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Swoon: The Art of Sinking

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PhD, Creative and Critical Writing

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UNIVERSITY OF SUSSEX

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SWOON: THE ART OF SINKING

SUMMARY

This thesis is a diachronic exploration of literary representations of swooning, which theorises the swoon's relation to concepts of gender, to narratives of radical transformation and to the rhetorical figure of bathos. In my first chapter, I focus on swooning in late medieval literature, when knights and ladies swoon with equal regularity. I consider the early etymologies of "swoon" and posit a relationship between swooning and dying, whereby recovering from the swoon is the symbolic possibility of waking into new life. I read hagiographies alongside Chaucer's historical romance, *Troilus and Criseyde*, to demonstrate the swoon's power as a strongly suggestive symbol of transformation. In my second chapter, I focus on sentimental accounts of swooning in the eighteenth century, when the swoon undergoes a process of gender acquisition, becoming symbolically feminine. By the early nineteenth century, swooning is often stigmatised as a spectacular display of morbidly excessive feminine sensibility, which leads writers such as Jane Austen to take an anti-swoon position. In my third chapter, I consider writers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries who incorporate the sickly, feminine symbolism of the swoon into their work in order to challenge masculinist narratives of health and power. I consider the work of Keats, Poe and Joyce and propose the notion of "swoon-aesthetics", whereby the artist is depicted as emerging into a radically transformed world following a swooning epiphany. In my fourth chapter, I focus on the swoon in vampire literature, positing its threatened terror and erotic excitement as a symbolically feminine immobility. I theorise this queer swooning in relation to "dark ecology", a recent deconstructive denaturing of concepts

of nature. My fifth chapter focuses on bathos as the rhetorical figure of sinking, suggesting that the female-only faints in contemporary erotic fiction might be seen as the bathos of certain radical hopes for the transformation of gender relations. The final part of this thesis is a novella, which imagines the desire to swoon in a contemporary female character, and speculates on what might be at stake in abandoning a fixation on passing out in favour of new models of engagement with the world.

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Abbreviations

MED *Middle English Dictionary* (University of Michigan, 2001), available at
<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/>

OED *The Oxford English Dictionary Online* (Oxford: Oxford University
Press, 2013)

Introduction

Has anyone ever swooned? It might seem perverse to begin a thesis on swooning by questioning its very existence; but by posing this question, I wish to highlight the strange status of the swoon. A number of sources suggest that swooning, seemingly the most extravagant of *bodily* demonstrations, might be constitutively *literary*. One dictionary definition, for example, describes the verb-form as “a *literary* word for faint”.¹ The frequency of swooning as attested to by literature varies enormously at different points in time. The swoon is so ubiquitous in medieval literature, for instance, that Barry Windeatt cautions us to consider whether a swoon is sometimes “not a swoon”.² Windeatt suggests here that the many swoons described in earlier literatures should not be seen as evidence, per se, of a medieval propensity towards frequent unconsciousness: they are not reliable medical records of hazardously frequent passing out. Rather, we might read the swoon at different points in its literary history as evidence of shifting attitudes towards *descriptions* of physical demonstrativeness commensurate with shifting *literary* sensibilities. This is the strange territory into which the literary swoon falls, sinking between bodily action and literary stylisation; between involuntary reaction and studied rhetorical flourish; between private response and public legibility; between feeling and performance; between corporeality and textuality. In this thesis, the swoon will be explored as an event of the body that always also calls for the practice of hermeneutics.³

¹ *The Free Dictionary (by Farlax)*, available online at <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/swoon>: “1. (Medicine / Pathology) a literary word for faint”.

² Barry Windeatt, “The Art of Swooning in Middle English” in *Medieval Latin and Middle English Literature: Essays in Honour of Jill Mann* (eds Christopher Cannon and Maura Nolan) (Cambridge, D.S. Brewer, 2011), p.211.

³ I draw here on some of the analyses made in respect of blushing, a “somatic testimony” given considerably more attention in recent criticism than swooning. See, for example, Mary Ann O’Farrell’s *Telling Complexions: The Nineteenth-Century Novel and the Blush* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997), where she describes the blush as “an event of the body ... And as an act of interpretation” (p.4).

The swoon and gender acquisition

“How to interpret the cultural difference that is swooning goes to the heart of the perennial question of how to evaluate texts now far removed in time,”⁴ Windeatt suggests. This thesis gives new perspectives on that “perennial question” through an attentiveness to changes in the writing and reading of swooning over time and across genres. One of the key “cultural differences” that will be addressed here is the relation of gender to evocations of the swooning body. Modern readers might expect the swoon to be particularly associated with depictions of the female body. I begin my study in the medieval period, however, when knights and ladies swoon with equal regularity. In my first chapter, “Heart-Stopped Transformations: Swooning in Late Medieval Literature”, I revisit the most critically-reviewed swoon of that period: the swoon of Geoffrey Chaucer’s “weldy” knight, Troilus. To expect swooning to be feminine in this period is anachronistic: but it is an instructive anachronism, because it highlights the “extravagant trajectory”⁵ that the swoon has travelled since the medieval period in terms of becoming symbolically feminine. By paying attention to the differences between swooning in the literature of the Middle Ages and in later periods, we might see through a new lens some of the ways in which gender has been fantasised and narratively constructed at different points in time. The critic Gretchen Mieszkowski has suggested the mid-eighteenth century as the crucial period during which swooning undergoes a process of gender acquisition: swooning emerges by the end of the eighteenth century as a symbolically feminine activity. My second chapter, “Feeling Too Much: The Swoon and the (In)Sensible Woman”, focuses on this process, suggesting that the cult of sensibility *feminised* swooning, which was consequently stigmatised as a morbid susceptibility to disease, to seduction and to radicalism. Mieszkowski argues that after the eighteenth century men seldom swoon in literature. In my third chapter I challenge this assertion, attempting to demonstrate that whilst the swoon may by this point have become *symbolically* feminine, male swooning continues to be deployed by influential

⁴ Windeatt, *op cit.*, p.230

⁵ The critic Gretchen Mieszkowski describes the “extravagant trajectory” that passive loving and swooning simultaneously undergo, in order to acquire “feminine gender between the fourteenth and twentieth centuries. Behaviours that had been appropriate for men as well as women in medieval romance turned into evidence of male effeminacy”: “Revisiting Troilus’s Faint” in Tison Pugh and Marcia Smith Marzec (eds), *Chaucer Studies XXXVIII: Men and Masculinities in Chaucer’s Troilus and Criseyde* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2008), pp.43–57 at p.54.

writers up to the early twentieth century, particularly those writers who attempt to unsettle certain masculine hierarchies of power. In, “‘Dead-born’: Swoon-Aesthetics and the (Re)Birth of the Artist”, I consider swoons in the writing of John Keats, Edgar Allan Poe and James Joyce, suggesting that they are used as metaphors for the process of artistic transformation, a process that deliberately incorporates the symbolically feminine in order to challenge the privileges of “men of power”. In my fourth chapter, “Vampiric Swoons and Dark Ecology”, I highlight the ability of the vampire in literature to make female *and* male characters swoon, suggesting that the vampiric swoon is a decidedly queer affair: it connotes feminine immobility and a potentially fatal langour in female and male victims alike. Erotophobia is a key concept here, defined as “the fear of and fascination with a feminized state”.⁶ I read *Dracula* (1897) as a spectacular example of erotophobia effected through swooning states. Dracula threatens *all* of his victims with the desire to swoon, to be subject to a languorous ecstasy; and this in turn might seem dangerously close to *desiring* a “feminized state”. The possibility of passive masculine states here is a source of terror, which nevertheless betrays an erotic fascination. In my fifth chapter, “Bathetic Masochism: *Fifty Shades of Grey* and the Art of Feminine Sinking”, I consider contemporary representations of swooning in popular erotic fiction, where the power of the vampiric swoon⁷ to make everyone faint is commuted into the eroticisation of the girls-only swoon. Here, falling back will be seen as an act of temporal regression and gender nostalgia: the swoon in EL James’ trilogy is a bathetic sinking back towards travestied versions of historical (feminine) literary faints. In the final part of this thesis, “Hartshorn”, I extrapolate from this eroticisation of the feminine swoon in a piece of fiction that imagines the desire to pass out in a contemporary female character. The central character is entranced by an idealised version of the swoon, and a consequent glamorisation of female incapacity. She tries to obsessively re-enact a primal scene of swooning provided by her dead mother. The bathetic conclusion of this novella suggests an imaginative move away from the veneration of the swoon towards different modes of oceanic experience. Finally, it suggests new patterns of feminine influence to break the swooning obsession, and to allow for vigorous feminine engagement with the world, rather than a passing out of it.

⁶ Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), p.137.

⁷ *Fifty Shades of Grey*, as is well know, originally started life as a piece of *Twilight* fan-fiction, so has a close relationship to the continuing power of vampire narratives in our contemporary culture.

Transforming swoons

Throughout this thesis, descriptions of the swooning body will be frequently associated with the possibility of transformation. Through medieval and Old English etymologies, we can trace the close connection between swooning and dying. The revival from a swoon in literature therefore symbolically offers the possibility of revival into new life. This makes swooning a common trope in medieval religious allegory; it suggests the new spiritual life that might come from death. And the swoon is also used by later writers to depict an overwhelming of the subject that might lead to radical communal transformation. The work of Leo Bersani, and his theorisations of masochism as an overwhelming of the subject as the precursor to new communal modes of being, will be of recurrent interest in this thesis in relation to the lying-low of the swoon.

In my third chapter I consider the swoon as a metaphor for artistic regeneration in the work of nineteenth and early twentieth-century writers. Suggesting certain continuities between Keats and Joyce, I propose that their work might be read as constituting a “swoon-aesthetics”. This term would refer back to the divided or duplicated nature of the swoon as previously described: a swoon-aesthetics might depict the bodily act of swooning; but it also posits the swoon as an inherently aesthetic experience. For Keats and Joyce, the swoon is the beginning of aesthetic response: it represents the transformation of the person into the poet, and of the layman into the extra-sensory perceiver. The swoon is crucial to these writers as part of an attempt to reconfigure how we perceive the world, and as a way of figuring the possibility of transformation. The swoon is therefore central to their conception of a radical poetics.

But if the swoon has often offered the radical possibility of revival into a renovated world, it also risks the possibility of the hope in new life being disappointed. We might think here of the word “dismay” and its close relation to the Spanish “*desmayo*”, meaning to swoon, and to the Portuguese “*desmaio*”, “a fainting fit.”⁸ A swoon might lead to dismay. Or it might be a disappointment in the sense of one French term for swooning, “*la défaillance*”, meaning both to fail and to faint. It might be a loss of resolution that is never recovered; and it might lead to death, if it is mistaken for a permanent state. And here we are drawn towards the macabre possibility of the swoon leading to live burial, a deadly potential exploited in the taphephobic fiction of Poe (see

Chapter Three). In a less sensational sense, swooning might always risk the disappointment of hope that Alexander Pope (1727) famously satirised as the downward trajectory of “Peri Bathos, Or the Art of Sinking in Poetry”. Keston Sutherland has recently expounded bathos as “what is fallen to ... what is sunk to. ... the *absolute value* fixed at the bottom ... the absolute destitution of truth or beauty”.⁹ This sense of bathos is explored in Chapter Five, where I consider the swooning of contemporary romance heroines as a specifically feminine art of sinking that constitutes the bathos of the radical hopes of feminism. Finally, I consider whether, in the early twenty-first century, it is too late to swoon. In a section titled “Passing Out”, I consider some contemporary uses of “swoon” to designate consumer approval, and ask the question: Has swooning now been evacuated of its earlier radical potential to suggest transformation? Can it now be anything other than catatonically ironic? The fiction that concludes this thesis imagines an exhausted contemporary feminine obsession with passing out, and hints at what might succeed it.

⁸ See *OED*, “dismay”, sense 1.

⁹ Keston Sutherland, *Stupefaction: A Radical Anatomy of Phantoms* (London, New York, Calcutta: Seagull Press, 2011), pp.176–208.

Chapter One

Heart-Stopped Transformations: Swooning in Late Medieval Literature

“To be true is to be vulnerable to death.”¹⁰

In some of the earliest surviving literary examples of swooning, the swoon’s symbolic power is bound up with the potential it allows for dramatic alteration: for conversion, for renewal, for sudden changes in direction.¹¹ Saints and romance lovers alike are laid low by a swooning that is the low point of a parabola of possible transformation. In this chapter I will describe some instances of the swoon in late medieval literature where it allows for the possibility of radical change at the very brink of life. Swooning will be seen as a phenomenon at the extreme of existence, connoting a dangerous vulnerability to death, for which it is sometimes mistaken. There is a rich vocabulary for swooning during this period, and many of its forms hint at early etymological connections to mortality. The verb form “swelten”, for instance, initially meant “To die, perish” (c.888),¹² but comes by c.1330 also to mean to swoon.¹³ Another common form, “swouen” (c.1250), is derived from the Old English *geswogan* (meaning insensible, or in a swoon), a past participle of *swogan*, which could mean to suffocate.¹⁴ Coming round from a swoon, is also, in some senses, coming back from dying.

The first specific example I focus on in this chapter is a death-straddling swoon in the “Life of Mary Magdalen” (c.1290), where the suggestiveness of swooning as a

¹⁰ Stephen A. Barney, “Troilus Bound” *Speculum: A Journal of Mediaeval Studies* 47(3) (1972), 445–458 at 458.

¹¹ Barry Windeatt, in his survey of medieval swooning, describes the way in which a swoon often “precedes a resolution”, suggesting its power to change the course of events: “The Art of Swooning in Middle English” in Christopher Cannon and Maura Nolan (eds), *Medieval Latin and Middle English Literature: Essays in Honour of Jill Mann* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2011), pp.211–230 at 222.

¹² All dates attested to either in the *OED* or the *MED*.

¹³ Windeatt demonstrates that this early form often occurs ambiguously in doublets with “swounen”, telling us that: “As a cessation of conscious thought, swoons may represent a rehearsal and reminder of a sudden death, and are sometimes mistaken for death: medieval medical writers emphasize the short step that may separate swooning from death.” (*Op cit.*, p.212.)

precursor to the transformation of conversion, a feint of death and resurrection in Christ, can be dramatically seen. I then focus in more detail on the most famously swoony text in medieval literature: Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* (c.1380). Troilus' swoon has been the focus of an enormous amount of criticism in the last twenty years, much of it reflecting a post-medieval correspondence between swooning and femininity, with critics casting aspersions on Troilus' masculinity.¹⁵ I will reconsider the relationship between passivity and passing out in terms of the very different construction of the *gender* of the swoon in these early appearances. As we shall see, in medieval literature swooning is common to both men and women, and is not in conflict with concepts of a masculine loving that is also *passive* in a way that contemporary readers might find surprising. Paying attention to the anachronism of some modern readings will serve to highlight the spectacular way in which the swoon has undergone a process of gender assignment over the past six centuries.¹⁶

Troilus' heart, and the way it is figured as violently overwhelmed in his swoon, will be seen as crucial to the *dangerousness* of swooning in the medieval medical and literary imagination; and to the *pleasure* of the swoon's parabola as part of the torturous delight of courtly love. Swooning will be seen as the bedfellow of other figurations of disequilibrium and physical danger experienced as an overwhelming of the heart: it is contiguous with *falling* in love, love-sickness and heartbreak, for example. And the risk of death, I will argue, is key to the swoon's *thrill* here. To claim that there is a connection between physical risk and eroticism in the literature of this period is not a new assertion. Slavoj Žižek has posited a relationship between courtly romance and personal jeopardy in deliberately anachronistic terms when he tells us that "it is only with the emergence of masochism, of the masochistic couple, towards the end of [the nineteenth century] that we can now grasp the libidinal economy of courtly love".¹⁷ I hope to add something new to this account by reading the dangerousness of swooning in

¹⁴ The *OED* gives the first definition of this word as: "To make a rushing, rustling, or murmuring sound" (c.949); whereas the *Free Dictionary* makes this diminution of sound correspondent to diminution of breath through suffocation: see <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/swoon> [Accessed August 20, 2013].

¹⁵ Judith Weiss describes these disparaging responses characterising the swooning Troilus as "unmanly, even emasculated, impotent, helpless and passive. In other words he is supposedly behaving like a woman, or at least a stereotypical one": "Modern and Medieval Views on Swooning: the Literary Contexts of Fainting in Romance" in Rhiannon Purdie and Michael Cichon (eds), *Medieval Romance, Medieval Contexts* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2011), pp.121–134, p.121.

¹⁶ Gretchen Mieszkowski suggests this in her article "Revisiting Troilus's Faint" in Tison Pugh and Marcia Smith Marzec (eds), *Men and Masculinities in Chaucer's Troilus and Criseyde* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2008), pp.43–57, and I will elaborate on this process of gender acquisition in my next chapter.

¹⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman and Causality* (London: Verso, 1994), p.84.

the context of theorisations which describe masochism as a potential *transformation* of the subject. A version of masochism as inundation will be seen to chime with the literary swoon in privileging a *moment of possible undoing*. The radical claims made in the work of Leo Bersani in this respect will be considered alongside the pleasures of medieval literary suffering and a rendering of the erotic through the swoon. I will represent Troilus' swoon as the demonstration of a vulnerability he *shares* with Criseyde under the erotic charge of physical risk, and I will posit a swooning reciprocity between the lovers: a reciprocal attraction to the possibility of mutual overwhelming. In so doing, I will also suggest a new way to amplify the swoon in order to read the larger trajectories of transformation in the poem. Tragedy, I will suggest, develops when the vulnerability of the swoon, as a moment of possibility, is transmuted into Criseyde's steely pragmatism and Troilus' final upwards ascent towards religious fixity.

Saintly swooning in the "Life of Mary Magdalen"

The "Life of Mary Magdalen" is one of the saintly biographies collected in the *Early South English Legendary* of approximately 1290, and gives us some of the earliest surviving Middle English examples of swooning. This hagiography exists in several different early manuscript forms and the legend of Mary Magdalen may be from an earlier source than most of the rest of the *Legendary*,¹⁸ hinting backwards towards ancient, unrecovered traditions laced with the legendary power of swooning.¹⁹ In the version of Mary's life we have recorded in this compilation, saint "Marie" is a beautiful woman, "fair"²⁰ beyond compare. But she is also "sunful and forlein [unchaste]"²¹; Marie is full of pride, and when she inherits a third of her parents' estate she wishes to

¹⁸ Manfred Görlach, who has done the most authoritative research on the textual history of the *South English Legendary*, claims that the Mary Magdalen account is possibly a much earlier poem that was inserted "as an emergency measure of the 'L' compiler who, not finding a legend of the important saint in his defective exemplar, adapted the heterogeneous text to the style of the *SEL* collection" (*The Textual Tradition of the South English Legendary* (Leeds: University of Leeds, 1974), pp.181–82).

¹⁹ There are numerous earlier examples of French descriptions of swooning, many of which are described by Weiss, *op cit.* But Windeatt suggests that swooning reaches a peak in the medieval period, in excess of anything that may have preceded it: "It is not hard to find cases where instances of swooning were added to medieval versions of stories from earlier times and different cultures, and these cases might be presented as evidence that demonstrative sensibility is more pleasing to medieval taste than to taste before or since": *op cit.*, p.224.

²⁰ All my references will be to the version of the text edited by Sherry L. Reames, "Early South English Legendary Life of Mary Magdalen" in *Middle English Legends of Women Saints* (Kalamazoo, Michigan: Medieval Institute Publications, [c.1290] 2003) ("*SEL*"), and my translations will be based on the ones provided in the notes thereto: line 63.

²¹ *SEL*, line 6.

adorn herself yet more exquisitely. The more beautiful she becomes, the narrator tells us, the more foolish.²² She pursues the desires of her flesh²³ and lies with rich men for great reward,²⁴ until her proper name is erased and she becomes known to all as “Sunfole wumman”.

