap left by language.

How did such processes play themselves out in the battlefield across the line of colour? A. G. Lind, an English officer serving with the Indian troops, recalled how his fellow officer Lieutenant Colonel Venour was one day suddenly thrown flat in the mud by Lashkarai, an Indian sepoy, who had jumped on him.<sup>30</sup> We realize, retrospectively, that Lashkarai had just saved Venour's life: the Indian sepoy had

<sup>29</sup> See Santanu Das, *Race, Empire and First World War Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>30</sup> A. G. Lind, *A Record of the 58th Rifles F.F. in the Great War 1914–1919* (Waziristan: Commercial Steam Press, 1933), 9.



**Figure 22.1** An Indian, unable to write, is giving his thumbprint to receive his pay. Imperial War Museum, London, Q12500 © IWM. Image not available in the digital format of the publication.



**Figure 22.2** A wounded sepoy dictating a letter at Brighton Pavilion Hospital. Imperial War Museum London, Q53887 © IWM. Image not available in the digital format of the publication.

spotted a German sniper taking aim at his officer and acted with lightning-quick-ness. The inexperienced officer decided to look over the top again but, this time, the sepoy was a second too late and Venour collapsed into Lashkarai's helpless arms. The Indian doctor Kalyan Kuman Mukherjee recalled offering some water to a badly wounded young English soldier in Mesopotamia: the grateful boy tried to kiss Mukherjee and died in his arms.<sup>31</sup> A similar account is recorded by the French soldier and nurse Pierre La Mazière about a wounded black soldier:

I took the poor Black to my arms to help him. I leaned over him on the table. His head rested on my chest. He continued to scream. Huge tears rolled down his cheeks. I felt sorry for him, I cradled him. At one point, I told him he was a handsome guy.

Then, with his lovely smile, he stretched out his arms and kissed me.<sup>32</sup>

The world of 'touch and intimacy' was by no means the preserve of European soldiers on the Western Front.

An early and curious 'literary' example occurs in the writings of Roly Grimshaw, an English officer serving with the Indian forces on the Western Front. In his war diaries, he recalls the 'extraordinary lightness' as he picks up a young, dead Pathan soldier and, later, recollects hauling a sepoy out of the mud and taking 'the poor chap, almost pulseless, to a ruined house a few feet away' where they 'stripped him, and four of us massaged him.'<sup>33</sup> Such charged moments testify to the complex history of emotions between the British officers and the Indian sepoy which is shaped by but goes far beyond the hierarchies of race and empire. His 'Captain Grimshaw's Diary' forms the basis of the remarkable novella *Experiences of Ram Singh* (1930)—a combination of first-hand testimony, fiction, ventriloquism, and propaganda—where he views the world as seen through the eyes of an Indian sepoy. Consider the following accounts, the first from the diary and the second from the novella:

The killed was Ashraf Khan, one of the nicest looking fellows I have seen. Both his legs were blown off below the knee, and one arm, and half his face. I saw he was a hopeless case and did up the others, two of whom were quite bad. Poor Ashraf Khan, an only son, and his mother a widow. He lived for 40 minutes. I did what I could for him but, as he was unconscious, it was not much use.

Lying in the bottom of the trench was Beji Singh with one leg severed at the knee, the other almost cut away at the fork. The mangled boy was quite conscious.... Smith Sahib bent close over the lad in order to administer a tabloid of morphia. Beji Singh,

<sup>31</sup> Mokkhada Devi, *Kalyan-Pradeep: The Life of Captain Kalyan Kumar Mukhopadhyay I.M.S.* (Calcutta: Rashik Press, 1928), 303. My translation.

<sup>32</sup> Pierre La Mazière, *L'H.C.F.: l'hôpital chirurgical flottant* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1919), 11, quoted in Leonard V. Smith, *The Embattled Self: French Soldiers' Testimony of the Great War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2007), 84.

<sup>33</sup> Captain 'Roly' Grimshaw, 'Captain Grimshaw's Diary', in *Indian Cavalry Officer, 1914–1915* (Southborough: Costello, 1986), 13–96 (39, 55). See also Santanu Das, *India, Empire and First World War Culture: Writings, Images and Songs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 192–200.

whose arms were uninjured, brushing aside the proffered drug, seized his Squadron Commander by both hands. Momentarily, he held him in a vice-like grip uttering the words 'Sahib, Sahib,' then letting go, subsided lifeless. Smith Sahib turned to Ram Singh with the words 'Guzar gea'... Covered with blood from the death grip of a young soldier for whom he entertained more than a passing regard, Smith Sahib felt strangely unnerved at the incident.<sup>34</sup>

Why does Grimshaw change the real-life record of the experience of a rather ineffectual witness to a fictive account of a passionate death-embrace? What kinds of anxieties and fantasies are being negotiated here? Written in 1930 amidst widespread post-war disillusionment and anti-colonial protests, is this a desperate attempt by an Anglo-Indian officer to recast war service as an irrevocable bond of imperial loyalty and service? Throughout the text, there are hints of a special bond between Grimshaw and Beji Singh, who is described as 'one of the nicest fellows I've seen.' There is also a personal subtext. In real life, when Grimshaw was wounded, he was carried to safety by a sepoy, whereas he, in turn, had failed in his role as officer and father figure to protect his young sepoy. The death embrace, in this context, becomes a wishful fantasy of intimacy and expiation.

The scene resonates with an equally curious moment in the African American writer Jessie Fauset's novel *There is Confusion* (1924), one of the earliest and most remarkable novels of the Harlem Renaissance. Some 357,000 African American soldiers were inducted into the US military during the First World War, of whom some 42,000 saw active service.<sup>35</sup> In this novel of black middle-class aspiration and quest for social equality, the protagonist Peter Bye, a would-be medical surgeon, enlists in the war as an officer and, on the troopship to France, meets the white Meriwether Bye, the great-grandson of the slaver Bye who owned Peter's great-grandfather, Joshua Bye. An unspoken intimacy develops between the two men, especially after Meriwether expresses his horror and remorse at his family's murky past. The complex, painful history of race relations which the novel charts reaches its denouement in the battlefield as Peter finds a dying Meriwether:

When he [Peter] came to, it was still dark, though the day, he felt, rather than saw, was approaching... Crawling forward he plunged his hand into blood, a depthless pool of sticky blood. Sickened, he drew back and dried it, wiping it on his coat. More cautiously, then, he reached out again, searching for the face, yes, that was Meriwether's nose. Those canny finger-tips of his recognized the facial structure. His hand came back to Meriwether's chest. The heart was beating faintly and just above it was a hole, with the blood gushing, spurting, hot and thick... Finally grunting, swearing, almost

<sup>34</sup> Grimshaw, 'Captain Grimshaw's Diary', 39, and 'Experiences of Ram Singh', 97–181 (146), in *Indian Cavalry Officer*.

<sup>35</sup> See Mark Whalan, *The Great War and the Culture of the New Negro* (Florida: University Press of Florida, 2008). Also see his chapter 'Not Only War: The First World War and African American Literature', in Santanu Das, ed., *Race, Empire and First World War Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 290–2 (283–300).

crying, he got Meriwether's head against his knee, then against his shoulder, and staunched the wound with the harsh, unyielding khaki.<sup>36</sup>

In the morning, the stretcher-bearers find the two clasped together in such a way that one of the rescue men notes: 'I've seen many a sight in this war, but none ever give me the turn seein' that smoke's hair dabblin' in the other fellow's blood' (253).

The dying embrace on the battlefield is a classic trope in First World War texts, from the mud-stained tableau of a dead German and French soldier at the end of Henri Barbusse's *Le Feu* to Erich Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front* where Paul realizes that his friend Kat is dead: 'I feel my fingers becoming moist. As I draw them away from behind his head, they are bloody.'<sup>37</sup> What Fauset does is to combine the horror of Barbusse with the *Freundschaft* of Remarque, but Fauset's stakes are very different. This is not just battlefield comradeship tipping into homoeroticism but the mobilization of touch for an urgent political cause. For Fauset, the African Americans 'fought a double battle in France, one with Germany and one with white America.'<sup>38</sup> They volunteered for the principles of liberty and equality, only to return to their own country and be denied both: 'We return. / We return from fighting. / We return fighting' ('Returning').<sup>39</sup> Race riots erupted across the US in the 'red summer' of 1919 and at least sixteen veterans were lynched.<sup>40</sup> In such a context, the death embrace between the white and black Byes, linked through the family history of enslavement, accretes further significance. Just before Meriwether loses consciousness, he sits up and says, 'Grandfather ... this is the last of the Byes' before collapsing across Peter's knees, 'his face turned childwise toward Peter's breast'.<sup>41</sup> Different impulses can be read into this remarkable scene: the end of a terrible family lineage and legacy, the portrayal of white vulnerability, the vision of interracial rapprochement, and therefore hope for a new chapter in American history are all combined.

## Modernist Imaginings: D. H. Lawrence and Claire Goll

But what happens if, or when, these men return home? How are such moments of intimacy reconfigured within the domestic spaces of the post-war world, particularly by

<sup>36</sup> Jessie Redmon Fauset, *There is Confusion* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1989), 252.

<sup>37</sup> Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front* [1929], trans. A. W. Wheen (Oxford: Heinemann, 1990), 245.

<sup>38</sup> Fauset, *There is Confusion*, 269.

<sup>39</sup> W. E. B. Du Bois, 'Returning', quoted in Mark Van Wienen, *Rendezvous With Death: American Poems of the Great War* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 252 [date of poem unknown].

<sup>40</sup> See David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 14–24.

<sup>41</sup> Fauset, *There is Confusion*, 253.

modernist civilian writers? In his poem 'Reserve,' the Imagist soldier-writer Richard Aldington notes:

Though you desire me I will still feign sleep  
And check my eyes from opening to the day,  
For as I lie, thrilled by your dark gold flesh,  
I think of how the dead, my dead, once lay.<sup>42</sup>

Hands which had held 'strong hands which palter' can no longer respond to the opposite sex.<sup>43</sup> And we get a very different perspective from Aldington's wife—the celebrated American poet H. D.—in *Bid Me to Live* (1960), the fictional account of her wartime trauma and the breakdown of her marriage. In the novel, Julia wakes up with a 'muddle of poisonous gas and flayed carcasses' in her head—reminiscent of her combatant husband Rafe's war dreams—as if, in a post-war world, the marital bed can only function as a site of contagion.<sup>44</sup> In Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1924), the shell-shocked Septimus Smith ignores (or cannot communicate with) his wife Rezia as he is haunted by the memory of his comrade Evans. If the First World War was a turning point in the history of European masculinity, it was also a moment of disruption in the history of heterosexuality. However, the most remarkable explorations occur in two short stories by two anti-war writers situated across the no man's land—D. H. Lawrence and Claire Goll.<sup>45</sup>

In the history of literature, few writers have celebrated touch as powerfully as Lawrence. For him, it could redeem humanity from the excessive self-consciousness and mechanization of modern times; his aim was to put men and women back in touch with their 'blood-consciousness.' 'My hand is alive, it flickers with a life of its own. It meets all the strange universe in touch, and learns a vast number of things, and knows a vast number of things,' Lawrence notes in *Phoenix*.<sup>46</sup> His writings on touch are too numerous even to be listed, but what he does time and again—from his poems in *Pansies* or the celebrated 'Gladiatorial' scene in *Women in Love* where the naked Crich and Birkin wrestle, to short stories such as 'You Touched Me' and his description of the 'quietest flow of touch . . . one of the rarest qualities, in life as well as in art' in *Etruscan Places*—is to plunge us, like no other writer, into the intensity of the tactile moment and get under the guard of our consciousness. Unlike Owen or Keats, the object of his touch is not just the body. Grope, grasp, reach, stroke are verbs he uses obsessively, as if the repeated handling would give him access to some

<sup>42</sup> Richard Aldington, 'Reserve,' in *Lads: Love Poetry of the Trenches*, ed. Martin Taylor (Bury St Edmunds: Duckworth, 1989), 149.

<sup>43</sup> Robert Nichols, 'The Secret,' in *Lads: Love Poetry of the Trenches*, 148–9 (l. 19).

<sup>44</sup> H. D., *Bid Me To Live* [1960] (London: Virago, 1984), 39.

<sup>45</sup> I discuss these two stories at greater length in my article 'Theatre of Hands: Writing the First World War,' in Laura Marcus, Michèle Mendelssohn, and Kirsten E. Shepherd-Barr, eds, *Late Victorian into Modern* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 392–6.

<sup>46</sup> *Phoenix: The Posthumous Papers of D. H. Lawrence* [1936], ed. Edward McDonald (New York: Viking, 1968), 533.

secret knowledge. For what he wants to touch is human feeling, the 'vital flow' between people in a 'circumambient universe'.<sup>47</sup>

In 'The Blind Man' (1922), wartime blindness becomes the perfect pretext for Lawrence to explore the deep recesses of tactile and psychic worlds. We are presented with Maurice Pervin, blinded war hero and larger-than-life figure, whose blindness has empowered rather than emasculated him: 'It was a pleasure to him to rock thus through a world of things, carried on the flood in a sort of blood prescience... Life seemed to move in him like a tide lapping, lapping, and advancing, enveloping all things darkly.'<sup>48</sup> Maurice lives in 'unspeakable intimacy with his wife,' alternating between 'dark, palpable joy' and 'black misery'. The story begins with Isabel Pervin 'listening for two sounds'—of a car announcing the arrival of her old barrister friend Bertie Reid and Maurice's heavy footsteps. But it is Maurice's hand that is the centre of attention, lunging forward in anticipation ('It was a pleasure to stretch forth a hand and meet the unseen object, clasp it, and possess it in pure contact') or described through the free indirect discourse which attaches itself to different viewpoints ('Bertie placed the tiny bowl against his large, warm-looking fingers. Maurice's hand closed over the thin, white fingers of the barrister. Bertie carefully extricated himself').<sup>49</sup> Midway through the story, Bertie goes into the dark barn to look for Maurice. As they meet, Maurice suddenly asks Bertie how disfigured his face is and, as the lawyer feels a 'quiver of horror,' the blind man asks, '[d]o you mind if I touch you?':

But he suffered as the blind man stretched out a strong, naked hand to him. Maurice accidentally knocked off Bertie's hat.

'I thought you were taller,' he said, starting. Then he laid his hand on Bertie Reid's head, closing the dome of the skull in a soft, firm grasp, gathering it, as it were; then, shifting his grasp and softly closing again, with a fine, close pressure, till he had covered the skull and the face of the smaller man, tracing the brows, and touching the full, closed eyes, touching the small nose and the nostrils, the rough, short moustache, the mouth, the rather strong chin. The hand of the blind man grasped the shoulder, the arm, the hand of the other man. He seemed to take him, in the soft, travelling grasp.<sup>50</sup>

The adjective 'naked,' needless yet crucial to the world of Lawrentian feeling, hints at the senses of exposure and violation on which this drama of arousal turns. The above passage raises fundamental questions about touch, knowledge, and desire: we are never wholly sure whether this is repressed eroticism masquerading as phenomenological exploration or if it is genuinely exploratory and its eroticism is precisely the function of the absence of an erotic aim or telos.

<sup>47</sup> Lawrence, 'Morality and the Novel,' in *Phoenix*, 527.

<sup>48</sup> Lawrence, 'The Blind Man,' in *D. H. Lawrence: Selected Short Stories*, ed. Brian Finney (London: Penguin, 1982), 301–17 (308–9).

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 301, 309, 311.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 316. Also see Garrington, *Haptic Modernism*, particularly ch. 5 on Lawrence.

'Language', for Roland Barthes, 'is a skin: I rub my language against the other. It is as if I had words instead of fingers, or fingers at the tip of my words. My language trembles with desire.'<sup>51</sup> Lawrence's use of language is uncanny. The rhythmical beat of the long sentence quoted above, with the clauses waxing and waning through the hesitancy of commas, seems to follow the movement of the hand, as it gropes, pauses, and gropes again, identifying individual facial features. He employs a pattern of repetition with ever-so-slight variation so that words like soft—adjective, adverb, and adjective again—work like a charm on our consciousness while capturing the tenderness of the mood. Maurice finally asks, '[t]ouch my eyes, will you? – touch my scar.' As Bertie, quivering with revulsion but hypnotized, lays his fingers on the scarred eyes, Maurice covers them with his own hand and presses Bertie's fingers upon his disfigured eye sockets, 'trembling in every fibre and rocking slightly.'<sup>52</sup> We, as readers, are also trapped in that closed space without knowing what is happening or into whose fingertips—Bertie's or Maurice's—our empathies flow. The linguistic intimacy or contagion between Bertie's 'quiver' and Maurice 'trembling' makes the scene palpitate perilously between seduction and violation, the phobic and the erotic. Intimate, violent, tender, with each running into the other, the scene touches us on that fragile spot where categories collapse—not just the homo/hetero dyad endlessly attractive for the sexually conflicted Lawrence, but a more fundamental fusion and confusion between horror and pleasure, tenderness and abuse, phenomenology and eroticism. In Pat Barker's reimagining of the war in *The Eye in the Door* (1994), she describes a sexual encounter between the bisexual Private Billy Prior and the wounded officer Charles Manning: 'He [Prior] took off his tie, tunic and shirt... He'd transform himself into the sort of working-class boy Manning would think it would be all right to fuck. A sort of seminal spittoon.'<sup>53</sup> Barker marks the distance we have travelled from the ambiguous, open-ended, and intensely erotic processes of touch and intimacy we have in Lawrence to its over-articulated, overdetermined, and curiously sexless version post-Stonewall, as if knowledge had taken away the frisson.

What challenged heterosexuality in post-war British society was not sexual dissidence but the veterans' powerful memories of such perilous intimacies. Claire Goll's 'The Hand of Wax' (1918), published in a collection of stories *Die Frauen erwachen* (*Women awake*), imagines the return of the soldier from the perspective of the wife. Goll (née Clarisse Liliane Aischmann), a German poet and novelist, moved in pacifist and expressionist circles and was married to the Jewish poet Ivan Goll.<sup>54</sup> 'The Hand of Wax' begins with Ines waiting for her soldier-husband at the

<sup>51</sup> Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, trans. Richard Howard (London: Vintage, 2002), 73.

<sup>52</sup> Lawrence, 'The Blind Man', 316.

<sup>53</sup> Pat Barker, *The Eye in the Door* (London: Penguin, 1993), 11.

<sup>54</sup> For information on Claire Goll, see Margaret Higonnet, ed., *Lines of Fire: Women Writers of World War I* (New York: Penguin, 1999), 88–9.



railway platform as ‘the train disgorged its passengers’: ‘When their eyes met fear shot through her like her electric shock. Her glance fell to the level of the hand and remained there as if glued to it . . . Like a white animal, pale and ghostlike, the hand seemed to creep out of his sleeve. A hand made of wax.’ And more: ‘The woman trembled as she imagined being accidentally touched by it.’<sup>55</sup> Ines gradually reveals herself to be a committed pacifist: she calls her husband a ‘murderer’, noting that ‘our victories’ only proved that ‘we are better at killing’. Later, in the night, as she lay beside her husband, she is haunted by the married, unknown soldier he had killed. Suddenly, ‘her hand came into contact with something smooth and soft’:

The hand! The hand of wax! Her husband must have secretly taken it off and put it there! As if by chance it lay there, bent at the wrist, so that all its protruding fingers seemed to be pointing at her. . . . Beside herself with terror she curled up. The hand filled the entire room, every one of its fingers pointing at her with an accusing: You!

Her fear grew monstrous. The hand began to creep up on her. Any moment how it was going to touch her. It was going to lie on top of her for the rest of night, every night. A scream began to rise in her.<sup>56</sup>

Bodily revulsion is compacted with political critique and expressionist fantasy through a moment of accidental contact. Traumatized, she gets up, unwraps a poisonous pill and ‘her face grew composed as she drank it down slowly and to the last drop’.<sup>57</sup> In the story, the hand is at once acutely physical and powerfully symbolic, as the moment of imagined rape invests it with different meanings, from the ‘hand’ of war and nationalism to the indirect ‘hand’ of women in the ‘murder’; underneath it also pulses the untold story of thousands of women who felt obliged to sleep with their disfigured and often violent husbands returned from combat.

## Conclusion

If touch has been central to the experience and representation of the First World War, it has also figured prominently, a hundred years on, in the ‘experiential’ and ‘immersive’ turn that has marked the centennial commemoration of the war. From large-scale physical re-enactments of battlefield scenes to projects such as ‘We Are Here Because We are Here’ where 1,500 volunteers, dressed up as First World War soldiers, appeared in locations across the United Kingdom on 1 July 2016 to mark the centenary of the Battle of the Somme, there has been an attempt to ‘recreate’ wartime bodies, as if only physical presences can authenticate our sense of connection to past lives, past bodies. The most startling example is Peter Jackson’s celebrated film *They Shall Not Grow Old* (2018), where he uses the latest digital technology to

<sup>55</sup> Claire Goll, ‘The Hand of Wax’, in *Women’s Writing on the First World War*, ed. Agnes Cardinal, Dorothy Goldman, and Judith Hattaway (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 244–50 (245).

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 249.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 249–50.

spectacular effect by colourizing archival footage of the First World War, regularizing it to modern speed, and getting lip-readers to read and dub such scenes. Phantasmal Edwardian faces suddenly become palpable and intimate. Indeed, the moment when the century-old grainy footage bursts into colour and sound—as spectral figures shed their black-and-white carapace and become haptic with their fresh complexions, khaki-brown uniforms, and cockney accents—is possibly the greatest instance of *unheimlich* in war cinema since the dead started walking in Abel Gance's *J'accuse* (1919). But verisimilitude is not reality, just as immediacy is not necessarily affect.

What often moves more, even in today's digital age, are material remnants from the past—letters, cards, uniforms with bullet-holes, a flower picked by a soldier in his trench and pressed into a letter for his beloved, Owen's manuscripts, Edward Thomas's watch which stopped ticking and recorded the precise moment of his death because of an explosion, a pair of broken and blood-stained glasses belonging to an Indian soldier, or the whole category of trench art—vases, crucifix, ashtrays, and penknives that the soldiers had made in trenches, hospitals, or at home while on leave, out of shells, cartridges, and trench debris.<sup>58</sup> Why do they move us so much? Writing about modern subjectivity, Roland Barthes notes: 'the deeper the wound, at the body's centre (at the "heart"), the more the subject becomes a subject: for the subject is *intimacy* ("The wound... is of a frightful intimacy").'<sup>59</sup> These objects have a certain 'frightful intimacy'; the handprints of war, they point to the importance of relicts as zones of contact between warm life and historical violence. They are the archives of touch and intimacy, congealing time and concealing processes of care. Yet literature too, as we have seen, can produce these moments of 'frightful intimacy'. Whether rooted in the actual sites of violence, as with Owen and Grimshaw, or far away from the battlefields, as with Fauset, Lawrence, and Goll, these writings do not just conjure up these moments, palpable and intractable, but turn them round and round, in the palm of our minds, to make us think.

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<sup>58</sup> Nicholas Saunders, *Trench Art* (Barnsley: Leo Cooper, 2001).

<sup>59</sup> Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, 189.

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VI

# MULTISENSORIALITY



# SENSOLOGY AND ENARGEIA

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## Sensology

Sensology, or sensory studies, the investigation of the human senses in all their facets as embodied cultural constructions (and not simply as factors limited to physiology or psychology), has flourished in the past two decades.<sup>1</sup> The backgrounds of sensology can be identified in the sensory turn in the social sciences and humanities in the later 1980s and 1990s, found in the studies of such scholars as Alain Corbin, Sidney Mintz, Walter Ong, and others (and preceded by the work of Johan Huizinga, Lucien Febvre, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and many more).<sup>2</sup> This sensory turn foregrounded the body as the sentient focus of individuals, which opened up the senses as an object of scholarly exploration.<sup>3</sup> The anthropologist David Howes and historian Constance Classen then expanded the exploration of the sensory interactions that make up a culture's sensorium, that is, the 'sensory model' of conscious and unconscious associations that functions in society to

<sup>1</sup> For the backgrounds of the term 'sensology' (my own coinage), see David Howes, 'Preface: David Le Breton and the Sociality of Sensation', in David Le Breton, *Sensing the World. An Anthropology of the Senses*, trans. Carmen Ruschinsky (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), viii–ix; Richard G. Newhauser, 'Introduction: The Sensual Middle Ages', in Richard G. Newhauser, ed., *A Cultural History of the Senses in the Middle Ages, 500–1450* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 1–22 (1).

<sup>2</sup> Alain Corbin, *The Foul and the Fragrant: Odor and the French Social Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1986); Alain Corbin, *Time, Desire, and Horror: Towards a History of the Senses*, trans. Jean Birrell (Cambridge, MA: Polity Press, 1995); Sidney Mintz, *Sweetness and Power* (New York: Viking, 1985); Walter J. Ong, 'The Shifting Sensorium', in David Howes, ed., *The Varieties of Sensory Experience* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 47–60; Johan Huizinga, *The Autumn of the Middle Ages* [Dutch original 1919], trans. Rodney J. Payton and Ulrich Mammitzsch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996); Lucien Febvre, *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century*, trans. Beatrice Gottlieb (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968); Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (London: Routledge, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> For an appreciation of the pioneering work of Corbin, Huizinga, Febvre, and others, see Mark M. Smith, *A Sensory History Manifesto* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2021), 7–34.

create meaning in individuals' complex web of continual and interconnected sensory perceptions.<sup>4</sup> Sensing individuals, then, build meaning out of sensation in the context of what Bruno Latour termed 'the social.'<sup>5</sup> And following the work of the sociologists Phillip Vannini, Dennis Waskul, and Simon Gottschalk, these 'sensory communities' can be defined as groups in which people are linked cohesively through norms of intellectual, affective, and emotional interpretations of sensory experience and subscribe to the same valuation (or devaluation) of those sensory experiences.<sup>6</sup>

Sensory communities, that is to say, provide the cultural boundaries for what literary analysis understands as intended audiences, the initial consumers of works of literature, and indeed sensory communities are clearly inscribed and defined in creative ways within literature itself. Sensory communities can be as ephemeral as a group gathered for a dinner party or as durable as groups whose constituents are determined by the enforced privileges of high social class and the subjugation of the lowest classes of society. They can be confined by the geography of a theatre's interior or the boundaries of a village, or they can be spread out over international borders among the readers of a single book. Sensory communities can also be configured historically, later generations encouraged through affective appeals and literary rhetoric to reconstruct the feelings and experiences of those who came before them. In the following, I will explore how multisensoriality, the interaction of many senses in acts of perception, supported and at times became part of the rhetorical device of *enargeia* that was employed in the affective appeal of medieval literature. *Enargeia* is the vivid actualization of dramatic scenes so that they appear to be immediately present to the mind's eye of the reader of texts or the viewer of art. Examining this device by means of sensology will help define how literature represents and communicates experience through the senses within specific sensory communities.

### *Enargeia*

Using phenomenology and sensology to examine the feelings vividly actualized by the internalization of literary descriptions that early rhetoricians termed *enargeia* provides a subjective focal point that at once claims specificity in collective responses to the reception of literature within a sensory community and also provides a

<sup>4</sup> See, most recently, David Howes and Constance Classen, *Ways of Sensing. Understanding the Senses in Society* (London: Routledge, 2014). On the sensorium, see Newhauser, 'Introduction: The Sensual Middle Ages', 1.

<sup>5</sup> Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social. An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> Phillip Vannini, Dennis Waskul, and Simon Gottschalk, *The Senses in Self, Society, and Culture: A Sociology of the Senses* (London: Routledge, 2012), 7–8.

channel between sensation and perception that no longer privileges the visual as the solitary sense involved in affective responses to literature. One of the changes the sensory turn has led to is a rethinking of the hegemony of the visual in cultural analysis. In its early rhetorical usage, however, Aristotle (384–322 BCE) understood the starkness of description that makes sayings popular and thus useful in persuasion as a way to set things before the eyes of the audience, ‘for we ought to see what is being done rather than what is going to be done.’<sup>7</sup>

The term Aristotle uses here is *energeia* to indicate a starkly visible description, but it became conflated at times with *enargeia*. Strictly speaking, though, Aristotle uses *energeia* to indicate the rhetorician’s task to produce stark descriptions, whereas in rhetorical analyses by other authors *enargeia* signalled the emotive and sensory response to affective descriptions from the perspective of the reader/listener. What Aristotle requires from the poet is to have a strong imagination in order to produce scenes of activity that are essential for effective writing. The Aristotelian model made it possible to emphasize the role of imagination (*phantasia*) so that sense perception in the realm of reality could become equivalent to the action of the imagination evoked by texts.<sup>8</sup> A late-antique example in which the visual imagination is activated by texts can be found in the series of ekphrases of an imaginary gallery of paintings in Naples written by Philostratus the Elder around 200 CE.<sup>9</sup> Many of these invented paintings are described as showing gods and goddesses, but also geographical formations (islands, rocks, etc). These descriptions call attention to the details in the paintings that act like poetry, depicting scenes that are said to mimic nature in the way imitation acts in literature. As Heinrich Plett has observed, ‘[s]ince the paintings do not exist, the only possible way to reconstruct their visuality is exclusively through the *enargeia* of a fictive *mimesis*.’<sup>10</sup>

The great theoretician of rhetorical *enargeia* Quintilian (c.35–c.100 CE) expanded the usage of the term to mean poetry’s ability to activate internally the audience’s sensation of vividness. Good oratory requires a marshalling of the senses, he argued, using vision as a synecdoche for all the senses, so that ‘the images of absent things are presented to the mind in such a way that we seem actually to see them with our eyes and have them physically present to us.’<sup>11</sup> Though he focuses on the sense of sight to be evoked in the reader/listener here, the scene he describes to illustrate the

<sup>7</sup> Aristotle, *Art of Rhetoric*, 3.10, trans. John Henry Freese, rev. Gisela Striker (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), 399.

<sup>8</sup> Gregor Vogt-Spira, ‘Senses, Imagination, and Literature: Some Epistemological Considerations,’ in Stephen G. Nichols, Andreas Kahlitz, and Alison Calhoun, eds, *Rethinking the Medieval Senses: Heritage, Fascinations, Frames* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008), 51–72.

<sup>9</sup> Philostratus the Elder, *Imagines*, in *Elder Philostratus, Imagines; Younger Philostratus, Imagines; Callistratus, Descriptions*, trans. Arthur Fairbanks (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931).

<sup>10</sup> Heinrich F. Plett, *Enargeia in Classical Antiquity and the Early Modern Age: The Aesthetics of Evidence* (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 40.

<sup>11</sup> Quintilian, *The Orator’s Education*, 6.2.29, ed. and trans. Donald A. Russell (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001), 61.



orator's power, one of violent murder, is filled with the sounds of the victim's cries for help and his death gasps, so the auditory is also included in the vividness with which he calls up the scene and postulates its internalization in the audience (this multisensoriality is also reiterated later in 8.3.61–71, especially in the description of the sack of a city). And Quintilian is clear in drawing a direct line between sensory perception and emotional experience in the desired subjective result of this kind of speech: 'The result will be *enargeia*, what Cicero calls *illustratio* and *evidentia*, a quality which makes us seem not so much to be talking about something as exhibiting it. Emotions will ensue just as if we were present at the event itself.'<sup>12</sup>

Multisensoriality is more explicitly understood as a part of *enargeia* in later centuries. Peter Damiani (c.1007–1072/3), in a letter written in the second half of 1058 in which he seeks to be relieved of his ecclesiastical duties, speaks of the emotional respite and pleasure it would give him to return to the solitary life. He expresses what this would mean to him through the vivid actualization (*mentis enargia*) of himself moving his feet after they were chafed in the stocks and raising his neck formerly weighed down by harsh chains so that he could eagerly sing the words of Psalm 115:16–17: '*Dirrupisti, Domine, vincula mea, tibi sacrificabo hostiam laudis*' [You have broken my bonds, oh Lord, I will sacrifice to you the sacrifice of praise].<sup>13</sup> In a letter of the period 1065–71 to his nephew in which he details the virtues of monastic life, Damiani praises the technique of a monk who avoided thoughts of lust by imagining (*imaginando*) that he was walking through cemeteries and was contemplating the decaying and worm-eaten flesh around him. As Damiani says with approval,

*O quoties frater ille candentem cultrum et vomerem quasi cauterium quoddam genitalibus imprimit, ita ut crepitante quodammodo perfrixae carnis incendio ad nares usque fumus per enargiam exhalare videatur.*<sup>14</sup>

[Oh, how often that brother presses a glowing hot coultter and ploughshare to his genitals as if it were a branding iron so that with the sizzling heat of his fried flesh, as it were, through vivid actualization fumes seem to rise up to his nose.]

The qualifications ('as it were', 'seem') contained in this passage come just in time to rescue it from being a moment of real self-mutilation and to convince the reader it is part of an imagined scene, no matter how much Damiani's rhetoric has made it seem real, but our sensory and emotional responses have been stirred nonetheless. The appeal to the heat of the coultter, the sizzling sound and nauseating stench of burning flesh, make it clear how much the senses of touch, hearing, and olfaction are being activated as part of the attempt to vividly evoke terror and pain as a way to control thoughts of sexual lust. Phenomenologically, the subjectivity of the narrator's

<sup>12</sup> Quintilian, *The Orator's Education*, 6.2.32, 61.

<sup>13</sup> Petrus Damiani, *Epistle 57*, in *Die Briefe des Petrus Damiani, Teil 2: 41–90*, ed. Kurt Reindel (Munich: Monumenta Germaniae Historica, 1988), 165. Translations from Damiani are my own.

<sup>14</sup> Damiani, *Epistle 132*, in *Die Briefe des Petrus Damiani, Teil 3: 91–150*, ed. Reindel, 442.

perspective works through the extreme interpenetration of object and body to achieve the desired perception of self-discipline's needed outcome. *Enargeia* is carried out here with full multisensory intensity, the haptic, auditory, and olfactory senses demanding our attention with an urgency that overwhelms taste and sight.

Vividly depicted (though rarely as immediately tangible) descriptions like Damiani's came to be designated as *demonstratio*, *evidentia*, *illustratio*, *imaginatio*, *representatio*, or *sub oculos subiectio* by later writers on poetics and rhetoric. Quintilian remained a largely indirect influence on the analysis of techniques used in compositions to create narratives that are perceptible to the senses, and in this way to make affect and emotion palpable.<sup>15</sup> *Demonstratio* is the term used by Geoffrey of Vinsauf (late twelfth/early thirteenth century), following the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* falsely attributed to Cicero through the Middle Ages, to achieve the effect in which 'the subject is revealed so vividly that it seems to be present to the eyes.'<sup>16</sup> The term was still common at the end of the fourteenth century, when the *Tria sunt* came to be used as a composition textbook in Oxford. Its author borrowed from Matthew of Vendôme (twelfth century), but also appropriated the material used earlier by Geoffrey of Vinsauf from pseudo-Cicero.<sup>17</sup>

Vernacular writers on matters touching the senses also engage the connection between sensory experience and affective and emotional experience. The Middle English devotional treatise *The Fyve Wyttes* (c.1400) uses the common metaphor of the senses as windows, noting that God created humanity with more care than any other creature:

And for to styre and excite him hom to his loue, he made him a reyel paleys for to dwelle þerynne, þat ys þis wyde worlde, wherynne he haþ ordeyned him dyuers delyte and dalyaunce for to desporte him wiþ . . . . And a pryue dwellynge he haþ ymad him in þis paleys which he may carye into what place him lyst, þat ys þys fleschly body . . . . Bot for cause þat he scholde be more war and wys of pereles þat myzte falle, he haþ ordeyned in þis dwellyng-place oþer in þis halle fyue sotel wyndowes.<sup>18</sup>

[And to stir up and excite humanity home to the love of God, God made a royal palace for him to dwell in, i.e. the wide world, in which he has provided many delights and pleasures to amuse himself with . . . . And he made for him a private lodging in this palace that he can carry wherever it pleases him, i.e. this fleshly body . . . . But so that he would be more aware and conscious of dangers that could happen, God provided this dwelling place or hall with five small windows.]

<sup>15</sup> Vincent Gillespie, 'The Songs of the Threshold: *Enargeia* and the Psalter', in Francis Leneghan and Tamara Atkin, eds, *The Psalms and Medieval English Literature: From the Conversion to the Reformation* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2017), 271–97 (277–82).

<sup>16</sup> *Poetria nova of Geoffrey of Vinsauf*, trans. Margaret F. Nims (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1956), Book 4, 62; [Cicero,] *Ad C. Herennium libri IV*, 4.55.68, trans. Harry Caplan (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1968), 404–7.

<sup>17</sup> *Tria sunt: An Art of Poetry and Prose*, 7.95, ed. and trans. Martin Camargo (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019), 282–5.

<sup>18</sup> 'Introduction', in *The Fyve Wyttes*, ed. Rolf H. Bremmer, Jr (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1987), 1.

The windows guard the soul, but when they let in divinely ordained pleasures, in the devotional view of this treatise, humanity is aroused to the love of God. John Trevisa's late fourteenth-century translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus's (*fl.* mid-thirteenth century) *De proprietatibus rerum* links types of sensations with types of emotional responses, finding that since the sense of touch is especially earthbound and coarse ('erpeliche and boistous'), it comprehends especially well harsh, violent, and earthbound emotions ('passiouns').<sup>19</sup>

## Multisensoriality

As has been seen already, multisensoriality—or pansensoriality, the involvement of *all* the senses in acts of perception—is an essential element of the present study. It is simply true, of course, that our quotidian consciousness depends on, and is shaped by, the continual input from our senses. One of the five external senses may, at times, be more pronounced in our awareness of the world around us as we necessarily pay more attention to a sensory stimulus, or a particular sense may be considered dominant in a culture's hierarchy of senses (as sight has generally been ranked in the West in lists of the senses since Aristotle), or a sense may be foregrounded by scholarly studies of that particular one, but as Charles Spence, an expert on multisensoriality, has observed:

No creature that has more than one sense keeps them separate. . . . It would be catastrophic if one sense pulled in one direction while another pulled in the opposite direction. There is simply no way of resolving such a conflict unless the senses communicate. Our perception and behaviour are controlled by many millions of multisensory neurons connecting the five main senses of sight, sound, smell, touch and taste.<sup>20</sup>

And, just as important for literature, the heightening of description through *enargeia* that aims to create an especially vivid sensory experience frequently involves multisensoriality. This vibrancy of literary description can be seen to parallel the way our conscious attention provides a filter for perception amid the constant communication of our senses, adding an urgent focus to some of the senses in affective immediacy while others fade into the background.<sup>21</sup> The evocation and control of multisensory perception in *enargeia* have their equivalents in the way mimesis

<sup>19</sup> Bartholomaeus Anglicus, *On the Properties of Things: John Trevisa's Translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus, De proprietatibus rerum*, 3.21, ed. M. C. Seymour et al., 3 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975–1988), I, 119.

<sup>20</sup> Charles Spence, *Sensehacking. How to Use the Power of Your Senses for Happier, Healthier Living* (London: Viking, 2021), 13.

<sup>21</sup> See David Howes, 'Can These Dry Bones Live? An Anthropological Approach to the History of the Senses,' *Journal of American History* 95 (2008), 442–51.

functions in literature to create to the mind's eye a realism in vividly described scenes.<sup>22</sup>

## Phenomenology

In its focus on both individual experience and the social/cultural components of perception, sensology shares much of its orientation towards 'being in the world' with phenomenology. The two modes of analysis (or ontologies) are not perfectly congruent, of course, but sensology owes much to phenomenology.<sup>23</sup> In both, subjectivity is foundational, but it alone is not sufficient for understanding experience. Merleau-Ponty acknowledges the connection between subjectivity and the world beyond the individual when he writes of the one human act that resonates with the comprehensiveness of truth:

this act is perception, in the broad sense of the knowledge of existences. When I begin to perceive [a] table, I resolutely contract the thickness of the duration gone by since I first saw it, I leave behind my individual life by grasping the object as an object for everyone, and I thus reunite, in a single stroke, the corroborating though disjointed experiences that are distributed across several points of time and several temporalities.<sup>24</sup>

For both sensology and phenomenology, all perception is a perception not only *of* something but also *from* a particular perspective, a point of view (narratorial or otherwise), and the perceptions of this perceiving 'I' are not generated in an act of solipsism but are constructed culturally in the subject's interaction with the norms of a particular sensory community at a particular period of time.<sup>25</sup> Literature clarifies the subjectivity of perception, as it also articulates in creative and affective ways a phenomenal field, 'the layer of living experience through which other people and things are first given to us, the system "Self-Others-things" in its nascent state' that has its foundation in sensory experience.<sup>26</sup> Sensology, then, shares with phenomenology a grounding in the subjectivity of the body as the site of sensory experience, and a view of the embeddedness of the subject in a web of constructed meaning of that experience made comprehensible to the subject in the subject's interaction with the cultural environment at the very moment of perception.

<sup>22</sup> Richard Newhauser, 'The Multisensoriality of Place and the Chaucerian Multisensual', in Annette Kern-Stähler, Beatrix Busse, and Wietse de Boer, eds, *The Five Senses in Medieval and Early Modern England* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 199–218 (211–12).

<sup>23</sup> For a critique of phenomenology from the perspective of sensory anthropology, see Howes and Classen, *Ways of Sensing*, 9–10.

<sup>24</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 42–3.

<sup>25</sup> See Bruce R. Smith, 'Afterword: Phenomophobia, or Who's Afraid of Merleau-Ponty?', *Criticism* 54, no. 3 (2012), 479–83 (482).

<sup>26</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 57.

To speak of sensology's and phenomenology's subjectivity should not be taken to mean that either one is constructed as a timeless orientation towards the world. As noted already, several temporalities may be uncovered in a moment of perceptual experience. The norms of interpretation of sensory experience within sensory communities can shift over time, though never unilaterally through all objects at once, and literature, as Ralf Hertel has observed, provides 'a prime site for making visible social norms and for reflecting on their impact on sensory perception.'<sup>27</sup> For example, though its valences are multiple and complex, gold remains a tangible and relatively stable indication of spiritual emptiness and an earthbound depravity in the literature of moral consciousness from Geoffrey Chaucer's late fourteenth-century *Pardoner's Tale* to John Huston's *Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948), but the plough undergoes a vast transformation from its male peasant domain in another late fourteenth-century text, *Piers the Plowman's Crede*, to an instrument of pioneering and noble womanhood in Willa Cather's *My Ántonia* (1918), where it serves to open up the American West as it opens the soil. History, Merleau-Ponty has written, 'is neither a perpetual novelty nor a perpetual repetition, but rather the *unique* movement that both creates stable forms and shatters them.'<sup>28</sup>

Moreover, both sensology and phenomenology resist any imperative to rely on only the normative in sensory perception. Erroneous or simply different perceptions, though they might be considered undesirable by some thinkers, are fundamental to phenomenology; as Edmund Husserl wrote, '[t]he pathway of factual as well as ideally possible cognition leads through errors, even at the lowest cognitive level, the level of intuitively seizing upon actuality.'<sup>29</sup> Sensology, too, encompasses problems, misperceptions, and perceptual errors,<sup>30</sup> as well as sensory orientations in which the requirements for veridical perception are met by the perceiving subject in ways that are defined culturally as 'Other': other in terms of race, class, gender, religion, age, and ability. The lines of sensory communities may be drawn around those of a particular age range or religion; they may also include those of particular sighted or hearing (dis)abilities. It is this diversity of being orientated that Sara Ahmed refers to as phenomenology's many queer moments, 'moments that may be the source of vitality as well as giddiness.'<sup>31</sup> The inclusion of subjectivities beyond the normative articulates itself in literature in the potential to compre-

<sup>27</sup> Ralf Hertel, 'The Senses in Literature: From the Modernist Shock of Sensation to Postcolonial and Virtual Voices', in David Howes, ed., *A Cultural History of the Senses in the Modern Age* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 173–94 (173).

<sup>28</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 90.

<sup>29</sup> Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy. First Book: General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*, trans. F. Kersten (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1983), 364.

<sup>30</sup> See Brian Glenny and José Filipe Silva, eds, *The Senses and the History of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 2019).

<sup>31</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 4.

hend the widest diversity of narratorial perspectives (or points of view) including, as we will see, the impoverishment and acute pain of the plain-spoken peasantry.

## Emotion

The formal expression of sensory experience and narratorial perspective in literature opens itself to modes of analytical research that have their foundations in sensology's and phenomenology's focus on the body. This research includes the fruitful investigations of the affective appeal of literature, especially of the feelings vividly actualized within particular reading publics by descriptions of dramatic scenes through *enargeia*. Whether or not we undertake our examination of those audience responses with a differentiation between, on the one hand, 'emotion', as the presentational expression of feelings, passions, and sentiments, and, on the other hand, 'affect', as a description of a more corporeally oriented activity, conscious or unconscious, we can agree with Stephanie Trigg that both affect and emotion have also been understood by their theorists to include 'a collective or social feeling'.<sup>32</sup> As Patricia Clough has recognized, moreover, we cannot think of affect as something existing before the social and emotion as something participating in the social. Both exist at the interface of somatic, social, linguistic, and object-oriented factors.<sup>33</sup> And that is to say that emotion and affect also intersect with the concerns of sensology. Resolving the question of differentiation between emotion and affect, Glenn Burger and Holly Crocker have judiciously written that there is an 'interdependence of affect, feeling and emotion'.<sup>34</sup>

Up to now, however, affect theory and emotionology have done too little to take into account sensology in a systematic way, and likewise scholars of the senses have sometimes paid too little attention to affect and emotion.<sup>35</sup> As Rob Boddice and Mark Smith have noted, treating sensory experience and affect/emotion as discrete categories recapitulates the way psychology both formalized 'basic emotions' and made the five senses canonical in psychological research. Boddice and Smith do not call for the end of histories of either the senses, affect, or emotions, but they rightly

<sup>32</sup> Stephanie Trigg, 'Affect Theory', in Susan Broomhall, ed., *Early Modern Emotions: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2017), 10–13 (11).

<sup>33</sup> Patricia T. Clough, 'The Affective Turn. Political Economy, Biomedicine and Bodies', *Theory, Culture & Society* 25, no. 1 (2008), 1–22.

<sup>34</sup> Glenn D. Burger and Holly A. Crocker, 'Introduction', in Glenn D. Burger and Holly A. Crocker, eds, *Medieval Affect, Feeling, and Emotion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 1–24 (8).

<sup>35</sup> 'Emotionology', parallel to 'sensology', is used here to express the study of emotions, but also '[t]he attitudes or standards that a society or definable group within a society maintain toward basic emotions and their appropriate expression, ways that institutions reflect and encourage these attitudes in human contact', in the definition offered by Peter N. Stearns with Carol Z. Stearns, 'Emotionology: Clarifying the History of Emotions and Emotional Standards', *American History Review* 90, no. 4 (1985), 813–36 (813). Thanks to Elizabeth Robertson for pointing out this publication.

call for dialogue between these fields as they can contribute to the reconstruction of experience.<sup>36</sup> Our sensory experiences with objects from the past or in spaces that have survived from the past or with texts written in the past, and so on, do not reproduce seamlessly and exactly the experiences of people who lived in those spaces with those objects and those writings. To be sure, one can find many appeals for sensory reproduction to do exactly that: the Haggadah exhorts participants in the Passover Seder to not just remember the Exodus from Egypt but relive it every year. The response called for from Middle English lyrics on Jesus's Passion is partially a grief that brings tears to the eyes.<sup>37</sup> Nicholas Love urges those who want to feel truly the fruit of his book to make present in their souls Jesus's words and deeds as if hearing and seeing them with their bodily ears and eyes.<sup>38</sup> These appeals to reproduce past experiences are important because they amount to exhortations to create a sensory community that extends not just spatially, but across time, connecting the living and the dead, by programming current responses to particular historical sensory factors. They seek to channel the kind of response Merleau-Ponty reported in the grasp of a table in ways that are historically preset. Ultimately, of course, the appeals themselves cannot guarantee that the contemporary sensation evoked by a text will equate with that of the past, but they become useful elements in understanding sensory responses in a particular historical milieu. They add to the reconstructive task of sensology, which is an analytic process that seeks to identify within a culturally and historically delimited sensorium the factors that created meaning through the interaction of sensory, affective, and emotional channels.

How understated a role the senses have played in some of even the very best work on emotions and affect in the Middle Ages can be seen in the otherwise superb study of medieval *affectus* by Damien Boquet and Piroska Nagy. Their work usefully skirts the scientism of narrow definitions of emotion and focuses with admirable detail on 'the sensible', by which they mean a sensibility that embraces affect, passion, atmosphere, and emotion—including such specifics as the embodied emotions of Francis of Assisi.<sup>39</sup> But just as sensoriality is excluded from what the authors intend here by the sensible, the senses themselves remain somewhat elusive in their study, as does the role of sensual perception in the process of the creation, expression, and sociality of emotions. The same can largely be said about the impressive collection of essays edited by Burger and Crocker. The way sensory perception contributes to the formation of affects and emotions (how the cultural construction of

<sup>36</sup> Rob Boddice and Mark Smith, *Emotion, Sense, Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 1.

<sup>37</sup> Rosemary Woolf, *The English Religious Lyric in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 21.

<sup>38</sup> Nicholas Love, *The Mirror of the Blessed Life of Jesus Christ. A Reading Text*, ed. Michael G. Sargent (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2004), 12–13; see Ps.-Bonaventure [Iohannes de Caulibus], *Meditaciones uitae Christi*, Prol., ll. 103–7, ed. M. Stallings-Taney, CCCM 153 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1997), 10.

<sup>39</sup> Damien Boquet and Piroska Nagy, *Medieval Sensibilities. A History of Emotions in the Middle Ages*, trans. Robert Shaw (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018), 6–7, 189–94.

sense perception includes in itself a range of emotional experiences within sensory communities) is not often foregrounded in the collection. There are, however, openings here to the intersection of emotions and sensoriality, in particular in literature, for example in Brantley Bryant's focus on the importance of visuality in Chaucer's *Reeve's Tale*, or Glenn Burger's invocation of touch when he writes of the Wife of Bath's 'affective skin and the production of negative emotion'.<sup>40</sup>

The senses and emotions have more thoroughly been linked in research on the Middle Ages by Niklaus Largier, for example, who provides a fascinating view of how Christian prayer can construct a space of sensory and emotional experience of the divine by using both the external senses and the spiritual senses, with the spiritual senses creating 'an inner space of "experience", "exploration" and "amplification" of the emotional as well as of the sensory life of the soul'.<sup>41</sup> Furthermore, this practice of prayer does not depend on the single spiritual sense of sight, but more particularly on the multisensory spiritual senses of taste (the sweetness of the perception of the divine) and touch (the fullness of love) as they work together to produce an arousal of emotions, such as the joy of rewarded desire or the melancholy of desolation.<sup>42</sup> Christina Lechtermann has also demonstrated how, in its decidedly non-spiritualized appearance, the sense of touch is appealed to within a restricted frame of reference in the literature of courtly epic in the arousal of desire and eroticism, and, as I will argue, the sense of touch can also work together with sight and other senses to evoke feelings of pity and commiseration for those who toil on the land within the peasant sensory community.<sup>43</sup>

In the Middle Ages, especially in philosophical analysis, the somatic factors involved in affect and emotion included those triggered by external stimuli leading to movements of the intellectual soul. These external stimuli, insofar as human knowledge gathering activities are concerned, necessarily involved the subject's physiological sensation; as Thomas Aquinas (1225–74) put it, the Peripatetic dictum that 'there is nothing in the intellect that was not previously in the senses' refers

<sup>40</sup> Glenn D. Burger, 'Becoming One Flesh, Inhabiting Two Genders: Ugly Feelings and Blocked Emotion in the *Wife of Bath's Prologue and Tale*', in Burger and Crocker, eds, *Medieval Affect, Feeling, and Emotion*, 90–117 (92–3); Brantley L. Bryant, 'Accounting for Affect in the *Reeve's Tale*', in *ibid.*, 118–38 (125–6).

<sup>41</sup> Niklaus Largier, 'Inner Senses – Outer Senses. The Practice of Emotions in Medieval Mysticism', in C. Stephen Jaeger and Ingrid Kasten, eds, *Codierungen von Emotionen im Mittelalter/Emotions and Sensibilities in the Middle Ages* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2003), 3–15 (5).

<sup>42</sup> See also Elizabeth Robertson, '*Noli me tangere*: The Enigma of Touch in Middle English Religious Literature and Art for and About Women', in Katie L. Walter, ed., *Reading Skin in Medieval Literature and Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 29–55.