The decisive change from sinner to saint occurs after Marie’s first encounter with “Jhesu”. Marie approaches Jesus unbidden, kisses his feet, bathes them in her tears and dries them with her hair. She is absolved of her sins and becomes a bold and devoted evangelist of Christ. After Christ’s Passion, the *Legendary* tells us, Christians are forced to flee from persecution in Jewish lands. Marie boards a ship and they are blown to Marseilles. Here Marie sets about evangelising and petitioning for support, as the Christian group are destitute and close to starving. She encounters a rich “Sarazen” prince and princess, who have travelled to Marseilles with their retinue. The prince listens to her preach, because of her great beauty, but gives the Christians nothing. Marie presses her case with the princess, and the prince then asks for a proof of Marie’s teachings. That night the princess conceives a long-hoped-for son, and the prince and princess immediately convert to Christianity. They set out on a pilgrimage across the Mediterranean, but are soon beset by storms: “The se bigan to flowen [surge], and the wawes for to arise/ Some bigonne to swounen, and heore heortene sore agrise [their hearts were afraid].”²⁵ The verb form of “swounen” is used here to describe falling into unconsciousness in the midst of the surging sea. The imagery of the waves rising and threatening to overwhelm the boat makes the consequent “to swoon” dependent on an apprehension of being imminently overwhelmed. This version of “to swoon” is also proximate with a figuration of the heart (“heortene”) as the receptacle of strong, potentially overwhelming, feeling—in this case fear. As the sea rises, and the wind blows yet more strongly, the princess is forced to her bed, taken there by fierce contractions.²⁶ Once there, she swoons often, we are told, and suffers keenly: “Heo swounede ful ilomeliche and harde pinede tharefore.”²⁷ To swoon is now the response to the inundation of birth pangs, to the “ful strongue throwes” of birth. “Throwes”, with its suggestion of violent and uncontrollable convulsion, links the experience of giving

²² “So more fairere that heo bicam, the more of hire was prys,/ The more fol womman heo wax, and sunful and unwys.” *Ibid.*, lines 64–65.

²³ “[H]ire flechses wille”; *ibid.*, line 51.

²⁴ “Manie riche men hire leighen bi and geven hire gret mede”; *ibid.*, line 54.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, lines 351–2.

²⁶ “Ase the quiene on hire bedde lay, hire token ful strongue throwes”; *ibid.*, line 354.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, line 355.

birth, and the swoon it frequently occasions, to the agony of death, to the “death-throe”.²⁸

The princess must swoon, the narrator tells us, “So forto that hire youngue sone were of hure ibore.”²⁹ But at the moment the child is born, “the moder bigan to deye”.³⁰ The infant is born into lamentation, bereft of his mother and of any other provider of milk. The ship’s men request that the dead princess be thrown into the sea, believing that keeping her cadaver aboard might prolong the storm. But the prince pleads for a stay, for the sake of his son: “Spariez for mi luytel sone, so that he mouwe habbe is lyf./ For yif is moder mouwe yuyt of hire suoweningue awake,/ Thanne may mi luytel sone to hire tete take.”³¹ The prince’s hope, then, is that this apparent death is, rather, the princess’s “suoweningue”, and here we are given the swoon as noun form. This form may, in fact, be the oldest, as the *OED* tells us that “to swounen” could be a back-formation, a shortened verb-form implied backwards from this noun. This early form of swooning, then, connects the experience of being overwhelmed, and the concomitant possibility of death, with the chiasmatic idea of revival. “To swounen” in the face of the potentially overwhelming waves is a condition from which the men recover. The princess’s “suoweningue”, hopes the prince, might similarly be a counterfeit of death, a temporary overwhelming from which she will revive. This chimes with contemporary versions of swooning which are to be found in the French *Chansons de geste*. In these heroic tales, Judith Weiss tells us: “Swooning is never a symptom of weakness or effeminacy: rather, where it is not a sign of religious ecstasy it is a recognised response to overwhelming grief or physical pain, sympathetically received; it is closely associated with death, which on occasion is mistaken for it.”³² The Prince hopes that just such a mistake is being made. But eventually he is persuaded to be parted from the princess’s body. He spies a hill from the ship, upon which he lays her and the infant he is unable to feed, entrusting them to “Jhesu Crist”.

The prince successfully makes his pilgrimage to Rome and is baptised. On his passage back to Marseille he passes the point where he has left his wife and child. The ship comes in to land, and he climbs the hill to see their bodies, finding them in repose.

²⁸ The *OED* gives the earliest use of “throwe” for the pain and struggle of birth as 1250, and for the “death-struggle” as 1300.

²⁹ *SEL*, line 365.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, line 366.

³¹ *Ibid.*, lines 374–6.

³² Weiss, *op cit.*, p.123.

He prays to “swete Marie Maudeleine” that he might see his wife’s body quicken, that she might stir again. And at his words:

his wif bigan to wake,
Of a swume heo schok and braid, and sone bigan awake,
And seide, “The hende Marie Maudeleyne, heo hath igive me space,
Fram dethe to live heo havez me ibrought thoru hire Loverdes grace.”³³

The princess shakes and starts out of her “swume”. This variant form figures the swoon as a spell of time in which Marie has miraculously brought the princess from death to life, through the Lord’s grace. The swoon here, then, comes to stand for religious renewal and transformation, as a way to figure the new life in “Crist” that might come from a symbolic death. It is particularly fitting that this early swooning binds together childbirth, apparent death and spiritual rebirth, given that the most familiar exemplar of swooning for medieval audiences would come to be, by the fourteenth century, the Virgin Mary during the Passion.³⁴ Weiss posits the flourishing of the swoon during and after the twelfth century as the result of a rise in “approved emotional behaviour in both secular and religious contexts”,³⁵ memorably described by Linda Georgianna as the “cult of tears”.³⁶ This emotional valency will come to be exhibited in popular depictions of Mary’s *compassio*, her strenuous weeping and fainting at the foot of the cross. Mary’s sympathetic swoon is “a sign of strength: the Virgin, by fainting ... shares Christ’s suffering and death: it is like a labour which gives birth to the eternal Church”.³⁷ The belief in Mary’s swoon persisted in the absence of any Biblical authority, and Barry Windeatt suggests that “the reference in Revelation 12.1–2 to ‘a woman clothed with the sun’ who ‘being with child cried, travailing in birth, and pained to be delivered’ might be adduced in support of the tradition that those labour pangs that Mary was spared at the miraculous birth of Christ were experienced instead in labour-like agonies of empathetic *compassio* for her son’s Passion, which came to include swooning”.³⁸ The tale of Saint Marie anticipates this tradition, bringing birth pangs and swooning together in an experience of overwhelming agony that might nevertheless

³³ *SEL*, lines 486–9.

³⁴ Windeatt, *op cit.*, p.213.

³⁵ Weiss, *op cit.*, p.123.

³⁶ Linda Georgianna, *The Solitary Self: Individuality in the Ancrene Wisse* (London and Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1981), pp.91 et seq.

³⁷ Weiss, *ibid.*, citing Amy Neff, “The Pain of *Compassio*: Mary’s Labor at the Foot of the Cross” *Art Bulletin* 80 (1980), 254–73 at 265.

produce new spiritual life.³⁹ The rich suggestiveness of swooning as a metaphor that implies both the possibility of death,⁴⁰ as the full extent of being overwhelmed, and the opportunity for revival and transformation at the very brink, is demonstrated here. It is this suggestiveness that later medieval allegories deploy when they continue to imagine great moments of spiritual ecstasy, vision and transition through the swoon.⁴¹

The swoon and self-shattering suffering in Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*

"While many different strong emotions incite faints in ... medieval literature," Gretchen Mieszkowski has recently written, "the most usual precipitator is love. Secular love allegories combine wounds with swoons⁴² to express at once falling in love and visionary insight into the heart of things."⁴³ It is in this context that I now turn to swooning's richness as a figuration of dramatic transformation in medieval romance.⁴⁴ The most-remarked-upon swoon in medieval literature is the collapse of the sort of character we moderns might least expect to feel faint: the celebrated warrior of the Trojan war, Troilus of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde* (c.1380).⁴⁵ And this apparent incongruity might go some way to account for the amount of modern critical attention

³⁸ Windeatt., *op cit.*, p.213.

³⁹ One might also think here also of the much more modern, and theologically eccentric, "Swoon Hypothesis", the name given to a number of theories that, since the end of the 18th century, have attempted to explain Christ's resurrection as his awakening from a swoon.

⁴⁰ The swoon is also during this period often figured as a *response to*, as well as an approach towards, death: "The grief and shock of confronting another's death and of mourning over a body is conveyed so frequently through swooning that such body language becomes a stock response." (Windeatt, *op cit.*, p.218.)

⁴¹ To name a couple of the most famous instances of this: William Langland's *The Vision of Piers Plowman* [c.1360–1387], is a swough of different swoons (Christ swoons on the cross, and Hawkin, the Active Man, swoons over his guilty soul; even Sloth swoons); and *Pearl* (c. late 14th century) concludes with a swoon. See Windeatt, *op cit.* and Weiss, *op cit.*, for many more examples.

⁴² This combination is made more explicit in the later word "swound", which the *OED* dates to c.1440.

⁴³ Mieszkowski, *op cit.*, p.49. Weiss argues that, "[w]ith the appearance of the *romans antiques* [the 12th century northern French romances of antiquity]... the phenomenon of fainting by both men and women is well-established and is clearly meant to denote an accepted response to strong emotion" (*op cit.*, p.124); but, she suggests, these emotions are initially connected to grief and not romance. It is with the *Roman d'Enéas* and in the figure of Dido that "fainting has for the first time a close association with love ... while continuing its connection death" (p.125).

⁴⁴ *Troilus and Criseyde* is difficult to classify in terms of genre; Molly A. Martin, for instance, tells us that despite Chaucer's indebtedness to the romance tradition, his text is not classifiable completely, or even primarily, as a romance, but should rather be seen as a play of different genres ("Troilus's Gaze and the Collapse of Masculinity in Romance" in Pugh and Marzec, *op cit.*, pp.132–147). I generally refer to it as a romance here, with an awareness of these complications.

⁴⁵ Geoffrey Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde* in Larry D. Benson (general ed.), *The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd edn (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, [c.1380] 1988) ("*Troilus*"). All future references will be to this version.

this swoon has attracted. Jill Mann's seminal article on "Troilus' Swoon"⁴⁶ cautions us that Troilus swoons only once in Chaucer's poem: "It is important to be reminded of this fact," she writes, "because this isolated instance is sometimes casually multiplied and generalised, as if it were a frequent testimony to the emotional intensity of Troilus' love... it is also largely responsible for the popular impression of Troilus as a passive and ineffectual lover."⁴⁷ Mann's article seeks to singularise this "multiplied" swoon, and to downplay its status. She sees Troilus' swoon as just one part of what she describes as Chaucer's "proces" of love, an idealised account of the "miraculous fusion of the two wills into one, so that it is no longer possible to say whose will is dominant and whose is subjected".⁴⁸ In my reading of *Troilus*, I seek to challenge this understanding of "proces" as a clean version of parity, instead proposing that eroticism in the poem is charged by a shared exposure to different risks. The swoon will be seen as the most emphatic dramatisation of Troilus' propensity to love sickness, to physical disintegration and to ecstatic self-shattering; and, I will argue, this propensity is erotically met by Criseyde's vulnerabilities and by her *mutual swoon*. I will argue that Criseyde's swoon⁴⁹ and its concomitant danger of death is over-looked by much criticism that takes the orthodox line that Criseyde is continually bent on steely self-preservation. Paying attention to her swoon, alongside the text's positioning of her as prone to violation, I suggest a new reading of erotic love in *Troilus and Criseyde* as a rendering of mutual physical vulnerability.

We might begin by remembering the importance of Troilus' swoon to the structure of Chaucer's poem. The Trojan war was a favourite subject matter for medieval writers, and of the many sources Chaucer had available to him, the overriding influence was Boccaccio's narrative poem *Il Filostrato*.⁵⁰ Boccaccio's work distinguishes itself from earlier sources in making the story of Troilus and Criseyde its main subject, and it

⁴⁶ Jill Mann, "Troilus' Swoon" *The Chaucer Review* 14 (1980), 319–335.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.* at 319.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.* at 324.

⁴⁹ Again, this may be due to our post-Medieval conceptions of gender: Weiss suggests that criticism has been guilty "of not taking swoons by women into account: precisely because they are thought an action so characteristic of women, they can be ignored" (*op cit.* at 122).

⁵⁰ See Barry Windeatt's "Introduction" to his translation of *Troilus and Criseyde* (Oxford, New York: Oxford World's Classic, Oxford University Press, 1998), p.xvi. Here he tells us that *Filostrato* was evidently in front of Chaucer as he worked on *Troilus*, with the structure often matching Boccaccio's stanza for stanza. The narrator of Chaucer's *Troilus* claims that he is the translator of his sources, although the only author mentioned is the mysterious and almost certainly apocryphal "Lollius" rather than Boccaccio (p.xvii).

imagines the lovers' meeting before the point of separation, the moment at which previous accounts had begun the tale. The title of Boccaccio's work might be translated literally as, *Laid Prostrate by Love*, or, perhaps more elegantly, *The One Overwhelmed by Love*.⁵¹ The idea of Troilus being laid out by love, of him being inundated and overwhelmed, is therefore crucial to Chaucer's main source. Boccaccio's account describes Troilus swooning at a moment of high drama: the point at which he hears that Criseyde is to be exchanged for a Trojan prisoner, Antenor, and is therefore to be removed from Troy. Chaucer's poem, however, moves the swoon to an entirely different point in the narrative: in *Troilus and Criseyde* it occurs immediately before the point of consummation, which is at the centre point of the total number of lines of the poem, around which the narrative rises and falls.⁵² Chaucer's deliberate movement of the swoon to this position in the narrative gives it particular prominence and makes the swoon crucial to how we understand the consummation between the two lovers and Chaucer's poetic vision as distinct from Boccaccio's.

We are introduced by Chaucer to a Troilus who is hubristically certain of himself and his imperviousness to love: he is a "worthy kynges son"⁵³ who dismisses lovers as foolish and blind; he believes himself to be in full self-possession, knowing of nothing with the power to move his heart against his will.⁵⁴ And yet, with one look at Criseyde, the "God of Love" afflicts him so that he feels as though his heart is on fire⁵⁵: Troilus is in a moment's glance knocked down from his elevated position, and the language he uses to describe himself now depicts him as the prostrate humble servant, the subject, the enslaved.⁵⁶ The reversal is further symbolised in the *Canticus Troili* in which Troilus metaphorically resigns his royal position and privilege to Criseyde: "For myn estat roial I here resigne/ Into hire hond, and with ful humble chere/ Bicomme hir man, as to my lady dere."⁵⁷ This is the basis for Mann's argument that there is a transformation of the relative power positions of Troilus and Criseyde as part of Chaucer's "proces" of love.⁵⁸ Whilst the dynamics of power and agency are clearly of

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.xvi.

⁵² There are 1,117 seven-line stanzas, with the lovers' union occurring at the centre of the total lines of the poem, as Windeatt has pointed out; *ibid.*, p.ix.

⁵³ *Troilus* I.226.

⁵⁴ "And wende nothing hadde had swich myght, Ayeys his wille that shuld his herte sterve"; *ibid.* I.227–228.

⁵⁵ "Yet with a look his herte was a-fere" (*ibid.* I.224).

⁵⁶ He is "sodeynly moost subgit unto love" (*ibid.* I.231); the freedom his heart is now "to hym [Love's] thralle" (*ibid.* I.235).

⁵⁷ *Ibid.* I.422–434.

⁵⁸ Mann, *op cit.*, at 324.

interest here, Mann describes a highly utopic equalising of social power between man and woman, between privileged and dispossessed. Troilus never gives up his royal or social advantage over Criseyde, or his position as dominant character in the poem. The crucial reversal is, instead, the dominance of Troilus' own will as opposed to the will of the "God of Love". Troilus submits to Love, rather than to Criseyde, who has, after all, asked nothing of him.

One startling aspect of Troilus' first sight of Criseyde, and his symbolic fall from self-possession, is the sense of physical danger that accompanies it, a danger that is at the heart of the medieval concept of love. When Criseyde looks at Troilus, "sodeynly hym thoughte he felte dyen,/ Right with hire look, the spirit in his herte".⁵⁹ This is the beginning of the remarkable depiction in the poem of Troilus' love as a matter of life and death. The death of the "spirit in his herte" can be understood in terms of the Galenic approach to physiology that was prevalent in the Middle Ages. Galen, a Greek physiologist (c.AD 200) whose influence on anatomy remained unsurpassed for nearly 1,400 years, often invoked the theory of *complexio*, or temperament: the balance of the elementary qualities of hot, wet, cold and dry in the body.⁶⁰ Each organ of the body was thought to have its own complexional quality, with the ideal complexion being temperate and imbalance thought to cause sickness. Alongside the complexions, the body was imagined to be composed of other "things natural" which included "humors, members, virtues, operations and *spiritus*".⁶¹ *Spiritus* was supposedly a substance manufactured in the heart and transmitted through the body via the arteries, closely resembling the Greek concept of *pneuma*, a breath-like vital force.⁶² So when we are told that Troilus feels as though his heart is on fire, dangerously affected by extraneous heat, and that he thinks the spirit of his heart is dying with Criseyde's look, this suggests that his apprehension of love is concomitant with an apprehension of physiological peril. It is extraordinary to the modern reader the extent to which Troilus conceives of and petitions for love in terms of the precariousness of his health, or "hele". In the early stages of his ardour, before proclaiming his love, Troilus wishes for Criseyde's pity, "er that I deyde!" and "hele ... And lif is lost".⁶³ His love is described

⁵⁹ *Troilus* I.306–7.

⁶⁰ See, for example, Galen's *On the Affected Parts* (c. late 2nd century A.D.). I am indebted to Nancy G. Siraisi for her summary of Galenic medicine: *Medieval and Early Renaissance Medicine* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press: 1990).

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p.101.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p.107.

⁶³ *Troilus* I.459–462.

as manifesting like a sickness: he is sleep deprived, food becomes his enemy and he looks decidedly peaky: “He seyde he hadde a fevere and ferde amys [felt unwell].”⁶⁴ When Pandarus petitions Criseyde on Troilus’ behalf, the matter is presented to her as the possibility for her to prevent the death of a virtuous man. The threat is then escalated to become the possible deaths of both Troilus and Pandarus if she refuses Troilus’ ardour: “But if ye late hym deyen, I wol sterve [die] ... What mende ye, though we booth appaire [should perish]?”⁶⁵ Criseyde is repeatedly figured as the “cure” for Troilus’ affliction, the cure, even, for death: “Lo, here his life, and from the deth his cure!”⁶⁶ And when she is finally persuaded to visit Troilus in his chamber at night it is because Pandarus exhorts her, twice, not to be so foolish as to put Troilus’ life in jeopardy by letting him endure a night of jealousy.⁶⁷ Barry Windeatt, in his introduction to his translation of the work, writes of the tradition of love as a sickness allowing Chaucer to play with the ironies of illnesses feigned and real; but, Windeatt reminds us, this is “always veined with seriousness, since some medieval medical writings did indeed recognise the lover’s malady as a form of illness ... the intensity of the most important emotional transitions and experiences is throughout associated with the extremity of death”.⁶⁸ Marcia Smith Marzec reiterates this point, suggesting that the love malady, which is sometimes merely a literary convention, is here posited as a “literal fact”⁶⁹; the “symptoms of courtly love in Troilus correspond to medieval understanding of the incapacitation caused by the disease *amor heros*”.⁷⁰ We might think of later definitions of lovesickness proceeding from the idea of being overwhelmed that is endemic to Chaucer’s description of love and its concomitant swoon: the *OED*, for instance, gives an early example of lovesick as “*Overwhelmed* by (esp. unrequited or unfulfilled) love” in the *Partonope of Blois* (1450), where a woman is described surrounded by suffering: “Love-syke She was... Grete greef She felt all aboute.”⁷¹

⁶⁴ *Ibid.* I.491.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* II.323, 329.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.* I.319–29.