<sup>43</sup> For the careful erotics of touch and desire in courtly epic, see Christina Lechtermann, 'Berühren und Berührtwerden: *daz was der beide ein begin*', in Jaeger and Kasten, eds, *Codierungen von Emotionen im Mittelalter*, 251–70. For the pansensual appeal to readers of the erotics of love in antiquity, see Silvia Montiglio, 'The Senses in Literature: Falling in Love in an Ancient Greek Novel', in Jerry Toner, ed., *A Cultural History of the Senses in Antiquity* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 163–81.



to human epistemology, not to how the divine intellect operates.<sup>44</sup> The senses, then, stand out among the first instances leading to the experience of affect and emotion. The organs of sensory perception are often written of using the metaphor of water sluices leading into a city, in other words like passive gates in a valve to be opened or shut to regulate the stream of sensory input, but they actually were considered in the Middle Ages to have more agency than these metaphors might suggest, and to have greater agency than the more or less passive receptors we might think of the senses as being today. One need only consider the currency well past the end of the Middle Ages of the extramission theory of vision, even after that theory had been discarded by perspectivist optics. In this theory, sight was accomplished through the agency of optical rays emitted from the eyes that touched objects and brought these objects' *species* back to the viewing subject. The later thirteenth-century Sorbonne master Peter of Limoges emphasizes the agency of the sense of sight by noting that 'not only is the intromission of the form of the visible object required for vision, but also the extramission and cooperation of one's own *species* and power'.<sup>45</sup> In fact, as Peter's words suggest and as more contemporary psychological research has investigated, children and adults do not necessarily give up a belief in extramission even after they have learned how sight occurs, for 'new theories, such as correct intromission beliefs, do not necessarily supplant erroneous beliefs or intuitions'.<sup>46</sup>

### *Piers the Plowman's Crede*

The interconnection between affects, emotions, and the senses can be pressingly felt in the late fourteenth-century *Piers the Plowman's Crede*, a work that articulates the political charge of creating and appealing to sensory formations in literature. It does so in a way that has been appreciated already for the 'sensual appeal of its poetic tactics'.<sup>47</sup> This polemical text in alliterative verse was likely composed between 1394 and 1401.<sup>48</sup> It articulates many Lollard themes in its harsh criticism of the fraternal orders in England that are too self-serving to explain the Apostles' Creed to the

<sup>44</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Quaestiones disputatae de veritate*, quaest. 2, art. 3, arg. 19 and ad 19; see Paul F. Cranefield, 'On the Origin of the Phrase NIHIL EST IN INTELLECTU QUOD NON PRIUS FUERIT IN SENSU', *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 25 (1970), 77–80.

<sup>45</sup> Peter of Limoges, *The Moral Treatise on the Eye*, ch. 4, trans. Richard Newhauser (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 2012), 14.

<sup>46</sup> Gerald A. Winer and Jane E. Cottrell, 'Does Anything Leave the Eye When We See? Extramission Beliefs of Children and Adults', *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 5, no. 5 (1996), 137–42 (142). Thanks to Annette Kern-Stähler for pointing out this publication.

<sup>47</sup> Bruce Holsinger, 'Lollard Ekphrasis: Situated Aesthetics and Literary History', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 35, no. 1 (2005), 67–90 (74).

<sup>48</sup> On the date, see Helen Barr, 'Introduction', in *The Piers Plowman Tradition: A Critical Edition of Pierce the Ploughman's Crede, Richard the Redeless, Mum and the Sothsegger, and The Crowned King*, ed. Helen Barr (London: J. M. Dent, 1993), 1–45 (9–10).

narrator. One by one, the narrator meets a Franciscan, a Dominican, an Austin (Augustinian friar), and a Carmelite, hoping to learn from each of them the simple truth of the Creed. All the friars do, however, is seek money and material goods from him while also denouncing their rival orders, a common strategy Wycliffites used to discredit their opponents as slanderers.<sup>49</sup> *Piers the Plowman's Crede*, thus, satirizes some of the important institutions of the fourteenth-century Church in England, as does William Langland's *Piers Plowman*, and it attacks the clergy, as does Langland, for their corruption, for their hypocritical claims of following the path of poverty while in fact avariciously acquiring ostentatious wealth, and for ignoring the essential basics of the faith. The *Crede* takes its place in a series of texts in the later fourteenth century that condemned those in a position to expound theology for adopting philosophical modes of analysis and then becoming divorced from a faith anchored in the Bible, as the authentic source of revelation, and the simplicity of the Creed. And yet, unlike Langland's subtlety, the *Crede*-author's response to ecclesiastical dishonesty is to insist on abandoning the complexity of possible ways to carry out the articles of the faith in the material world, and to do so legitimately.<sup>50</sup> The *Crede*'s position 'is essentially an anti-intellectual and anti-academic one.'<sup>51</sup>

The *Crede*-author often characterizes the fraternal orders as sinners because of how they misuse and misdirect their senses, and the author does this in a way that emphasizes the multisensorial appeal of the text. Here, phenomenological subjectivity becomes the starting point for an analysis that exposes the Church's need for ethical realignment. The Franciscan, whom the narrator meets first, slanders Carmelites not only by charging them with lechery ('Thei lyven [live] more in lecherie'; they visit 'quenes, old crones or harlots)<sup>52</sup> but more often by accusing them of an excessive devotion to the sense of taste. They are gluttonous for food:

But what glut of the gomes may any good kachen,  
He will kepen it hymself, and cofren it faste,  
And theigh his felawes fayle good, for him he may sterven.<sup>53</sup>

[But whichever glutton among the men [i.e. the Carmelites] can seize some good thing, he will keep it for himself and shut it away securely, and even though his fellows are without something good, for all he cares they can starve.]

<sup>49</sup> Edwin Craun, 'Discarding Traditional Pastoral Ethics: Wycliffism and Slander', in Mishtooni Bose and J. Patrick Hornbeck II, eds, *Wycliffite Controversies* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), 227–42 (232–4).

<sup>50</sup> Kate Crassons, *The Claims of Poverty. Literature, Culture, and Ideology in Late Medieval England* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2010), 89–137.

<sup>51</sup> John Scattergood, 'Pierce the Ploughman's Crede: Lollardy and Texts', in Margaret Aston and Colin Richmond, eds, *Lollardy and the Gentry in the Later Middle Ages* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1997), 77–94 (90).

<sup>52</sup> *Piers the Plowman's Crede*, in *Six Ecclesiastical Satires*, ed. James Dean (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1991), 1–49 (ll. 59 and 84 respectively); available at *TEAMS Middle English Texts Series*, <http://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/dean-six-ecclesiastical-satires-piers-the-plowmans-crede>. For its accessibility, I have taken all citations from this edition.

<sup>53</sup> *Piers the Plowman's Crede*, ll. 67–9.

They also drink to excess at fairs (line 73), to the point that the Franciscan echoes Philippians 3:19 in his reproach of Carmelites by adding, '[a]nd glotony is her god, with gloppyng of drynk' [and gluttony is their god, with gulping down of drink].<sup>54</sup> In a later section of the poem, the Augustinian friar accuses Franciscans of being overly fastidious in their sense of touch by wearing fine clothes trimmed with fur hidden hypocritically under their mendicant cloaks:

And yet, under that cope, a cote hathe he furred  
With foyns, or with fitchewes, other fyn bever,  
And that is cutted to the kne, and queyntly ybotend,  
Lest any spirituell man asprie that gile.<sup>55</sup>

[And yet, under that cloak he has a tunic trimmed with the fur of beech martens or the pole cat or with fine beaver fur, and the tunic is cut knee length and ingeniously buttoned up so that no one in the religious life can detect the ruse.]

In the next section, the Carmelite censures Dominicans for having dishonestly manipulated the auditory sense, pretending to be learned when they do not understand what they are saying:

Loke a ribaut of hem that can nought wel reden  
His Rewle and his Respondes but be pure rote,  
Als as he were a connyng clerke he casteth the lawes,  
Nought lowli but lordly, and leesinges lyeth.<sup>56</sup>

[Take [for example] a scoundrel among them who is unable to read well his Rule and his Responsory except purely by rote; he formulates the laws as if he were a knowledgeable cleric, not with humility but haughtily, and lies his falsehoods.]

What connects these multisensory indulgences and deceptions for the narrator is that they all amount to signs of pride, the sin opposed to the self-representation of the Lollards as humble and simple. In this way, *Piers the Plowman's Crede* links the ethics of the sensory community of the poem's readers/listeners to their emotional response to sensory deceptions. Important representatives of the institutional Church engender scorn, ridicule, and rejection precisely because they can be shown to mismanage sensation, opening the water sluices of the senses to invite in a flood of sensory pleasure or to project a pretence of sensory control.

Among the sensory charges the poem levels at the fraternal orders in a further sign of pride is importantly the ease with which they have manipulated the sense of sight in ways Lollard simplicity finds misleading and false. The Dominican convent's church is a marvel of architectural achievement, its beautiful ornamentation especially noteworthy to the narrator, as he emphasizes in a passage of descriptive realism:

<sup>54</sup> *Piers the Plowman's Crede*, l. 92.

<sup>55</sup> *Piers the Plowman's Crede*, ll. 294–7.

<sup>56</sup> *Piers the Plowman's Crede*, ll. 376–9.

Thanne I munte me forth the mynstre to knowen,  
 And awaytete a woon, wonderlie well ybeld,  
 With arches on everiche half and belliche ycorven,  
 With crochetes on corners, with knottes of golde,  
 Wyde wyndowes ywrought, ywritten full thikke,  
 Schynen with schapen scheldes to schewen aboute,  
 With merkes of marchauntes ymedled bytwene.<sup>57</sup>

[Then I proceeded on to become familiar with the church and beheld a building wonderfully well-constructed, with arches everywhere and handsomely carved, with crocket in the corners, with golden embossed ornaments on the wall; broad windows, closely written on, gleam with coats of arms, showing themselves widely, intermingled with the badges of merchants.]

But what stands out for the narrator, and the reader, is the visual display in the windows not of devotion but of connections with the powerful in society, the aristocracy and the merchants. The church windows demonstrate the Dominicans' secular networks, not their spiritual teaching. In fact, the ornamentation of the friars' churches is explicitly understood as a deterrent to spirituality, as the poem makes clear later:

For though a man in her mynster a masse wolde heren,  
 His sight schal so be set on sundry werkes,  
 The penounes and the pomels and poyntes of scheldes  
 Withdrawen his devocion, and dusken his herte.<sup>58</sup>

[For although a man wants to hear mass in their friary church, his sight will gaze so much on diverse objects that the pennants and the decorative bosses and shield ornaments will hinder his devotion and darken his heart.]

The danger to the piety of the community is manifest. As with the other senses, vision is fraught: not all that is set before the eyes, literally and rhetorically, leads to the health of the soul.

But in this poem, one particular scene is orientated in that direction, precisely because it works to activate within the implied audience a sensation of vividness and realism that depends on the senses of sight and touch and that authenticates the key figure in the scene. After the disappointment of meeting the four orders of friars, and weighed down with grief, the narrator meets a lowly ploughman:

And as I wente be the waie, wepyng for sorowe,  
 And seigh a sely man me by, opon the plow hongen.  
 His cote was of a cloute that cary was ycalled,  
 His hod was full of holes, and his heer oute,  
 With his knopped schon clouted full thykke.  
 His ton todeden out as he the londe treddede,  
 His hosen overhongen his hokschyne on everiche a side,

<sup>57</sup> *Piers the Plowman's Crede*, ll. 171–7.

<sup>58</sup> *Piers the Plowman's Crede*, ll. 560–3.

Al beslombred in fen as he the plow folwede.  
 Twey myteynes, as mete, maad all of cloutes;  
 The fyngers weren forwerd and ful of fen honged.  
 This whit waselede in the fen almost to the ancle,  
 Foure rotheren hym byfor that feble were worthen.  
 Men myghte reken ich a ryb, so reufull they weren.  
 His wijf walked him with, with a longe gode,  
 In a cutted cote, cutted full heyghe,  
 Wrapped in a wynwe schete to weren hire fro weders,  
 Barfote on the bare ijs, that the blode folwede.<sup>59</sup>

[As I walked along the road, weeping with sorrow, I saw a simple man near me who was clinging to the plough. His tunic was made of rags called 'checked cloth', his hood was full of holes and his hair stuck through, with his lumpy shoes stuffed tightly with rags. His toes stuck out as he trod over the land, his leggings hung over his ankles on both sides, all soiled with dirt as he followed the plough. Two mittens, matching [the shoes], made of rags; his fingers were harmed and fully covered with dirt. This person was befouled with filth almost to his ankles, four oxen before him that had grown feeble. People could count each rib, so pitiful they were. His wife walked with him with a long goad, in a shortened tunic, cut quite high, wrapped in a winnowing sheet to protect her from the weather, barefoot on the ice, so that blood flowed after her.]

In the pathos and vivid description of this scene, some of the mimetically gritty details that stand out are the palms of the ploughman's dirty hands and the bloody soles of his wife's feet, the parts of the body considered to be those in which the sense of touch was most concentrated.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, the ploughman is portrayed in ragged clothing, in a gesture of exhaustion, barely hanging on to his plough. The affective response called for by the kind of realism presented here translates the narrator's sorrow and grief into the reader's pity and tears. What makes the *enargeia* of the scene so effective is that it also seems to upend the cultural understanding of touch within the sensory community of the peasantry in late fourteenth-century England, imaged in the hand of the ploughman grasping the plough.<sup>61</sup> That sensory experience had become the expression of the triumphant agency of rural male peasantry, as it is demonstrated, for example, in William Langland's poem when his Piers the Plowman refuses to allow an aristocrat to plough the half acre. Piers's decision in Langland's poem to give himself the task of working with the plough is in line with the gendered view of male peasant labour. But then a knight suggests that he might take over the task of ploughing: "By Crist!" quod a knyght thoo, "he

<sup>59</sup> *Piers the Plowman's Crede*, ll. 420–36.

<sup>60</sup> Bartholomaeus Anglicus, *Liber de proprietatibus rerum*, 3.21 (Strasbourg, 1485): 'Hic autem sensus licet sit in omnibus partibus principaliter tamen viget in volis manuum et in plantis.'

<sup>61</sup> Richard Newhauser, "Putten to Ploughe": Touching the Peasant Sensory Community', in Fiona Griffiths and Kathryn Starkey, eds, *Sensory Reflections: Traces of Experience in Medieval Artifacts* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2018), 225–48, plates XVII–XX.

kenneth us the beste; / Ac on the teme, trewely, taught was I nevere. / Ac kenne me,” quod the knyght, “and by Crist I wole assaye!” [‘By Christ!’ said a knight then, ‘he [i.e. Piers] is instructing us in the best way, but concerning the plough team, to tell the truth, I was never given instruction. But teach me,’ said the knight, ‘and by Christ I will try to do it!’].<sup>62</sup> Echoing the knight’s rhetorical structure, Piers politely rejects this offer, reserving the plough and the results of its interaction with the ploughman for the peasantry, namely, to provide food for all of society. It is not just Piers’s personal righteousness that justifies him in declining the knight’s proposal<sup>63</sup> but also the ploughman’s understanding of his position as representative of the sensory community of the peasantry (and the poet’s idealized view, at this point in the poem, of society operating ‘properly’ when each estate fulfils its function). As he explains, with specific reference to the somatic context of his labour: “By Seint Poull,” quod Perkyn, “ye profre yow so faire / That I shal swynke and swete and sowe for us bothe” [‘By Saint Paul,’ said Piers, ‘you offer yourself so graciously, but I’ll work and sweat and sow for both of us’].<sup>64</sup>

In *Piers the Plowman’s Crede*, on the other hand, the narrator’s tears, the pathos of the scene, and the suffering with which he clings to the plough and his wife drags her bleeding feet along the ice all work as polar opposites of what the interface of affective factors presents elsewhere in English literature as the success of the ploughman. These peasants’ physical misery and their dirt-covered limbs become reinterpreted through the transgressive spiritual authority with which the ploughman comes to speak with the narrator. Only this ploughman can finally explain the Apostles’ Creed to him and, as he says to the narrator, ‘teach the [thee] the trewthe, and tellen the [thee] the sothe’ in plain and simple language.<sup>65</sup> In *Piers the Plowman’s Crede* the sense of touch, as culturally constructed to express masculinity within the peasant sensory community, has also become an integral part of depicting the intensity of deep sorrow, physical weariness, and spiritual triumph. Touch functions here as a sensory part of authenticating realism moving up from the bottom of society along with the voice of the simple ploughman to correct the elitist demonstrations of worldly power that are exerted by the visual sense in the friars’ churches. The phenomenology and sensology of the scene begin with the sight of the suffering body and reach out to implicate both the readership of the scene and the iconic object that defines the ploughman’s existence. Merleau-Ponty’s idea of the

<sup>62</sup> William Langland, *Piers Plowman*, B.6.21–3, in *The Vision of Piers Plowman: A Critical Edition of the B-Text Based on Trinity College Cambridge MS B.15.17*, ed. A. V. C. Schmidt, 2nd edn (London: Dent, 1997), 96.

<sup>63</sup> Alan J. Fletcher, ‘The Social Trinity of Piers Plowman’, *Review of English Studies* 44, no. 175 (1993), 343–61 (349).

<sup>64</sup> Langland, *Piers Plowman*, B.6.24–5, ed. Schmidt, 96.

<sup>65</sup> *Piers the Plowman’s Crede*, l. 794.

phenomenal field, the system ‘Self-Others-things,’ is instantiated in the senses of sight and touch presented in this scene.

This is not to say that the readers/listeners of the poem, the Lollard communities (or ‘networks’) that came together ‘in small meetings, often for the purpose of reading aloud from vernacular translations of the scriptures or devotional texts,’ must have themselves been part of the poor, rural peasantry.<sup>66</sup> But they were groups that rejected sensory deceit and visual demonstrations of power in the institutional Church and, on the other hand, understood the sight of the suffering ploughman and the touch of the ploughman’s hand on his plough as exemplifying a model of communal responsibility. Moreover, they could connect that understanding easily with the Lollard rejection of ecclesiastical corruption.<sup>67</sup> They participated in the misery and the wisdom of the ploughman, forming a sensory community created through the presentation of sight and touch in the *enargeia* of his initial entrance into the poem.

In making this sensory activation possible, the *Crede* also accomplishes political work. The associations between individuals’ sensory perceptions that make up a sensorium are not spread evenly throughout a society; they experience what Jacques Rancière has called a ‘distribution of the sensible.’<sup>68</sup> This ‘regime of perception’ is properly political in that it reflects the development and exercise of status, authority, and the power that goes with them within a social order. The political in sensation is understood by Davide Panagia as ‘the rendering sensible of a previously insensible,’ and by Rancière as a process that ‘makes visible what had been excluded from the perceptual field and . . . makes audible what used to be inaudible.’<sup>69</sup> By giving a voice to those who are representative of the poor and powerless, by satirizing those with authority in the Church and exposing their inability to speak about the simple truth the narrator seeks, the *Crede*’s sensory programme allows the formerly inaudible to be heard as the sound of true authority. In the late fourteenth century, that voice did not result in the effect the *Crede*-author wanted, as witnessed by the often-violent repression of Lollards underway at the time, but about a century later what was at times heard as its echo certainly did.

<sup>66</sup> J. Patrick Hornbeck II, ‘The People,’ in J. Patrick Hornbeck II, with Mishtooni Bose and Fiona Somerset, *A Companion to Lollardy* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 24–58 (52). On the importance of the family in Lollard society, see Anne Hudson, *The Premature Reformation* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 134–7.

<sup>67</sup> Mark Bailey, ‘The Ploughman,’ in Stephen H. Rigby, ed., with the assistance of Alastair J. Minnis, *Historians on Chaucer. The ‘General Prologue’ to the Canterbury Tales* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 352–67 (365–7).

<sup>68</sup> Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004).

<sup>69</sup> Davide Panagia, *The Political Life of Sensation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 153; Jacques Rancière, *The Philosopher and his Poor*, trans. Andrew Parker (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 55.

Multisensoriality, as the neuropsychologists Beatrice de Gelder, Jean Vroomen, and Gilles Pourtois have written, is important for the relation of the self to the world, for ‘multisensory integration contributes to a sense of self and an intensified presence of the perceiver in his or her world.’<sup>70</sup> By presenting that world mimetically in a way that engages some, or many, of the senses, moments of *enargeia* may achieve that same intensification. They certainly demonstrate that the ‘serious realism’ that Erich Auerbach understood to have sensory power in medieval literature, able ‘to represent the most everyday phenomena of reality’, could be extended far beyond the quotidian mimesis he focused on.<sup>71</sup> As the rhetoricians who theorized *enargeia* understood, actualizing dramatic scenes in literature so that they appear to be immediately present to the mind’s eye of the readers not only activates the emotions of the readers as if they were present in the scene, and in a way other texts cannot do, but also engages the full range of associations between the reader’s self and the phenomena that suffuse that world. As the focus on sensory activation has shown, phenomenology’s system of ‘Self-Others-things’ is made vibrantly present in moments of literary *enargeia*.

#### FURTHER READING

- Boddice, Rob, and Mark Smith, *Emotion, Sense, Experience* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).
- Connor, Steven, ‘Literature, Technology and the Senses’, in David Hillman and Ulrika Maude, eds, *The Cambridge Companion to the Body in Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 177–96.
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<sup>70</sup> Beatrice de Gelder, Jean Vroomen, and Gilles Pourtois, ‘Multisensory Perception of Emotion, Its Time Course, and Its Neural Basis’, in Gemma A. Calvert, Charles Spence, and Barry E. Stein, eds, *The Handbook of Multisensory Processes* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004), 581–96 (581).

<sup>71</sup> Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis. The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953), 555; Newhauser, ‘The Multisensoriality of Place’, 212.



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## BEARING THE WORD

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### Speech Scrolls, Touch, and the *Carthusian Miscellany*

SARAH STANBURY

The end of the Rebellion of 1381 begins with a handshake. On his fateful meeting with Richard II at Smithfield, Wat Tyler dismounted his horse, halfway bent his knee, and, taking the king by his hand, ‘par la mayne’, shook his arm forcefully and vigorously, ‘shaka sa brace durement et fortemet’. After this greeting Wat Tyler addressed the king as brother, ‘Frer’, and listed the demands of the commons. As the chronicle describes it, Tyler carefully curated his gestures to communicate equality or even studied insouciance—his half bow, his familiar ‘brother’, and his energetic handshake.<sup>1</sup> That handshake may have been insulting to Richard for more than its forwardness, however. It seems to have been an unfamiliar form of greeting altogether. Commenting on this meeting in his study of medieval gesture, John Burrow points out that the handshake is not recorded until the seventeenth century. The Anglo-Norman chronicler of the 1381 Rebellion does not even have a word for it, apparently, resorting to the English word ‘shake.’<sup>2</sup> While ‘dexiosis’, or taking another’s right hand as an oath or pledge, dates to the classical period, there is little evidence to show that shaking was part of the handclasp until well beyond 1381.<sup>3</sup> ‘Touch of hand’ is the phrase Lydgate uses for a gesture that accompanies an oath.<sup>4</sup> Richard may have

<sup>1</sup> *Anominalle Chronicle, 1333-81*, ed. V. H. Galbraith (New York: Manchester University Press, 1970), 147.

<sup>2</sup> J. A. Burrow, *Gestures and Looks in Medieval Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 35–7; see also C. M. Woolgar, *The Senses in Late Medieval England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 33.

<sup>3</sup> For instance, the right handclasp in the Samos Stele, 403–402 BCE; see Jas Elsner, ‘Visual Culture and Ancient History: Issues of Empiricism and Ideology in the Samos Stele at Athens,’ *Classical Antiquity* 34, no. 1 (2015), 33–73. In Athenian culture the dexiosis was an oath or pledge, 62.

<sup>4</sup> John Lydgate, *The Life of Saint Alban and Saint Amphibal*, ed. J. E. Van Der Westhuizen (Leiden: Brill, 1974), l. 173.

perceived the handshake like the beard shake in *Guy of Warwick*: 'I shuld shake thy berd so sore, / Thy teth shuld fall owte.'<sup>5</sup> Indeed, when people 'shake' others, or parts of them, in Middle English writings, it is generally to assault them.

Wat Tyler's handshake, recorded with such attention by the chronicler, is a small window into the history of touch, and a reminder of the ways senses and their organizing gestures are culturally embedded.<sup>6</sup> For most of my lifetime, a handshake has served as the conventional gesture of greeting and agreement. I was even taught the polite way to do it. While a handshake is likely accompanied by words ('How do you do,' 'Nice to meet you'), it is above all a non-verbal speech act of the hand. With the handshake, you enter into a relationship. The handshake may also become a lost gesture.<sup>7</sup> In many parts of the world the handshake has been replaced by other kinds of touch, such as the elbow, or more often, no touch at all.

In this chapter I reflect on touch as multisensory language in the medieval speech scroll, or banderole. How does the speech scroll, as a visual sign, conscript touch, and especially the touch of a hand, to amplify and translate sound? My particular focus is the mid fifteenth-century *Carthusian Miscellany*, British Library MS Additional 37049, a unique English vernacular manuscript whose pages are filled with exuberantly gesturing and speaking figures, many of them holding or otherwise connected to text scrolls. I also reflect on the work of touch in Annunciation iconography, where the scroll held in Gabriel's hand performs a greeting as it literally bears the word. Ubiquitous in medieval and early modern manuscript illustration, sculpture, and stained glass, banderoles are primarily indicators and containers of the spoken word, though they also function as identifying markers or messages.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> *The Romance of Guy of Warwick: The First or Fourteenth-Century Version*, ed. Julius Zupitza, EETS, s.s., 42, 49, 59 (London: Paul, Trench, and Trübner, 1883), ll. 9488–9; see also the Ashmole Fragment in *Non-Cycle Plays and Fragments*, ed. N. Davis, EETS s.s. 1 (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 120, ll. 5–6: 'By þe berd I schall hym schake, / That ys skulle schall al tocrake.'

<sup>6</sup> Richard G. Newhauser, 'Introduction: The Sensual Middle Ages', in Newhauser, ed., *A Cultural History of the Senses in the Middle Ages, 500–1450* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 1–22 (2).

<sup>7</sup> John Egan, 'Waving Goodbye to the Handshake: Seven Alternatives to a Workplace Custom', *SHRM* (27 April 2020), <http://www.shrm.org/resourcesandtools/hr-topics/employee-relations/pages/coronavirus-handshake-alternatives.aspx>.