⁶⁷ “Ye ben to wys to doon so gret folie,/ To putte his lif al nyght in jupertie” (*Ibid.* III.867–8); and then again “his lif al nyght in jupertie” (III.876).

⁶⁸ Windeatt, *op cit.*, p.xxiv.

⁶⁹ Marcia Smith Marzec, “What makes a Man? Troilus, Hector, and the Masculinities of Courtly Love,” in Pugh and Marzec, *op cit.*, pp.58–72.

⁷⁰ Here she cites Charlotte Otten, “The Love-Sickness of Troilus,” in Leigh Arrathoon (ed.), *Chaucer and the Craft of Fiction* (Rochester, MI: Solaris, 1986), pp.22–33 at 22–23.

⁷¹ Weiss, *op cit.*, p.129, argues that Mary Wack’s *Love Sickness in the Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: 1990) has been too influential on many critics, who are keen to see the swoon as directly implicated in *amor heros*: “the symptoms of *amor heros* in these and other medical authors do not include fainting”.

The coincidence of desire and disease; a profound longing that works through the collaboration of body and mind to produce extreme disequilibrium; the concomitant risk of fatality: these are the dangerous states that are most dramatically expressed in Troilus' swoon. We might see the various prostrate states in which Troilus is presented in the earlier stages of the narrative as building up towards the physical crisis of his swoon. When Pandarus encourages Troilus to take him into his confidence about his love of Criseyde, Troilus initially says not a word: "But longe he ley as styll as he ded were".⁷² His eyes are cast up in his head, so that Pandarus fears he will "in frensie ... falle, or elles soone dye".⁷³ Troilus here seems close to some kind of fatal fit. Pandarus tries to rouse him: "What! Slombrestow as in a litergie?"⁷⁴ Litergie here connotes a more serious state of lethargy than we might now imagine, which the *Middle English Dictionary* describes as "a disease characterized by prolonged unconsciousness or coma". Pandarus is a pragmatist in the game of love, one who threatens his own death with a sort of playful cynicism, and similarly threatens to swoon as part of his love parley with Criseyde (he cannot repeat all of Troilus' sorrowful words to Criseyde, else "ye wol se me swowne"⁷⁵). But for Troilus, the threat of death functions as more than an elaborate play to win his lady's affection. The swoon will become the demonstration of the physical jeopardy love has placed him in.

And so to the central swoon in question: Pandarus has finally manoeuvred Criseyde into Troilus' chamber, through the fabrication of a story about Troilus' great jealousy. This story has been concocted without Troilus' knowledge or consent, and when he realises how upset his imputed jealousy has made Criseyde, he fears that all is lost. With each tear that Criseyde sheds, "wel he felte aboute his herte crepe, ... The crampe of deth to streyne hym by the herte."⁷⁶ The importance of the heart is emphasised here in its repetition. The beginning of the swoon is the creeping cramp of death, which clutches Troilus' heart. He feels he is as good as dead ("He felte he nas but deed").⁷⁷ He protests he is not to blame for the situation and then his heart begins to effect the swoon proper:

However, these symptoms do include changes in the heart, key to Chaucer's description of the mechanism of the swoon, which justifies my conjunction of the swoon and lovesickness here.

⁷² *Troilus* I.722.

⁷³ *Ibid.* I.727–8.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.* I.730.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.* II.574.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.* III.1063–5.

Therwith the sorwe so his herte shette
 That from his eyen fil there nought a tere,
 And every spirit his vigour in knette,
 So they astoned or oppressed were.
 The felyng of his sorwe, or of his fere,
 Or of aught elles, fled was out of towne;
 And down he fel al sodeynly a-swowne.⁷⁸

The swoon's physiological onset is described here as a totalising contraction beginning in the heart. The heart shuts tightly; Troilus' tears are stopped up inside him; the vital spirits, essential for the function of the organs and the humors, are contracted in their force, as though stunned or overcome; all feeling flees. And then Troilus swoons. Windeatt tells us that even given the ubiquity of the swoon in medieval literature, Chaucer here gives us an "unusually scientifically aware" depiction of the onset of a swoon.⁷⁹ The close relation of the swoon here to the idea of syncope, the failure of the heart's action resulting in loss of consciousness and possible death, is striking: this swoon is most definitely a matter of the heart.⁸⁰

The prostrate Troilus is immediately thrown onto the bed by Pandarus and finally awakens from his "swough"⁸¹ after Criseyde's fervent whisperings of forgiveness and plentiful kisses. Both Pandarus and Criseyde chastise him for his being unmanly: "O thef, is this a mannes herte?";⁸² "Is this a mannes game?"⁸³ And there has been a slew of criticism focussing on Troilus' passivity, and the status of his masculinity, largely in relation to his swoon: David Aers, for example, has described Troilus suffering from male-identity performance anxiety⁸⁴; Windeatt describes the swoon as a deflation of male stereotypes⁸⁵; Edward Condren likens Troilus to a Victorian maiden suffering under vapour attack and suggests the swoon is symbolic of the experience of premature ejaculation⁸⁶; elsewhere the swoon is viewed as a response

⁷⁷ *Ibid.* III.1081.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.* III.1086–1092.

⁷⁹ Windeatt, "The Art of Swooning in Middle English" at 227.

⁸⁰ Syncope, now often just taken to mean "faint", also connotes a disturbance to the pattern of the beating heart (as in syncopation): see the *OED*: "Failure of the heart's action, resulting in loss of consciousness, and sometimes in death."

⁸¹ *Troilus* III.1120.

⁸² *Ibid.* III.1098.

⁸³ *Ibid.* III.1126.

⁸⁴ David Aers, *Community, Gender, and Individual Identity: English Writing, 1360–1430* (London: Routledge, 1988), p.129.

⁸⁵ Barry Windeatt, *Oxford Guides to Chaucer: Troilus and Criseyde* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), pp.225–6.

⁸⁶ Edward Condren, "Transcendent Metaphor or Banal Reality: Three Chaucerian Dilemmas" *PLL* 21(3) (1985), 233–57 at 248 and 252–54.

to the possibility of impotence.⁸⁷ These positions are summarised by Gretchen Mieszkowski, in her “Revisiting Troilus’s Faint”, and she goes on to posit their profoundly anachronistic assumptions: commentators since the 1990s have focussed on Troilus as effeminate, emasculated, and even impotent, basing their analysis on his “feminine” passivity. Contemporary readers, she suggests, see Troilus as sexually inadequate because they think of “[f]ainting as a behaviour peculiar to women”.⁸⁸ However, twenty-first century readers

will be surprised to learn that there is no basis in medieval literature for reading Troilus’s passivity or his faint as evidence of effeminacy. Neither passive loving nor fainting was identified with women more than with men in the literature of Chaucer’s period.⁸⁹ ... Both men and women faint in medieval literature, heroes in particular faint, and there is nothing unmanly about the act of fainting. “Traunce,” “swelte,” and most often “swouen” in various forms precede “faint” as words for losing consciousness in Middle English, and even a cursory reading of the pronouns in the Middle English Dictionary’s citations for them shows how much more often the swooners are male than female. Some faint because they are wounded in battle, but others faint for strong feelings of all sort: joy, misery, humiliation, remorse, and particularly love.⁹⁰

Mieszkowski goes on to describe the ways in which Troilus’ swoon might be seen as typical courtly behaviour in the context of medieval romance genres. “Being capable of extraordinarily intense, idealising love is an attribute of greatness in these romances, and fainting is a sign of that capacity. By romance convention it is the greatest warriors and the greatest lovers who faint.”⁹¹ And if a medieval audience were likely to consider swooning a sign of emasculation, she argues, Chaucer’s Arcite, Aurelius, and Mars, the romances’ Lancelot, Florimont, Partonopeu, Generydes, Claris, and “other battle-hardened, tournament-winning, giant- and dragon-slaying heroes would not have been depicted fainting”.⁹² We might see the recent critical response to the swoon, then, and its critique of Troilus’ masculinity, as an anachronistic reading that encodes the remarkable transformation of the swoon in terms of its *gender acquisition*. Over the course of six centuries, Mieszkowski suggests, “passive loving became gendered so exclusively female that its earlier stature as a powerful and appropriate form of male

⁸⁷ Maud Burnett McInernay, “‘Is this a mannes herte?’: Unmanning Troilus through Ovidian Allusion” in Peter Beidler (ed.), *Masculinities in Chaucer* (Boydell and Brewer, 1997), pp.221–235, at pp.222–25.

⁸⁸ Mieszkowski, *op cit.*, pp.47–48.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p.44.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.48.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p.50.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p.52.

loving in romance sank out of sight. Male fainting follows a similar but more extravagant trajectory”.⁹³ This “extravagant trajectory” is the focus of my next chapter. But for now, let us return to Troilus’ swoon, with Mieszkowski’s injunction to attend to its medical seriousness and its ethical importance in the context of a romance tradition that rendered it appropriate to a masculine hero. The question of Troilus’ “mannes herte” is one that is raised, Mieszkowski contends, in order to nudge Troilus towards making love to Criseyde, rather than in response to his swoon. The swoon precipitates, rather than undermines, the physical consummation of love; Troilus is suddenly resolved and takes Criseyde in his arms.

At the point in the text where physical consummation between Troilus and Criseyde is achieved, I would like to return to ideas about gender and (dis)empowerment that arise in both Mann and Mieszkowski’s readings of the swoon. As I suggested earlier, Mann’s notion of an equivalence of social and political equality achieved through the “proces” of love seems to me to be an untenably optimistic reading. Mieszkowski, however, offers a more nuanced version of a certain kind of parity that might be proposed in the romance tradition. A sort of equality, she suggests, may reside in the linked experience of passivity and suffering by *both sexes* in the face of Love. Medieval romances lavish attention on the paralysis of male lovers and how excessively they suffer. The male hero is not feminized by this suffering, because “passive loving is not gendered female or male in these stories. ... Romance men and women suffer equal passivity as lovers”.⁹⁴

We might see this kind of parity operating in Chaucer’s text in the pairing of the two lovers’ swoons. Criseyde swoons in Book IV, an episode that is given considerable space in the poem, but has been given disproportionately little critical attention. This is the point at which we discover that Criseyde is to be exchanged with the Greeks for a Trojan prisoner, Antenor, at the request of her father; the full extent of her vulnerability to being traded like a commodity has been realised. When the two lovers next meet, Criseyde asks, in desperation, for Troilus’ help; and then, we are told, she “loste speche”.⁹⁵ Criseyde sinks into her own swoon: she lies as though dead, unresponsive, her limbs cold, her complexion turned pallid and greenish. Troilus can find no trace of breath. All of the risks that have previously attended Troilus’ swoon are attendant upon

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.45, 47.

⁹⁵ *Troilus* IV.1151.

Criseyde here. During the swoon, Criseyde's "spirit" is described as flickering above her, before returning again into her woeful heart. The swoon is once again associated with the vital spirit of the heart, and with the possibility of it fatally fleeing. Troilus lays Criseyde out, "And after this, with sterne cruel herte,/ His swerd anon out of his shethe he twichte/ Hymself to slen".⁹⁶ Criseyde's swoon, and its potential to trigger a death domino-effect, flashes us forward here to its full tragic possibility in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, with Juliet in her "borrowed likeness of shrunk death",⁹⁷ Romeo's quick drugs and the final "happy dagger"⁹⁸ left to rust in Juliet's breast.⁹⁹ In *Troilus*, however, the hero's suicide is averted at the last possible moment: Criseyde revives from her swoon ("of swough therwith sh'abreyde")¹⁰⁰ at the very point when Troilus is poised "With swerd at herte, al redy for to deye."¹⁰¹ The swoon is dramatically positioned as the brink between life and death, with Criseyde and Troilus poised at the very cusp. And *both* Troilus and Criseyde are depicted as subject to this danger.

There have, however, been recent arguments that the poem's particular focus on Troilus' exquisite suffering is the apotheosis of a refined, spiritually-masochistic masculinity which is offered as an elevated and superior alternative to female agency. This is perhaps most persuasively argued in recent work by Holly Croker and Tison Pugh.¹⁰² Troilus' suffering, they claim, is given an extraordinarily privileged position within the text, in excess of what might be expected even within the traditions of courtly tribulation. The importance accorded to the suffering of Troilus, they argue, gives him an elevated position within the poem, and his ordeal "refines even more delicately an elite model of masculinity in which his endurance of pain is identified as a defining experience for the culturally privileged male".¹⁰³ They connect this to the sacrificial

⁹⁶ *Ibid.* IV.1184–6.

⁹⁷ William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*, IV.i line 104 in *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Boston, New York: Houghton Mifflin Co, [1623] 1997).

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, V.iii line 170.

⁹⁹ There has been scattered scholarship on the relationship between Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* and his reading of Chaucer's *Troilus and Criseyde*: see Ann Thompson, who suggests that "the medieval poem was very much in [Shakespeare's] mind if not actually in front of his eyes when he was working on *Romeo and Juliet*" ("Troilus and Criseyde' and 'Romeo and Juliet'" *The Yearbook of English Studies* 6 (1976) 26–37 at 26). Prior to this M.C. Bradbrook suggested: "That the author of *Romeo and Juliet* had learned from the author of *Troilus and Criseyde* would seem to be one of those possibilities not to be measured by the number of detectable parallels. A poet learns his trade not from books of rhetoric but from other poets" ("What Shakespeare Did to Chaucer's *Romeo and Juliet*" *Shakespeare Quarterly* 9(3) (1958), 311–319 at 312).

¹⁰⁰ *Troilus* IV.1212.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.* IV.1211.

¹⁰² Holly A. Crocker and Tison Pugh, "Masochism, Masculinity and the Pleasures of Troilus" in Pugh and Marzec, *op cit.*, pp.82–96.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p.83.

poetics of the text: the elevation of the penalised male form is informed by the visual sacralisation of Christ's pain in the late Middle Ages, so that the "cultural valorization of suffering provides a valuable commentary on masochism's connection to courtly love, for in this rendering of loving sacrifice, it is the bleeding, broken body of the divine that is sublimated."¹⁰⁴ The cultural privilege afforded to Troilus' masochism is, in their formulation, denied to Criseyde as a woman, and it "achieves fixity"¹⁰⁵ for an idealised Troilus through a refined masculine identity. In the end, they suggest, it is Troilus' "self-possession" through his suffering that is the source of his masochistic pleasure, and his final ascendance to the celestial realms represents the apotheosis of his refined, and redemptive, masculine suffering.

Whilst this "immuration" of Troilus' identity is an enlightening reading of the final stages of the poem, I believe it glosses over the earlier possibilities for pleasure in *catastrophic disintegration* and *dispossession* that are posed by the narrative. Crocker and Pugh fleetingly mention the work of Leo Bersani, describing Troilus' experience as an "ecstatic 'shattering' of subjectivity" similar to Bersani's formulation of masochism, which differs from the "eviscerating termination that Freud connects to the so-called 'perversion'".¹⁰⁶ But their insistence on Troilus being "immured", confined or bricked in by his masochism seems to contradict the propensity to shattering that Bersani sees as constitutive of masochism, *and of eroticism*, at least in his early formulations. In *The Freudian Body*¹⁰⁷ Bersani rereads Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*¹⁰⁸ to argue that masochism is constitutionally essential to the development of childhood sexuality. This sexuality, Bersani argues, is the byproduct of experiences when they reach a certain level of *intensity*. Intensity, Bersani tells us, is experienced as a shattering for the infant, and any intensity will be experienced as a sexual pleasure when it is strong enough to shatter a certain stability or equilibrium of the self. Bersani draws here on Jean Laplanche's theory of sexual excitement as an effect of *ébranlement*, of perturbation or shattering. The gap between the "period of shattering

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p.87.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p.86.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁷ Leo Bersani, *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

¹⁰⁸ Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, 7:203 and 233, quoted in *The Freudian Body*, pp.37–38: Freud tells us that, for the infant, "all comparatively intense affective processes, including even terrifying ones [spill over into] sexuality"; and that sexual excitement develops as "a byproduct ... of a large number of processes as they reach of a certain degree of intensity, and most especially of any relatively powerful emotion, even though it is of a distressing nature."

stimuli and the development of resistant or defensive ego structures”¹⁰⁹ is psychically bridged by a strategic masochism, the development of a sexuality that finds pleasure in being shattered. It is in this sense that, “sexuality—at least in the mode in which it is constituted—could be thought of as a tautology for masochism”.¹¹⁰ If sexuality is “constituted as a kind of psychic shattering, as a threat to the stability and integrity of the self”¹¹¹ then Bersani can extrapolate that: “sexuality would be that which is intolerable to the structured self”.¹¹² We are “‘shattered’ into an ego-shattering sexuality”¹¹³ that is a kind of disintegration of the self rather than its triumph.¹¹⁴

Against Crocker and Pugh’s reading of Troilus as “fixed” by his masochistic trajectory, then, I posit the remarkable star-trail of images of Troilus’ shattered body as a means of describing his disintegration rather than his fixity. After discovering that Criseyde is to be removed to the Greek camp, Troilus spirals towards the physical disintegration his love has always threatened: his woe “Out breste [bursts out]”¹¹⁵ of his chest, and he is described as acting like a wild bull pierced through the heart; he flings himself around his chamber, beating his breast with his fists, striking his head against the wall and his body against the floor, “hymselfen to confounde”.¹¹⁶ This is love’s operation, he concludes, to prove its “gerful [unpredictable] violence.”¹¹⁷ When Pandarus visits him, he “gan bresten out to rore”¹¹⁸; he roars out his pain, a violently rupturing expression of his grief and the inevitability of his death. Separated from Criseyde and increasingly jealous of her love, Troilus undergoes a rapid physical decline. He thinks his heart is split in two (“Hym thoughte his sorwful herte braste a-two”).¹¹⁹ The modern metaphor of the broken heart seems anodyne in comparison to Chaucer’s depiction of the heart violently ruptured. When Troilus sleeps, he falls into nightmares that wake him suddenly, and strangely disturb his heart: “And swich a

¹⁰⁹ Bersani, *op cit.*, pp.38–39.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.60.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, p.38.

¹¹³ Bersani, describing in Laplanchian terms his work in *The Freudian Body* in “Sociality and Sexuality” in *Is the Rectum a Grave? And Other Essays* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, [2000] 2010), pp.102–119, at p.108.

¹¹⁴ Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?” in *Is the Rectum a Grave? And Other Essays* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, [1987] 2010), pp.3–30, at p.25.

¹¹⁵ *Troilus* IV.237.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.* IV.245.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.* IV.286.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.* V.530.

tremour fele aboute his herte/ That of the fere his body sholde quake".¹²⁰ He feels himself to be steered towards death, like a boat on a dark sea ("Toward my deth with wynd in steere I saille").¹²¹ Troilus becomes physically unrecognisable, so thin and weak that he walks with a crutch. He is described as violently confounding himself with his anger ("with his ire he thus hymselfe shente")¹²²; when asked what pains him, he explains that "his harm was al aboute his herte".¹²³ He begins to will his own death, wishing that his heart would, irrevocably, break: "Ful ofte a day he bad his herte breste."¹²⁴

Alongside the vulnerability to physical danger which the swoon connotes, then, Troilus is prone to other forms of physical brokenness in the face of Love. And this physical risk is another tender spot which he shares with Criseyde. Troilus' brittle, "breste"-prone heart, susceptible to violent shattering, is, alongside swooning, another important component of a poetics that eroticises mutual exposure to danger and physical disintegration. If we turn back to Criseyde, in particular to the extraordinary images surrounding *her* heart, and to her responses to Troilus' "weldy", knightly manliness, we might see how this mutual propensity to risk continually constitutes their erotic connection, in ways that echo the reciprocity of the swoon.