<sup>8</sup> Meyer Schapiro, *Words, Script, and Pictures: Semiotics of Visual Language* (New York: Braziller, 1996), 117–91; Alison R. Flett, 'The Significance of Text Scrolls: Towards a Descriptive Terminology', in Margaret M. Manion and Bernard J. Muir, eds, *Medieval Texts and Images: Studies of Manuscripts from the Middle Ages* (Sydney: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1991), 43–56 (48); Victor M. Schmidt, 'Some Notes on Scrolls in the Middle Ages', *Quaerendo* 41, no. 3 (2011), 373–83; Holger Schott Syme, 'The Look of Speech', *Textual Cultures* 2, no. 2 (2007), 34–60; Michael Camille, 'Seeing and Reading: Some Implications of Medieval Literacy and Illiteracy', *Art History* 8, no. 1 (1985), 26–49; Susanne Wittekind, 'Vom Schriftband zum Spruchband. Zum Funktionswandel von Spruchbändern in Illustrationen biblischer Stoffe', *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 30 (1996), 343–67; Peter Stallybrass, 'Books and Scrolls: Navigating the Bible', in Jennifer Andersen and Elizabeth Sauer, eds, *Books and Readers in Early Modern England: Material Studies* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2001), 42–79; Jessica Brantley, 'Visual Cultures of the Word in Medieval English Alabasters', in Jessica Brantley, Stephen Perkinson, and Elizabeth C. Teviotdale, eds, *Reassessing Alabaster Sculpture in Late Medieval England*,

When banderoles are used today as art motifs, they are likely to annotate the medieval as a category in past time; like chain mail, they gesture as anachronistic signs from an old lexicon. A perception of speech scrolls as medieval, even inarticulate, signs may be apt; banderoles on premodern objects are often difficult or impossible to read, as the painted words have often chipped away. Many banderoles appear never to have had inscriptions on them at all. Studies of banderoles, reading them not just as inscriptions but as material, historically bound sign systems, have focused on their intermix of written language and speech. Both narrative (word) and representation (picture), scroll and text tether semantically to each other. Robustly performative, banderoles function as ‘irreducibly double...simultaneously as textual and as aural, as citation and as performance’.<sup>9</sup> And oral as well as aural. Neither text nor image, they articulate as composite signs.

The sense of touch, I argue in this chapter, is intrinsic to the banderole’s performativity as text and image, citation and performance. Banderoles are most commonly pictured unspooling from a hand, rather than a mouth.<sup>10</sup> Even when they are not held in the hand, they carry visible weight as material containers for text. Often unfurling around or above the figure associated with them, they amplify speech in visual mimicry of sonic resonance—that is, of sounds ‘filling’ the air. In *Script as Image*, Jeffrey Hamburger argues that, in manuscript ornament, decorated initials and containers for script, such as speech scrolls, play a role not just in the creation but also in the ‘sensation’ of meaning.<sup>11</sup> Unlike cartoon speech bubbles, to which they are often compared, in their dimensionality, heft, and bodily attachment banderoles are objects with mass.<sup>12</sup> Cartoon speech balloons, in contrast, conventionally float above the speaker as flat white clouds inscribed with dialogue.<sup>13</sup> A tail points from the balloon toward the speaker, whose activity as speaker is indicated by an open mouth, as in the cartoon of a handshake (Figure 24.1). The commentary on the handshake as a wordless speech act lies in the surprise emptiness of the two balloons. A handshake itself, the cartoon seems to say, speaks volumes.

In images of the Annunciation, the iconic setting for the banderole, the scroll as a container for the spoken word often appears as a lively object of uncanny mobility, bearing text but also performing in the scene as a physical extension of the body. In the well-known early fifteenth-century miniature from the *Beaufort/Beauchamp Hours*, British Library MS Royal 2 A XVIII, Gabriel’s scroll spirals upward in

special issue of *Studies in Iconography* (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2021), 97–136; J. Sparrow, *Visible Words: A Study of Inscriptions in and as Books and Works of Art* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1969), 48–50.

<sup>9</sup> Syme, ‘Speech’, 49; Flett, ‘Text Scrolls’, 46, 47.

<sup>10</sup> Schmidt, ‘Notes on Scrolls’, 383.

<sup>11</sup> Jeffrey F. Hamburger, *Script as Image* (Paris: Peeters, 2014), 4.

<sup>12</sup> See Flett, ‘Text Scrolls’, 46.

<sup>13</sup> See Syme, ‘Speech’, 34–5.



**Figure 24.1** John Egan, ‘Waving Goodbye to the Handshake: Seven Alternatives to a Workplace Custom’. SHRM, 27 April 2020. Alamy.

dramatic contrast with the Virgin’s book and the books on draped *prie-dieux* in front of each of the two donors (fol. 23v, Figure 24.2).<sup>14</sup>

The donors’ books are inscribed with ink drops, not letters. Legible writing in Mary’s book says only ‘Ecce ancilla domini’ [Behold the handmaid of the Lord, Luke 2:37–8]. Gabriel’s sinuous banderole, a complicated, three-dimensional object, is the textual centrepiece of the miniature. In Annunciation iconography the ubiquity and prominence of Gabriel’s scroll may gesture to the Incarnation as a moment of profound change in practices of writing; as Michael Clancy notes, in medieval painting and sculpture the Bible is almost always pictured as a codex, in categorical distinction to scrolls associated with Old Testament prophets and other figures.<sup>15</sup> In the *Beaufort/Beauchamp Hours* Gabriel’s scroll, rather than the Virgin, appears to be the object of the angel’s gaze—though Gabriel may be also focusing on the tiny, hard-to-detect dove zooming from God’s mouth toward the Virgin’s ear. The scroll even seems to be an agent of the Virgin’s stunned reaction. Part of it mirroring in

<sup>14</sup> *The Beaufort/Beauchamp Hours* (1401–15), [http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=royal\\_ms\\_2\\_a\\_xviii\\_f003r](http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=royal_ms_2_a_xviii_f003r); for provenance see Kathleen L. Scott, *Later Gothic Manuscripts 1390–1490*, 6 vols (London: Harvey Miller, 1996), II, cat. No. 37, 129; Janet Backhouse, ‘Patronage and Commemoration in the *Beaufort Hours*’, in Kathryn A. Smith and Carol H. Krinsky, eds, *Tributes to Lucy Freeman Sandler: Studies in Illuminated Manuscripts* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 331–44; and Laura Saetveit Miles, *The Virgin Mary’s Book at the Annunciation: Reading, Interpretation, and Devotion in Medieval England* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2020), 219. For donor scrolls in this and other manuscript illustrations see Nigel Morgan, ‘What Are They Saying? Patrons and Their Text Scrolls in Fifteenth-Century English Art’, in Colum Hourihane, ed., *Patronage, Power, and Agency in Medieval Art* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2013), 175–93.

<sup>15</sup> M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066–1307*, 2nd edn (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1993), 139–40.



**Figure 24.2** Annunciation, *The Beaufort/Beauchamp Hours*. © British Library Board, MS Royal 2 A XVIII, fol. 23v.

reverse the curves of Mary's body, the scroll seems to have not just weight but even a mind of its own. Gabriel holds the scroll's rolled-up end in his right hand, supporting it on his knee, while with his left he appears to be angling to support its upward curl, which reaches far above the Virgin's head to the top of her canopy. On the scroll, which carries Gabriel's conventional announcement—'Ave Maria gratia plena dominus tecum benedicta tu in mulieribus' [Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you, blessed are you among women]—the words follow the scroll's Möbius-

strip-like twist. To read ‘tecum’ we need to turn the manuscript upside down. ‘Gratia’ and ‘tu’ are missing, perhaps imagined written on the part of the scroll’s curl the reader cannot see.

The speech scroll in this Annunciation, a masterpiece of fifteenth-century book illumination, is rendered with exceptional detail and dimensionality. Yet like other Annunciation speech scrolls, in its function as a text-bearing container it doubles as a vehicle for the Incarnation through its materiality. It is the word made flesh (John 1:14). In his sermon on the Annunciation, Bernard of Clairvaux imagines Mary’s thoughts on Christ as the incarnate word:

Let it be to me, [a Word] not only audible to the ear, but visible to the eyes, one which hands can touch and arms carry. And let it not be to me a written and mute word, but one incarnate and living, that is to say, not [a word] scratched by dumb signs on dead skins, but one in human form truly graven, lively, within my chaste womb, not by the tracings of a dead pen, but by the workings of the Holy Spirit.<sup>16</sup>

Mary asks that the word be sensual and multisensory—audible, visible, and touchable. At the same time, she asks for life, repudiating text for incarnation. The word she uses is ‘vivaciter’, lively. In the Annunciation from the *Beaufort/Beauchamp Hours*, the Word, held by Gabriel on a sinuous and mobile scroll, is indeed alive.

As containers for the spoken rather than written word—in this Annunciation, dramatically differentiated from the three books—speech scrolls in the visual arts may claim part of their authority and performativity from rolls used for chronicles and monastic obituaries, as well as from *rotuli* or account rolls, which came into use in England in the eleventh century, first with the pipe rolls of the Exchequer.<sup>17</sup> More immediately, though, banderoles may have resonated with rolls containing prayers and other kinds of performance scripts. In fifteenth-century English art, it was commonplace to picture donors holding petitionary prayer scrolls, and evidence suggests that monks and laypeople sometimes carried prayer rolls stashed in a purse or belt.<sup>18</sup> Banderole may have also held associations with scrolls used as

<sup>16</sup> Bernard of Clairvaux, *Sermones super missus est*, from *Homilia de laudibus virginis matris*, Sermon IV.11, PL 183: 86b; trans. Marie-Bernard Saïd OSB, *Homilies in Praise of the Virgin Mary* (Kalamazoo: Cistercian, 1993), 57; cited in Miles, *Virgin Mary’s Book*, 24: ‘Fiat mihi non tantum audibile auribus, sed et visibile oculis, palpabile manibus, gestabile humeris. Nec fiat mihi verbum scriptum et mutum, sed incarnatum et vivum: hoc est, non mutis figuris, mortuis in pellibus exaratum – sed in forma humana meis castis visceribus vivaciter impressum: et hoc non mortui calami depictione, sed sancti Spiritus operatione.’

<sup>17</sup> Clanchy, *Memory*, 135–44.

<sup>18</sup> For donors and petitionary scrolls see Morgan, ‘What are they Saying?’; for prayer rolls see Kathryn A. Smith, *Art, Identity and Devotion in Fourteenth-Century England* (London: British Library and University of Toronto Press, 2003), 228–32. An illustrated prayer roll owned by the young Henry VIII is reproduced in Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England, 1400–1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), fig. 110; for text and analysis of a fifteenth-century parchment scroll beginning ‘Always carry this about in your purse’, see W. A. Pantin, ‘Instructions for a Devout and Literate Layman’, in Jonathan J. G. Alexander and Margaret T. Gibson, eds, *Medieval*

scripts in theatrical performances. In early theatre, actors learned their roles from parts written on physical 'rolls', strips of paper that were rolled around a wooden baton.<sup>19</sup> Indeed, linearity is particular to the banderole: whereas script on account rolls is recorded vertically, on the speech scroll it is pictured linearly. Michael Camille even speculates that speech became identified with rolls because, like speech, rolls unfold in a linear direction.<sup>20</sup> Our modern word for a dramatic 'role' in a play derives, in fact, from the French 'rolle', from Latin *rotulus* or scroll. Though material evidence is sparse, a few early surviving 'rolls' in England attest to their use in medieval and early modern theatre: the thirteenth-century 'Interludium de Clerico et Puella', the Rickingham Fragment (a fifteen-line dialogue between a king and messenger, in French with English translation), and the Ashmole Fragment, a paper scrap of written dialogue that was probably from a lost fifteenth-century play.<sup>21</sup> The lack of surviving script 'rolls' may be related to their uses for specific performances in the liturgy or in secular or sacred drama, such as medieval biblical pageants.<sup>22</sup> In some media, such as alabaster carvings of saints and scenes from the life of Christ, speech scrolls may even be designed to elicit a performative response from the viewer. Pointing to the multiple echoes between the iconography of popular fifteenth-century English alabaster carvings and biblical plays, Jessica Brantley argues that speech scrolls in alabaster sculpture should be understood as performers in their narrative 'imagetexts', a term she adopts from W. J. T. Mitchell.<sup>23</sup> Banderoles cue a dramatic performance of the words they contain, which in some images doubles as an act of prayer: 'To combine text and image, in the context of devotional objects such as these, is to pray.'<sup>24</sup>

Banderoles also appear to have had associations with secular poetry. Though material evidence is only fragmentary, scrolls, as ephemera, appear to have been used for drafting lyrics and songs. In the satiric fourteenth-century English Harley Lyric beginning 'Of rybauds [rascals] Y ryme / ant rede o my rolle', 'rolle'

*Learning and Literature: Essays Presented to Richard William Hunt* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976), 398–422.

<sup>19</sup> Simon Palfrey and Tiffany Stern, *Shakespeare in Parts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 17; see especially Schapiro, *Words, Script, and Pictures*, 157–73.

<sup>20</sup> Camille, 'Seeing and Reading', 29; Stallybrass, 'Books and Scrolls', 48.

<sup>21</sup> For the *Interludium* see Clanchy, *Memory*, 143; Rickingham Fragment (also known as Bury St Edmunds Fragment), British Library Add. Roll 63481 B; Ashmole Fragment, Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 750, fol. 168r. See Richard Rastall, *Music in Early English Religious Drama: Minstrels Playing* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2001), 367–8; and Jessica Brantley, *Reading in the Wilderness: Private Devotion and Public Performance in Late Medieval England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 292.

<sup>22</sup> Richard H. Rouse, 'Roll and Codex: The Transmission of the Works of Reinmar von Zweter', *Münchener Beiträge zur Mediävistik und Renaissance-Forschung* 32 (1991), 107–23. Holger Syme, 'Speech', 49–53, suggests that banderoles in Robert Campin's Dijon Nativity function as theatrical scripts.

<sup>23</sup> Brantley, *Wilderness*, 5; see also Flett, 'Text Scrolls', 53.

<sup>24</sup> Brantley, 'Alabaster', 131; on the representation of reading as prayer see Margaret Aston, 'Devotional Literacy', in *Lollards and Reformers: Images and Literacy in Late Medieval Religion* (London: Hambleton Press, 1984), 101–33.



may pun on the double meaning of an account roll as well as a lyric script.<sup>25</sup> The speaker is taking to account, or listing on an account roll, misdeeds of 'rybaudz' or rascals; he is also rhyming and reading on a physical roll of parchment or paper. Other material survivals include two fragments from what was a mid-thirteenth-century scroll containing songs by poet Reinmar von Zweter (d.1260). Richard Rouse, who discovered the fragments in 1991 at the UCLA Library, argues that they provide a material counterpart to the poetic scrolls pictured in the Manesse Codex (1304–40), the most important manuscript of Middle High German *Minnesang*. In the Codex more than a quarter of its 137 author portraits picture some form of written material; and, of these, the majority are shown as strips of parchment, or banderoles.<sup>26</sup> Many of those scrolls are blank, Rouse observes, with the scroll itself, even without text, annotating the activity of song-writing and serving as an identifying symbol for a poet, as in a portrait of Reinmar von Zweter (Figure 24.3).<sup>27</sup> Reinmar is pictured with his eyes closed, perhaps indicating blindness or, as has also been suggested, inward contemplation or interiority.<sup>28</sup> The act of transcription is being undertaken in part by a young woman writing on a large scroll.

In the speech scroll's performance, the hand is a vital agent, not only recording speech as sound or oral text but also referencing the hand that writes the scroll. Words on the scroll, that is to say, get articulated or even come to life through the touch of the hand. Unlike singers, who are conventionally pictured with their mouths open, speaking figures in medieval illustration are normally represented with mouths closed. We know who is speaking through hand gestures, not an open mouth.<sup>29</sup> From the classical period through to the Middle Ages, the curving index finger of the right hand is a visual cue for speech and serves, according to Michael Camille, as an 'oral witness in a written text'.<sup>30</sup> Hands also populate medieval texts and illustrated books as familiar annotations for the text in other ways as well, perhaps taking a cue from God's finger in the gesture of 'declamation', deriving from Exodus 31:18, where Moses receives the tablets 'scriptas digito Dei', written with the finger of God.<sup>31</sup> The manicule, an elongated pointing index finger attached to a fist,

<sup>25</sup> *The Complete Harley 2253 Manuscript*, ed. Susanna Greer Fein, trans. David Raybin and Jan Ziolkowski, 3 vols (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2015), III, no. 88, <https://d.lib.rochester.edu/teams/text/fein-harley2253-volume-3-article-88>. See Rouse, 'Roll and Codex', 118.

<sup>26</sup> Rouse, 'Roll and Codex', 115; Schmidt, 'Notes on Scrolls', 375.

<sup>27</sup> Rouse, 'Roll and Codex', 116.

<sup>28</sup> Wolfgang Jaeger, 'Die Darstellung von Blinden in der Manessischen Liederhandschrift', *Heidelberger Jahrbücher* 32 (1957), 119–28 (126).

<sup>29</sup> Syme, 'Speech', 52; for origins of the visual representation of speaking, see Walter Cahn, 'Représentation de la Parole', *Connaissance des arts* 369 (1982), 82–9 (84); Gerd Althoff, 'Zur Bedeutung symbolischer Kommunikation für das Verständnis des Mittelalters', *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 31 (1997), 370–89; Gerd Althoff, *Formen und Funktionen öffentlicher Kommunikation im Mittelalter* (Stuttgart: Jan Thorbecke Verlag, 2001).

<sup>30</sup> Camille, 'Seeing and Reading', 28.

<sup>31</sup> Camille, 'Seeing and Reading', 27; see also Marlene Villalobos Hennessy, 'The Social Life of a Manuscript Metaphor: Christ's Blood as Ink', in Joyce Coleman, Mark Kruse, and Kathryn A. Smith, eds, *The Social Life of Illumination: Manuscripts, Images, and Communities in the Late Middle Ages* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2013), 17–52 (19).



**Figure 24.3** *Codex Manesse*, Universitätsbibliothek Heidelberg, Cod. Pal. germ. 848, fol. 323r (Wikimedia Commons), [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Codex\\_Manesse\\_Reinmar\\_von\\_Zweter.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Codex_Manesse_Reinmar_von_Zweter.jpg).

commonly appears in the margins of medieval manuscripts and early printed books as an indexical sign marking chapters, semantic breaks, or, like the *nota*, important points in the text.<sup>32</sup> In Hoccleve's famous Chaucer portrait from the *Regiment of*

<sup>32</sup> For the history of the manicule see William H. Sherman, *Used Books: Marking Readers in Renaissance England* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 29–52.

*Princes*, Chaucer's right hand even extends beyond the frame of the picture to point to the text on the left side of the page, where Hoccleve explains his decision to include the poet's 'likeness' as an aid to Chaucer's memory.<sup>33</sup> Chaucer's pointed finger not only marks the text but even marks a spirited conversation with Hoccleve about resemblance, likeness, painting, and memory. Though Chaucer is dead, Hoccleve writes, his resemblance is still so vivid (has such 'fresh lyflynesse') that he has had the painting made to bring him to mind for others. That likeness, however, is hardly a static memorial image.<sup>34</sup> Through his pointing hand, Chaucer is dynamically present on the page in all his 'lyflynesse'.

A touch of the hand, or of the skin more generally, also bespeaks or channels 'feeling'. In her study of meaningful text-image alignments in the illustrated Complaint of Our Lady/Gospel of Nicodemus in the early fourteenth-century *Neville of Hornby Hours* (British Library MS Egerton 2781), Kathryn Smith notes the pervasive gestures of touch linking speaking bodies to the written word: a finger points to a significant word; an arm of the Cross touches the word 'parchment'—an 'image-text pairing' that, as Smith argues, would have supported contemplation of and instruction in the allegory of Christ's body as parchment, and as the very book in the reader-viewer's hands. Christ's left hand touches 'mes doulours' in a Crucifixion initial (fol. 159r; Figure 24.4).<sup>35</sup> Touching these words—'mes doulours', my pain—Christ invites the reader to share his suffering through the experience and voice of his mother. Like touching a relic, Christ's hand is a contact portal to the sacred through the embodied experience of empathy.<sup>36</sup>

And not just Christ's hands, but Christ's skin, understood as both tactile surface of empathetic suffering as well as the parchment on which his birth and suffering are both inscribed and recorded. The metaphor had a long circulation throughout medieval writing on the Passion, as has been well documented by Vincent Gillespie and others.<sup>37</sup> For the Cistercian Caesarius of Heisterbach

<sup>33</sup> British Library MS Harley 4866, fol. 88r, [http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=harley\\_ms\\_4866\\_fs001r](http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=harley_ms_4866_fs001r); in Thomas Hoccleve, *The Regiment of Princes*, ed. Charles R. Blyth, TEAMS (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1999), 186–7.

<sup>34</sup> The Hoccleve Chaucer is unusual as an author portrait that, in all probability, was made from life. According to Jeanne Krochalis, it marks an early moment in the transformation in English portraiture from representation of the subject as a generic or idealized figure to an individualized likeness; 'Hoccleve's Chaucer Portrait', *Chaucer Review* 21, no. 2 (1986), 234–45.

<sup>35</sup> [http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=egerton\\_ms\\_2781\\_fs001r](http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=egerton_ms_2781_fs001r); Smith, *Art, Identity and Devotion*, 218, 205, 207.

<sup>36</sup> For touch and the sacred see Martina Bagnoli, 'Making Sense', in Bagnoli, ed., *A Feast for the Senses: Art and Experience in Medieval Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press for the Walters Art Museum, 2017), 17–30 (19–20).

<sup>37</sup> See esp. Vincent Gillespie, 'Strange Images of Death: The Passion in Later Medieval English Devotional and Mystical Writing', in James Hogg, ed., *Zeit, Tod, und Ewigkeit in der Renaissance Literatur*, Analecta Cartusiana 117 (Salzburg: Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik, 1987), 11–59; and Hennessy, 'Blood as Ink', 20–9.



**Figure 24.4** Crucifixion, *Neville of Hornby Hours*. © British Library Board, MS Egerton 2781, fol. 159r.

(d. c.1240), Christ is the book of life, whose letters are written by blows ‘on the parchment of his body’; Benedictine Pierre Bersuire (Petrus Berchorius) (d.1362) describes Christ as a book written on the Virgin Mary’s skin and womb as well as a book ‘punctuated in the imprint of the wounds’; the English Monk of Farne, in the fourteenth-century *Meditations on the Passion*, describes Christ on the Cross as a book open for our perusal, whose wounds are the letters or

characters.<sup>38</sup> In a well-known passage, Richard Rolle, whose spiritual writings had a wide readership in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century England, imagines Christ's body as a book rubricated in red ink: 'More yit, swet Jhesu, þy body is lyke a boke written al with rede ynke; so is þy body al written with rede woundes. Now, swete Ihesu, graunt me to rede vpon þy boke, and somwhate to vnderstond þe swetnes of þat writing.'<sup>39</sup> Parchment skin becomes the parchment scroll—or sometimes a charter. As Sarah Kay puts it, 'for Christian readers the drama of death and redemption, enunciated in the contents of pious texts, is also enfolded in the original skin of the parchment book.'<sup>40</sup>

In the medieval sensorium, touch, of course, is also a direct avenue to sins of the flesh. In Chaucer's *Parson's Tale* 'feelynge' is the fifth of the five wits, or senses: 'sighte, herynge, smellynge, tastynge or savourynge, and feelynge' (X.959), with feeling or touch in its usual place at the bottom of the sensory hierarchy.<sup>41</sup> Touch, which John Trevisa, translating Bartholomaeus Anglicus, calls the most 'boistous' and 'erthy' of the senses, is repeatedly remarked as the primary sensory portal for sin.<sup>42</sup> As Elizabeth Robertson observes, the word 'feeling' ('felunge') first appears in the thirteenth-century *Ancrene Wisse* (*Guide for Anchoresses*), and while it had yet to accrue the meaning of an inner emotional state, it nonetheless modulates inner with outer by its ethical correlation with two bodily sites: the hand ('flesches felunge',

<sup>38</sup> Caesarius of Heisterbach, *Dialogus miraculorum*, ed. Josephus Strange, 2 vols (Cologne: Lempertz, 1851), II, 108–9, trans. Hennessy, 'Blood as Ink', 21; Petrus Berchorius, *Repertorium morale*, 3 vols (Nuremberg: Koberger), II, cxcix, trans. Hennessy, 'Blood as Ink', 23; Monk of Farne, 'The Meditations of the Monk of Farne', ed. Dom Hugh Farmer, *Studia Anselmiana* 41 (1957), 141–245, (191), this edn trans. by a Benedictine of Stanbrook, *The Monk of Farne: The Meditations of a Fourteenth-Century Monk*, ed. Hugh Farmer (Baltimore: Helicon, 1961), 76, cited in Hennessy, 'Blood as Ink', 27.

<sup>39</sup> *Meditation B*, in Richard Rolle, *Prose and Verse Edited from MS Longleat 29 and Related Manuscripts*, ed. Sarah J. Ogilvie-Thomson, EETS, o.s. 293 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), 75; cited in Hennessy, 'Blood as Ink', 28.

<sup>40</sup> Sarah Kay, 'Original Skin: Flaying, Reading, and Thinking in the Legend of Saint Bartholomew and Other Works', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 36, no. 1 (2006), 35–74 (65). For Charters of Christ see Emily Steiner, *Documentary Culture and the Making of Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 50–3, 159–61, 85–90; Aston, *Lollards and Reformers*, 104–5; Stephanie Béreziat-Lang and Michael R. Ott, 'From Tattoo to Stigma: Writing on Body and Skin', in Ricarda Wagner, Christine Neufeld, and Ludger Lieb, eds, *Writing Beyond Pen and Parchment: Inscribed Objects in Medieval European Literature* (Boston: De Gruyter, 2019), 193–207 (198–9); see also Elizabeth Robertson, 'Afterword: Skin Matters', in Nicole Nyffenegger and Katrin Rupp, eds, *Writing on Skin in the Age of Chaucer*, Anglia Book Series 60 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 251–64 (260–1).

<sup>41</sup> *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1987).

<sup>42</sup> *On the Properties of Things: John Trevisa's Translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus*, De Proprietatibus Rerum, ed. M. C. Seymour et al., 3 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), I, 108, ll. 8–9; for the hierarchy of the senses see Katie L. Walter, *Middle English Mouths: Late Medieval Medical, Religious, and Literary Traditions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 36; Annette Kern-Stähler and Kathrin Scheuchzer, 'Introduction', in Annette Kern-Stähler, Beatrix Busse, and Wietse de Boer, eds, *The Five Senses in Medieval and Early Modern England* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 1–17 (3); and Woolgar, *Senses*, 29. On negative moral valences of touch see Newhauser, *Cultural History*, 2–5.

or carnal pleasure), and Christ's tortured skin (pain).<sup>43</sup> By the late Middle Ages, 'feeling' had come to carry both meanings of tactile sensation and affect, perhaps through the lexical logic that what one does or touches with the skin is a contact relay to both positive and negative affective witnessing—that is, to reason or inner feelings, or what Trevisa calls 'inwit': 'And what he fongiþ [grasps] of þat he felith [feels] he presentþ to þe inwit.'<sup>44</sup>

### The *Carthusian Miscellany*

Multiple registers of feeling, from a touch of the hand to a heart pierced in two, are robustly pictured and enacted through speech scrolls in the late fifteenth-century manuscript known as the *Carthusian Miscellany*, British Library MS Additional 37049. The *Miscellany* is a compilation, on paper, of devotional materials with a strong Carthusian interest: religious lyrics, the *Desert of Religion*, Suso's *Horologium sapientiae*, selections from *The Pilgrimage of the Soul*, the *Prick of Conscience*, and much more. The manuscript is remarkable for the vigour and quantity of its drawings, which are not relegated to the margins or initials, as in many illustrated manuscripts, but interspersed with the texts. Most are line drawings painted in a simple wash. Studies on the manuscript generally agree that the text is primarily by a single scribal hand and the pictures are also by a single artist.<sup>45</sup> Perhaps best known for its images of mortality—hearts dripping blood, Christ on the Cross holding a parchment charter, the Man of Sorrows covered in blood—the *Miscellany's* dominant images are of prayer, often being performed by Carthusians in their characteristic white robes.

As Jessica Brantley argues in *Reading in the Wilderness*, an important (and the only) book-length study of the manuscript, prayer is imagined as a participatory action. The *Carthusian Miscellany* invites 'performative devotional reading' through its exceptionally plentiful and dynamic visual links between text and images.<sup>46</sup> Carthusians, who resided in separate substantial cells around a communal cloister, practised a form of extreme eremitic austerity. Monks took strict vows of silence and came together in community much less frequently than did members of other orders. A central activity of the Carthusian eremitical life was reading and the cop-

<sup>43</sup> Bella Millett, *The Ancrene Wisse: A Corrected Edition of the Text in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 402, with Variants from Other Manuscripts*, EETS o.s. 325–2, 2 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), I, 46; cited in Elizabeth Robertson, 'Noli me tangere: The Enigma of Touch in Middle English Religious Literature and Art for and about Women', in Katie L. Walter, ed., *Reading Skin in Medieval Literature and Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 29–55 (34, 31).

<sup>44</sup> On the *Properties of Things*, 108, l. 12.

<sup>45</sup> See Brantley, *Wilderness*, 332–3, n. 61.

<sup>46</sup> Brantley, *Wilderness*, 290.

ying of books, work undertaken alone in the cell yet engaging with wide communities of other readers through the circulation of texts.<sup>47</sup> In the *Carthusian Customs*, the *Consuetudines Cartusiae* (c.1128), Guigo de Saint-Romain (d.1136), fifth prior of the Grande Chartreuse, spelled out in detail items that the monastery would provide for each monk's needs. Along with items such as two hair shirts, a razor, and a whetstone, the *Customs* itemize what each monk would need for writing: a desk, pens, inkhorns, and parchment scrapers, among other writing tools.<sup>48</sup> Writing and book-making, Guigo comments, take the place of aural prayer: 'so because we are not able to preach the word of God with our mouths, we may do so with our hands'. In the *Miscellany's* many illustrations, hands are everywhere, clasped in prayer and pointing to the text. In spite of—or because of—their lives of silence, Brantley argues, reading in the *Miscellany* becomes a performative dialogue or conversation, enacted through interactions between exuberantly animated figures and the text on the page.<sup>49</sup>

Through its banderoles and other containers for speech, the *Miscellany* repeatedly invokes touch as part of its ascetic sensorium, picturing prayer as an action reinforced by contact with parchment as skin. Prayer, as enacted through speech scrolls, is sensation. Readers familiar with the *Carthusian Miscellany* may be familiar with the images I discuss here; I have chosen to take a new look at them to draw attention to the ways their speech scrolls graphically materialize prayer as a form of touch, such that reading and praying in the eremitical wilderness become a bodily practice. Speech scrolls inscribed with dialogue, identifying markers, and prayers appear on thirty-one of the manuscript's ninety-six illustrated pages. Many of those pages contain multiple scrolls; in one deathbed image (fol. 19r, which I discuss below), each of its seven figures holds a scroll, some of them taking up more space on the page than the speaker. Twenty-one other folia bracket passages of text inside scroll-like boxes and banners, often next to or brushing up against gesturing figures.

One of the most immediately physical ways scrolls represent prayer as touch in the *Miscellany* is through the action of piercing, especially as pictured in the *Desert of Religion*, a devotional treatise occupying fols 46r–66v. Developing a central metaphor of a tree, the *Desert* is illustrated with twenty full-page diagrams of trees,

<sup>47</sup> For Carthusians and books see Michael Sargent, 'The Transmission by the English Carthusians of Some Late Medieval Spiritual Writings', *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 27, no. 3 (1976), 225–40; Brantley, *Wilderness*, 46–57.

<sup>48</sup> Glyn Coppack and Laurence Keen, *Mount Grace Priory: Excavations of 1957–92* (Oxford: Oxbow, 2019), 3; E. M. Thompson, *The Carthusian Order in England* (London: SPCK, 1930), 33–4. See also Brantley, *Wilderness*, 35–6.

<sup>49</sup> For another speech-scroll dialogue, see the Ages of Man cycle in the De Lisle Hours, as discussed in Smith, *Art, Identity and Devotion*, 58–81, 161–7.

whose trunks are each speared by a scroll identifying the types of virtues or vices atomized on the tree's leaves (fol. 55r; Figure 24.5).<sup>50</sup>

The banderole piercing this trunk identifies the tree as charity: 'þe rotes [roots] of þis gastly [spiritual] tre / is mercy, pyte [pity], and charite', and extending up the trunk, '[t]he seven gostly warkes [spiritual works] here growes, / And þe seuene bodily in þir bowes [boughs]'. While the text states explicitly that it is a 'gastly' or spiritual tree, the act of piercing and the text itself imagine charity as a somatic act: the tree has roots; the seven corporal and seven spiritual works of mercy are 'bodily,' and (itemized on the leaves) grow on the tree's boughs. Through their association with prayer and the word elsewhere in the manuscript and in visual conventions more broadly, the trunk-piercing banderoles give graphic form to spiritual abstractions while resonating with other kinds of piercing: the piercing of Christ's body by his tormentors; the pricking of parchment, perhaps, to produce a manuscript page. Even more: they picture those moral abstractions and echoes as pain. To grow in charity, that is, may hurt.

To inhabit the eremitical wilderness is also to be not only pierced but also raised up by wilderness prayer. On the verso, another page pictures a reciprocal seven scrolls, each inscribed with a gift of the Holy Spirit, stacked above a praying monk. Each scroll supports a dove in various postures of standing, sitting, and flying. Along with the tree on the recto, the allegorical doves animate the allegorical desert, and the scrolls that support them lend material solidity to prayer (fol. 55v; Figure 24.6).

Banderoles pierce not just trees but also hearts. In an echo of the twenty pierced tree trunks of the *Desert of Religion*, hearts penetrated or overlaid by banderoles give even more graphic life to prayer as feeling, or emotional touch. In late medieval devotional iconography, the sacred heart is often pictured pierced or tortured, normally with instruments of the Passion—nails or Longinus's spear.<sup>51</sup> In the *Miscellany*, stand-alone hearts make a robust presence, speared, covered in drops of blood, and even speaking (fols 20r, 24r, 61v).<sup>52</sup> Not surprisingly, they are among the manuscript's most frequently reproduced images. In several sacred heart images, the heart-rending instrument gets a startling graphic textualization, appearing not as the expected spear, but as a scroll (fols 36v, 37r, 62v, 67r). In a drawing accompanying the lyric 'In þis wylde foreste is a tre / Grovand [Growing] þat gracios is to se',

<sup>50</sup> London, British Library MS Additional 37,049, fol. 55r. For the digitized manuscript see [http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Add\\_MS\\_37049](http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Add_MS_37049).

<sup>51</sup> Eric Jaeger, *The Book of the Heart* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Martin Kemp, *Christ to Coke: How Image Becomes Icon* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 99–106. For a nail-pierced heart, see the book of hours, c.1490, Pierpont Morgan Library MS M 7, fol. 24r: <http://ica.themorgan.org/manuscript/page/46/76834>.

<sup>52</sup> For the trope of the inscribed heart, see Jager, *The Heart*, 44–64.



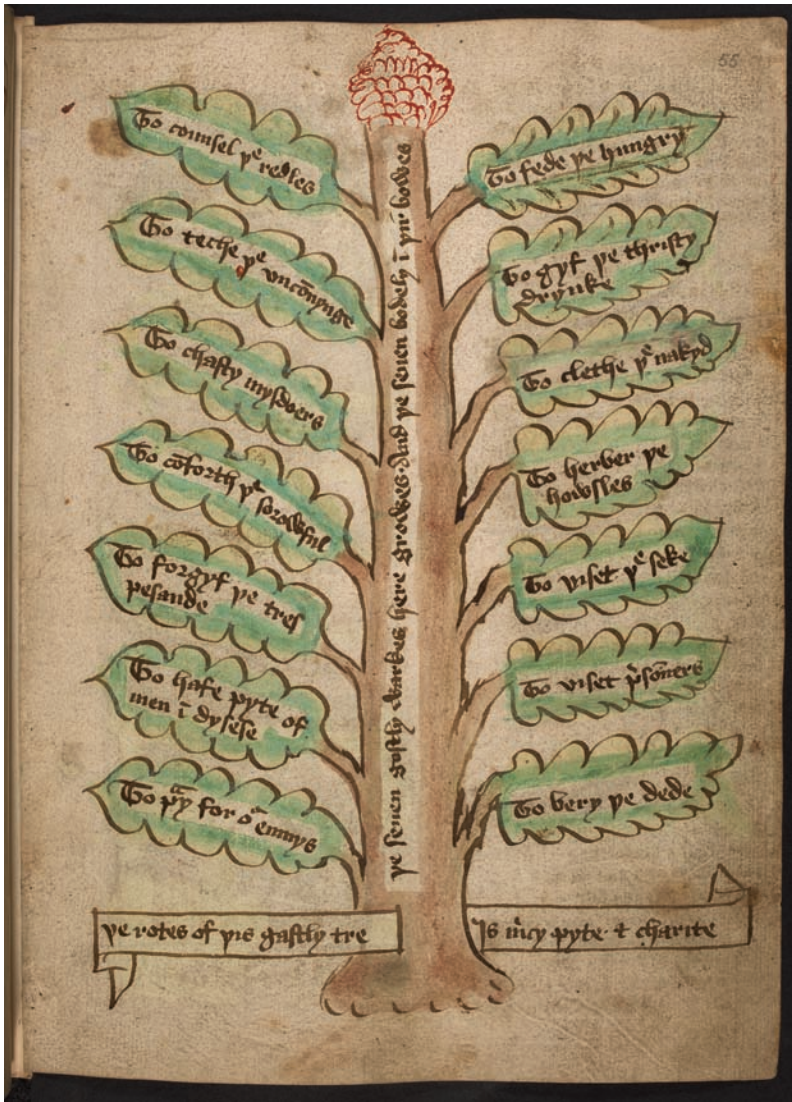


Figure 24.5 Tree, *Desert of Religion*. © British Library Board, MS Additional 37049, fol. 55r.

the praying hands of a Carthusian monk appear to touch both an enormous heart and a banderole inscribed with the word 'Contemplacion' (fol. 62v; Figure 24.7).<sup>53</sup> Connected to the monk by his praying hands, the banderole, distilling the lyric, is an agent in a conduit of embodied, multisensory prayer. A tree sprouts from the

<sup>53</sup> The *Miscellany's* text is transcribed by Brant L. Doty, 'An Edition of British Museum MS Additional 37049', PhD Thesis, Michigan State University, 1969, <https://d.lib.msu.edu/etd/25453/datastream/OBJ/view>.

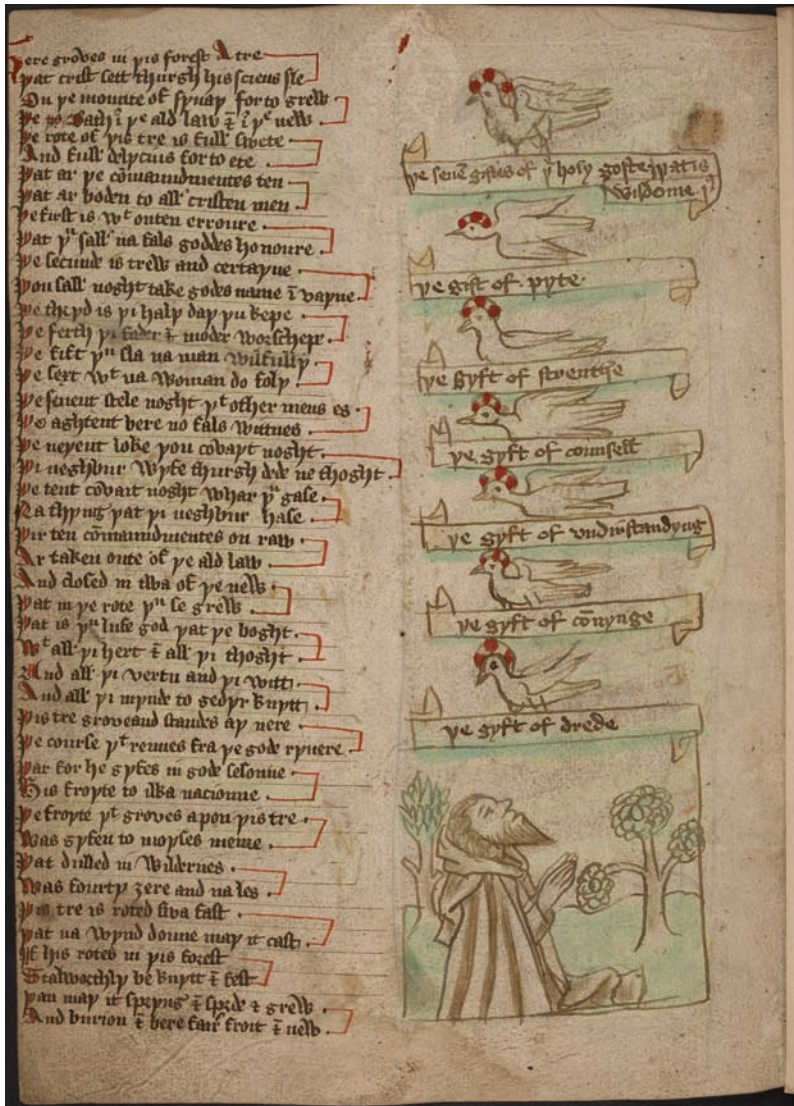


Figure 24.6 Doves and Scrolls, *Desert of Religion*. © British Library Board, MS Additional 37049, fol. 55v.

heart, reaching up to Christ as Man of Sorrows, who looks down and meets the monk's gaze. Prayer, which begins with a scroll touching the hand and the heart, grows vertically to communion with Christ.

In a far more complex rendition of a similar scheme, one of the *Miscellany's* most spectacular images, a crucifixion arbour, pictures a scroll-pierced heart, from which springs a tree that doubles as the Cross and the Holy Name, entwined with scrolls (fol. 36v; Figure 24.8). The Carthusian's prayer '[IHC] est amor meus' [Jesus is my

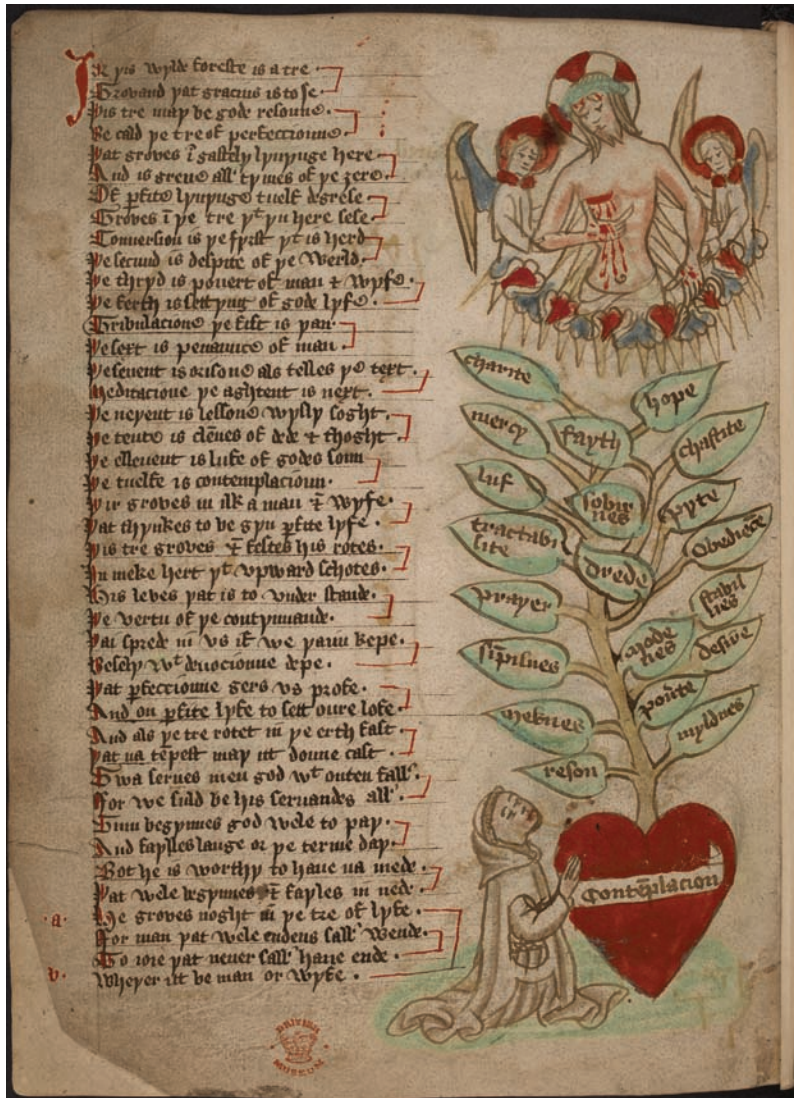


Figure 24.7 'Contemplation'. © British Library Board, MS Additional 37049, fol. 62v.

love] takes the form of a literally heart-rending scroll, with prayer somatically registering as compassion.<sup>54</sup> Written out as prose, the forty-five-line Passion lyric below the heart and monk, 'þe luf [love] of god who so will lere [learn]', begins with

<sup>54</sup> For discussion of 62v and 36v see Marlene Villalobos Hennessy, 'Aspects of Blood Piety in a Late Medieval English Manuscript: London, British Library Additional 37049', in Rachel Fulton and Bruce W. Holsinger, eds, *History in the Comic Mode: Medieval Communities and the Matter of Person* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 191–3.



Figure 24.8 Crucifixion Arbour. © British Library Board, MS Additional 37049, fol. 36v.

a prayer to Christ and then shifts into a love song for Christ through meditation on his wounds:<sup>55</sup>

Nayled is his hend*	*hand
And nayled is his fete,	
And þirled* is his syde*	*pierced *side
So seemly and so swete.	

<sup>55</sup> Indexed in Julia Boffey and A. S. G. Edwards, *A New Index of Middle English Verse* (London: British Library, 2005), #3416.

The image gives graphic life to the monk's prayer—and also to the lyric—through the scroll as flesh. Flowering into a tree, the monk's prayer is amplified, and its text ('est amor meus') completed through a scroll-wrapped crucifixion arbour, rubricated in drops of Christ's blood, that itself spells the Holy Name, IHC: IHC (Jesus) is my love, say the prayer and the heart. Scrolls not only entwine around the Holy Name but actually shape its letters, in a rich somatic palimpsest between the body and the book. Like Christ, the scrolls suffer, pierced by a spear, nail, and sponge. They are rubricated in blood. The Holy Name scroll becomes Christ's body as a book and the parchment scroll becomes an extension of his skin. In this most unusual image, the artist has captured the powerful physical registers of affective prayer, or 'flesches felunge', both love and pain. From its corner near the monk's hands to its unfurling into the Holy Name, the scroll links the monk to Christ in a literally sensational tableau.

When they contain dialogue, scrolls in the *Miscellany* commonly point to mouths and hands, often in a dynamic interchange in which they reach out as physical emanations of prayer and mystical conversation. In an image introducing an excerpt from Richard Rolle's prose epistle 'Ego dormio', two scrolls circulate between the hand of a sleeper and the hand of baby Jesus, sitting in the Virgin's lap (fol. 30v; Figure 24.9).<sup>56</sup> The sleeper (possibly meant to be Rolle himself) raises his left hand in a conventional gesture marking speech, touching a scroll whose twists seems to mime the parts of the Rolle text written on it. His scroll, 'I slepe & my hert wakes to thee / Swete Jhesu the son of Mary fre', first rises upward, grazing the sunrays encircling Jesus and Mary. The Latin opening, 'Ego dormio et cor meum vigilat' [I sleep and my heart wakes], occupies the lower part of the banderole, which curls downward toward his sleeping body.<sup>57</sup> He also holds a rolled-up scroll in his right hand, perhaps to mark him as writer—or if it is Richard Rolle, to pun on his name: Rolle, with a roll that identifies what he does, which is writing verse on rolls. The baby Jesus's scroll, 'If thou my true lufer [lover] wil be / My selfe to reward I sal gyf þe [shall give you]', a loose paraphrase drawn from parts of the Rolle text, unfurls from his two hands with visible weight and shading. At the upper left corner, the other tip of the scroll, touching the edge of the page, may speak the words of an offstage God: 'Fili probe mihi cor tuum' [Son, give me your heart, Proverbs 23:26]. Perhaps because he is a baby—or because his scroll carries the doubled words of God the Father and God the Son—Jesus needs both hands to support it.

<sup>56</sup> For the identification of Richard Rolle in this image see Brantley, *Wilderness*, 138.

<sup>57</sup> Song of Songs 5:2; this is the first line of Rolle's *Ego Dormio*. The damaged prose text below the image includes selections from Rolle. *English Writings of Richard Rolle, Hermit of Hampole*, ed. Hope Emily Allen, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1963), 61–72.



Figure 24.9 'Ego dormio'. © British Library Board, MS Additional 37049, fol. 30v.

Scrolls also attach not just to hands but even polymorphously to other body parts. Animating a *Debate for the Soul* in one of the *Miscellany's* robustly dramatic pages, scrolls attach differentially to parts of the body and push each other around the page (fol. 19r; Figure 24.10). With the pointing finger of his right hand signifying his conventional *declamatio*, God speaks to his son on the Cross: 'Son, als þou byddes sal [ask shall] al be / No thing sal [shall] I denye þe', in a banderole emanating from his hand. Jesus on the Cross, one hand nailed and the other showing his wound, speaks his intercessory prayer to God from



Figure 24.10 Debate for a Soul. © British Library Board, MS Additional 37049, fol. 19r.

his mouth ('I pray þe fader graunt þi son ffor my sake my moder bone [prayer]'). Scrolls containing prayers from other figures also propel the scene's deathbed drama. The prayer from the angel at the head of the deathbed floats straight up above the Cross, parallel with Christ's prayer, while the prayer from the demon at the bed's foot is short and shoved off to the side. The scroll containing the soul's prayer to the Virgin ('O hope in need þou help me, God's moder I pray to þe')

not only reaches toward her but even makes contact with her scroll, deflecting it upwards toward the dove and God. Or is it that her scroll pushes the soul's scroll upward? However we are to read them, the two scrolls mutually support each other, both physically and textually. And in the page's most unusual speech annotation, the Virgin, the second largest figure in the scene, makes her intercessory prayers to her son directly from her breast. Her breast speaks: 'For this þu sowke [sucked] in þy childhede; son forgyf hym his mysdede.' One tip of her scroll appears to emanate from her nipple—or at least graze it as it connects to her right hand, which supports the scroll. The other tip of her scroll points to and seems to propel forward, in a lactational speech act, the Trinitarian dove emerging from the clouds and winging toward God. Discussing this page, Brantley describes it as an imagetext or—given the high volume devoted to text—a 'textimage' that demands diffuse, non-linear reading.<sup>58</sup> Prayer is physically intercessional, the page's mobile scrolls propelling speech acts from the corpse (whose speech scroll below him has unfortunately been lost to damage), between the Virgin, Christ, and God on his throne. It is ultimately unclear who has the final say: Christ? Mary? God? It seems to be a drama, perhaps even comic, of mutual deference. Speech scrolls, both volatile and material, fill the ether with clamour.

And also, perhaps, with skin. Although paper accounted for 60 per cent of books produced in England between 1450 and 1500, according to a recent study, illumination and elaborate illustration remained associated with parchment, not paper.<sup>59</sup> It seems likely that, even drawn in a paper manuscript like the *Carthusian Miscellany*, speech scrolls would have conjured text written on parchment, not paper. That is, even as the illustrator of Additional 37049 drew the images on paper pages, he or she imagined the scrolls as parchment banderoles. If so, in the *Debate Between Body and Soul* the banderoles, like the *Miscellany's* many other speech scrolls, fill the air with skin—parchment on parchment, parchment on the human body. In Annunciation images, scrolls in a scene that promises the Word made flesh are logically parchment, Christ's body becoming the Book through the Virgin's body. In the *Miscellany's Debate Between Body and Soul*, their astonishing vivacity may even comment, however ironically, on their deathbed work, ferrying prayers for the soul on scraps of flesh. Clearly the scrolls are understood as parchment in the *Miscellany's* Holy Name illustration, wrapping Christ's name with a scroll that is also Christ's own bleeding skin.

<sup>58</sup> A feature of medieval reading noted by many scholars, including Smith, *Book*, 168, 136–7; for the relationship of this scene to possible exemplars in British Library MS Cotton Faustina B.VI (Pt. II), fol. 2r and British Library MS Stowe 39, fol. 33v, see Brantley, *Wilderness*, 89–94.

<sup>59</sup> Orietta Da Rold, *Paper in Medieval England: From Pulp to Fictions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 177–8.