When Pandarus first presents Troilus' suit, Criseyde's immediate response is fear: she was, "wel neigh starf [dead] for feere"¹²⁵ and she is, we are told, the most fearful person that might be.¹²⁶ Criseyde's fear highlights her precarious situation in Troy. Her father has abandoned the city and defected to the Greek side. Her social position is vulnerable, and the possibility of rape (both in the modern sexual sense and the more ambiguous medieval sense of plunder),¹²⁷ is frequently evoked in the poem. On the morning before Pandarus' visit to Criseyde, he is awoken by birdsong:

That swalowe Progene, with a sorowful lay [song],
Whan morwen come, gan make hire waymentynge [lament]
Whi she forshapen was...

¹²⁰ *Ibid.* V.255–6.

¹²¹ *Ibid.* V.641.

¹²² *Ibid.* V.1123.

¹²³ *Ibid.* V.1125.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.* V.1568.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.* II.449.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.* II.450–1.

¹²⁷ Rape can in the medieval period mean plunder and/or sexual assault: the *MED* gives as one definition "the act of abducting a woman or sexually assaulting her or both".

How Tereus gan forth hire suster take.¹²⁸

It is with the myth of Procne and Philomela, the Greek tale of rape, revenge and metamorphosis, that Pandarus is roused from his sleep and reminded of his task to seduce Criseyde. This is an unsettling reminder of mythologies of sexual violence at the very start of Troilus and Criseyde's courtship, and it echoes darkly through the narrative. Later, when Troilus discovers that Criseyde is to be taken from Troy, Pandarus will propose that he "ravysshe" Criseyde, carry her off by force, thereby making known that he is a man.¹²⁹ This is "no rape... ne no vice",¹³⁰ Pandarus reasons. But Troilus reminds him that the Trojan war is itself the result of the abduction of women, and refuses any masculine action that involves force, and the risk of injury to Criseyde. When Troilus and Criseyde are separated, it is the possibility of being raped in an attempt to return to him that she dreads "moost of alle": "If in the hondes of some wrecche I falle,/ I nam but lost, al be [even though] myn herte trewe."¹³¹ These are all reminders that the world these characters inhabit is one in which a woman is perpetually vulnerable to rape and plunder.

How might Criseyde negotiate her own desires in such a dangerous context? After Pandarus' first approach, Criseyde reflects on her situation. In a much remarked-upon line, Criseyde tells us that she is self-sufficient: "I am myn owene womman".¹³² Why, she questions, would she countenance a relationship with a man, a husband who might "checkmate" her, who might be jealous, or domineering, or philandering? These fears overshadow all her "bryghte thoughtes" until "for feere almost she gan to falle".¹³³ Criseyde almost faints here at the terrible possibility of being in thrall to a man; she is almost overcome by the thought of being overpowered. And yet, despite these fears, she does finally entertain the thought of Troilus: "He which that nothing undertaketh, / Nothyng n'acheveth, be hym looth or deere."¹³⁴ Nothing ventured, nothing gained seems to be her final resolution on the matter. By the end of that day, the early morning chanteuse of sexual rape, Procne, gives way to a new set of disquieting images of birds. As Criseyde falls asleep, she hears a nightingale sing. This transports us again to the mythical scene of rape, to Philomela overpowered, tongueless, and metamorphosed into

¹²⁸ *Ibid.* II.63–73.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.* IV.538.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.* IV.596.

¹³¹ *Ibid.* V.705–706.

¹³² *Ibid.* II.750.

¹³³ *Ibid.* II.770.

a nightingale. Yet, the song of the nightingale is now, “Peraunter in his briddes wise a lay/ Of love”.¹³⁵ The ambivalence of the “Peraunter”, or “perhaps”, here, is crucial. There is the *possibility* for the song to be one of love, not rape; the inverse is also, therefore, still possible. A similarly ambivalent set of images follows as Criseyde is described being violently “seized” by sleep:

Til at the laste the dede slepe hire hente [seized].
 And as she slep, anonright tho hire mette [dream]
 How that an egle, fethered whit as bon,
 Under hire brest his longe clawes sette,
 And out hire heart he rente, and that anon,
 And dide his herte into hire brest to gon—
 Of which she nought agroos [was frightened], ne nothyng smerte [felt pain]—
 And forth he fleigh, with hert left for herte.¹³⁶

Alan Fletcher¹³⁷ has described this dream fragment as combining two traditions that would have been familiar to medieval readers: the trope of the exchange of lovers’ hearts, and the connection between the *avis predalis* and the heart. Certain medieval bestiaries reveal the custom of rewarding domestic birds of prey with the hearts of the birds they seize, and the influential fourteenth-century treatise on the seven deadly sins and their remedies, the *Fasciculus morum*, depicts the *avis predalis* as eating nothing from its prey but the heart. This leads Fletcher to conclude that the *elements* of the dream that are most strange to a modern reader might have been more familiar to the medieval reader; but, “[w]hat is more likely to have been surprising to them is how Chaucer has conflated the two traditions”.¹³⁸

This conflation, of a loving exchange of hearts and the violent consumption of the heart in a predatory relation, is indeed a fascinating and troubling one. What is perhaps even more striking is the fantasy that this “aquiline operation is painless”.¹³⁹ The symbolism of the traditional exchange of hearts is rendered profoundly violent through the admixture of the bird-of-prey imagery, and the tearing of Criseyde’s heart from her breast. And yet Criseyde dreams herself without fear or pain; in fact, Fletcher suggests, the “sensation is implied to be quite otherwise”.¹⁴⁰ The possibility posed by

¹³⁴ *Ibid.* II.807–808.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.* II.921–2.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.* II.925–931.

¹³⁷ Alan Fletcher, “Lost Hearts: Troilus and Criseyde, Book II, lines 925–31” *Notes and Queries* (June 1990), 163–164.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

the dream for Criseyde is not an escape from a process of violation through the ideal social equality that Mann seems to imagine. Rather it places her in the extreme position of vulnerability to a violent rending, with the possibility of an anesthetic pleasure through the pain. A rending of the heart that is painless. A violent penetration that incurs no fear. These ambivalences are deeply, unresolvably, and *pleasurably* embedded in the dream imagery. And they are crucial to the developing erotics of the poem. The bird of prey imagery is revived a little further in the poem, at the very point of consummation, placing it at the structural heart of the poem. When Troilus revives from his swoon, he is described as taking Criseyde decisively into his hold. She is the hapless “larke”, grasped by the “sperhawk”.¹⁴¹ The violence of these metaphors has led some feminist critics to describe the consummation depicted here as tantamount to rape.¹⁴² But perhaps the more unsettling interpretation is that there is a mutual erotic pleasure in assenting to the possibility of being overwhelmed and destroyed. Criseyde has emphatically consented to this hold, and consented in advance: “‘Ne hadde I er now [If I hadn’t before this], my sweet herte deere, / Ben yolde [Yielded], ywis, I were now nought heere!’”¹⁴³

I propose a parallel between this yielding, and the possibility of violence it admits, and Troilus’ earlier yielding to the dangerous torment of Love: “O quike deth, O swete harm so queynte,/ How may of the in me swich quantite,/ But if that I consente that it be?”¹⁴⁴ Criseyde’s assent to the possibility of a pleasurable violence is erotically met by Troilus’ propensity to “swete harm” as the consequence of love, and this, I think, is the mutual erotic grounds for consummation. Their hearts are both compromised by the possibility of violent interference: Criseyde’s might be torn from her breast; Troilus’ is liable to shatter. And both of them, the text suggests, find erotic pleasure through this possibility. In fact, the post-coital moment for Troilus and Criseyde is described as a mutual relief of this very fear: Criseyde is like the “newe abaysed [suddenly startled] nyghtyngale”,¹⁴⁵ stopped in her song, but then, relieved of fear, letting her voice ring out stronger; Troilus is like one who knows his death has

¹⁴¹ *Troilus* III.1191–92.

¹⁴² Mary Behrman gives an overview of these positions, citing, inter alia, Angela Jane Weisl, who views Criseyde as “invaded by male power” (*Conquering the Reign of Femeny: Gender and Genre in Chaucer’s Romance* (Cambridge: (1995), p.28); and Catherine Cox, who sees the consummation as tantamount to rape (*Gender and Language in Chaucer* (Gainesville, Fla.: 1997), p.45); see Mary Behrman, “Heroic Criseyde” *The Chaucer Review* 38(4) (2004), 314–336 at 315.

¹⁴³ *Troilus* III.1210–11.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.* I.411–13.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.* III.1233.

been decreed (“his deth yshapen,/ And dyen mot”),¹⁴⁶ but who is suddenly rescued, and is brought from death to safety. Criseyde is briefly given the power of her own voice, in contrast to the mythical end of speech as the consequence of rape in the story of Procne and Philomena; and Troilus is temporarily relieved from sickness and the fear of death. But the pleasure of this relief can only take place in the context of the previously threatened risk.

What’s more, Criseyde’s recognition of the fragile quality of Troilus’ “tendre herte”¹⁴⁷ is the precondition for her erotic involvement with him, and is, I propose, part of what she finds intoxicating about his knightly masculinity. Just before Criseyde first sees Troilus after hearing of his love for her, she muses on how a woman may receive a man’s love: “For man may love, of possibilitie,/ A womman so, his herte may tobreste, / And she naught love ayein [in return], but if hire lest [unless she wants to].”¹⁴⁸ Criseyde uses a particularly violent image here of the male lover’s heart shattering into pieces, “tobreste”. She then watches from her window as Troilus rides back into the city after battle. Troilus is a vision of knightly bravery, a man of battle likened to Mars. So “weldy”, or vigorous, he seemed, that it was “heven” to look upon him. The details of his appearance after battle are noted: his helmet, we are told, has been “tohewen”, or chopped, into twenty pieces; his shield has been “todasshed”, shattered into pieces, by swords and maces, and embedded with arrows that have “thirled”, or pierced it. Criseyde lets the whole scene soak into her heart, we are told, until she is forced to ask herself, “Who yaf me drynke?”¹⁴⁹ Criseyde’s use of “drink” here is ambiguous: she could be imagining alcohol, or some more affecting potion. But whatever “drink” is being imagined here, the effects to which she attests are those of intoxication. And in the absence of a real drink, the intoxication of Troilus’ knightly masculinity seems to be, at least in part, due to the possibility this weldy performance connotes of its own violation; the performance of strength depends on the possibility of the knight being shattered, “tohewen”, “todasshed” and “thirled”.

There is an earlier precedent within the text for interpreting the defensive accoutrements of war as erotically implying their own destruction, and this is Troilus’ description of being assailed by the God of Love:

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.* III.1240–1.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.* IV.795.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.* II.607–609.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.* II.651.

Love, ayeins the which whoso defendeth
 Hymselfen most, hym alderlest awaylleth,
 With disespeyr so sorwfulli me offendeth,
 That streight unto the deth myn herte sailleth.¹⁵⁰

In this formulation of the violent onslaught of love, he who most defends himself against it, avails himself of the least protection (“alderlest awaylleth”). Defensive structures are figured as the precursor to a fatal attack, as implying and inciting their own destruction. “[S]o soore hath she me wounded,” Troilus relates, “That to myn hertes botme it is ysounded, / Through which I woot that I moot nedes dyen.”¹⁵¹ A barrier necessarily connotes the idea of inundation; a shield the possibility of its being “todasshed”; a fortified heart, that it might be fatally “tobreste”. Troilus’ defences can be seen as at once forestalling *and soliciting* their own violation. This sort of ambivalence is similar to J.D. Rhodes’ recent conceptualisation of private, defended, property¹⁵²: to erect an architectural barrier might be to suggest and invite the possibility of attack. Troilus’ “weldy” masculinity, and Criseyde’s attraction to it, operates through similar ambivalences of defence and destruction. And what brings the lovers to the point of consummation is a shared physical vulnerability in the respective forms of rape and death, a mutual physical vulnerability demonstrated most dramatically through their mutual swoons. Troilus’ swoon represents his full transformation into a lover, his adherence to certain romance conventions, and *at the same time* his openness to the full possibility of his erotic shattering. The swoon is the crucial proof of Troilus’ exposure to danger; that he risks not just to the danger of battle, which erotically poses the male body on the brink of its destruction, but a love which itself poses a grave danger to his physical integrity. The possibility of Troilus’ heart and body being overwhelmed, to the point of death, is crucial to his experience of his passion for Criseyde, and to her acceptance of it. And her swoon, in turn, dramatises her own apprehension of her vulnerability, to exchange and to rape, and this danger brings her equally close to death.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.* I.602–609.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.* II.533–536.

¹⁵² J.D. Rhodes, “The Spectacle of Property”, presented at the University of Sussex English Colloquium (February 9, 2012). In this paper, Rhodes uses Arendt to suggest that private property is only meaningful as a designation because it is fundamentally alienable. Giving a reading of D.W. Griffiths’ short film, “The Lonely Villa” (1909), Rhodes suggests that the boundaried house might, in constituting itself

The very end of the poem might, however, return us to Crocker and Pugh's conception of Troilus as textually positioned as an elevated, fixed point of masculine religious refinement, rather than an ecstatically, erotically-shattered subject. Troilus is, finally, slain in battle by Achilles. At the point of death his spirit (his "goost") ascends, just as Criseyde's has in her death-tease swoon. But this time the spirit does not return to Troilus' ravaged body: it now surpasses the planets, moving up to the heavens, from where it has a total view of the "erratik sterres"¹⁵³ and can look down on "This litel spot of erthe".¹⁵⁴ This is, crucially, the point at which the narrative makes the swoon impossible, and death inevitable. But, unlike Crocker and Pugh, I do not see the narrative as a straightforward trajectory towards this idealisation and reification of the dead Troilus. And it is the importance of the two swoons, as symbolic disturbances of an ascendant trajectory towards death, that disrupts such a reading. My agreement with Crocker and Pugh's reading is strictly in a post-swoon context. We might see the hardening of certain positions *after* Criseyde's swoon as producing *Troilus and Criseyde* as "tragedye". Criseyde's swoon reinforces a mutual propensity to being violently overwhelmed; but it also marks a point of transition, after which Criseyde will be set on the path towards pragmatism and Troilus towards idealised death. I see a parallel between this movement (away from the swoon and towards pragmatism and death) and the "tragedy" of the trajectory of certain modern concepts of masochism,¹⁵⁵ specifically masochism as elaborated in the work of Leo Bersani. In Bersani's early work, as previously discussed, he posits masochism as a profound experience of shattering, which ruptures the ego and therefore paves the way to radical new forms of selfhood and society. In his later work, however, Bersani reports that, "[m]uch of this now seems to me a rather facile, even irresponsible celebration of 'self-defeat'", and goes on to say:

Masochism is not a viable alternative to mastery, either practically or theoretically. The defeat of the self belongs to the same relational system, the same relational imagination, as the self's exercise of power; it is merely the transgressive version of that exercise.¹⁵⁶

through a boundary, invite its own violation: modern private property simultaneously solicits and forestalls its own violation.

¹⁵³ *Troilus* V.1812.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.* V.1815.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.* V.1786.

¹⁵⁶ Bersani, "Sociality and Sexuality", p.110.

Whilst masochism might *transgress* the current relational field, Bersani suggests here, it does not transform it. And while his work might seek to privilege “the moment of undoing,” as Kaja Silverman has suggested,¹⁵⁷ his use of the term “masochism” might inadvertently reinforce a masochistic identity, as defensively constituted as the other forms of identity he hoped might be shattered. Adam Phillips describes masochism as synonymous with mobility and disruption in Bersani’s work:

The individual tried to, in both senses, fix himself in a definably bounded and accountable self ... ‘The masochistic excitement,’ Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit write in *The Forms of Violence*, ‘which perhaps initiates us to sexuality can therefore be exploited not as the goal of representation, but rather as a psychic ‘technique’ for destabilizing representations and maintaining mobility.’¹⁵⁸

But Bersani seems to recognise the danger, in using the term “masochism” past a certain point, of creating a new fixity, a new orthodoxy of the masochistic self. The ego might then be gratified, rather than shattered, by identifying with this term, and masochism might become a self-affirming orthodoxy. This seems to be the kind of orthodoxy that Crocker and Pugh see operating as Troilus ascends to the heavens, the apogee of superior, suffering masculinity.

This ending does not mitigate the earlier power of the swoons in the text as *points of possibility*, moments of “unmaking” and laying low. Eugenie Brinkema¹⁵⁹ has recently written of the importance of the attempt to retain masochism as a “wound” in language, which refuses to close: “We must hold masochism stubbornly open—gaping in its lack of definition, its refusal of the needle and thread—to admit its own relation to the cut, the split, the very wound it makes for theory as much as for bodies.” The radicalism of masochism depends, for Brinkema, on its resistance to the suturing of conceptual specificity. It must be a perpetual work and word of undoing; a work that may prove impossible to sustain, when the wound is liable to mend, when the shattered subject is liable to re-solidify. But we might see masochism’s *potential* as a work of undoing (or, as Crocker and Pugh might describe it, “unmaking”), forcefully demonstrated by the swoon, as the ultimate experience of a dispossession on the brink

¹⁵⁷ Bersani, “A Conversation with Leo Bersani: with Tim Dean, Hal Foster, and Kaja Silverman” in *Is the Rectum a Grave? And Other Essays* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, [1997] 2010), pp.171–186, at p.172.

¹⁵⁸ Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips, *Intimacies* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), pp.93–95.

¹⁵⁹ Eugenie Brinkema, “To cut, to split, to touch, to eat, as of a body or a text” *Angelaki* 14(3) (2009), 131–146 at 132.

of death. What comes *after* the final swoon in *Troilus and Criseyde*, the pragmatism and the reification of a salvific masochistic status, would be the tragic failure of Bersani's concept of masochism and the failure of Brinkema's notion of the work of masochism. In this sense, Troilus' ascent, "Up to the holughnesse of the eighthe spere",¹⁶⁰ would be the antithetical motion to the laying low of the swoon. And the ascent of Troilus' "goost" above the suffering body into bliss and a panoptic, regulatory, religious vision of the universe would constitute a tragedy of sclerosis: a hardening of a religious perspective that is unnervingly still in comparison with the "erratik stars" it contemplates.

The swoons that have preceded this ascent, this religious brittling, represent in contrast *moments of possibility*, moments where the subject is overwhelmed and unmade, laid low before any resurgence or resolution or remaking. Here, then, we might still find pockets of possibility for radical transformation, deeply thrilling in the low-down disorder of the body, a whole world below the ascended spirit.

¹⁶⁰ *Troilus* V.1809.

Chapter Two

Feeling Too Much: The Swoon and the (In)Sensible Woman

In Jane Austen's *Persuasion* (1818), the young Louisa Musgrove, prospective fiancée of Captain Wentworth, develops the habit of throwing herself into the Captain's arms from various heights, because she finds the sensation "delightful".¹⁶¹ In one such incident, on the steep steps of the Cobb at Lyme, she insists on running back up the incline to hurl herself at him: she is "precipitate by half a second",¹⁶² and, missing Wentworth's arms, knocks herself out cold on the pavement. Louisa's sister, seeing her unconscious, sinks into a sympathetic swoon, so that both are "insensible",¹⁶³ and a third woman in their party is thrown into "hysterical agitations":

By this time the report of the accident had spread among the workmen and boatmen about the Cobb, and many were collected ... to enjoy the sight of a dead young lady, nay, two dead young ladies, for it proved twice as fine as the first report.¹⁶⁴

If the "fallen and fainted"¹⁶⁵ refined female forms here offer a doubly "fine" proposition to their male labouring-class audience, Austen also offers us a double lampoon: she satirises the spectacular necrophilic *pleasure* that the swoon allows the male viewer in the possibility of regarding a dead, nay two dead, young ladies; and at the same time satirises the performances of fine-feeling femininity that have produced such a scene of sisterly reciprocal unconsciousness.