Of whatever material the reader imagines them to be made, parchment or paper, scrolls have agency. If the *Miscellany* can be read as a performative text, its scrolls not only cue speech but also act themselves. They float about the page with their prayers, some of which compete and some of which amplify each other. In the images from the *Miscellany* that I have looked at in this chapter, banderoles wrap, pierce, bleed, touch, and even nourish. As in the *Beaufort/Beauchamp* Annunciation, they have weight and mass, along with sinuous directionality. Above all, these speech scrolls, circulating physically as ‘fleshes felynge’, are multisensory prayers engaging sight, sound, and touch. In some instances, obviously, a banderole, held in the hand, serves just as stylized annotation marking speech. But in other contexts, as these images so actively demonstrate, banderoles do far more. Inscribed inside and animating a banderole, speech and prayers can become the touch of the hand itself.

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MULTISENSORY  
 ENTANGLEMENTS IN EDWIDGE  
 DANTICAT'S *CLAIRE OF THE SEA  
 LIGHT* AND CHIMAMANDA  
 NGOZI ADICHIE'S  
*PURPLE HIBISCUS*

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For Maurice Merleau-Ponty, multisensory perception lies at the heart of all human experience. 'This synthesis', he writes in *Phenomenology of Perception*, 'cannot be understood as the subsumption of the senses beneath an originary consciousness, but rather through their never completed integration into a single knowing organism.'<sup>1</sup> Sensory integration, here, suggests a blurring of the boundaries between visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, and tactile appearances. What is more, it grounds thought in the body, one always already situated inside a particular environment, always already intentional. Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of perception is especially relevant at a time when neuroscientific research reinforces the ambiguous boundaries and transformative linkages between the senses. The body of scholarship that has emerged offers insights into the receptive fields of multisensory neurons and the spatial and temporal principles that govern the integration of multiple sensory cues.<sup>2</sup> Bringing this research into a productive relation with the ways in which literature has inscribed multisensory perception, I turn to Edwidge Danticat's *Claire of the Sea Light* and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*

<sup>1</sup> Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Donald A. Landes (London: Routledge, 2012), 242–3.

<sup>2</sup> See Barry E. Stein, Terrence R. Stanford, and Benjamin A. Rowland, 'Multisensory Integration and the Society for Neuroscience: Then and Now', *Journal of Neuroscience* 40, no. 1 (January 2020), 3–11.

to engage with sensory experiences through an ecocritical prism. I will show how Danticat's and Adichie's renderings of the landscape, in particular the vegetal world—one Haitian, the other Nigerian—help destabilize culturally mediated understandings of the senses and foreground the biotic contours of perception. Conceiving of perception as what we might call an ecological phenomenon, I argue, offers grounds for an ethics of relationality that requires a recalibration of the conceptions of the body and its sensory engagement with the world. It suggests a multisensoriality in the sense of a sensory simultaneity that allows for intersensorial interactions, that is, the cooperation between different sensory modalities, to occur.<sup>3</sup>

Set in the fictional coastal town of Ville Rose in Haiti, Danticat's *Claire of the Sea Light* opens with Nozia, a fisherman and father of the title character Claire, witnessing 'a freak wave, measuring between ten and twelve feet high' claiming the life of Caleb, another of the town's fishermen.<sup>4</sup> Suggesting the ocean's capacity simultaneously to give and take life, the scene invokes the interconnectedness of life and death embodied even more powerfully in Claire, whose mother died giving birth to her. Moreover, it fathoms the violence of transoceanic slavery and the memory of the drowned lives that mark ocean history. As the passage develops, the emphasis moves away from the mere sight of the colossal wave towards Nozia's multisensory experience of this traumatic event: 'He first heard a low rumbling, like that of distant thunder, then saw a wall of water rise from the depths of the ocean, a giant blue-green tongue, trying, it seemed, to lick a pink sky.'<sup>5</sup> Danticat's depiction of the event exemplifies the ways in which, following Michel Serres, '[the] five or six senses are entwined and attached, above and below the fabric that they form by weaving or splicing, plaits, balls, joins, planes, loops and bindings, slip or fixed knots.'<sup>6</sup> It implicates the senses of taste, smell, and touch through the image of a 'blue-green tongue' rolling, folding, 'trying to lick a pink sky': the focal object of the senses in this particular scene.

Reading *Claire of the Sea Light* feels at times as if losing oneself in the object of a particular sense. In a flashback to Gaëlle's pregnancy years before Nozia would try to convince the wealthy fabric vendor to adopt his daughter, we learn of her fascination with the carcasses of frogs that have exploded due to extreme heat: 'After one sleepless night during which she'd been haunted by visions of frog carcasses slithering into her mouth and down her throat,' she began performing 'a wordless burial for a handful of frog skins' until one day, she picked up a frog,

<sup>3</sup> See David Howes, 'The Expanding Field of Sensory Studies,' *Sensory Studies* (August 2013), <http://www.sensorystudies.org/sensorial-investigations/the-expanding-field-of-sensory-studies/>.

<sup>4</sup> Edwidge Danticat, *Claire of the Sea Light* (New York: Knopf, 2013), 3.

<sup>5</sup> Danticat, *Claire of the Sea Light*, 3.

<sup>6</sup> Michel Serres, *The Five Senses: A Philosophy of Mingled Bodies*, trans. Margaret Sankey and Peter Cowley (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 60.

slapping the ants away. They scattered madly, while others crawled up and down her arms, stinging her. The ants must have not been there for long, because the koki was still whole, its interior organs, which she could spy through its sheer skin, intact. Without thinking, she wiped a warm mist from her face and stuffed the koki into her mouth. The frog stank of mold and decay and was slippery as it landed on her tongue. And though the koki was dead, she imagined it struggling as she pushed back her head and allowed it to reach her throat.<sup>7</sup>

It is not the frog's 'bitter taste' or even the thought of swallowing a dead creature, I argue, that renders this scene so disturbing but, rather, a multisensorial encounter with death—seeing the carcass's interior organs, touching its sheer skin, and smelling its mould and decay.<sup>8</sup> Occluding the conceptual and abstract in favour of the bodily and concrete, the sensory mingling of bodies and materials foregrounds the physicality of death as evident in Claire's mother, also named Claire, washing and dressing the dead at a funeral parlour:

[Nozia] had grown used to the dead being part of her life. Because she had touched so many corpses, some of their friends and neighbors wouldn't even allow her to shake their hands or wouldn't eat the food she cooked. But he was happy to live with all of that, if it meant living with her. Sometimes he could even smell the dead on her, in the embalming fluids and disinfectant. The hands that stroked the faces of the dead stroked his. He ate from those hands. He kissed them. He loved them.<sup>9</sup>

Claire's work counters the slow progression in human cognition from the immediate and the sensory to the abstract.<sup>10</sup> Within the walls of the funeral parlour, Claire has intimate contact with the dead mourned by people who dread the touch of Claire's hands emitting 'the smell of death, covered by fragrances intended to mask it.'<sup>11</sup> Claire's relationship with the dead goes beyond care and compassion, suggesting a stance toward the world characterized by the promise of life and growth in the face of death and loss. As we learn near the end of the novel, she shares the news of her pregnancy with Nozia inside the funeral parlour, 'as if life had sprung up to embrace him, even in this place of death.'<sup>12</sup>

Enmeshed with, rather than opposed to, life, death in *Claire of the Sea Light* invokes the intricacies of vegetal life and death—the withering of leaves and rotting of roots being 'ecological occurrences central to the regeneration of biospheric

<sup>7</sup> Danticat, *Claire of the Sea Light*, 41, 43, 58.

<sup>8</sup> Danticat, *Claire of the Sea Light*, 59.

<sup>9</sup> Danticat, *Claire of the Sea Light*, 208.

<sup>10</sup> In a similar fashion, Adichie renders emotional states in terms of embodied sensations—from happiness filling one's mouth with 'melting sugar' (25) to fear 'clutching itself around [one's] ankles' (173), '[coming] in different flavors and colors' (196). What is more, sensation often suggests sensory minglings, as when 'eyes seem a deeper golden, like extra-sweet honey' (96), silence 'was heavy but comfortable, like a well-worn, prickly cardigan on a bitter morning' (69), and lightness is experienced as 'sweetness of an overripe bright yellow cashew fruit' (180). See Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 2012).

<sup>11</sup> Danticat, *Claire of the Sea Light*, 29.

<sup>12</sup> Danticat, *Claire of the Sea Light*, 209.

systems and the proliferation of obligate species.<sup>13</sup> Both *Claire of the Sea Light* and *Purple Hibiscus* depict the vegetal world as more than an aesthetically pleasing backdrop to human action and events. Rather, they narrativize human–flora entanglements on multiple levels. Danticat’s fictional town of Ville Rose, for instance, ‘had a flower-shaped perimeter that, from the mountains, looked like the unfurling petals of a massive tropical rose, so the major road connecting the town to the sea became the stem...with its many alleys and capillaries being called épines, or thorns.’<sup>14</sup> Broadening the unidimensionality of a floral symbolism that invokes the inhabitants’ experience of both beauty and pain, I take this passage as a first clue to an understanding of the human world as sharing actual properties with botanical being. The shape of the town, like that of a petal, is spread out, thin and flat, to provide maximum exposure to the sun; its major road brings commerce, culture, and people just like a stem brings in as much moisture, air, and light as possible. Allusions to the characters’ exposure to the elements—sunlight, moisture, air—abound in both novels. From ‘sundried skin the color and texture of groundnut husks’ to ‘skin, usually the smooth brown of groundnut paste, [looking] like the liquid had been sucked out of it, ashen, like the color of cracked harmattan soil,’ Adichie’s references to the characters’ skin implicitly acknowledge what it means to be either exposed to or deprived of these elements.<sup>15</sup> *Claire of the Sea Light*, similarly, invokes an exposure to the elements in Nozia’s ‘sun- and sea-air-battered ebony skin’ and Claire’s ‘gait sluggish in the afternoon sun.’<sup>16</sup> Here, the risk and danger of being exposed to the elements is even more pronounced against the backdrop of a community that had previously been perched alongside stretches of fertile land and water resources and now faces a disappearing seabed with sea grass ‘buried under silt and trash,’ rivers ‘swelling in response to the lack of trees, the land erosion, the dying topsoil’ and ‘hotter-than-usual weather.’<sup>17</sup> “‘It’s terrible,” Claire Narcis declared...“With all the heat and rain this year, we’ll either melt or be washed away.”<sup>18</sup> ‘Like the leaves of plants,’ following Michael Marder, ‘our skin senses humidity and temperature, light gradients and vibrations... [keeping] our living bodies intact and, at the same time, [communicating] with whatever lies beyond them.’<sup>19</sup> To discover oneself in the plant world, as Marder has argued, is to become aware of our breathing ‘through the pores in our skin... this more vegetal mode of respiration.’<sup>20</sup> To adopt what Marder has called vegetal mindfulness entails a being-together with air, moisture, soil, warmth, and sunlight.

<sup>13</sup> John Charles Ryan, *Plants in Contemporary Poetry: Ecocriticism and the Botanical Imagination* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 191.

<sup>14</sup> Danticat, *Claire of the Sea Light*, 5.

<sup>15</sup> Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus*, 91, 29.

<sup>16</sup> Danticat, *Claire of the Sea Light*, 12, 27.

<sup>17</sup> Danticat, *Claire of the Sea Light*, 9, 51, 53.

<sup>18</sup> Danticat, *Claire of the Sea Light*, 52.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Marder and Luce Irigaray, *Through Vegetal Being: Two Philosophical Perspectives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 186.

<sup>20</sup> Marder and Irigaray, *Through Vegetal Being*, 154.

*Claire of the Sea Light* and *Purple Hibiscus* invoke the idea of a non-verbal, ecological, and corporeal voice as the manifestation of vegetal mindfulness through the human capacities for smell, taste, touch, and proprioception, the sense that lets us perceive the location, movement, and action of parts of the body. For one, many of the novels' characters serve, like plants, as conduits for embodiment in terms of scent: Gaëlle 'smelled like gardenias', Kambili, the 15-year-old protagonist in *Purple Hibiscus*, enjoys '[plucking] off yellow allamanda flowers, still wet, and [sliding] them over [her] fingers', which was 'like wearing a scented glove', and Father Amadi, the progressive young priest Kambili adores, would signal his arrivals 'in a whiff of an earthy cologne'.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, characters tend to indulge in the pleasures and discomforts of the senses as when Gaëlle, watching girls play on the beach after spending time at a bar surrounded by men,

wanted to grab a little girl and hold her in her arms, just to inhale her smell, the smell that [the] men lacked. Their smells were musty: they smelled of roads and dust and cologne that never quite covered their musk. They smelled of work, of sweat, of other women. But little girls smelled of roses and wet leaves, of talcum powder, and the dew.<sup>22</sup>

With sensory articulation lying not in semantic units that we string together in speech but in material living expression, Kambili's way of communicating with Father Amadi highlights a shift from speech to sound and physical gesture. As we learn, Father Amadi would speak 'so effortlessly, as if his mouth were a musical instrument that just let sound out when touched, when opened'.<sup>23</sup> Speech here suggests an intercorporeal encounter based in touch and spatial movement. What is more, Adichie's comparison of Father Amadi's mouth to a musical instrument is indicative of an understanding of language not as transcendent or abstracted but as immanent and embodied. As David Haskell lyrically puts it in his exploration of early music-making, '[fingertips] brush, press, and slide along strings. Cellos stir the skin and muscles of inner thighs... Lungs cry out through trembling lips, their agitations shaped and amplified by brass coils soaked through on the inside with the moisture of human breath.' Moreover, Haskell reminds us of the emergence of instruments in precolonial times when 'the air comes alive with the sounds of vibrating plant and animal parts, the voices of forests and fields reanimated through human art'. With precolonial instruments grounded in local soils and materials, human music-making not only was a responsive and embodied practice but consisted of multisensory human-plant encounters: 'Clay, shaped then fired, turns human breath and lip vibrations into amplified tones. Rocks turned to bells and strings reveal metallurgical connections to land. Plant matter is given voice in carved wood, stretched palm frond, and spun fiber.'<sup>24</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Danticat, *Claire of the Sea Light*, 39; Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus*, 267, 135.

<sup>22</sup> Danticat, *Claire of the Sea Light*, 158. <sup>23</sup> Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus*, 137-8.

<sup>24</sup> David Haskell, *Sounds Wild and Broken: Sonic Marvels, Evolution's Creativity, and the Crisis of Sensory Extinction* (London: Penguin General, 2022), 251, 243, 241-2.

The integration of the senses constitutes a participatory approach to the natural environment in which ‘to hear plants speak’, following Marder, ‘we must learn to listen to the lacunae and silences of language.’<sup>25</sup> The silence pervading *Purple Hibiscus* offers a focal point for exploring ‘an articulation without saying.’<sup>26</sup> Kambili, her mother Beatrice, and her brother Jaja shy away from confronting Eugene, the family’s tyrannical patriarch combining ‘anxious, overbearing masculinity with absolutist religion.’<sup>27</sup> All their pain and distress visibly traceable in swollen eyes, burned feet, and trails of blood on the floor have been quietened under a blanket of abuse. And yet, leaving us with a gaping dark hole that stutters, coughs, and chokes, Kambili’s voice suggests a visceral presence that consistently vibrates in its possibility. While the ‘voice as messenger is eroded of its semantic meaning as it speaks’, in Salomé Voegelin’s words, it ‘is rendered its own flesh, dissected, infested, rolled around on the listener’s tongue.’<sup>28</sup> It is this sense of the imminent that invites the reader into a multisensory practice of attention where silence turns into embodied sound—from the palm of Eugene’s hand on Jaja’s face sounding ‘like a heavy book falling from a library shelf’ to the belt on Kambili’s back ‘making clucking sounds’ of Fulani nomads ‘[herding] their cows . . . with a switch, each smack of the switch swift and precise.’<sup>29</sup>

Just as Kambili’s silence is not a mere sonic backdrop to the family drama that unfolds, so depictions of vegetal being in *Purple Hibiscus* suggest not merely picturesque scenery, expendable foodstuff, or tropes for human longing but presences, bodies, and sensory entanglements. Consider Adichie’s description of a family gathering around food, relying on the family’s domestic servant Sisi, and one of many instances in the novel that reflect the immediacy of the characters’ sensory transactions with plants:

Lunch was fufu and onugbu soup. The fufu was smooth and fluffy. Sisi made it well; she pounded the yam energetically, adding drops of water into the mortar, her cheeks contracting with the *thump-thump-thump* of the pestle. The soup was thick with chunks of boiled beef and dried fish and dark green onugbu leaves. We ate silently. I molded my fufu into small balls with my fingers, dipped it in the soup, making sure to scoop up fish chunks, and then brought it to my mouth. I was certain the soup was good, but I did not taste it, could not taste it. My tongue felt like paper.<sup>30</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Michael Marder, ‘To Hear Plants Speak’, in Monica Gagliano, John C. Ryan, and Patrícia Vieira, eds, *The Language of Plants: Science, Philosophy, Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 103–25 (105).

<sup>26</sup> Michael Marder, ‘To Hear Plants Speak’, 119.

<sup>27</sup> Cheryl Stobie, ‘Gendered Bodies in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus*’, in Bill Ashcroft, Ranjini Mendis, Julie McGonegal, and Arun Mukherjee, eds, *Literature for Our Times: Postcolonial Studies in the Twenty-First Century* (Amsterdam: Brill, 2012), 325–44 (309).

<sup>28</sup> Salomé Voegelin, *Listening to Noise and Silence: Towards a Philosophy of Sound Art* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), 37.

<sup>29</sup> Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus*, 68, 102.

<sup>30</sup> Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus*, 11–12.



On one level, the passage illustrates Kambili's inability to engage with, let alone be nourished by, the vegetal life surrounding her. Throughout the novel, she struggles to take in what plants have to offer, from their bodies—'The boiled yam and peppery greens refused to go down [her] throat—to the oxygen they produce: she often feels suffocated. Inhibited and controlled, moulded and tamed to fit her father's expectations, her own body approximates the purple bougainvillea 'cut smooth and straight as a buffet table', grown for its aesthetic, decorative appeal.<sup>31</sup> On another level, passages like these render cooking, especially the handling of fresh produce, as an embodied skill with hands peeling, pounding, and shaping fruits and vegetables. Familiar with and highly sensitive to the texture and other physical properties as well as the chemical consistency of the yams, Sisi's hands seem to grasp the yams in the exact way they afford to be grasped. Here, the preparation of food becomes an act of collaboration between cook and plant. Peeling yams properly may seem effortless to someone like Kambili's cousin Amaka, who 'picked up the knife and started to peel a slice, letting only the brown skin go... the measured movement of her hand' making sure that 'the peel did not break, a continuous twirling soil-studded ribbon.'<sup>32</sup> The peel thus pulls Amaka's hands into its spiralling motions, joining the human will to that of plants and producing a knowledge that influences human actions. By contrast, the handling of cocoyams may pose challenges to a novice like Kambili:

The skins seemed to slip off easily enough for Auntie Ifeoma, but when I pressed one end of a tuber, the rough brown skin stayed put and the heat stung my palms... I watched her pound the cocoyams, dipping the pestle often into the bowl of water so the cocoyam wouldn't stick too much to it. Still, the sticky white mash clung to the pestle, to the mortar, to Auntie Ifeoma's hand. She was pleased, though, because it would thicken the onugbu soup well.<sup>33</sup>

The soup's desired consistency is, therefore, the result of a porous, immersive, and multisensory mode of contact where plants are embodied agents negotiating their environments.

Fostering an immersive connection to plants, the garden tended by Kambili's aunt Ifeoma forms the centrepiece in the characters' increasing bodily attunement to the vegetal world. The following passage describes Kambili's experiences in the garden as she watches her brother and cousin interacting with the natural surroundings:

It had rained all night. Jaja was kneeling in the garden, weeding. He did not have to water anymore because the sky did it... I took a deep breath and held it, to savor the smell of green leaves washed clean by rain... The allamanda bushes bordering the garden bloomed heavily with yellow, cylindrical flowers. Chima was pulling the flowers

<sup>31</sup> Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus*, 40–1, 8.

<sup>32</sup> Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus*, 134.

<sup>33</sup> Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus*, 165.

down and sticking his fingers in them, one after the other. I watched as he examined flower after flower, looking for a suitable small bloom that would fit onto his pinky.<sup>34</sup>

Weeding, savouring the smell of green leaves, making fingers disappear into floral cylinders—Kambili, Jaja, and Chima become bodily implicated in the vegetal world. They touch it, they smell it, they move within it. Everything including that which is conventionally understood as a medium—like the air—is bound up in processes of touching and proximity. One entity touches upon, constitutes, and is constituted by the other. Kambili's impulse as she takes in the 'smell of freshness in the air, that edible scent the baked soil gave out at the first touch of rain,' to '[dig] out a clump of mud with [her] fingers and [eat] it' epitomizes a human longing to bond with the nonhuman world that continually bestows upon us the necessities and pleasures of life.<sup>35</sup> This bond, as Marder would argue, 'is not cemented by a common essence, but emerges from shared life, understood based on its vegetal determination as growth.'<sup>36</sup> It describes an enmeshment that is not a merging but a participatory mode of interacting, or what Merleau-Ponty has called 'intentionality', a responsiveness in direct engagement with the world suggesting, beyond bodily capacities and dispositions, ways of 'being in the world'.<sup>37</sup>

Extending beyond human–plant encounters, Adichie's and Danticat's portrayals of characters resemble those of plants that articulate themselves spatially, materially, and sensuously as an expression of their ecological situatedness. The affinity between human and plant bodies is apparent in Kambili's portrayal of Papa-Nnukwu, her paternal grandfather and 'traditionalist' rooted in Nigeria's Igbo culture and traditions: of a 'soil-colored complexion',

his entire body, like the bark of the gnarled gmelina tree in our yard, captured the gold shadows from the lamp flame in its many furrows and ridges... Between his legs hung a limp cocoon that seemed smoother, free from the wrinkles that crisscrossed the rest of his body... His nipples were like dark raisins.<sup>38</sup>

Under the lamp's flickering flame, Papa-Nnukwu's different body parts appear as animate matter as Kambili begins to map his human body onto the natural world: skin becoming bark, the human metamorphosing into the vegetal. Rooted in the earth, Papa-Nnukwu's body, like the body of a plant, reaches towards the airy expanse of the sky, absorbing the heat of the sun and the humidity that the rains bring. While Adichie's portrayal of Papa-Nnukwu bears witness to the potential of an elemental origin, Danticat makes the connection between human and plant bodies even more explicit in Gaëlle's impressions of Claire's mother during her husband's funeral:

<sup>34</sup> Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus*, 224. <sup>35</sup> Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus*, 217–18.

<sup>36</sup> Marder and Irigaray, *Through Vegetal Being*, 208.

<sup>37</sup> Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 81.

<sup>38</sup> Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus*, 80, 64, 168.

That morning, it seemed that Claire Narcis and the weeping willow had become one. Claire's body seemed indistinguishable from the small part of the willow's trunk that was not covered by its drooping branches. Claire's head was topped by the willow's golden crown. Claire Narcis had seemed that morning to be a dazzling mirage, a veil between the dirt being piled on her husband's coffin and the wailing baby waiting at home. And Claire's presence at the cemetery gate, and the surprising way it had both jolted and comforted her, was one of the reasons she'd agreed to nurse Claire's daughter when she was newly born, and one of the many reasons she could honestly call the girl's mother her friend.<sup>39</sup>

Notwithstanding its appearance as a 'dazzling mirage', Claire's body—'indistinguishable' from parts of the willow's trunk, her head 'topped by the willow's golden crown'—resists a botanical imagination of disembodied, transcendent reverie. It does so by attending to the human body's ecological situatedness and permeability resistive of firmly individuated subjectivity. Here, clues to Claire's character may lie less in the willow's symbolic associations with death and mourning than in its ecological sensibilities: '[growing] in tidy knee-high mounds, smooth edged, seeming to flow through swales and to fill small basins, clinging to the lowest, wettest parts of the terrain ... [its] stems and leaves ... fuzzy'.<sup>40</sup>

*Purple Hibiscus* figures human bodies as plant analogues at numerous occasions—from a smiling face 'breaking open like a coconut with the brilliant white meat inside' and 'teeth flashing like the insides of a cracked palm kernel' to a laughing, staggering, 'tall body bending like a whistling pine tree on a windy day'.<sup>41</sup> The novel reveals the congruencies between human and botanical bodies most powerfully in Jaja's fate of opening up to the world during the time he spends gardening under his aunt's care and later being imprisoned for allegedly killing his father. While working on his knees in his aunt's garden, 'the muscles on his back rippled, smooth and long like the ridges he weeded', and his 'shoulders seemed broader', making Kambili wonder 'if it was possible for a teenager's shoulders to broaden' within the span of the week he spent gardening.<sup>42</sup> His immersive, sensory engagement with the natural world, too, makes him forget about his maimed finger, a consequence of his father's violence impairing his son's senses.<sup>43</sup> By contrast, within the bleak walls of the prison compound, deprived of fresh air, sunlight, and human touch, his 'shoulders that bloomed in Nsukka, that grew wide and capable, have sagged', his skin is 'covered with scabs that look dry', and his eyes have 'hardened ... like the bark of a palm tree, unyielding'.<sup>44</sup> Severed from the elements and vegetal surroundings that

<sup>39</sup> Danticat, *Claire of the Sea Light*, 162.

<sup>40</sup> Haskell, *Sounds Wild and Broken*, 144.

<sup>41</sup> Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus*, 24, 99, 124.

<sup>42</sup> Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus*, 143, 154.

<sup>43</sup> Stobie, 'Gendered Bodies in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*', 315. Stobie's analysis of Eugene's intolerance of women's biological functions and references to imagery that figures Eugene as human and his wife and daughter as animals aligns with a resistance to break away from dominant Western articulations of the human/nature binary.

<sup>44</sup> Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus*, 299, 304, 305.

contributed to the awakening of all his senses, his flourishing turns into a withering. Father Amadi's advice for Kambili gains particular significance in the context of her brother's imprisonment. 'You should have learned the art of questioning from Amaka,' he tells her, following up with questions that touch upon the very principle that plants stand for, the principle of a material living expression: 'Why does the tree's shoot go up and the root down? Why is there a sky? What is life?'<sup>45</sup> As if knowing the answers to Father Amadi's questions, Kambili anticipates Jaja's renewed flourishing once he is released and able to reimmerge himself in an environment that fosters growth and a sense of belonging: 'We'll plant new orange trees... and Jaja will plant purple hibiscus, too, and I'll plant ixora so we can suck the juices of the flowers.'<sup>46</sup> Kambili says those things as she looks up to the clouds that 'hang low,' making her feel as if she 'can reach out and squeeze the moisture from them.'<sup>47</sup> In light of Kambili's hope rooted in the blossoming of our natural belonging, Ifeoma's experimental hybrid purple blooms—'rare, fragrant with the undertones of freedom,' a 'freedom to be, to do'—invite us to rethink the human and the vegetal along the lines of both corporeal interdependence and transformative possibility.<sup>48</sup>

If the vegetal world in *Purple Hibiscus* 'teaches us that we cannot continue being alive without becoming,' without branching out in all directions, *Claire of the Sea Light* renders its lessons even more explicit.<sup>49</sup> Interwoven with all four elements—rooted in the soil, absorbing heat, light, and moisture, and enriching the atmosphere with oxygen—plants express themselves spatially and relationally, forging connections that are 'nothing short of the language of life itself.'<sup>50</sup> This 'articulation without saying' is something that Claire embraces. As she states, '[s]ometimes she wished people, especially adults, were trees. If only trees could move. With trees, you'd have to be the one who moved around them... Yet most people thought they were smarter than trees because they could talk. But talking wasn't everything.'<sup>51</sup> If 'talking wasn't everything,' what is it, then, that matters? What exactly does Claire long for in her wish for people to be trees? In *Claire of the Sea Light*, a tree's self-expression or 'language' suggests neither the figure of 'talking trees' traversing different cultures and tending to conflate speech with vocalization nor biochemical, electrical, and other kinds of signals central to scientific understandings of the vegetal world. It does not even suggest the language spoken by Josephine, 'the smartest person [Claire] knew,' who 'had no voice, so she made up a new language with her hands. It was a more direct language than the one the other adults spoke.'<sup>52</sup> Rather, I argue, it invokes a language that requires us to refrain from imposing a human semantic form onto the sounds that plants emit and, instead, to distill

<sup>45</sup> Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus*, 178.

<sup>46</sup> Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus*, 306.

<sup>47</sup> Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus*, 306.

<sup>48</sup> Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus*, 15.

<sup>49</sup> Luce Irigaray, 'What the Vegetal World Says to Us,' in Gagliano, Ryan, and Vieira, eds, *The Language of Plants*, 126–35 (128).

<sup>50</sup> Marder, 'To Hear Plants Speak,' 120.

<sup>51</sup> Danticat, *Claire of the Sea Light*, 213–14.

<sup>52</sup> Danticat, *Claire of the Sea Light*, 214.

meaningful signs by attending to them in the places of their growth. In other words, it requires us to ‘acknowledge the untranslatable and the indiscernible, what cannot be picked up by the human ear and what exceeds our every interpretative venture, oriented toward the communication (if not the communion) of plants and the elements.’<sup>53</sup> Claire’s frequent dreams about the day she was born, the moment when the ‘echo of the heart that had been thumping so loudly above her head would stop’, signal an awareness of experiences that resist a reduction to stories where ‘everything was organized a certain way; everything was neat’—stories meant to contain what is steeped in confusion and ambiguity.<sup>54</sup>

Danticat’s darkly lyrical depiction of a rape scene provides a basis for thinking about voice as the spatial and material articulation of that which exceeds our interpretive grasp. The depiction of a hailstorm, with ‘ice balls . . . pounding the roof’, frames the moment when Max Junior, an affluent Haitian expat, sexually assaults Flore, the family’s cook:

As he pulled her night slip up toward her chest, she thought she saw a few drops of rain in a corner of the room, sliding down the walls from the ceiling. Maybe the roof had been damaged in the hailstorm. And if the roof were damaged, then she was no safer inside than she would be outside. When he left the room – was it some minutes or hours or days later? – the rain was still falling, though not as heavily as before.<sup>55</sup>

The scene eludes evocations of injury or emotional shock. And yet, signs of trauma are noticeable in Flore’s seeming lack of temporal awareness, as if the event had taken life and consciousness out of her for the time it must have unfolded. Never grasped in the present, the violence of the traumatic event emerges belatedly by means of various ecological idioms:

She walked out into the courtyard rose garden . . . raising her face to the sky. The wind rattled her, her body soaked . . . The rain kept on falling with a persistence that made it seem it would last forever. Slipping back under her blanket, she felt the torment of the fabric scraping her skin. She could still feel the danger brewing both inside and outside the house, the scorched smell of lightning cracking open the surrounding palms and the echoes of swelling waves meeting the seashore . . . She felt a stabbing pain in places where he had pummeled his body against hers. She had used all her weight to try to push him off of her, but could not. She had tried to slap his hands off of her, as though they were cloying animals, leeches or a jellyfish. He still had not spoken, was not making any sounds. He had been swimming earlier that evening and still smelled like the sea. The house had rocked as his entire body covered hers, but the house had shaken before, during other storms. What was new was the water coming up so fast, with fire ants, which meant that it was coming down from deep inside the mountains and the hills, and not the sea. She smelled rum on his breath. She gasped for her own breath . . . A hummingbird flew over the pummeled rosebushes, and Max Junior raised his fingers, as if to grab the minute wings. [Max Junior and his father] looked solemn and

<sup>53</sup> Marder, ‘To Hear Plants Speak’, 115.

<sup>54</sup> Danticat, *Claire of the Sea Light*, 211, 213.

<sup>55</sup> Danticat, *Claire of the Sea Light*, 166, 168.

stone-faced, their eyes focused on the hail-crushed flowers, as they inspected the storm damage.<sup>56</sup>

Facing the sky in the aftermath of the event—‘rattled’ by the wind, her ‘body soaked’—Flore becomes aware of the symptoms of an injury that was itself not witnessed: ‘the torment of the fabric scraping her skin,’ ‘stabbing pain in places where he had pummeled his body against hers.’ Haunted by Max Junior’s silence and his smell of rum and the sea, she viscerally relives the moment when she tried to ‘slap his hands off of her, as though they were cloying animals, leeches or a jellyfish.’ What is more, sensations and flashbacks mingle with ecological manifestations of the bodily transgression, externalizing the physical pain and inner turmoil: ‘She could still feel the danger brewing both inside and outside the house, the scorched smell of lightning cracking open the surrounding palms and the echoes of swelling waves meeting the seashore.’ The trauma is thus embedded not only in her own, individuated body but also in the bodies of land and sea. Insofar as ‘[the] individual, the community, the land,’ as Édouard Glissant has argued, ‘are inextricable in the process of creating history,’ the trauma is embedded beyond the individual body in socio-material realities.<sup>57</sup> On one level, the event can be read as socially conditioned. It was, after all, societal pressure to conform to masculine norms that pushed Max Junior, afraid of being demasculinized for loving other men, to ‘foolishly [want] to prove something to his father that night... He wanted his father to hear [Flore’s] screams.’<sup>58</sup> On another, broader level, the event invokes the brutalities of Caribbean plantation slavery and environmental destruction. After Gaëlle agrees to adopt Claire, the girl runs away and hides in the mountains: ‘She would find a cave large enough inside Mòn Inital to live in, and at night she would lie on beds of ferns and listen to the bats squeal and the owls moan. She would dig a hole to catch rainwater for drinking and bathing. And she would try very hard not to disturb the marooned spirits who had found refuge there before her.’<sup>59</sup> The mountain serves as the material site of both maroonage and exploitative practices of globalization: ‘The land seemed as though it had just been cleared by fire. The earth was still warm beneath her sandals... very rich people had figured out that they could burn it down, flatten it, and build their big palaces there... She stood in the middle of the scorched field... imagining this life as a maroon.’<sup>60</sup> A result of gentrification ‘[echoing] acts of colonial exploitation,’ the ‘scorched field’ on the mountain invokes the very site of Flore’s rape: the ‘scorched smell of lightning cracking open the surrounding palms’ and ‘the water coming up so fast, with fire ants, which meant that

<sup>56</sup> Danticat, *Claire of the Sea Light*, 168–9.

<sup>57</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, trans. J. Michael Dash (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989), 105.

<sup>58</sup> Danticat, *Claire of the Sea Light*, 204.

<sup>59</sup> Danticat, *Claire of the Sea Light*, 234.

<sup>60</sup> Danticat, *Claire of the Sea Light*, 233, 235.

it was coming down from deep inside the mountains and the hills, and not the sea.<sup>61</sup> Therefore, when Max Junior and his father inspect the storm damage, their ‘solemn and stone-faced’ expressions speak simultaneously to ‘the hail-crushed flowers’, Flore’s injury, and the fate of a battered and bruised nation. These narrative echoes suggest a unity of intersecting life forms and environments in which the multisensorial relations among different modes of being might yield symbiotic collaboration, unsettling mergings, or destruction for any of the entities involved.

While the scene discussed above captures the multisensory entanglement of human and nonhuman landscapes, a focus on touch provides an even more subtle, sensory dimension to both novels’ historical allusions. Serres acknowledges the centrality of touch within a holistic agency of the body and the senses when he writes that ‘[t]ouching is situated between, the skin is the place where exchanges are made, the body traces the knotted, bound, folded, complex path, between the things to be known.’<sup>62</sup> Both *Claire of the Sea Light* and *Purple Hibiscus* abound in references to touch in the form of hair plaiting and plaited hair linking the practice to decoding encrypted messages. Kambili recalls her mother ‘caressing [her] cornrows... [tracing] the way strands of hair from different parts of [her] scalp meshed and held together’ and how, ‘with the windows always open, [her] hair would... absorb the spices’ so that ‘[bringing] the end of a braid to [her] nose, [she] would smell egusi soup, utazi, curry.’<sup>63</sup> Gaëlle, too, would make sure her daughter’s ‘hair was always perfectly coiffed... in playful and colorful designs,’ ‘carving simple flower or geometrical shapes into the girl’s scalp.’<sup>64</sup> The allusion to encoded messages is most explicit in Claire’s mother’s hair, ‘neatly brushed, the cornrows lined up like roads on a map to some mysterious land.’<sup>65</sup> Maroon oral history reveals that from the earliest moments of colonization enslaved peoples found ways to keep themselves and their cultures alive through their entwinement with the natural world. Female slaves would smuggle in their hair grains taken from slave ships that transported them to the New World and, once living on plantations, they would use ancient African braid patterns to create and transfer maps for their escape.<sup>66</sup> The significance of these practices is not merely the conjunction of human and plant bodies but their multisensory nature. Given the living quality of hair, the braiding hand instantiates a play between durable and malleable, mineral and organic. What is more, ‘[w]hen we touch something,’ as Steven Connor reminds us, ‘we simultaneously

<sup>61</sup> Kristina S. Gibby, “‘So Much Had Fallen into the Sea’: An Ecocritical Approach to Danticat’s *Claire of the Sea Light*,” in Jana Evans Braziel and Nadège T. Clitandre, eds, *The Bloomsbury Handbook to Edwidge Danticat* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 347–64 (359).

<sup>62</sup> Serres, *The Five Senses*, 80.

<sup>63</sup> Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus*, 14, 10.

<sup>64</sup> Danticat, *Claire of the Sea Light*, 13.

<sup>65</sup> Danticat, *Claire of the Sea Light*, 208.

<sup>66</sup> See Judith A. Carney, *Black Rice: The African Origins of Rice Cultivation in the Americas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), 153–4.

feel the object, and feel ourselves feeling it... Touch gives us the reflexive form of our being-in-the-world.<sup>67</sup>

The ecological grounding of perception that pervades both *Claire of the Sea Light* and *Purple Hibiscus* results in multisensory relations of bodies across the multiple scales that compose an environment. When Claire, 'lying on her back in the sea,' expresses her yearning 'for the warm salty water to be her mother's body, the waves her mother's heartbeat, the sunlight the tunnel that guided her out the day her mother died,' it does not only speak to the ocean's capacity to generate life with tiny ocean plants such as phytoplankton, seaweed, and kelp producing most of the oxygen we breathe but also to a multisensory engagement with a world that, engendered as a feminine space, is itself multisensory.<sup>68</sup> 'If the sea disappeared,' Claire ponders,

she would miss its ever-changing sounds... sometimes... one long breath... sometimes... a cry... the turquoise in the distance and its light-blue ripples up close, the white foam at the peaks of the waves... the surge of high tide and the retreat of low tide, the milky or rosy clouds of dawn and the orange mists of sunsets... driftwood, sea glass, seashells... the baby ears and buttercups... the slimy seaweed that the sea spewed out... smelling the sea, which sometimes reminded her of wet hair.<sup>69</sup>

The ocean and, by extension, plants thus suggest an unmediated relationship with the environment, resulting in a synergism of sensory modalities. By mapping the human body onto the natural world and by foregrounding the prominence of the proximal senses of touch, taste, and smell, both *Claire of the Sea Light* and *Purple Hibiscus* invoke a material and sensory interweaving of the human and the vegetal that turns both into an assemblage of variably expressive beings. It encodes 'an active, participatory ecology' that opens up the possibility of a sensuous return to the earth and that offers grounds for an epistemic rethinking of voice and language along the lines of a multisensorial poetics that is grounded in the material realities and sensory expressions of all living organisms.<sup>70</sup> As Luce Irigaray reminds us, '[w]e came into a world of trees, bushes, grass, and flowers, which helped us find our own breathing and... contributed to the awakening of all our senses.'<sup>71</sup>

An analysis of the sensuous geographies of *Claire of the Sea Light* and *Purple Hibiscus* brings to light a recognition of a holistic agency that emerges in the fluid, contingent, and embodied sensory relations between human and nonhuman bodies. Here, the senses work together to produce a whole whose perceptual experience is 'determined not just by the objects and properties that it represents, but also by

<sup>67</sup> Steven Connor, 'Intact,' talk given as part of *Embodied Values: Bringing the Senses Back to the Environment*, University of Edinburgh, May 2011, <http://stevenconnor.com/intact.html>.

<sup>68</sup> Danticat, *Claire of the Sea Light*, 214. <sup>69</sup> Danticat, *Claire of the Sea Light*, 219–20.

<sup>70</sup> Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey, *Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 6.

<sup>71</sup> Irigaray, 'What the Vegetal World Says to Us,' 126.



how those objects and properties are represented.<sup>72</sup> Moreover, rather than a lyrical or symbolic evocation emptied of its visual, auditory, olfactory, gustatory, tactile, and proprioceptive cues, the imagery in both novels engages all of the senses and, in doing so, draws its power from a heightened sense of embodiment as an inherently plural, porous, and immersive mode of contact. By foregrounding the multisensory, embodied nature of perception, both novels ultimately yield a deeper knowledge of the complex, often hidden, sensory and ecological entanglements that shape human experience and imagination.

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<sup>72</sup> Tim Bayne and Charles Spence, 'Multisensory Perception', in Mohan Matthen, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Perception* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 603–20 (613).

## SALT TASTE OF THE SEA

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### The Multisensorial Beach in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* and Charles Simmons's *Salt Water*

VIRGINIA RICHTER

In her poem 'Inland' (1921), Edna St. Vincent Millay describes the distinction between the interior of a country and the seashore as a difference of sensory experience. The inland's stillness is presented as a lack, an absence of 'the sound / Of water sucking the hollow ledges' that marks the shore.<sup>1</sup> Whereas the loud beating of the waves appears as violent, dangerous, and almost intentionally malignant—'Tons of water striking the shore' (line 6), 'Spanking the boats at the harbour's head' (line 10)—the silence in a house built inland is claustrophobic, its indwellers are '[p]eople the waves have not awakened' (line 9), people who have even lost the ability to long for a change. Against the stillness and stasis of the interior, the poem's speaker is tormented but also animated by a longing triggered by multisensorial memories of the sound, smell, and taste of the seashore. In the closeness of their room, even the existential danger of the shore becomes preferable:

What do they long for, as I long for, –  
Starting up in my inland bed,  
Beating the narrow walls, and finding  
Neither a window nor a door,  
Screaming to God for death by drowning, –  
One salt taste of the sea once more? (lines 11–16)

As the dichotomous construction of space in 'Inland' shows, the shore is often represented as a particularly sensory-rich environment. This is especially true of the beach as the space along the waterline, where sea, earth, and air interact and where

<sup>1</sup> Edna St. Vincent Millay, 'Inland', in *Second April* (New York: Harper, 1921), 38, ll. 4–5.

individual bodies engage on all sensory levels with the elements. In consequence, the beach is culturally coded as life-enhancing, healthy, and sensuous; at the same time, as the penultimate line in St. Vincent Millay's poem suggests, this heightened sensory engagement is also linked with death.

The beach intensifies multisensorial bodily perception, as it touches, stimulates, and invades the human body through various material channels: the wind that caresses the skin and the sunrays that burn it, the salty air that is smelled and inhaled, the seawater that buoys up the whole body but, when swallowed, makes it choke and, when entering the lungs, makes it perish by drowning. This experience of the beach is not ahistorical. While the Victorians, even as they sought out the beach, tried to shield their bodies from some of its sensory stimuli, especially the sun, the modern beach can be defined by an encompassing exposure to and engagement with its multisensorial experience. Two cultural techniques, widely adopted by beach visitors in the late nineteenth century and in the 1920s, contributed to this transformation: swimming and sunbathing. As the cultural historian Jean-Didier Urbain has argued, it was swimming in particular that recoded 'physical contact with the sea, tactile and coenesthetic', from a dangerous and immoral activity into something pleasurable and innocent.<sup>2</sup> This transformation of the beach experience is concurrent with the formation of new moral codes, fashions, patterns of consumption, and ideas of both individualism and community.

Literature engages with the multisensorial beach mainly in two ways. Literary texts record a 'thick description' of the sensory and emotional experience of, for example, swimming; in other words, they describe the interaction between the material environment and the body and offer an interpretation of what it means for the individual. Secondly, they explore the ambivalence of the beach, the persistence of conflicting emotional patterns such as sensuous liberation side by side with a dread of the deep. Significantly, the two novels I want to look at in my chapter, although separated by a century, address similar issues. Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899) and Charles Simmons's *Salt Water* (1998) are both set at moments of social change (women's liberation at the turn of the twentieth century, the sexual revolution of the 1960s); they both have liminal protagonists (a woman artist and an adolescent boy); and both use littoral activities (swimming, sailing) as conduits to sexual awakening, liberation from social and familial constraints, and greater self-knowledge. However, they also show that these positive developments are not viable outside the heterotopia of the beach; in both instances, the novel ends with a death by drowning.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Jean-Didier Urbain, *At the Beach* [*Sur la plage*, 1994], trans. Catherine Porter (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 70.

<sup>3</sup> For an elaboration of the beach as heterotopia, see Ursula Kluwick and Virginia Richter, 'Of Tourists and Refugees: The Global Beach in the Twenty-First Century', in Simon Ferdinand, Irina Souch, and Daan Wesselman, eds, *Heterotopia and Globalisation in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Routledge, 2020), 116–30.

## Swimming Far Out: Edna Pontellier's Multisensorial Awakening

Two key scenes of *The Awakening* are set on the beach and describe the protagonist Edna Pontellier's attempts at swimming. During a nocturnal bathing party, Edna, until then an inept swimmer and afraid of the deep, for the first time masters the technique and swims out into the sea at Grand Isle, where the affluent Creole families of New Orleans are spending their summer vacation. As several critics, especially those approaching the novel from a feminist angle, have pointed out, this successful swim marks a turning point in Edna's personal development: she 'awakens' sexually, sheds the shackles of bourgeois marriage, and pursues a career as an artist. In the final scene of the novel, Edna returns to Grand Isle in winter and swims to her death, an ending widely interpreted as the ultimate failure of her emancipatory departure.<sup>4</sup> While the importance of Edna's bodily experience of swimming for her mental liberation is generally acknowledged, only a few critics have paid detailed attention to the multisensorial impact of the littoral setting, and in particular her sensory experience of immersion and swimming.

Tara K. Parmiter has pointed out the connection between resorts, the discourse on women's health, and the emancipatory potential of vacations for women: 'these summer places offer alternatives to the domestic realm, affording new freedoms to women writers to reevaluate the social restrictions of the homes left behind for the summer.'<sup>5</sup> As family vacations at the seaside had become an established yearly ritual both in North America and Europe, bathing in mixed company also became a respectable practice for women, and arguably paved the way for a broader social emancipation.<sup>6</sup> As Parmiter notes, however, 'sea-bathing can simultaneously benefit and threaten a spirited woman like Edna, whose need for bodily stimulation mirrors her need for intellectual excitement', if this 'new freedom' is strictly limited

<sup>4</sup> For classic examples of feminist engagements with *The Awakening*, see Sandra M. Gilbert, 'The Second Coming of Aphrodite: Kate Chopin's Fantasy of Desire', *Kenyon Review* 5 (1983), 42–66; Elaine Showalter, 'The Awakening: Tradition and the American Female Talent', in *Sister's Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women's Writing* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 66–85; Patricia S. Yaeger, 'A Language Which Nobody Understood': Emancipatory Strategies in *The Awakening*, *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 20, no. 3 (1987), 197–219.

<sup>5</sup> Tara K. Parmiter, 'Taking the Waters: The Summer Place and Women's Health in Kate Chopin's *The Awakening*', *American Literary Realism* 39, no. 1 (2006), 1–19 (1).

<sup>6</sup> Swimming was long considered unsuitable for women, because wet bathing suits, however modestly cut, revealed too much of the body. In the context of late nineteenth-century discourses on physical fitness and health, however, swimming was accepted as an ideal sport for women both in the United States and the United Kingdom. See Claire Parker, 'Swimming: The "Ideal" Sport for Nineteenth-century British Women', *International Journal of the History of Sport* 27, no. 1–2 (2010), 675–89. On the development of women's swimming in the first decades of the twentieth century, and its challenge to restrictions on women's conduct and clothing, see Catherine Horwood, "'Girls Who Arouse Dangerous Passions': Women and Bathing, 1900–39', *Women's History Review* 9, no. 4 (2000), 653–73.

to the vacation period.<sup>7</sup> Like other scholars, Parmiter highlights the importance of swimming as ‘a major component of Edna’s vacation’ which ‘greatly influences her well-being and sense of self’, but does not pursue further Chopin’s depiction of swimming as an embodied, multisensorial activity.<sup>8</sup>

Kathrin Tordasi is one of the few critics to pay detailed attention to the seaside as a socially constructed space in *The Awakening*. The actual resort, that is, the hotel and summer cottages, ‘reflect the spatial and social order of the mainland’, but even here the middle-class codes of social, especially gendered, conduct are observed less strictly.<sup>9</sup> It is the beach in particular, however, visited by Edna at odd times—for instance, during the midday heat—and unchaperoned, that functions as a transformational space:

Edna experiences the liminal space-time of the island in a way that changes her perspective and resets her life course. *The Awakening* is therefore another example of a literary text which locates self-altering experiences on the beach and, on a structural level, uses beach liminality to disrupt social routines and create alternative (and, as I am going to argue, queer) temporalities and spaces.<sup>10</sup>

In a close reading of Edna’s nocturnal swim, Tordasi interprets the scene as ‘a rite of passage during which Edna turns into a threshold person, who no longer perceives herself the way she did before, and does not yet understand who she is about to become’.<sup>11</sup> While this reading is persuasive, again the physical and sensory components of Edna’s swim are mentioned only perfunctorily, such as her disorientation in the water and her ‘departure from stable ground and the forward motion’ of swimming.<sup>12</sup> In what follows, I focus on precisely these neglected aspects of *The Awakening*: the multisensorial environment that prepares Edna for her transformation, and her embodied engagement with the elements, especially the sea.<sup>13</sup>

The setting at Grand Isle, on the Louisiana shore of the Gulf of Mexico, constitutes a crucial spatial framework for Edna’s radical self-examination, which begins long before her successful swim. In the warmth and relaxation of the summer resort, Edna is exposed to sensory stimuli that heighten her awareness of her body, as well as accentuating her dissatisfaction with her role as the representative wife, the ‘valuable piece of personal property’ of the wealthy New Orleans businessman

<sup>7</sup> Parmiter, ‘Taking the Waters’, 2.

<sup>8</sup> Parmiter, ‘Taking the Waters’, 8.

<sup>9</sup> Kathrin Tordasi, *Women by the Waterfront: Modernist (Re)Visions of Gender, Self and Littoral Space* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2018), 234.

<sup>10</sup> Tordasi, *Women by the Waterfront*, 235.

<sup>11</sup> Tordasi, *Women by the Waterfront*, 244.

<sup>12</sup> Tordasi, *Women by the Waterfront*, 244–5.

<sup>13</sup> For the concept of sensory, emotional, and cognitive embodiment in relation to the sea, see Barbara Humberstone, ‘Embodied Narratives: Being with the Sea’, in Mike Brown and Barbara Humberstone, eds, *Seascapes: Shaped by the Sea. Embodied Narratives and Fluid Geographies* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), 27–39.

Léonce Pontellier.<sup>14</sup> The narrator describes at great length the tropical nature surrounding the resort, the sounds and smells, the heat, the sea breeze, and other sensory triggers that have, by turns, calming, oppressive, and stimulating effects on Edna. For example, the path leading to the beach is bordered by ‘acres of yellow camomile’, a plant with calming and soporific qualities, and, beyond, ‘small plantations of orange or lemon trees’ (15). These citrus groves not only are fragrant but also form a visually pleasing aspect: ‘The dark green clusters glistened from afar in the sun’ (15). As Edna walks down the beach path with her friend Adèle Ratignolle, she perceives these vegetable scents as well as the smell of the sea, brought inland by ‘a breeze . . . , a choppy stiff wind’ that not only carries odours but touches the skin and impedes the women’s walk as it flutters their skirts (16). The women also register the heat and the soundscape produced by the wind, the waves, and the absence of other human beings: ‘The beach was very still of human sound at that hour’ (16).

Sensory engagement with this environment is a matter of the whole body, including not only the ‘classic’ senses such as smell, sight, touch, and hearing but also the sense of temperature and kinaesthesia, the sense of movement. Proximity to the sea, according to Barbara Humberstone, heightens this holistic embodiment: ‘Being in or on the sea attends to the whole body, not the (un-)consciousness in isolation but the whole of the corporeal body: mind, senses, their inter-relatedness and particular embodied relationship with the sea.’<sup>15</sup> I argue that Edna’s experience of the seaside provokes such a profound upheaval of her psychosocial position because it does not engage with single senses but precisely with the totality of her sensory perception. As Caroline Potter has observed, ‘the senses should be understood as an intermeshed web of perceptory apparatuses that direct the body’s total attention to its situation in the world, rather than as a set of discreet biological pathways that respond independently to physical stimuli.’<sup>16</sup> It is the ensemble of these stimuli that makes Edna ready for her unsettling swimming experience, and alters her understanding of ‘her situation in the world’, or in the novel’s own phrase, the realization of ‘her position in the universe as a human being’, and of ‘her relations as an individual to the world within and about her’ (14).