¹⁶¹ "In all their walks, he had had to jump her from the stiles; the sensation was delightful to her." (Jane Austen, *Persuasion* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, [1818] 1993), p.78.) The proposition that a woman might "throw herself" at a man is mordantly literalised here. The *OED* gives this sense of "throw" as a peculiarly feminine usage by the end of the 18th century: *OED*, sense 30, b: "*to throw oneself or be thrown at* (a man), of a woman, to put herself or be put designedly in the way of, so as to invite the attention of; *to throw oneself into the arms of*, to become the wife or mistress of. ... 1789 H. More *Lett.* (1925) 127 The women all threw themselves at his head."

¹⁶² *Ibid.*, p.78.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, p.79.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ This is the description given by Mary Ann O'Farrell, *Telling Complexions: The Nineteenth-Century Novel and the Blush* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997), p.49.

In this chapter, I will argue that by the time Austen was writing, the swoon had become a specifically *feminine* and *eroticised* impasse under the rubric of “sensibility”, a situation to which Austen shows a keen satirical sensitivity. Sensibility will be explored as a cultural current emerging through the eighteenth century that prized demonstrations of feeling. The cult of sensibility has in this respect certain resonances with the emotional valency of the medieval “cult of tears”¹⁶⁶ (albeit that it arises in a more secular context), and Claire Tomalin has connected the literary demonstrativeness of these two periods when she anachronistically posits Chaucer’s Troilus as an early “hero of sensibility”.¹⁶⁷ If the literary swoon flourished during the twelfth century as a result of a rise in “approved emotional behaviour”,¹⁶⁸ a similar flourishing of the swoon occurred through the eighteenth century under the rubric of sensibility. A preponderance of literary swooning, then, coincides with historic moments during which emotional demonstrativeness is highly prized. And the swoon, as the literary depiction of feelings overwhelming the subject, has, I will argue, a crucial status in the discourse of sensibility: the swoon is the most dramatic in a long list of textual somatic signs of sensitivity—sighs, blushes, tremblings, flinchings, agitations, palpitations, tears, fevers. But, paradoxically, the swoon pushes high sensibility over into insensibility.¹⁶⁹ The swoon in sentimental literature might therefore be read as a test of some of the aspirations that emerged as part of the discourse of sensibility: in particular, the aspiration to produce a communicable, socially-useful version of *interior feeling* through a rhetoric of the body. As the cusp between the sensible and the insensible, the swoon might then function as *the bathos*¹⁷⁰ of these aspirations of communicability of feeling: it dramatises the risk that high “sensibility” might turn in on itself, becoming incommunicable and unconscious; that the speaking body might become sickly and silent, producing insensibility from its own sensitivity. Swooning, then, textually literalises the possible failure of sentimental language. And this swooning failure of communicability must put us in mind of Sedgwick’s propositions in “Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl”, where she describes sensibility as a point of “dangerous overlap” between “the allo-identifications that were supposed to guarantee the sociable

¹⁶⁶ Georgianna, *op cit*, pp.91 et seq.

¹⁶⁷ Chaucer’s swooning Troilus has been described by Claire Tomalin as “the first hero of sensibility”, and his swoon might be seen as a key link to later notions of sensibility: speaking on *In Our Time* (London: BBC Radio 4, January 3, 2002), with Melvyn Bragg, John Mullan and Hermione Lee.

¹⁶⁸ Weiss, *op cit.*, p.123.

¹⁶⁹ The Old English ancestor of the swoon, “*geswogen*”, reveals its influence on its modern progeny in this sense, connoting as it did a *falling* into insensibility. See *OED* entry for “swow | swown”.

nature of sensibility” and “solipsism, a somatics of trembling self-absorption”.¹⁷¹ I will suggest that the swoon is particularly bound up with the textual depiction of inwardly-directed *feminine* feeling that Sedgwick deems autoerotic and pornographic.

In this chapter, then, the demonstrativeness of the swoon in eighteenth-century literature will be seen to be intimately involved with productions and performances of gender. The swoon will be implicated in a range of overlapping discourses: medical, literary, philosophic, political and pornographic. I will demonstrate that sentimental scenes of feminine swooning in the popular novels of this period fall back on the pleasures of regarding the inert female form, and I read a complex scenography around fallen women: the swooning woman is rendered a picturesque pathetic object, advertising for our sympathy, but simultaneously held down for our viewing pleasure. Focussing on the differences in the depictions of feminine swooning in two novels set apart by forty years —Henry Mackenzie’s *The Man of Feeling* (1771)¹⁷² and Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility* (1811)¹⁷³—I argue that their treatment of the swoon is symptomatic of differing attitudes towards the female body in relation to sensibility. Mackenzie’s popular sentimental man of feeling is lachrymose, feverish, even suicidal; but sensibility’s *swooning* manifestations are depicted by Mackenzie as particularly feminine, and are consequently eroticised *and* pathologised as a feminine indulgence of feeling. As anxieties about sensibility and its representation in “feminine” novels¹⁷⁴ deepened towards the end of the eighteenth century, a morbid excessiveness of feminine feeling was linked to different types of falling: to the disastrous tumble of the “fallen woman”; to “falling ill”; and to “falling into hysterics”. Swooning therefore became charged with all the risks held to attend on a particularly female susceptibility to seduction, to sickness, and to hysteria. In the readings that follow, Mackenzie will be seen to demonstrate the erotic impasse of (in)sensible feminine swooning; while Austen will be seen to respond to this, proposing an *anti-swoon* position. Her valorisation of feminine “exertion” will be shown to be contiguous with Mary Wollstonecraft’s idea of the vigorous woman: writing in the wake of sensibility, both Austen and Wollstonecraft

¹⁷⁰ See Chapter Five for a fuller exploration of Pope’s definition of bathos and its relation to swooning.

¹⁷¹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, “Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl” *Critical Inquiry* (Summer 1991), 818–837 at 820.

¹⁷² Henry Mackenzie, *The Man of Feeling* (London: Oxford University Press, [1771] 1967).

¹⁷³ Jane Austen, *Sense and Sensibility* (London: Macmillan & Co, [1811] 1926).

¹⁷⁴ Jane Spencer, “Women writers and the eighteenth-century novel” in John Richetti (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Eighteenth-Century Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp.212–235, describes the gendered conception of the novel at the time as follows: “contemporary

propose new models of feminine engagement with the world, rather than a passing-out of it.

The Man of Feeling

Before addressing the swoon specifically, it will be necessary to consider the context of developing eighteenth-century concepts of sensibility, and the concomitant importance of descriptions of physical demonstrativeness. What does it mean to have feelings? And how *much* should one feel, for oneself and for others? Is the limit of feeling to be measured in sympathy; in charity; in radical political action? In being overwhelmed; or in illness; or in shooting oneself in the head? In pleasure? These questions are posed by writers and philosophers concerned with the notion of “sensibility” as it develops through the eighteenth and into the early nineteenth century, and are of particular interest in relation to the sentimental novel.

“Sensibility” had originally been used in medical parlance to describe the body’s response to physical stimuli, its sensitivity and responsivity. In the early eighteenth century this use was extended to include emotional responsiveness; and later in the eighteenth century this fine-feelinged responsivity became aspirational, so that “sensibility” connoted a “laudable delicacy”, and the “cult of sensibility” was born. The eighteenth century is the period during which “feelings”, proliferated into the plural noun-form from “feeling”,¹⁷⁵ first come into linguistic being, and the sentimental novel, an unprecedentedly popular literary form,¹⁷⁶ became an important crucible in which these “feelings” were tested under the rigmarole of readerly sensibility. “‘Sentimental’,” John Mullan tells us, “was usually a description of a *representation*; a person possessed ‘sensibility’; a text was ‘sentimental’. ... ‘Sentimental,’ by becoming a word for a type of text, promised an *occasion* for fine feeling.”¹⁷⁷ “Sentimental” was “so much in

commentators on the novel persistently gendered the form as a female one... the didacticism and sentimentalism that became its standard features were associated particularly with women” (p.215).

¹⁷⁵ See *OED*, “Feeling”, entry 4b, which dates the first instance of the “plural”, “collective” sense of “Emotions, susceptibilities, sympathies” as 1771.

¹⁷⁶ This was the period in which the novel became the dominant literary form, attracting an unprecedented reading audience. See Markman Ellis’ description of the rise of the sentimental novel in *The Politics of Sensibility* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp.2 *et seq.*

¹⁷⁷ John Mullan, “Sentimental novels” in John Richetti (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Eighteenth-Century Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.238. Others suggest that any rigid distinction is impossible to maintain: see, for instance, Ellis, *op cit.*, p.6: “The terms ‘sensibility’ and ‘sentimental’ denote a complex field of meanings and connotations in the late eighteenth century, overlapping and coinciding to such an extent as to offer no obvious distinction. Despite the attempts of

vogue among the polite”,¹⁷⁸ that its use was extended to all works that wished to attest to the “refined” sensitivity of their author and to the reader’s finer feelings: take for instance Joseph Hanway’s *A Sentimental History of Chimney Sweeps* (1785). The *OED* tells us that these early uses of “sentimental” were strongly approbatory, referring to “persons, their dispositions and actions: Characterized by sentiment... Characterized by or exhibiting refined and elevated feeling,” and the term was liberally applied as a descriptor of many novels of the time.¹⁷⁹

Henry Mackenzie’s *The Man of Feeling*, a popular sentimental novel of the second half of the eighteenth century,¹⁸⁰ was written and read as one such occasion for refined feeling. In her well-known letter to Sir Walter Scott in 1826, Lady Louise Stuart describes reading the book at the age of fourteen, and fearing that she “should not cry enough to gain the credit of proper sensibility”.¹⁸¹ Mackenzie’s work builds on the popularity of the novels of sentiment that had preceded it and readers’ expectations of the genre: it draws on the weeping men of Samuel Richardson’s novels, and its fragmentary style borrows heavily from Laurence Sterne’s *A Sentimental Journey Through France and Italy* (1768). The novel consists of discontinuous scraps of narrative, and the reader’s attention is thereby focused on the central character, Harley, and on the opportunities for his sensibility to be displayed as he meets the unfortunate characters who share their stories with him. In an important sense, then, Harley is both protagonist and exemplary *reader* of sentimental scenes: his responses to the stories he hears are an example of a finely-tuned sensibility and its proper responsivity to the *narratives* of the sufferings of others; as the man of feeling he is also an exemplar of the *reader of feeling*.

Harley experiences the “the most delicate feelings”¹⁸² and his tears flow in a constant course of pity and sympathy in response to the moving tales he hears.¹⁸³ And

some recent critics, it is not possible to legislate between closely allied terms ‘sensibility’ and ‘sentimental’.”

¹⁷⁸ See the *OED* entry for “sentimental”, which gives Lady Bradshaigh’s question in 1749 in correspondence with Samuel Richardson as the first written instance: “What, in your opinion, is the meaning of the word *sentimental*, so much in vogue among the polite... Every thing clever and agreeable is comprehended in that word... I am frequently astonished to hear such a one is a *sentimental* man; we were a *sentimental* party; I have been taking a *sentimental* walk.”

¹⁷⁹ John Mullan describes the liberal use of the term in “Sentimental novels” in John Richetti (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Eighteenth-Century Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), pp.236–254, at pp.236–237.

¹⁸⁰ Initially published in 1771, *The Man of Feeling* was an immediate success, with its first edition selling out and frequent reprints in the following years; all references here are to the text of the 2nd edition.

¹⁸¹ Lady Louise Stuart, quoted in Brian Vickers’ “Introduction” to Mackenzie’s *The Man of Feeling*.

¹⁸² Mackenzie, *op cit.*, p.9.

Harley's incontinent emotional response is positioned as an emphatically *moral* encounter with the world around him. Harley's fine feelings, for example, are figured as a moral rejection of acquisitive greed and the misery such acquisition causes to those who are deprived of it: he is informed by others of the interests he should have on behalf of himself in relation to "power, wealth, or grandeur"; but "Harley was apt to hear those lectures with indifference".¹⁸⁴ He chooses instead to *sympathise* with those who have been disadvantaged and dispossessed by the ambitions of the more powerful. The investigation of sentiment as both an emotional *and a moral* response is at the heart of literary and philosophical enquiry in the eighteenth century. "It is no coincidence," John Mullan tells us, "that the moral philosophers who were the contemporaries of Richardson, Sterne and Mackenzie produced complex analyses of 'moral sentiments'".¹⁸⁵ David Hume (1711–76), for instance, rejects a rationalist ethics, arguing rather that "morality ... is determined merely by *sentiment*".¹⁸⁶ In *A Treatise of Human Nature*, he suggests that moral judgments cannot be made with the same strict rationality as other forms of knowledge and must instead depend on *feeling*: "Morality ... is more properly *felt* than judged of".¹⁸⁷ The action that morality would require of us is, then, properly occasioned by *feeling*. And the essential bridge between moral reason and feeling comes through Hume's concept of sympathy: "No quality of human nature is more remarkable, both in itself and its consequences, than the propensity we have to sympathise with others, and to receive by communication their inclinations and sentiments, however different from, or even contrary to, our own."¹⁸⁸ This anti-Hobbesian notion of sympathy is extended and elaborated upon in the work of Adam Smith (1723–90), particularly in *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*:

As we have no immediate experience of what other men feel, we can form no idea of the manner in which they are affected, but by conceiving what we ourselves should feel in the like situation. Though our brother is upon the rack, as long as we ourselves are at our ease, our senses will never inform us of what he suffers ... It is *by the imagination only* that we can form any conception of what are his sensations.¹⁸⁹

¹⁸³ There are so many outbursts of weeping in the novel that the Victorian critic Henry Morley prepared an edition in 1886 with an "Index to Tears", which contained forty-seven references, despite his decision to exclude "Chokings, etc."

¹⁸⁴ Mackenzie, *op cit.*, p.10.

¹⁸⁵ Mullan, *op cit.*, p.248.

¹⁸⁶ David Hume writing to Hutcheson in 1740, quoted by Ellis, *op cit.*, p.12.

¹⁸⁷ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, [1739–40] 1978), III, I, p.2.

¹⁸⁸ Hume, *op cit.*, III, 40, p.316.

¹⁸⁹ Adam Smith, *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, [1759] 1976), p.9.

We can see at work here a general vindication of feeling as the beginning of sympathy and moral virtue.¹⁹⁰ Markman Ellis describes the reading of sentimental novels as a parallel process that “leads the reader to feel the emotions of the character”,¹⁹¹ reproducing Smith’s theory of sympathy in terms of the “Delicacy of Sentiment ... teach[ing] men to feel for others as for themselves”.¹⁹² Certainly it seems that Mackenzie, in composing *The Man of Feeling*, had a similar notion of the efficacy of the sentimental narrative to excite “both the memory and the affections deeper than mere argument or moral reasoning”, and it is for this reason that he thinks of “introducing a man of sensibility into different scenes where his feelings might be seen in their effects, and his sentiments occasionally delivered without the stiffness of regular deduction”.¹⁹³ The opportunity sentimental literature offers for the possibility of a morally-improving sympathy is key to understanding Mackenzie’s work, and, as Mullan has suggested, “sentiment” in this context means both “feeling” (we should read the sentimental novel to be “touched”) and “precept” (we should read the sentimental novel to be morally instructed by the sympathy it produces).¹⁹⁴

If sentiment and sensibility are involved in instructing the reader about injustices suffered by others, the novel of feeling’s connection to political action becomes an important question. Markman Ellis, in *The Politics of Sensibility*, argues that the sentimental novel moulds the “feelings” of the reader, whilst also inserting “matters of political controversy into the text of the novel itself”.¹⁹⁵ I propose that we might read this sort of manoeuvre in *The Man of Feeling* operating through what I will call an *ethic of shedding*. Harley’s studied failure to pursue his own material advantage, alongside his copious shedding of tears, demonstrates an anti-accumulative ethos. This sense of shedding accords with Janet Todd’s description of the sentimentalist as “ardently anti-capitalist, despising those who hoard and increase money and dispensing his own

¹⁹⁰ Mullan notes, “that these philosophers of moral sentiment showed little or no interest in novels, even though it is now clear that it was in novels that the powers of sentiment were being tested” (*op cit.*, p.248).

¹⁹¹ Ellis, *op cit.*, p.16.

¹⁹² “On Delicacy of Sentiment” *The Universal Magazine* (1778), pp.172–4.

¹⁹³ Quoted in Harold W. Thompson, *A Scottish Man of Feeling: Some Account of Henry Mackenzie, Esq. of Edinburgh, and the Golden Age of Burns and Scott* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1931), pp.107–11.

¹⁹⁴ Mullan, *op cit.*, p.245.

¹⁹⁵ Ellis, *op cit.*, p.2.

wealth liberally and with speed”,¹⁹⁶ and positions weeping as part of a critique of the accumulation of wealth.¹⁹⁷ Harley’s ethic of shedding might then be read as extending itself into an ostensibly anti-imperialist political stance¹⁹⁸:

I cannot ... rejoice at our conquests in India. You tell me of immense territories subject to the English: I cannot think of their possession, without being led to enquire, by what right they possess them ... The fame of conquest, barbarous as that motive is, is but a secondary consideration: there are certain stations in wealth to which the warriors of the East aspire ... When shall I see a commander return from India in the pride of honourable poverty? ... they are covered with the blood of the vanquished! ... Could you tell me of some conqueror giving peace and happiness to the conquered? ... did he return with no lace on his coat, no slaves in his retinue, no chariot at his door, and no Burgundy at his table?¹⁹⁹

The acquisitive motive of the British in the East Indies is one of the charges against conquest here, and it is “feelings” that Harley calls-up as the defence against injustice: “the *feelings* are not yet lost that applaud benevolence, and censure inhumanity. Let us endeavour to strengthen them in ourselves”.²⁰⁰ The issue of social justice is in this account tightly bound to intensity of feeling; strengthening feeling, exciting passion, is the way to censure inhumanity. And shedding is not just a performance of tears: it must also be a shedding of wealth, of imperialist accumulation, and of slavery. The described performance of the body shedding tears is doubled by the implication of a material shedding of wealth and exploitation.

Ellis suggests that the sentimental novel attempts to “reformulate social attitudes to inequality through the development of a new humanitarian sensibility”.²⁰¹ Of contemporary examples of inequality, the most scandalous was, of course, the slave trade. Ellis reads Mackenzie, and particularly his later novel *Julie de Roubigné* (1777), as providing an active opposition to the *conditions* of slavery. He describes the way in which sentimentalists might be seen to attack the terminologies of racial difference of

¹⁹⁶ Janet Todd, *Sensibility: An Introduction* (London & New York: Methuen, 1986), quoted by Ellis, *op cit.*, p.129.

¹⁹⁷ Ellis agrees that the sentimentalist critiques the *vices* associated with wealth, but also suggests that sentimental fiction plays a more complicated game in terms of capitalism than Todd suggests, evolving “complex systems to commodify virtue by assigning cash value to sentimental moments”. (Ellis, *op cit.*, p.129.)

¹⁹⁸ Brian Vickers’ notes to the second edition tell us that “Mackenzie’s liberalism is ahead of the times”; two years later the first Parliamentary report on Indian affairs appeared, which took a neutral attitude towards the situation (Vickers in Mackenzie, *op cit.*, p.137).