In this multisensorial set-up, the sea plays a particularly agential role. It is not simply part of a topography understood as passive, as the background for human action. According to Marie-Laure Ryan, Kenneth Foote, and Maoz Azaryahu, spatial elements in a narrative can serve as ‘a focus to attention, a bearer of symbolic

<sup>14</sup> Kate Chopin, *The Awakening* [1899], ed. Margo Culley (London: Norton, 1994), 4. Henceforth page numbers are given in the text.

<sup>15</sup> Humberstone, ‘Embodied Narratives’, 28–9.

<sup>16</sup> Caroline Potter, ‘Sense of Motion, Senses of Self: Becoming a Dancer’, *Ethnos* 73, no. 4 (2008), 444–65 (446).

meaning,<sup>17</sup> an object of emotional investment, a means of strategic planning, a principle of organization, and even a supporting medium.<sup>18</sup> The spatial arrangement of a narrative, such as, in *The Awakening*, the littoral situation of Grand Isle, thus actively engenders potential plot trajectories. However, as proponents of the new materialism argue, the agency of non-human objects, including natural spaces, can be understood even more literally:

Agency assumes many forms, all of which are characterized by an important feature: they are material, and the meanings they produce influence in various ways the existence of both human and nonhuman natures. Agency, therefore, is not necessarily and exclusively associated with human beings and with human intentionality, but it is a pervasive and inbuilt property of matter, as part and parcel of its generative dynamism.<sup>19</sup>

The sea, as an expanse, a voluminous body of water which has not only surface but depth,<sup>20</sup> and a personified ‘voice’, is in this sense an agent that interacts with Edna and summons her sensory response. Before the nocturnal swim, the sea acts on Edna mostly through sight, smell, and sound. For example, the expanse of the sea and the horizon invite her gaze, which turns from active—‘casting... about’—to passive and is ‘carried... out’ by the clear atmosphere, and offer themselves as a vanishing point for her restive eyes: ‘Edna Pontellier, casting her eyes about, had finally kept them at rest upon the sea. The day was clear and carried the gaze out as far as the blue sky went; there were a few white clouds suspended idly over the horizon’ (16). Her sense of smell is similarly stirred by ‘the breeze soft and languorous that came up from the south, charged with the seductive odor of the sea’ (13). According to Potter, smell is a ‘trans-boundary mode’, that is, in contrast to touch and taste, which ‘bring explicit attention to the body’s boundaries’, smell transcends these boundaries between the body’s outside and inside.<sup>21</sup> The ‘odor of the sea’ invades Edna’s body, is intrusive but also welcome. Throughout this passage, the

<sup>17</sup> In literary studies, the sea has predominantly been interpreted as ‘a bearer of symbolic meaning’; an example in the literature on Chopin is Molly J. Hildebrandt’s ‘The Masculine Sea: Gender, Art, and Suicide in Kate Chopin’s *The Awakening*’, *American Literary Realism* 48, no. 3 (2016), 189–208. Hildebrandt reads the sea as a metaphor for artistic creativity, practically without mentioning the actual ocean in *The Awakening* at all. Advocates for a non-figurative engagement with the sea within oceanic studies are, for example, Philip Steinberg and Hester Blum, whose lead I am following here: Philip Steinberg, ‘Of Other Seas: Metaphors and Materialities in Maritime Regions’, *Atlantic Studies* 10, no. 2 (2013), 156–69; Hester Blum, ‘The Prospect of Oceanic Studies’, *PMLA* 125, no. 3 (2010), 670–7.

<sup>18</sup> Marie-Laure Ryan, Kenneth Foote, and Maoz Azaryahu, *Narrating Space/Spatializing Narrative: Where Narrative Theory and Geography Meet* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2016), 1.

<sup>19</sup> Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, ‘Introduction’, in Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann, eds, *Material Ecocriticism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 1–17, 3.

<sup>20</sup> See Philip Steinberg and Kimberley Peters, ‘Wet Ontologies, Fluid Spaces: Giving Depth to Volume through Oceanic Thinking’, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 33 (2015), 247–64.

<sup>21</sup> Potter, ‘Sense of Motion’, 456.

narrator's phrasing stresses Edna's position as a sensory receptor, and correspondingly accentuates the sea's agency as a personified seducer:

The voice of the sea is seductive; never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander for a spell in abysses of solitude; to lose itself in mazes of inward contemplation.

The voice of the sea speaks to the soul. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace. (14)

This passage shows distinctly the functioning of the senses as 'an intermeshed web of perceptory apparatuses' in which the senses are not separable from each other: voice blends into touch, which enfolds the body from the outside while simultaneously penetrating the soul and inviting introspection.<sup>22</sup>

As Edna's sensorium is animated by the variegated stimuli of the natural environment, as well as the attentions of her suitor Robert Lebrun, she realizes her unhappiness as a conventional wife and mother. The tension built up by the sensuous caresses of nature and Robert's admiration on the one hand, and her husband's demands on the other, is cathartically released in two stages during a social gathering. In the first phase, Edna experiences a piece of music as an immersion in the sea; in the second, she actually enters the ocean and learns to swim. The two events are inextricably linked; Edna experiences both as direct physical encounters rather than social rituals. When, after a series of amateur recitals, the professional pianist Mademoiselle Reisz begins to play Chopin, Edna doesn't so much hear the sound as absorb the shock of the chords: 'The very first chords which Mademoiselle Reisz struck upon the piano sent a keen tremor down Mrs. Pontellier's spinal column' (26). Instead of translating the music into visualizations, as she is used to doing during concerts, Edna experiences the unmediated emotions as an internal storm:

She waited for the material pictures which she thought would gather and blaze before her imagination. She waited in vain. She saw no pictures of solitude, of hope, of longing, or of despair. But the very passions themselves were aroused within her soul, swaying it, lashing it, as the waves daily beat upon her splendid body. She trembled, she was choking, and the tears blinded her. (26)

More violently than through the sea's acoustic and olfactory caresses, the boundaries of her body are transgressed, in terms reminiscent of immersion and of drowning ('she was choking'). Edna's internal vision, her ability to create 'material images', is impaired by the impact of the music, just as her external vision is blurred by her tears; the sense of sight is replaced by a more visceral sensory experience. The fact that she cannot translate the sound into a visual medium but experiences 'the very passions themselves' suggests that this inner storm gives her access to a core of the self beyond social conventions, but also that she is not fully in control of the passions so released.

<sup>22</sup> Potter, 'Sense of Motion', 446.



After the concert, a joint swim by moonlight is proposed. Again, the narrator stresses the multisensorial quality of the stroll to the seaside and the bathing: the moonlight, the 'strange, rare odors' of the night, the quietness of the sea (27). Still aroused by Mademoiselle Reisz's performance, Edna, who 'had attempted all summer to learn to swim' but could not overcome her 'ungovernable dread . . . when in the water' on her own, suddenly feels confident like a child learning to walk: 'She did shout for joy, as with a sweeping stroke or two she lifted her body to the surface of the water' (27). This moment of buoyancy also decisively marks her separation from the community of Creole families, and from her own husband and children: 'She would not join the groups in their sports and bouts, but intoxicated with her newly conquered power, she swam out alone'; she also wants 'to swim far out, where no woman had swum before' (27).

Edna's swim is thus characterized by independence, solitude, and ambition; if before Edna was the languorous recipient of sensory stimulation, she is now depicted as active and energetic. But, as she swims farther out, her feat appears as ambivalent, more fanciful than realistic, and marked by sensory confusion:

She turned her face seaward to gather in an impression of space and solitude, which the vast expanse of water, meeting and melting with the moonlit sky, conveyed to her excited fancy. As she swam she seemed to be reaching out for the unlimited in which to lose herself.

Once she turned and looked toward the shore, toward the people she had left there. She had not gone any great distance – that is, what would have been a great distance for an experienced swimmer. But to her unaccustomed vision the stretch of water behind her assumed the aspect of a barrier which her unaided strength would never be able to overcome.

A quick vision of death smote her soul, and for a second of time appalled and enfeebled her senses. But by an effort she rallied her staggering faculties and managed to regain the land. (28)

Edna only *seems* 'to be reaching out for the unlimited', she only believes she has swum out a great distance, and in the end she barely regains the land. Her achievement—not only the physical feat but the supposedly gained independence—is further undermined by her husband's casual comment: "You were not so very far, my dear; I was watching you," he told her' (28). Regarding the depiction of the senses, there is an interesting difference between the impact of the Chopin piece and Edna's swim. Her hearing of the music appears to be, for the first time, truthful and revelatory about her sense of self. Her swim, by contrast, although celebratory, is marked by sensory confusion. Edna is not sure about the distance she covered, her perception of the sea is marred by 'her excited fancy', and in the end her senses are 'appalled and enfeebled'. A straightforward reading of her successful swim as the beginning of an emancipatory trajectory is thus put into question.

However, a dismissal of Edna's endeavours would fall similarly short. Arguably, the novel's achievement lies in offering Edna neither a successful artistic career nor

a happy ending with Robert, but in keeping her suspended between radical liberation and failure or, in Tordasi's words, 'looking, drifting and experimenting with the pleasures of the moment' until she returns, deliberately, to the sea.<sup>23</sup> Seen in this light, Edna's final swim is similarly ambivalent to her first. If her nocturnal venture into the sea was troubled by sensory confusion and the fear of death, what is usually read as her suicide by drowning is marked by an *erasure* of death. As Tordasi points out, following Gilbert, Edna's suicide is not shown; in the novel's final scene she swims towards the horizon, 'the unlimited' which was unattainable in her first swim.<sup>24</sup> The ending thus leaves Edna 'in a liminal state of still conscious and not quite oblivious. . . . With its ending, the novel therefore successfully consigns the representation of its protagonist to ambiguity, mobility and possibility.'<sup>25</sup>

Tordasi's suggestion that the novel does not end with a resolution, but in a queer suspension that undermines heteronormative narrative structures, is supported by the passage immediately preceding Edna's final swim. After the disappointing end of her affair with Robert, Edna has returned to Grand Isle, which, in winter, is abandoned by its seasonal visitors. The verbatim repetition of the phrase about the seductive voice of the sea suggests that her journey has come full circle, but now the beach, so sensuous in summer, is recoded as bleak and desolate:

The water of the Gulf stretched out before her, gleaming with the million lights of the sun. The voice of the sea is seductive, never ceasing, whispering, clamoring, murmuring, inviting the soul to wander in abysses of solitude. All along the white beach, up and down, there was no living thing in sight. A bird with a broken wing was beating the air above, reeling, fluttering, circling disabled down, down to the water. (108)

The setting remains as ambivalent as ever: despite the strand's desolation, and the ominous portent of the 'bird with a broken wing', the sea is still resplendent, 'gleaming with the million lights of the sun', and still seductive. The sea suggests both the possibility of death and the offer of an embrace. Edna thus approaches the water not in a suicidal mood, but with a gesture that boldly defies all conventions and enables her to enjoy her body in a self-conscious, almost narcissistic, way:

Edna had found her old bathing suit still hanging, faded, upon its accustomed peg.

She put it on, leaving her clothing in the bath-house. But when she was there beside the sea, absolutely alone, she cast the unpleasant, pricking garments from her, and for the first time in her life she stood naked in the open air, at the mercy of the sun, the breeze that beat upon her, and the waves that invited her.

How strange and awful it seemed to stand naked under the sky! how delicious! She felt like some new-born creature, opening its eyes in a familiar world that it had never known. (108–9)

<sup>23</sup> Tordasi, *Women by the Waterfront*, 266.

<sup>24</sup> Tordasi, *Women by the Waterfront*, 266; see Gilbert, 'The Second Coming of Aphrodite', 58.

<sup>25</sup> Tordasi, *Women by the Waterfront*, 271.

To appreciate the audacity of this gesture, one should remember that the champion swimmer Annette Kellermann ‘was arrested for indecency on a beach in Boston, USA in 1907’—eight years after the publication of *The Awakening*—‘when she wore a clinging ankle-to-neck bodysuit.’<sup>26</sup> Controlling and covering the female body stood at the centre of the disputes about women’s swimming at the turn of the century. Here, Edna not only undresses herself but does it without reference to the gaze of others, be it lascivious or censorious. The fact that the beach is empty makes her gesture even more defiant: she does it for herself. If in the novel’s first part Edna was much more ready to expose her skin to the sun than the ‘mother-woman’ Adèle Ratignolle (9, 15), thus damaging her value as a well-groomed wife, she now exposes herself fully to the touch of the sunrays and the breeze. Prompted by a sensory response, the itch of ‘the unpleasant, pricking garments’, she returns, even more radically than in the first swim scene, to a primal state of being in the world, a moment of sensuous fulfilment. When Edna then enters the sea, it is as an active being who enjoys the buoyancy of the water and her kinaesthetic mastery: ‘The water was chill, but she walked on. The water was deep, but she lifted her white body and reached out with a long, sweeping stroke. The touch of the sea is sensuous, enfolding the body in its soft, close embrace’ (109). Even as she is overpowered by exhaustion, she remains suspended between the horizon and the shore, in the sea’s embrace.

### **‘You Have to Know What You’re Doing’: Kinaesthetic Knowledge in *Salt Water***

As in *The Awakening*, the sea in Charles Simmons’s *Salt Water* is an agential force, shaping the topography of Bone Point, a peninsula off the Atlantic coast, and influencing the life of its inhabitants. As John R. Gillis has observed, ‘beaches are the most fluid of landscapes, the ultimate *terrae infirmae*.’<sup>27</sup> Under the impact of the tides, waves, currents, winds, storms, erosion, and silting, coastal areas undergo a constant process of transformation. Seawater can be murky, undercurrents strong, the ground beneath one’s feet unstable. In this environment, all the senses are particularly challenged, and often deceived. This renders littoral space treacherous, as the dangers are often hidden from sight, and only perceptible to those intimately familiar with the shore and the sea:

The first day after a nor’easter is sunny and cool. You can’t lie on the beach, because it’s still wet. If you want you can swim, but you have to know what you’re doing. Father used to say that after a storm the sea is short tempered. The waves are strong and full

<sup>26</sup> Horwood, ‘Girls Who Arouse Dangerous Passions’, 657–8.

<sup>27</sup> John R. Gillis, *The Human Shore: Seacoasts in History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), 143.

of sand. Sand is all through the water and doesn't settle out for a couple of days. A lot of sand gets washed out from the shore, so the incline into the water is steep. An undertow can sweep you off your feet, and the gritty waves slap you down hard. Near the shore the water is unpleasant, farther out it's dangerous. Currents move against one another. Whirlpools form and pull at you.<sup>28</sup>

This unstable littoral topography determines the organization of the plot in Simmons's novel, and also indicates to the reader that the relations between the characters are governed by the same deceitful undercurrents as the ocean. The story, set in the summer of 1963, is narrated by 15-year-old Michael, the only son of parents whose marriage is rocky due to the father's adulterous forays. Their house at Bone Point is a summer residence, but unlike Grand Isle not at an elegant resort but a former military area and now a federal reserve with only a few inhabited houses. When Michael's parents rent their guest house to Mrs Mertz and her daughter, he falls in love with the latter, 20-year-old Zina. Later he learns that his father, Peter, and Zina are lovers. The story, inspired by Ivan Turgenev's 'First Love' (1860), is as much about Michael's relationship with his father as his first love for Zina; the ocean, and their sailing boat *Angela*, are the 'object[s] of emotional investment' which at first forge a deep link between father and son, and then tear them apart.<sup>29</sup> It is on board the *Angela* that Michael forces Zina to have sex with him, and where subsequently he causes his father's death—whether intentionally or by accident remaining unclear.

Sensory perception and the embodied experience of swimming play an equally important role as in *The Awakening*; however, the northern climate of *Salt Water* offers little of the seductive sensuousness of Grand Isle. Perhaps in consequence, the senses are less directed at enjoyment and more closely tied to knowing. As Michael states in the quotation above, whoever wants to enter the sea has to know what they are doing. This is true on the figurative as well as the literal level. Both Michael and his father—as well as Zina—miscalculate the effects of their emotional entanglement. Similarly, although highly competent swimmers and sailors, father and son on several occasions do not know what they are doing, and put each other in danger.

Their strong emotional attachment is based to a large extent on their joint aquatic activities: fishing trips from which the mother is excluded, and swims in the ocean. Both revel in their kinaesthetic competence as swimmers:

We were both good swimmers. Father used the crawl for general purposes. I did the backstroke, which is slower but not so tiring, and I liked looking up at the sky when I swam. Is there anything better than your body in the water and your mind in the sky? Whenever we swam together, because he was faster, Father would pull ahead, flip over, dive, stay down, come up, and fool around till I caught up. He was a regular porpoise.  
(16–17)

<sup>28</sup> Charles Simmons, *Salt Water* (New York: Washington Square Press, 1998), 21. Henceforth page numbers are given in the text.

<sup>29</sup> Ryan et al., *Narrating Space/Spatializing Narrative*, 1.

This description highlights the ties between father and son, but also the difference in their characters. Michael is a 'sky-gazer,' a dreamer, whereas Peter likes to show off his superior strength and skill; by his aquatic nature—'a regular porpoise'—he is connected to the treacherous sea. In the opening chapter, Peter's readiness to assume a risk puts their lives in danger. The changeability of littoral topography affords him the opportunity to challenge his son to a hazardous swim, when a sandbar forms 'half a mile out in the ocean,' remaining hidden underwater but discernible to the knowledgeable shore dweller: 'we knew it was there because waves were breaking on it' (13). After a week, they still 'couldn't actually see the bar,' but 'its presence got plainer every day. Complete waves were breaking on it' (16). Peter's plan, when he asks Michael to swim out to the bar, is to work with the tides: "'The tide is out,'" he said. "We can rest on the bar when we get there. On the way back the tide will be coming in and carry us along"' (16). However, it soon turns out that, despite his intimate knowledge of the sea, Peter has miscalculated both his own strength as he pulls off his usual playful routine and the timing of the tides. Michael discerns his father's error:

I didn't think he should be doing it this time. We were heading half a mile straight out to sea, and he was using up his energy. Then two hundred yards out I knew we had miscalculated. We were moving too fast. It wasn't ebb tide, as Father had thought. The tide was still going out and speeding us to the bar. Every day the tide is an hour later. Today we had started out at noon, and I remembered that the previous day low tide had been at noon. Now low tide wouldn't be for an hour. (17)

To miscalculate the tides like this is a rather basic error for a shore dweller with nautical knowledge. It characterizes Peter as an overly self-confident, foolhardy man who puts his son's life at risk. When they reach the sandbar, Peter can stand with his mouth above water, but the smaller Michael cannot. Instead of resting, they have to swim back against the outgoing current: 'It was hard getting in. What kept us going was knowing that the tide against us was weakening. The question was, would the tide wear out before we did?' (18). As they reach the beach with their last ounce of strength, two things happen: Michael meets Zina for the first time as she looks down on him, lying exhausted on the ground: 'I fell in love with Zina upside down' (18). And he voices for the first time doubt in his father: "'I thought for a moment out there you were going to leave me," I said' (19).

In contrast to *The Awakening*, in *Salt Water* the individual senses are not separately named. Implicitly, however, Michael's swimming experience is similarly constituted as a multisensorial experience, with kinaesthetic enjoyment at its centre. The distance to the sandbar is partly calculated by sight, as Michael and his father observe the position of the waves breaking over it, but once they have entered the water it is the experienced swimmer's embodied knowledge that informs Michael about his body's position—'two hundred yards out'—relative to the strength needed

to reach the bar. As for the professional dancers in Caroline Potter's study, for the experienced swimmer 'kinaesthesia is a crucial sense that frames the shaping of all other sensory modes, interconnecting one moving body to another'.<sup>30</sup> In Michael's case, his kinaesthetic sense tells him about his distance from the sandbar and the shore, his proximity to his father's body swimming near him, and the growing fatigue of his muscles as he battles against the outgoing tide. Interestingly, in the description of the actual swim, Michael is aware of his father's factual errors—wasting his powers by cavorting in the water, miscalculating the tides—but his moral doubt is voiced only after their safe return to the beach. During the swim, there is no indication that Peter might leave him to drown. Michael's inference that his father may not only be irresponsible but deceitful, although in the end it turns out to be correct, is not founded on sensory evidence, but is a spontaneous insight—'It was just a thought' (19)—an unvoiced knowledge about his father that Michael does his best to suppress.

The theme of drowning, in connection with kinaesthetic competence, recurs twice more in the novel. In the first instance, Michael takes Zina out sailing. As an excellent swimmer, Zina is metaphorically connected to Peter—she 'was a porpoise like Father' (25)—and metonymically to water. However, she lacks Peter's and Michael's long-term experience with sailing in the open sea. As she spontaneously dives from the boat, 'she was surprised by the feel of deep water. It has a swell and pull that let you know you're in its power' (68). Like Peter in the novel's opening chapter, Zina endangers both herself and Michael, as the *Angela* drifts away and he has to execute single-handedly a complicated manoeuvre for her rescue. To return 'to a given spot in a sailboat', '[y]ou execute a figure eight. As roundabout as that sounds, it's the proven way to get back to someone overboard. Father taught it to me. I had done it once, and did it again now' (68). While Michael's rescue of Zina is successful, and shows his ability to control the boat under difficult circumstances, the scene again highlights the agential power of the sea and foreshadows a second sailing scene that ends fatally.

After Michael has found out by coincidence that Zina and his father are in a clandestine love relationship, he blackmails her into letting him sleep with her in the cabin of the *Angela*. Although he realizes immediately that 'I had made a terrible mistake' (165), destroying any friendly feelings Zina had for him, he later provocatively blurts out the truth as he is sailing with his father. Peter gets up and moves towards Michael:

Then I thought he wanted to hurt me. He seemed immense. I yanked the tiller. The boom swung across the deck, slowly at first and then fast. He tried to duck, but it hit him in the head, and he went over backwards and disappeared. The *Angela* swerved sharply toward the Rocks. I lost control and almost capsized. By dropping the tiller and

<sup>30</sup> Potter, 'Sense of Motion', 453.

catching the butt of the boom I turned the Angela into the wind and steadied her. I had to get back to where he went over. I did a figure eight, tacking southeast and northwest. On the last tack I slammed into the Rocks and tore a hole in the Angela's port side. Water flooded in, and she sank to the gunnels. Whitecaps in the moonlight looked like Father and then didn't. (170)

Despite the first-person narrative, we don't get any insight into Michael's—or his father's—intentions. It is not clear whether Peter really wanted to attack his son, and whether Michael manipulated the boom in panic, in self-defence, or with the intention to hurt his father. He tries to replicate the manoeuvre that led to Zina's successful rescue, but only damages the *Angela*. In this fatal scene, as falsehoods in the family finally come to light, sensory perception appears as treacherous. While at first Peter 'seemed immense' to Michael's overstrung eyes, after falling overboard he becomes indistinguishable from the crested waves. In his panic-fuelled state, and impeded by the rough sea, Michael's nautical embodied knowledge does not suffice to rescue his father. In the end, Peter's body is never found. As a result of his unresolved trauma, Michael remains frozen in the liminal state of adolescence: 'I'm now older than Father was when he drowned. I don't know why I still feel like a child' (175). In both *The Awakening* and *Salt Water*, sensory encounters with the sea lead to the protagonists' greater self-knowledge. If, however, the ending of Chopin's novel can be interpreted optimistically as a queer suspension in which Edna keeps swimming to the horizon, Michael's insight results in stasis.

## Conclusion

The two novels discussed here show how the multisensorial engagement with the beach and the sea opens up but also forecloses the potential for the protagonists' personal development. Drawing on littoral and oceanic studies and new materialism, my chapter has focused on the interplay between the material environment—the unstable topography of the beach, the impact of natural elements on the senses, the agential and unpredictable force of seawater—and Edna's and Michael's entangled sensory experiences. Swimming is so important in both novels because it does not privilege a particular sense, but stimulates the whole perceptory ensemble as well as sensory experiences specific to the immersion in seawater, such as a feeling of buoyancy and weightlessness, but also the pull of the deep. Both novels describe the feeling of mastery and achievement connected to swimming, but also the potential overestimation of one's strength and the danger of disorientation in deep water. Swimming thus always constitutes a profoundly ambivalent experience, keeping Edna and Michael suspended between the capacity for renewal and the finality of death. By taking their protagonists from dry land into the water, the novels funda-

mentally complicate the representation of the senses. In the sea, human sensory perception—the sense apparatus of a land-adapted mammal—is altered: sound carries differently across and below water; salt water stings the eyes and blurs vision; proprioception is materially affected as the body is borne up, but also tossed and turned by the waves. Water thus constitutes an alienating, but therefore cognitively stimulating, element for human beings: because their senses are rendered strange, they perceive their bodies in their full animality while, paradoxically, becoming aware of what it means to be human most fully. This exploration of the human experience could not be achieved with a restricted focus on a single sense; in this regard, attentiveness to multisensorial entanglements is essential to the novels' attainment of psychological complexity.

The comparison of two novels from different literary epochs, separated by a century, suggests that this phenomenology of sensory perception can to a certain extent be generalized. Edna and Michael could hardly be more different, and yet they share a sense of kinaesthetic pleasure in the act of swimming, the richness of sensory experience in a particularly stimulating environment, and the potential for self-development offered by the liminal space–time of the beach. At the same time, both novels reflect the historically specific concerns of their respective period of origin, or the period when they are set. Whereas Edna battles against the restrictions the late nineteenth century imposes on middle-class women, and uses the innovative activity of swimming to further her emancipation, Michael, experiencing his adolescence on the brink of the sexual revolution of the 1960s, gets caught up in the pitfalls of a type of masculinity represented by his father, which he idealizes but is not able to reproduce. In consequence, he is also incapable of coming to terms with Zina's self-determined sexuality, and of reconciling her autonomy with his desire. This gendered positionality has repercussions for the representation of the senses, which in both cases are shown to be unreliable and delusive. While the senses are the conduits to personal development, in the end their liberating potential is limited—both novels conclude with the protagonists' failure to realize their possibility for achievement outside the littoral setting. Like the swimmers who experience the simultaneous uplift of their buoyant bodies, and the outward and downward pull of the undertow, the multisensorial beach remains suspended between its positive potential as a space of sensory stimulation, renewal, and liberation, and the pervasive mortality that constitutes its darker side.

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