¹⁹⁹ Mackenzie, *op cit.*, pp.102–103.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p.104 (my italics).

the time: Sterne, for example, describes “typological gradations of complexion as ‘insensible’”,²⁰² and sentimentalist discussion of slavery accords a priority to the possibility of mutual feeling rather than to “scopic typologies of complexion and race”,²⁰³ valorising a notion of “affectual equality”.²⁰⁴

But we must also be sensitive to the limitations of sentimental narratives. Whilst these novels might be thought of as “innovative and forceful ... brave and even radical”, they stop short, in Ellis’ view, of being meaningfully “anti-slavery”. Adjacent to the discursive positions “pro-slavery” and “anti-slavery”, Ellis proposes “a third position, called ... ‘amelioration’, that argued for the mitigation of the conditions of slavery, but not its abolition”.²⁰⁵ It is this ameliorative voice that Ellis suggests is iterated by sentimentalism, and particularly by Mackenzie, who “seeks to transform the peculiar asymmetries of power endemic to the slavery economies, but without destroying the ideology or economy of slavery”.²⁰⁶ And the failure to more radically address slavery at the ideological level is bound up with the *structural asymmetric aesthetics of suffering* that exist and persist in the occasion of the sentimental:

The sentimentalist rhetoric is a one way street: the colonial viewer is distressed by the condition of the slave (a kind of sublimity is operating here, that I have previously called ‘bathos’); but the slave is not empowered by it, nor given any greater insight into the condition of slavery. The slave remains in the hyperbolically violent underworld of chattel slavery. The slaves are treated as a kind of property within sentimentalism, alongside and equivalent to dead asses, lame lap-dogs, lunatic women, incarcerated starlings, and so.²⁰⁷

The sentimentalist approach might be seen to “advertise”²⁰⁸ the suffering occasioned by slavery and other situations of inequality, Ellis suggests: but in doing so it is also drawn into a relation of voyeurism with it, and “runs aground on the shoals of the pathetic and the little—that category of the sentimentally apotropaic which voyeuristically focuses on the powerless resigned to powerlessness”.²⁰⁹ Because of the *pleasures* of regarding

²⁰¹ Ellis, *op cit.*, p.49.

²⁰² Ellis quotes much of the correspondence between Sterne and Sancho; Ellis, *op cit.*, p.66.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, p.86.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p.93.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p.87.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p.123.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p.86.

²⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p.128.

the powerless, then, the sentimentalist approach might fail or refuse “to move beyond the depiction of its theme to a critique of that theme’s subject, slavery proper”.²¹⁰

Ellis’ observations are useful to us here because they highlight the problematic intrusion of *pleasure* into the purview of literature’s political aspirations. Harley’s visit to Bedlam, and his observations of a “lunatic woman”,²¹¹ are illuminating in this regard. “Of all those things called Sights, in London, which every stranger is supposed desirous to see, Bedlam is one,”²¹² the reader of *The Man of Feeling* is told. Harley is reluctant to attend Bedlam on humanitarian grounds, but is “overpowered” by his group. In Harley’s objections to a tourism of misery we can trace a moral ambivalence endemic to the reading of sentimental literature itself: the miseries and misfortunes of others are paraded in order for the observer to demonstrate a *moral* sensibility; but they simultaneously excite a *pleasure* in the sensible spectator/reader, and might therefore betray an investment in the maintenance and repetition of the scene. Harley’s show of sentiment, his plentiful tribute of tears to a particular lunatic woman in Bedlam,²¹³ are, the text suggests, a *moral* response; but they are also drawn into correspondence with the pleasure of sightseeing that he objects to in his friends. Might reading the novel of sentiment be a similarly dubious pleasure? John Mullan has hinted at these murky complexities in his description of the “cadences of self-satisfaction” sounding through the “description of the powers of feeling” in sentimental novels²¹⁴; Ellis has described something similar in attributing to the sentimental “a complex aesthetic logic akin to the sublime, that discovers pleasure in distress and misery”.²¹⁵ I suggest that sentimental literature involves itself in a complex and potentially sado-masochistic scenography: it advertises pathetic objects for our moral sympathy, but is also bound up in the pleasures of regarding their debasement. And the *type* of sentimental objects focussed on in novels, in contrast to those chosen by philosophic discourse, are of significance: the violent examples used to model sympathy by Adam Smith, for instance (the man torn upon the rack; the hanged, dancing corpse; the ulcerated beggar), give way to more

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.86.

²¹¹ One thinks here, of course, of Elaine Showalter’s description of the “appealing madwoman” gaining cultural prominence during this period: “In the course of the [eighteenth] century, however, the appealing madwoman gradually displaced the repulsive madman, both as the prototype of the confined lunatic and as a cultural icon.” (*The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830–1980* (London: Virago Press, 1987), p.8.)

²¹² Mackenzie, *op cit.*, p.29.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, p.34.

²¹⁴ Mullan, *op cit.*, p.244.

picturesque and feminised objects (incarcerated starlings and lunatic women) in sentimental literature. I offer the following reading of swooning as a paradigmatic case of sentimental literature's complex relation to its prettified objects: the pretty, prone woman will be paraded by sentimental literature for our sympathy *and* our viewing pleasure.

Pathetic feminine objects: The fallen woman

There is one particularly common picturesque "pathetic object" repeatedly featured in sentimental narratives: the swooning "fallen woman". The most dramatic swoons in *The Man of Feeling* are recounted to us as part of the friendship Harley strikes up with Emily, a woman who has "fallen" into prostitution. Emily, who begs from Harley a pint of wine, is emphatically physically fallen; dramatising her failure of moral rectitude, her body cannot stay upright. She initially catches Harley's arm and "her eye grew fixed, her lip assumed a clayey whiteness, and she fell back lifeless in her chair"; she is a "dying figure"; and Harley later succeeds in catching her to prevent her "falling to the ground".²¹⁶ Even Emily's voice is "tremulous and faint".²¹⁷ Harley's desire to visit the woman, following her supplication and faint, is mocked by his friends: "he ... is bubbled by a fine story invented by a whore".²¹⁸ The possibility of Harley being fooled by a bubble-work of words, "deluded by bubbles",²¹⁹ is in his own mind weighed against the physical prostration of the woman: "he recalled the languid form of the fainting wretch to his mind; he wept at the recollection of her tears"²²⁰; her body's faint wins his sympathetic response and he sets out to see her.

The faint is "proof" for Harley here: he sees no possibility of it being a feint. And this response attests to a rhetoric of bodily display that accords with contemporary medical accounts of the nervous system, crucial to the idea of sensibility as the *natural, physical* manifestation of feeling. Contemporary physicians such as George Cheyne and Robert Whytt were producing models of the "sensitised body" in which the concept of "sensibility" was "the co-ordinating principle of bodily integrity, providing the basis for

²¹⁵ Ellis qualifies this "sublime" as "untouched by transcendence": *op cit.*, p.6.

²¹⁶ Mackenzie, *op cit.*, p.49.

²¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.48.

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.52–3.

²¹⁹ The now obsolete "bubbled" used in this sense is described by the *OED*: "To delude with 'bubbles'; to befool, cheat, humbug. Also *to bubble* (any one) *of, out of, or into* a thing."

²²⁰ Mackenzie, *op cit.*, p.53.

the overall integration of body function”.²²¹ Christopher Lawrence has argued that, to such physicians, the notion of sympathy “was no more than the communication of feeling between different bodily organs, manifested by functional disturbance of one organ when another was stimulated”.²²² Whytt’s suggestion in 1768 that “by doleful stories or shocking sights delicate people have often been affected with fainting and general convulsion”²²³ shows the proximity between a doctrine of physical sympathy and the scene of literary production, with “stories” or “sights” affecting the sensitised, sympathetic system. Ellis argues that this is “enthusiastically articulated in the novels of the sentimental school, who adapted the vocabulary of the scientists’ model of the workings of the nerves to communicate a deepened range of emotions and feelings. On these foundations is built a repertoire of conventions associated with the sentimental rhetoric of the body: fainting, weeping, sighing, hand-holding, mute gesture, the beat of a pulse, blushing—and so on.”²²⁴ Emily’s faints and swoons, then, are read by Harley as a *reliable* expression of her “natural” sensibility within the signifying system of the nervous, sympathetic body.

But why does the fallen woman repeatedly *swoon* in the literature of this period, rather than trembling, weeping or sighing to demonstrate her “natural” sensibility? The swoon’s rhetorical shape is as important here as its correspondence with medical accounts of the sensitised body. The swoon functions as part of a sentimental depiction of prostitution that depends on the downward trajectory of the female body, and the subsequent possibility of upwards transformation through repentance, as a *moral narrative pattern*; but the novel simultaneously revels in a female susceptibility to becoming prone, and is therefore invested in erotically elaborating on the prostrate female form.²²⁵

It has been shown elsewhere how prostitutes became “sentimentalized subjects” in the eighteenth century, with Richard Steele, amongst others, writing sympathetic

²²¹ Ellis, *op cit.*, p.19.

²²² Christopher Lawrence, “The Nervous System and Society in the Scottish Enlightenment” in B. Barnes and S. Shapin (eds), *Natural Order: Historical Studies of Scientific Cultures* (London: Sage, 1979), p.27.

²²³ Robert Whytt, *The Works* (Edinburgh: 1768), quoted in Lawrence, *ibid.*, p.27.

²²⁴ Ellis, *op cit.*, p.19.

²²⁵ Richardson’s *Clarissa* (1748) might be an important example to consider here, where the innumerable female faints and falling seem to build towards the fateful drugged unconsciousness during which *Clarissa* is raped. In *Pamela*, on the other hand, a different kind of *active, struggling* female unconsciousness is a prophylactic against rape: when Mr B., dressed as a maid-servant, attempts to rape Pamela she falls into violent fits, which seem to “frighten” Mr B. away (Samuel Richardson, *Pamela; Or, Virtue Rewarded* (London: Penguin Books, [1740] 1980), pp.242, 273).

accounts of the “seduced” prostitute.²²⁶ This occurred in the context of a public debate around prostitute reform which had, Ellis suggests, two main consequences: first, the possibility that “unhappy women” might re-establish their social standing through repentance; and second the establishment of benevolent charities for the reformation of prostitutes.²²⁷ The most famous of such establishments was the Magdalen Hospital for the Reception of Penitent Prostitutes, where church services were open to the public by ticket and became fashionable events. The young, fallen women were effectively paraded as a sympathetic spectacle. Horace Walpole, for example, records his visit in January 1760, and notes the sympathetic responses of the audience: he listens to the sermon through which the minister “apostrophized the lost sheep, who sobbed and cried from their souls—so did my Lady Hertford and Fanny Pelham”. Following the sermon, Walpole describes being “struck and pleased with the modesty of two of [the penitent prostitutes], who swooned away with the confusion of being stared at”.²²⁸ Walpole’s observations exemplify the creation of the prostitute as sentimental object: she is the spectacle that excites sobbing sympathy in the observer; and she is also “pleasing” in her display of swooning, Walpole experiencing the “self-satisfaction” of observing the women in their speechless discomfort.

The Magdalen Hospital gave rise to a number of sentimentalist narratives and novels, which related histories of exemplary Magdalens to raise money for the charity. If these novels translate “the seduction motif (down and away from domestic respectability to the status of the fallen woman) into the discourse of repentance (up towards the status of the virtuous penitents)”,²²⁹ then we might see such a narrative shape following the *narrative pattern* of the swoon. The swoon therefore functions as metonym of the sentimental depiction of prostitution. But this sweeping pattern also erotically revels in a female susceptibility to being prone; it is invested in repeating female lowness. Ellis describes the way in which the Magdalen novels were forced to distinguish themselves from one another by focussing on “how low the fallen woman can fall, or on the peculiarities of her fall”. These novels elaborate at length on the fall, the swoon of seduction, and risk resembling the libertine erotica they ostensibly vilify. The complexity of the pleasure of viewing the suffering of others through a sentimental lens here takes on an overtly erotic dimension. The narratives of fallen women that

²²⁶ See Ellis’ description of this: *op cit.*, p.62.

²²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.62

²²⁸ Horace Walpole, *The Letters of Horace Walpole* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1903–25), IV, p.247.

²²⁹ Ellis, *op cit.*, p.182.

might pretend to raise them up, also glory in their demise, taking pleasure in the moment of the swoon as the locus of female susceptibility to seduction as well as to spiritual transformation.

Mackenzie's description of swooning Emily might be read as a sister account to these novels, structured along the downward/upward trajectory of the fallen woman, and simultaneously inviting prurient readerly pleasure. Emily relates her history to Harley as one long decline, the focus very much on the downward motion of the swoon. Importantly, her moral dip begins with *aberrant reading*: after her mother's death, she gives up reading religious books and instead turns to the "plays, novels, and those poetical descriptions of the beauty of virtue and honour, which the circulating libraries easily afforded".²³⁰ Mackenzie is here corresponding with a widespread contemporary anxiety about the reading habits of women, in the context of increased access to literature and particularly to the novel. The fear that the sentimental novel might pose a particular danger to women, in terms of seducing the imagination, stimulating fantasies of romantic love and therefore weakening the "prophylactic power of innocence",²³¹ was widespread, with even Samuel Richardson censuring the "indistinct reading" of sentimental novels because it might "corrupt ... more female hearts than any cause whatsoever".²³² Anxiety on behalf of female readers was often expressed in the language of the fear of feminine susceptibility to seduction. The Reverend Edward Barry, for example, described novels as "incentive to seduction" because the "main drift of such writing is to interest, to agitate, and convulse the passions, and is but too prone, by a sympathy of sentiment, to lead the mind astray".²³³ Clara Reeve described the effects of the circulating libraries as profoundly ambivalent, providing as they did both "food and poison" to the young mind. The novel is often associated with fears of intoxication, as producing a potentially narcotic effect, as a "complicated drug" or, in Fanny Burney's worst imagining, as a kind of virus in the circulatory system, producing a "distemper" or "contagion".²³⁴ Underlying these fears is a particular anxiety about *female* susceptibility: what might be good for men, might be poison for women. William Craig, in *The Lounger*, for instance, describes the sentimental novel as potentially civic and virtuous: "The cold and selfish may be warmed and expanded by

²³⁰ Mackenzie, *op cit.*, p.55.

²³¹ Ellis, *op cit.*, p.164.

²³² Richardson, quoted *ibid.*, p.164.

²³³ Reverend Edward Barry (1791), quoted *ibid.*

²³⁴ For a fuller survey of such responses, see *ibid.*, pp.208–211.

the fiction of distress or the eloquence of sentiment”. But the feminising reformation offered by sensibility to gentlemen is dangerous when extended to the “tender, warm and visionary” minds of the young and *women*, for whom “the walks of fancy and enthusiasm, or romantic love, or exaggerated sorrow, or trembling sensibility, are very unsafe”.²³⁵

Sure enough, following her reading of the material available in the circulating libraries, Mackenzie’s young Emily falls in love with a man and “imputed to his sensibility that silence which was the effect of art and design”²³⁶; she projects her romanticised notions of sensibility upon the man and is seduced by him, falling “prey to his artifices”.²³⁷ Emily travels with the man to London and when she discovers that he has no intention of marrying her, intending instead to discard her or keep her as a mistress, she is choked by “[s]hame, grief, and indignation ... unable to speak my wrongs, and unable to bear them in silence, I fell in a swoon at his feet”.²³⁸ “What happened in the interval [of swooning] I cannot tell,” Emily tells Harley as she relays the story of her life: Emily describes a literalised downward trajectory whereby she has been seduced by a man who abandons her, swoons, and comes to in the arms of an unscrupulous landlady: she suffers a miscarriage and is forced into drudgery, prison and then prostitution.

An impassioned call for sympathy follows the swoon’s expressive impasse, and this call is founded on the basis of the conditional possibility of compassion for what is currently unknown and unseen: “Oh! Did the daughters of virtue know our suffering! Did they see our hearts torn with anguish amidst the affectation of gaiety which our faces are obliged to assume; our bodies tortured by disease, our minds with that consciousness they cannot lose!”²³⁹ Whilst this might be an attempt to advertise for sympathy, the relaying of Emily’s seduction is also a narrative that revels in her debasement. The fallen woman is rendered prone and silent and sexually susceptible for charitable purposes; but also for our reading *pleasure*. And this pleasure might correspond with the “viewer satisfactions” that Sedgwick describes as providing “coverture” for material injustices in sentimental literature: “sentimental spectatorship seemed to offer coverture for differences in material wealth (the bourgeois weeping

²³⁵ William Craig, “Remarks upon Tragedy” *The Lounger* (1785–86), essays 27 and 28.

²³⁶ Mackenzie, *op cit.*, p.58.

²³⁷ *Ibid.*

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.62.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.65.

over the spectacle of poverty) or sexual entitlement ... [M]aterial or sexual exploitations ... might even be perpetuated or accelerated by the nonaccountable viewer satisfactions”.²⁴⁰ Sedgwick reveals a deeper scepticism than Ellis here about the possibility of sentimental “amelioration”. Reading pathetic scenes might “accelerate”, not ameliorate, inequality. And these “nonaccountable viewer satisfactions” might provide the coverture, Sedgwick suggests, for *desire* to be misrepresented as pity. We might, then, see the swoon of the fallen woman as the most dramatic exemplification of the “unaccountable pleasures” of the *mise-en-scène* of sentimental pathos; and the swooning woman implicates gender as crucial to the construction of this scene.

“Unable to speak [her] wrongs, and unable to bear them in silence,” Mackenzie’s Emily swoons. The failure of speech to adequately express intensity of feeling that the swoon dramatises here is endemic to the sentimental novel. In this description of the swoon, however, the impasse is complicated by the relationship between *gender* and expressivity. Female sexual desire and female complaint are rendered impossible to express in an available language. This impossibility is demonstrated by Emily’s father’s arrival and his demand that she “speak” to him: on the one hand, this demand wishes her dead (“Her death I could have borne! But the death of her honour has added obloquy and shame to that sorrow which bends my gray hairs to the dust”²⁴¹); and on the other hand it gives her no tenable subject position from which to speak, impossibly locating her as the “paradoxical figure of the seduced but virtuous prostitute”.²⁴² Emily’s body symptomatises the impossibility of her verbal expression in the language her father demands, and she mimes the cessation of her verbal expressivity, falling to the ground, and bathing his feet with her tears. The swoon here gestures towards inarticulacy itself, constituting a paradoxical attempt to communicate incommunicability, to make legible the impossibility of sustained female expression and consciousness in an available language.

But there is another endemic complication to Emily’s speechlessness: the novel relies on words to recount this silence; it simultaneously disavows language as the adequate communicator of intense feeling, and particularly female feeling, yet depends on its own language to make legible the speaking/speechless body. When Harley hears

²⁴⁰ Eve Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, [1990] 2008), p.151.

²⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.76.

²⁴² Ellis, *op cit.*, p.165.

Emily's story, for instance, he shares a sympathetic connection to her speechless condition: overcome with feeling for her, "he could not speak, had it been to beg a diadem"²⁴³ and she sees "his tears" as the demonstration of his sympathy. But Harley determines *to speak for* Emily to her father, just as the novel insists on articulating her swoon as part of a sentimentalist discourse. And Harley's speech on Emily's behalf, whilst urging sympathy, is unable to make an account of female sexual desire without giving way to desire as voyeurism, and then to alarm. The conversation between Harley and Emily's father is addressed to a female readership of sentimental literature; and it is a conversation that takes place between two men, written by a man, which restates the danger of women reading sentimental literature as a progression towards falling into prostitution. Benevolence towards the fallen woman here is an extension of paternal control and protection, that is also prurience. The novel's attempt to render the swoon in language is an exhortation towards sympathy with the downward trajectory of "the fallen woman", where being "moved" by her story is to be emotionally affected by her physical instability and the impossibility of her eloquence; yet it produces a language of benevolence as discipline. It prefers silence to the articulation of female desire and makes of swooning a potential site of licentious voyeurism.²⁴⁴

The nuances of gender in terms of feeling and falling are reinforced in the final stages of Mackenzie's novel. The silenced, sexually and morally compromised *fallen woman* is contrasted at the close with the *heroically dying man*, in a way that uncannily parallels the closing masculine elevation of Chaucer's *Troilus*. Harley is "seized with a very dangerous fever",²⁴⁵ a sickness the cause of which is suggested to be "his hopeless love for Miss Walton".²⁴⁶ Harley is presented as being too feeling to exist in a "hard" and "unfeeling" world: "There are some feelings which perhaps are too tender to be suffered by the world."²⁴⁷ Here Harley seems to share with other contemporary men of feeling a propensity towards dramatic death, rather than the feminine *intermittent* insensibility of swooning.²⁴⁸ Harley, succumbing to his fever, "is gone forever", his

²⁴³ Mackenzie, *op cit.*, p.66.

²⁴⁴ There is only one male faint in the novel, produced by an elderly man: Old Edwards falls "backwards into the arms of the astonished Harley" and is recovered with the assistance of "some water, and a smelling-bottle" (*ibid.*, p.89).

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.126.

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p.125.

²⁴⁸ Goethe's *Young Werther*, for instance, feeling too much to carry on living, will shoot himself in the head: Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (Wilder Publications, [1774] 2009).

corpse “stretched without sense or feeling”.²⁴⁹ Unlike the swooning woman, there is no impasse of insensibility here: rather Harley’s sensibility ascends the body and becomes *immortalised*. After death, we are told, his “feelings will subsist” in some “better modification”, where they will “deserve the name of virtues”. As if to remind us that the woman of feeling collapses into a *worldly* insensibility, while the man of feeling ascends to immortal sensibility, Harley’s beloved swoons on top of him, but is “recovered”. The insensibility of the woman of feeling is recuperated into a masculine language that attempts sympathy but, in doing so, disciplines her desires; the insensible man of feeling is resurrected into religious righteousness. The curate will recall Harley and: “It is worth a thousand homilies! Every nobler feeling rises within me! Every beat of my heart awakens a virtue!”²⁵⁰ The insensible woman of feeling is the silenced fallen woman laid temporarily, erotically, low; the insensible man of feeling lies in the valley of fallen heroes, while his sensibility ascends to the highest spiritual peaks.

Morbid excess and the woman of feeling

The vogue of sensibility had become, by the end of the eighteenth century, the “problem” of sensibility.²⁵¹ Lady Louise Stuart’s 1826 letter on her reading of *The Man of Feeling* marks a change in readers’ experiences of novels of sentiment: Stuart decides to read the novel aloud one evening to friends, remembering her family once dwelling on the book “with rapture” and fearing that it might “prove too affecting”; but the reader’s response is now in a quite different direction: “Nobody cried, and at some of the passages, the touches I used to think so exquisite—oh dear! they laughed.”²⁵² The modern pejorative sense of sentimental as “[a]ddicted to indulgence in superficial emotion; apt to be swayed by sentiment”,²⁵³ comes to impinge on its earlier widespread approbatory use, such that Raymond Williams describes “sentimental” undergoing a change through its association with “unregulated feeling” which results in it being “permanently damaged”.²⁵⁴

²⁴⁹ Mackenzie, *op cit.*, p.131.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.133.

²⁵¹ Ellis, for instance, describes the debate around sensibility accelerating “into a crisis in the last decades of the century” (*op cit.*, p.190).

²⁵² Quoted in Vickers’ introduction to Mackenzie, *op cit.*, p.viii.

²⁵³ *OED*, sense 1a.

²⁵⁴ Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, revised edition (London: Fontana, 1983), pp.281–2.

We might briefly note here that the “damage” done to the literary reputation of the sentimental novel is bound up with its relation to femininity,²⁵⁵ particularly the kind of swooning femininity characterised by excess of feeling and susceptibility to seduction and illness. This association can be seen to operate in a number of ways, two of which I will outline here: First, suspicions are articulated about the value of sensibility as a serious *moral stance* when it can also be seen as a fashionable or superficial pose capriciously adopted by women. Samuel Johnson betrayed his scorn for “the fashionable whine of sensibility”,²⁵⁶ and in so doing implicitly criticised the instability of a moral system which is also modish, pointing up the potential for affectation in the adoption of sensibility. The problem became such that, in Janet Todd’s words: “By the 1790s almost all serious novelists noted the selfishness, irrationality and amorality of the cult of sensibility”.²⁵⁷ This “serious” opposition to sensibility is drawn, I wish to suggest, in large part along gendered lines, whereby the fashionable, the frivolous and the irrational are associated with femininity. Ellis describes sensibility as “not only especially significant for women” but as inherently gendered from its inception: “[sensibility] was in some sense a feminine attribute”.²⁵⁸ Sensibility was *available* to men, but was commonly apostrophised as a feminine figure and was particularly “associated with the behaviour and experience of women”.²⁵⁹ Sensibility might therefore be thought of as part of a gendered transformation of manners, a feminising of social experience and domestic economy, an attempt to socialise male behaviour along supposedly female lines.²⁶⁰ Criticisms of sensibility as amoral fashion might therefore be seen as anxiogenic in relation to this gendered transformation.

²⁵⁵ Sedgwick has described recent feminist attempts to rehabilitate “the sentimental”, thereby attesting to a large body of criticism that is now highlighting the gendered tendentiousness of its denigration: “In recent feminist criticism, particularly that involving nineteenth century American women’s fiction, a conscious rehabilitation of the category of ‘the sentimental’ has taken place, insofar as ‘the sentimental’ is seen as a derogatory code name for female bodies and the female domestic and ‘reproductive’ preoccupations of birth, socialization, illness, and death. The devaluation of ‘the sentimental,’ it is argued, has been of a piece with the devaluation of many aspects of women’s characteristic experience and culture.” (Eve Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, p.144.)

²⁵⁶ Quoted by Vickers, *op cit.*, p.xxiii.

²⁵⁷ Janet Todd, *op cit.*

²⁵⁸ Ellis, *op cit.*, p.23.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p.24. Ellis refers here to James Gillray’s depiction of “Sensibility” in the *New Morality* (1798) as a distraught young woman and to George Romney’s *Sensibility* (1786), which depicts the famously beautiful prostitute Emma Hart holding a branch of mimosa (the “sensitive” plant).

²⁶⁰ This is one of the effects of sensibility according to George J. Barker-Benfield, *The Culture of Sensibility: Sex and Society in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

Secondly, the interrogation of sensibility in terms of its *political* tendencies again demonstrates the strength of the imaginative connections between sensibility, gender and a fear of feminine susceptibility to seduction. The relation between sensibility and *sensiblerie* meant that it was strongly associated with French principles and was bound up with the reception of the French Revolution in Britain.²⁶¹ As the Revolution degenerated into the Terror, sensibility was concomitantly scrutinised in terms of its potential political consequences. And these consequences were often depicted as the aftermath of *feminine* vulnerability. George Canning's "The New Morality", published in *The Anti-Jacobin*, depicts sensibility as an attractive feminine figure seduced into the prostitution of radicalism by the (French) Jacobins.²⁶² Sensibility is the vulnerable innocent who becomes the sexualised female victim of the French radical debauch.

It is in this vein that I now turn to the work of Jane Austen, and to her intervention in the "problem of sensibility". In *Sense and Sensibility*, which Austen worked on between 1797 and its publication in 1811, we find an exploration of the pervasiveness of sensibility as a particularly feminine habit.²⁶³ Writing in the wake of the sentimental novel, Austen, like certain other female authors of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries,²⁶⁴ is interested in the gendered terms of sensibility, and in the *alternatives* to them that might now be proposed. I read her intervention in the "problem of sensibility" as a promotion of the value of feminine sensibility *only* when it is combined with a feminine *exertion* against the possibility of swooning, seduction and sickness.

The title of Austen's novel has often been read as substituting "the leading characteristics of [the] principal personages for their names", so that we are presented with the "sense of Elinor" and "sensibility (or rather *sensiblerie*) of Marianne".²⁶⁵ Whilst this is by no means the only way in which we might conceive of the relation between the novel's titular terms, Marianne might usefully be construed as representing

²⁶¹ See Ellis, *op cit.*

²⁶² For a detailed reading of this, see *ibid.*, p.196.

²⁶³ Austen's unfinished novel of 1817, *Sanditon*, has also been thought of as a satire on the pretensions of literary sensibility.

²⁶⁴ See, for instance, Mary Bruton, *Self-Control* (1811); correspondence between these novelistic explorations and Mary Wollstonecraft's work will be discussed a little later.

²⁶⁵ These typical views are expressed by Austin Dobson in his introduction to *Sense and Sensibility*, p.viii

the “survival of the sentimental novel”²⁶⁶ of the eighteenth century, and she is emphatically portrayed as a creature of excessive feeling: “her sorrows, her joys, could have no moderation,” and Elinor detects “excess in her sister’s sensibility”.²⁶⁷ The novel describes a feminine reaffirmation of the value of this emotional excess in the relationship between Marianne and her mother, such that, after the death of Mr Dashwood, they encourage one another “in the violence of their affliction. The agony of grief which overpowered them at first was voluntarily renewed, was sought for, was *created* again and again. They gave themselves up wholly to their sorrow, *seeking increase* of wretchedness in every reflection that could afford it, and resolved against ever admitting consolation in future.”²⁶⁸ Feeling as a “natural” response is here compromised by the activity of the women in “creating” and “seeking increase”, so that emotional agony becomes a feminine indulgence and performance. Elinor later describes Marianne experiencing a “violent sorrow” that she is not “merely giving way to as a relief, but feeding and encouraging as a duty”²⁶⁹—this, then, is the duty sensibility places on the female sufferer: to actively produce overwrought emotional states.

Literary response and taste are key ways in which this excessive sensibility must be demonstrated for Marianne. She dismisses those people, particularly potential suitors, who have no “real taste”, who are not “connoisseurs”; it would “break her heart” to hear a man she loved read with “little sensibility”: “I could not be happy with a man whose taste did not in every point coincide with my own. He must enter into all my feeling; the same books, the same music, must charm us both”.²⁷⁰ The test for shared feeling is in the correct and sensible response to Cowper and Scott, and in admiring Pope “no more than is proper”.²⁷¹ Marianne’s poetic sensibility means that she responds to all things around her in a manner we might now refer to as that of an aesthete. She describes, for instance, the “transporting sensations” she experiences watching leaves fall from a tree, the refined “feelings” that the leaves, “the season, the

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p.viii.

²⁶⁷ Austen, *Sense and Sensibility*, p.5.

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.* (my emphasis).

²⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.68.

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.15.

²⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p.40.

air, altogether inspired”.²⁷² To which Elinor crisply retorts: “It is not everyone ... who has your passion for dead leaves.”²⁷³

Elinor’s responses to her sister’s feelings throughout the novel interrogate feminine sensibility as an overwrought *performance*, whilst sardonically suggesting Marianne’s absurd exaggeration of literary and aesthetic response and her injudiciousness. Elinor’s criticism of Marianne’s literary response turns through the novel towards a larger questioning of the efficacy of sensibility as a system for regulating taste and judgment more generally, particularly judgments of moral propriety. Marianne’s notion of sensibility means that she believes a code of moral propriety can be worked out justly through her *feelings*: in her relationship with Willoughby, for instance, she insists to Elinor that she would have been “sensible of it” had there been any impropriety: “for we always know when we are acting wrong, and with such a conviction I could have had no pleasure.”²⁷⁴ In Marianne’s view, she would know if she had acted wrongly through her refinement of sensibility: “I am not sensible of having done anything wrong.”²⁷⁵ But the moral judgments produced by sensibility are criticised by Elinor and the narrator as being tendentious in the extreme. In Marianne’s dismissal of Colonel Brandon as uninteresting, for instance, Elinor thinks her sister “undiscerning ... prejudiced and unjust”.²⁷⁶ The narrator attests to the inadequacy of this method of judgment when she describes “the injustice to which [Marianne] was often led in her opinion of others, by the irritable refinement of her own mind, and the too great importance placed by her on the delicacies of a strong sensibility and the graces of a polished manner.”²⁷⁷ Her prejudices, here explicitly the prejudices conditioned by the cult of sensibility, mean that she is neither “reasonable nor candid. She expected from other people the same opinions and feelings as her own, and she judged of their motives by the immediate effect of their actions on herself”.²⁷⁸ Sensibility is figured as a disciplinary code of response,²⁷⁹ and Marianne’s feelings, her supposed “natural” responsivity, are presented as conditioned and morally-insufficient

²⁷² *Ibid.*, p.77.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, p.79.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p.60.

²⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p.44.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p.174.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁷⁹ For a Foucauldian exploration of Austen’s bodies—and in particular the blush whereby “the body is enlisted in the production of legibility in order to serve at surveillance’s creation of domesticable bodies, and the novel’s use of the blush would be seen as instrumentalizing that service”—see O’Farrell, *op cit.*, pp.6, 7.

prejudices. This critique is similar to a later indictment of the hypocrisy of a moral code supposedly demonstrated through a mannered feminine sensibility, and particularly through the swoon, in Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1869):

As it is, we've been playing at war—that's the nasty thing, we act magnanimously and all that. It's like the magnanimity and *sensibility* of the lady who swoons when she sees a calf slaughtered; she's so kind, she can't bear the sight of blood, but she eats the same calf in sauce with great appetite.²⁸⁰

As an interrogation of sensibility as an insufficient code of response, there are many ways in which *Sense and Sensibility* suggests that the cult of feminine sensibility hampers judgement.²⁸¹ But the danger of excessive sensibility is most emphatically stated by Austen in terms of the different ways in which Marianne “falls” in the novel: she falls in the rain, and this “tumbling down ... tumbling about”,²⁸² is the precursor to her falling in love with Willoughby.²⁸³ At points of extreme feeling she “falls back” into hysterics,²⁸⁴ and the relation between feeling strongly and feminine illness is elaborated throughout the novel in the language used to describe Marianne's distress: Marianne, when suffering from heart-break, is “not well”; she is “indisposed”²⁸⁵; she is “much plagued lately with nervous headaches”²⁸⁶; “she has had a nervous complaint on her for several weeks”²⁸⁷; she suffers from a “a general nervous faintness”.²⁸⁸ These nervous symptoms find full expression in Marianne *falling ill*, falling into a potentially deadly fever: Marianne “shivers” over the fire; she is “weary and languid”, and develops a “feverish wildness” that threatens to be fatal.²⁸⁹ Marianne describes her illness as the fulfillment of her “feelings” and the approach she takes to extending them under the rigmarole of sensibility: she has “courted misery”, embracing sleeplessness, tears,

²⁸⁰ Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace* (London: Penguin, [1869] 2007), p.575.

²⁸¹ Marianne's “romantic refinements” of mind mean, for instance, that she fantasises Willoughby's character from her literary encounters: “His person and air were equal to what her fancy had ever drawn for the hero of a favourite story” (Austen, *op cit.*, p.41). And this literary romanticisation will prove heartbreaking for Marianne. For a similar warning against the dangers posed to the female romantic imagination by reading, see Gustav Flaubert's later tragic heroine Emma Bovary: *Madame Bovary* (1857); but in contrast to this see Hardy's Tess, who laments her deficient education in terms of novels: “Ladies know what to fend hands against, because they read novels that tell them of these tricks; but I never had the chance ‘o learning in that way, and you did not help me!” (Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles; A Pure Woman* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Ltd, [1891] 1992), p.100.)

²⁸² Austen, *op cit.*, p.38.

²⁸³ “There, exactly there, on that projective mound, there I fell; and there I first saw W.” *Ibid.*, p.309.

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p.316.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p.172.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p.191.

²⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p.199.

²⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p.159.

fasting and silence such that the narrator exclaims: “Her sensibility was potent enough!”²⁹⁰ This “potency” is a preparation for “suffering”, a morbid indulgence that tends towards self-annihilation. It is a falling into the abyss of “self-destruction”.²⁹¹

In contrast to this, Elinor stands resolutely against tumbling: her position is *staunchly anti-swoon*. Elinor ministers to Marianne at crucial moments of faintness, providing remedies and exhorting her to “exert” herself. When Marianne encounters Willoughby with a fashionable-looking young lady, for example, she turns “dreadfully white, and unable to stand”, sinks onto a chair. Elinor, “expecting every moment to see her faint”, screens Marianne from observation and revives her “with lavender water”,²⁹² lavender drops being an old remedy for swooning.²⁹³ Later, hartshorn²⁹⁴ is administered as a smelling salt, in an attempt to “restore” Marianne to herself and to keep her from fainting. Again and again Elinor exhorts the “faint and giddy” Marianne²⁹⁵ towards self-exertion *against swooning*: “Exert yourself, dear Marianne ... exert yourself”.²⁹⁶ And it is in response to her own strong feelings that Elinor most heroically demonstrates the principle of remaining upright. When Elinor discovers that the man she hopes to marry is closely acquainted with a Miss Lucy Steele she is in “silent amazement” and “though her complexion varied, she *stood firm* in incredulity, and felt in no danger of an hysterical fit or a swoon”.²⁹⁷ As the details of their secret engagement emerge, Elinor is threatened more seriously with the danger of swooning: “for a few moments she was almost overcome—her heart sank within her, and she could hardly stand”;²⁹⁸ but, crucially, she “exerts” herself in order to prevent a faint: “and she struggled so resolutely against the oppression of her feelings that her success was speedy, and for the time complete”.²⁹⁹ Elinor’s “self-command” is described as a force towards uprightness: she “did not sink”.³⁰⁰ One is reminded by this of Austen’s juvenile writing in *Love and Freindship* [sic], a satire of female characters who faint at the slightest provocation, wherein the 14-year-old author has her heroine cautioned against such enfeebling

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p.276.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.73.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p.312.

²⁹² *Ibid.*, p.153.

²⁹³ See Dobson’s introduction; *ibid.*, p.viii.

²⁹⁴ Also know as salt of hartshorn or ammonium carbonate.

²⁹⁵ Austen, *op cit.*, p.159.

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.160.

²⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.114 (my emphasis).

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.120.

²⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p.117.

performances of femininity: “beware of swoons, Dear Laura ... Run mad as often as you chuse; but do not faint”.³⁰¹

Elinor’s opposition to the risk of a feminine insensibility might be seen to coincide with the sort of opposition to a *debilitating* sensibility voiced by Mary Wollstonecraft.³⁰² In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792),³⁰³ Wollstonecraft identifies the dangers of a discourse of sensibility that enfeebles women, that produces in them a morbid tendency towards delicacy. The sort of mid-eighteenth century view of feminine delicacy that she writes against is typified in Edmund Burke’s *On the Sublime and the Beautiful* (1757):

An air of robustness and strength is very prejudicial to beauty. An appearance of *delicacy*, and even of fragility, is almost essential to it. ... I need here say little of the fair sex, where I believe the point will be easily allowed me. The beauty of women is considerably owing to their weakness or delicacy, and is even enhanced by their timidity, a quality of mind analogous to it.³⁰⁴

Wollstonecraft’s opposition to such wide-spread (“easily allowed”) notions of the desirability of feminine delicacy is strongly set forth: she detests the “weak elegance of mind, exquisite sensibility, and sweet docility of manners, supposed to be the sexual characteristics of the weaker vessel”, because such notions are “epithets of weakness” that “soften our slavish dependence” and make of women “objects of contempt”.³⁰⁵ It is women “in general”, as well as “the rich of both sexes” who have acquired the vices associated with “civilized” sensibility and the result is that “[t]heir senses are inflamed, and their understandings neglected; consequently they become the prey of their senses, delicately termed sensibility, and are blown about by every momentary gust of feeling”.³⁰⁶ In continuing to describe the ill effects of sensibility Wollstonecraft’s

³⁰¹ Jane Austen, *Love and Freindship* in Deidre Shauna Lynch and Jack Stillinger (eds), *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, [c.1790] 2006).

³⁰² For more detailed examinations of the relationship between Austen and Wollstonecraft see, inter alia, Lloyd W. Brown, “Jane Austen and the Feminist Tradition” *Nineteenth-Century Literature* 28(3) (1973) 321–328: “the textual parallels between *Persuasion* and the *Rights of Woman* suggest that there is a significant connection between Jane Austen and writers like Mary Wollstonecraft on the subject of female ‘feelings’” (327–328); Claire Tomalin also offers some biographical evidence that Austen may have known Wollstonecraft and her work: *Jane Austen: A Life* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), p.158.

³⁰³ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1792] 1999), *passim*.

³⁰⁴ Edmund Burke, *On the Sublime and Beautiful* (The Harvard Classics, [1757] 1909–14), “On Delicacy”.

³⁰⁵ Wollstonecraft, *op cit.*, p.73.

³⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p.130.

language reflects a female physical instability that we might read as correspondent with the swoon: not only are women “blown about”, but they are rendered “faint”, “unstable”, “wavering”, “exhausted”, “transient”, consist emotionally in “fits and starts”, lack the stability of “gravity”.³⁰⁷ “Women,” she tells us, “are supposed to possess more sensibility, and even humanity, than men”³⁰⁸; but the result of this tendentious notion of sensibility is morbidity: it is a “sickly delicacy” and an “enervating” indulgence.³⁰⁹ Sensibility accords a certain privilege to the feminine, but with the “baneful consequences” that the genteel woman’s time is employed in physical indisposition: in “guard[ing] against or endur[ing] sickness... Most men are sometimes obliged to bear with bodily inconveniences, and to endure, occasionally, the inclemency of the elements; but genteel women are, literally speaking, slaves to their bodies, and glory in their subjection.”³¹⁰

As an alternative to the “false descriptions” or “caricatures” of sensibility, Wollstonecraft proposes the “vigor of intellect”, a “strengthening” of judgment, and a focus on “sense”: “it requires sense to turn sensibility into the broad channel of humanity”.³¹¹ Here, then, is another way in which we might fruitfully think through the terms of Austen’s title. Wollstonecraft’s version of feminine “vigor” seems to chime with Austen’s emphasis on “exertion”, and both suggest a redemption of feminine sensibility through its alliance with “sense”. Both Wollstonecraft and Austen, then, propose models of feminine response that accord with sensibility in terms of a capacity for feeling, but are not sensible to the morbid extent of *insensibility*: that would, in other words, stop short of the inchoate unconsciousness of the swoon.

Sense and sensibility is not a novel that wishes to entirely dispense with the value of sensibility as a demonstration of feminine feeling and response, and of “humanity”. Elinor is in no way an unfeeling character: we are told in the opening stages of the novel, for instance, that she has an “excellent heart; and her disposition was affectionate, and her feelings were strong”. Nor does it suggest sensibility’s complete usurpation by “sense”. The novel, in fact, repeatedly reinforces that sentimental rhetoric of the body that makes feeling legible through physical display. Language alone,

³⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, *passim*.

³⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p.277.

³⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p.111.

³¹⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.261.

Austen's narrator suggests, fails to be fully expressive: speech, for instance, frequently breaks off into the dash of silence at moments of intensity when Austen's characters feel "too much for speech"³¹²; silence attains degrees of expressive power when Marianne revives and Colonel Brandon shares Mrs Dashwood's bliss "in a silence even greater than her own"³¹³; changes in "complexion" (blushing, colouring, crimsoning) are repeatedly deployed as reliable signs of inner emotion, through countenances that "show"³¹⁴; the body "speaks" for characters when they are unable to do so themselves (when, for instance, the experience of agony affects "every feature" of a character; or when characters have "expressive" or "eloquent" eyes, and "look"³¹⁵ their feelings, as though the oracular could emit emotion, with "the most speaking tenderness"). In this way the narrative voice corroborates the sentimental narrative physiognomy that is the literary demonstration of *narrative sensibility*, where bodies are used by a narrator to describe inner states through the fantasy of physical divination or bodily legibility.

However, alongside her use of the body as a site of possible expressive communication, Austen employs what we might think of as a hermeneutics of suspicion³¹⁶ towards descriptions of the female body as the novelistically valorised medium of feminine expression. Elinor feels strongly, but she also exerts her sense alongside her feelings; she "governs" them.³¹⁷ Following her father's death, for instance, she too is "affronted", like her sister and mother; "but still she could struggle, she could exert herself."³¹⁸ And when she suffers further disappointments, she is active in procuring consolation for herself, and in aiding others, through "constant and painful exertion".³¹⁹ Elinor struggles against being *all feeling*. And she repeatedly seeks for words to accompany physical demonstration, betraying a mistrust of physiognomy as a master discourse. She is, for instance, anxious for verbal or written corroboration of Willoughby's supposed physical demonstration of his intentions towards Marianne: she wants "syllables", and a "professed declaration" to accompany his imputed somatic declarations of love. And crucially, for Elinor, the avowal of words "outweighs"³²⁰ the power of the body to signify or promise *reliably*. Elinor seeks a *coincidence* of language

³¹² Austen, *op cit.*, p.67.

³¹³ *Ibid.*, p.300

³¹⁴ For much more on blushing and somatic legibility in Austen see O'Farrell, *op cit.*

³¹⁵ Austen, *op cit.*, p.210.

³¹⁶ I borrow Paul Ricoeur's phrase here: *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970).

³¹⁷ Austen, *op cit.*, p.4.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.5.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.231.

and bodily expression, an ideal state in which the two forms of communication exist in mutuality and neither need be sacrificed to the other. When the female body's connotations are privileged over the denotation of language, the results, for a woman, are disastrous: she is potentially misled into desire; and, rendered speechless, she falls into swooning insensibility. When Marianne is "overpowered" by emotion following Willoughby's betrayal of his "*appearance of ... honourable and delicate feeling*",³²¹ it is speech that Elinor recommends for her recovery: "Elinor encouraged her as much as possible to talk of what she felt".³²² Elinor seems here to be administering a proleptic "talking cure" for her sister's "nervous faintness" and hysterics, realising that the privileges of an unspeaking female sensibility would keep her sister silent and ill. Available language may fail to account for feminine feeling and desire; but the answer, Austen and Wollstonecraft both suggest, is not for the novel to deliver up the female body as a swooning semiotics of female silence; the answer is not to keep women prostrated in hysterical manifestations of female feeling, disavowing the possibility of female speech. This would doom women to a perpetual and dangerous falling: into seduction, into hysterics, into illness, into insensibility. And the tendency of the novel to react in this way to the problem of female expressivity might account for the long procession of heroines collapsing, "made sick by their sensitivities".³²³ Feminine swooning would in these circumstances signal the failure of sentimentalism and its promise of a communicable feeling as the grounds for sympathy: the silence of the swoon becomes the "limit" of sentiment, or its tragedy in John Mullan's terms, "the silence of feeling becoming private, visceral, debilitating".³²⁴

In Sedgwick's reading of Austen and Mullan, the tragic mutability of sensibility's "sociability" into "isolation," "solipsism," or "hypochondria" can also be read as the intersection it produces "between alloerotic [eroticism directed towards another] and autoerotic investments".³²⁵ Sedgwick reads *Sense and Sensibility* in parallel with a text of unknown provenance, "Onanism and Nervous Disorders in Two

³²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.70.

³²¹ *Ibid.*, p.158.

³²² *Ibid.*, p.173.

³²³ This is John Mullan's description of the literary woman of feeling post-Richardson: "Richardson's Pamela, a resolute heroine who endures suffering triumphantly, also sometimes collapses under the pressure of her feelings. The heroines who follow her up to and including the gothic novels of Ann Radcliffe, are made sick by their sensitivities". (Mullan, *op cit.*, p.250.)

³²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.250.

³²⁵ Sedgwick, "Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl", pp.835–836, fn.22.

Little Girls” (1881).³²⁶ This fragmented description of the treatment of a female onanist presents a pathological, inwardly-directed feminine autoeroticism as synonymous with hysteria and swooning:

The 23rd. She repeats: “I deserve to be burnt and I will be. I will be brave during the operation, I won’t cry.” From ten at night until six in the morning, she has a terrible attack, falling several times into a swoon that lasted about a quarter of an hour. At times she had visual hallucinations. At other times she became delirious, wild eyed, saying: “Turn the page, who is hitting me, etc.”
The 25th. I apply a hot point to X...’s clitoris.³²⁷

That it is impossible to determine whether this text is a medical case history or a piece of sado-masochistic pornography, that these are substitutable possibilities in terms of plausibility, dramatically demonstrates how swooning is bound up with a voyeurism of the prostrate female form that destabilises the boundaries of different discourses: texts of medicine and of sentimentality alike might swoon into pornography. And if the swoon here is concurrent with pathologising descriptions of autoeroticism, with feminine feeling failing to be directed towards the world and instead turning back on itself, then it reveals the propensity for all female feeling to be masturbatory when forced into domestication, confined in scope only to inward effect. The “prison” that Wollstonecraft describes as the world of women would, in this most extreme account, be her own body.³²⁸

Sense and Sensibility, then, produces a *language* of bodily expression that also reveals the dangerous insufficiencies of sensibility’s rhetoric of the female body; it suggests that the narration of female thought and feeling can be undertaken as an anti-hysterical and anti-pornographic task. Both Austen and Wollstonecraft, women writers who undertook their work in the wake of sensibility, valorise the female “exertion” necessary to stay upright against the tendency to swoon, motioning towards a world in which women’s bodies might be narrated with their own words; where *to feel* might also be to stay conscious and to attempt, however stutteringly, to speak.

³²⁶ Demetrius Zambaco, “Onanism and Nervous Disorders in Two Little Girls” (trans. Catherine Duncan) *Semiotext(e)* 4 ([1881] 1981); I quote from Sedgwick’s reproduction of the material, which corrects some typographical errors and layout ambiguities.

³²⁷ Sedgwick, *op cit.*, p.829.

³²⁸ I am referring here to Wollstonecraft’s unfinished novel *Maria; or, The Wrongs of Woman* (1797), and Elaine Showalter’s reading of the “mansion of despair” in which Maria is incarcerated as symbolic of all man-made institutions, from marriage to the law, that confine women and drive them mad: “Was not the world a vast prison, and women born slaves?” (Showalter, *op cit.*, p.1).

I have attempted here to demonstrate some of the complexities endemic to the gendering of the swoon within sentimental literature during the eighteenth century. The performance of feminine sensibility in these sentimental narratives suggests the eroticised desirability of feminine incapacity. Jane Austen gives us an arch and ironical response to the vogue for female insensibility that sensibility produced: she authors satirical scenes of reciprocal feminine insensibility, and shows us, alongside Wollstonecraft, the morbidity inherent in a glamorisation of feminine delicacy. In the next chapter, I will consider how a distrust of the symbolic gendering of the swoon might turn into a creative redeployment of its potential power in some later nineteenth and early twentieth century writing. The feminine morbidity of the swoon is used by certain romantic and modernist writers as a means of challenging masculinist notions of the “upstanding”, the “vigorous” and the “powerful”, while also providing a powerful metaphor for artistic transformation.

Chapter Three

“Dead-born”: Swoon-Aesthetics and the (Re)Birth of the Artist

I did not die. But slowly, as one in a swoon
 To whom life creeps back in the form of death,
 With a sense of separation, a blind pain
 Of blank obstruction, and a roar i' the ears
 Of visionary chariots which retreat
 As earth grows clearer ... slowly, by degrees,
 I woke, rose up.³²⁹

Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh* (1856)

The necrotic recovery from a swoon, which resurrects the swooner into death, is the striking simile Elizabeth Barrett Browning uses in her long verse-novel *Aurora Leigh* to describe the transformation of the eponymous narrator into a poet. If Jane Austen holds the swoon in suspicion, interrogating its role as part of a mannered performance of female incapacity, Elizabeth Barrett Browning draws on the feminine morbidity of swooning in order to challenge and subvert notions of masculine health and capacity. The transformation of the woman into the poet makes the return to altered consciousness a kind of apocalypse: life creeps back in the form of death, bringing with it the end of life as we know it. For Barrett Browning the swoon is potentially salvific; it brings death to the old life, and is infused with an eschatology that looks forward to the arrival of the “Woman and artist” as inaugurator of a new age. When artists awake from their swoons, Barrett Browning tells us, “Life calls to us/ In some transformed, apocalyptic voice”³³⁰; the writer is symbolically reborn, into a life that speaks the language of radical transformation *as death*.

Barrett Browning’s work is an early formulation of “swoon-aesthetics”. I propose through this term a series of connections between ways of imagining the task of writing and ways of imagining the swoon, whereby the swoon is offered as a model of artistic transformation. I suggest that the symbolism of the swoon as a death-born

³²⁹ Elizabeth Barrett Browning, *Aurora Leigh* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, [1856] 1993), I:559–565.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*, I:663–674.

revivification is employed by nineteenth and early twentieth-century writers who seek to challenge certain traditions: swoon-aesthetics privileges feminine morbidity as a powerful symbolic threat to the health of masculinist systems of power and as the inaugurator of radical change. If the swoon had become tarnished with feminine morbidity by the end of the eighteenth century, the writers discussed here use just that association to position their writing as a challenge to prevailing codes of masculine health. John Keats, Edgar Allan Poe and James Joyce might initially seem strange swoon-fellows; but I will argue that they all embrace the deathly possibilities of the swoon as the way into new life, and into new forms of aesthetics. In particular, I will argue that the importance of the swoon in James Joyce's writing has been overlooked. Joyce's swoons connect his writing back to the radical poetics of John Keats, and to previous figurations of swoon-aesthetics, where new life is imagined to emerge from death. Joyce brings the swoon into the twentieth century as a powerful metaphor for the modernist hope of radical artistic transformation.

John Keats and the "Dead-born" artist

Mario Praz, in his famous study *The Romantic Agony* (1968), extrapolates from opprobrious responses to Romanticism (particular those framed in terms of Romanticism's continuities with sensibility), to suggest that every artist might, if this derogatory logic is followed, be seen to inhabit the denigrated space of the feminine and the sickly. Praz's argument works in the following way: the roots of Romanticism are typically thought to lie "in the border between an ancient, hereditary faith which had collapsed and a new faith, the faith in new philosophical and liberal ideals".³³¹ To live this new Enlightenment faith, and to believe in the industrialisation, rationalism, colonialism and commodity capitalism that were its corollaries, required "courage and a virile attitude"; those who rejected it were therefore stigmatised in terms of their "feminine, impressionable, sentimental, incoherent, fickle minds".³³² One name for this rejection would be Romanticism, and if the Romantics could be accused of having "feminine minds", Praz suggests, then "it is questionable whether the minds of all artists are not, in a greater or lesser degree, of this [feminine] kind".³³³ The Romantic is often

³³¹ Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony* (trans. Angus Davidson) (London; NY; Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1968), 2nd edn, p.xii.

³³² *Ibid.*

³³³ *Ibid.*

defined in conjunction with the Classic, so that they “come finally to denote, respectively, ‘equilibrium’ and ‘interruption of equilibrium’”,³³⁴ which comes close to Goethe’s formulation “*Classic ist das Gesunde, Romantische das Kranke* [Classic is the healthy, Romantic the sick]”.³³⁵ Defined in this way, Praz argues, the terms lose all historical specificity; instead they “indicate the process which goes on universally in every artist”.³³⁶ Romanticism, characterised as feminine disequilibrium and sickness, might therefore come to typify artistic innovation.

John Keats, that “poor”, “stripling” poet, is the writer who best demonstrates how the critical denigration of the sickly “feminine mind” might instead be seen to describe the necessary preconditions for radical art. Nicholas Roe, in his work on Keats and the culture of dissent, describes the way in which Tory journals successfully denigrated the poet in exactly the terms Praz describes Romantic sensibility being derided: in the “Cockney School” essays published in *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* from 1817 onwards, Keats was ridiculed “in terms of his youth, his social class, cultural status and gender ... his poetry demonstrated that he was ‘not capable of understanding’, and in this last respect his intellect was shown to be unformed, sickly, and ‘feminine’ in character”.³³⁷ Roe suggests that the reviewer discredits Keats by describing him in terms of the Burkean paradigm of feminine beauty: he is afflicted with “‘effeminate’ incapacity”.³³⁸ The most virulent attacks occurred in the Fourth Cockney Essay (1818), which appeared after the publication of Keats’ first two volumes, *Poems*, by John Keats and *Endymion*. Here Keats is diminished along the lines of his youth as the “the wavering apprentice”³³⁹ and relegated to “the Grub-street race” of scribbling “farm-servants and unmarried ladies ... footmen [and] superannuated governess[es]”.³⁴⁰ Finally, the Cockney School poets are dismissed as “uneducated and flimsy striplings, who are not capable of understanding ... [the merits of] other men of power—fanciful dreaming teadrinkers”,³⁴¹ and Keats as a “bentling [who] has already learned to lisp sedition”. Keats is, according to this account, an illegitimate child who has been taught to versify in a “lisp”, associated during this period with childish or

³³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.8.

³³⁵ *Ibid.*

³³⁶ *Ibid.* It should be noted that Praz is not in favour of this loss of historical specificity, whereas I am interested in what it might tell us about post-Romantic ways of imagining artistic process.

³³⁷ Nicholas Roe, *John Keats and the Culture of Dissent* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp.10–11.

³³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.11.

³³⁹ Quoted by Roe, *ibid.*, p.15.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.16.

³⁴¹ Quoted *ibid.*, p.18.

affected “effeminate” sensibility.³⁴² Much of this criticism aimed to depict Keats in “the subordinate social position occupied by women”,³⁴³ Roe argues, and this criticism was successful to the extent that Keats continued through the nineteenth century to be seen as an effeminate poet appealing to feminine tastes: this criticism effectively “feminizes” Keats.³⁴⁴ And this feminisation is bound up with the enduring belief that Keats had no interest in anything but beauty, with a critical obliteration of his poetry’s intellectual and political content that Stopford Brookes has called the “evacuation of Keats”.³⁴⁵ The stereotypes of childish and effeminate passivity established in the Cockney School essays had the effect of publicly depoliticising Keats’ poetry, meaning that for many years his “intellectual and political presence has been wholly effaced by the supposedly uncerebral category of the aesthetic”.³⁴⁶ An unwillingness to treat Keats as a serious political poet has then, according to Roe, been the result of the success of early reviewers in identifying him with (feminine) stereotypes of passivity and weakness, which allowed him to be accommodated to the “prevailing masculine structure of social and cultural authority”³⁴⁷ as the antithesis of “men of power”.

More recent Keats criticism has encouraged readers to see that the failure to be a man of power might in fact be Keats’ key strength. And his “feminine” passivity might become, in his own conception of artistic creation, the precondition for works of genius. This conception is most strikingly set out in his own famous formulation of Negative Capability:

[S]everal things dovetail in my mind, and at once it struck me, what quality went to form a man of Achievement especially in literature and which Shakespeare possessed most enormously—I mean Negative Capability, that is when man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.³⁴⁸

Much has been written on Keats’ Negative Capability as a perfect state of artistic receptivity, a rejection of Godwinian philosophical pre-resolution in favour of open

³⁴² *Ibid.*, p.205.

³⁴³ *Ibid.*, p.16.

³⁴⁴ “The feminizing of Keats during the nineteenth century ... has been analysed in detail by Susan Wolfson, who shows how during this period Keats was ‘deemed to have particular appeal to women’; his poetry was marketed in particular ‘to female audiences’. This was one way of assimilating Keats’s threat to prevailing codes of masculinity.” *Ibid.*, p.229.

³⁴⁵ Cited by Roe, *ibid.*, p.12.

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.12.

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, pp.225–6.

³⁴⁸ John Keats, letter to his brothers (1817): *The Letters of John Keats, 1814–1821* (ed. Hyder Edward Rollins) (Cambridge, Mass.: 1958), i., pp.191–4.

uncertainty.³⁴⁹ Donald Crichlow Goellnicht connects this with Wordsworth's notion of "wise passivity", and the state of "calm receptivity" that is venerated in his "Expostulation and Reply"; but he also highlights the passive quality of Negative Capability more strikingly than any other critic in suggesting that Keats may have chosen the term "negative" from the scientific vocabulary of chemistry. Keats was, as is well known, a medical student, and Goellnicht argues that he would have had a basic understanding of electricity from lectures he is known to have attended. If the "negative" is an electrical metaphor, then,

the negative pole becomes the ideal representation of the negatively capable poet: like the negative pole, the poet is passive, receptive, and as the negative pole receives the current of electricity from the positive pole, so the poet receives impulses from the world around him, a world that is full of mysteries and doubts that the poet cannot explain, but which in his passive state of receptivity he does not feel the need to explain.³⁵⁰

Whilst this remains a speculative account, it does much to electrify the importance of receptivity to Keats' account of the poet. This striking focus on receptivity also coincides in certain respects with the stereotypes of passive femininity that were used in an attempt to discredit Keats. In making receptivity an inherent part of the quality of achievement for men of literature, notably Shakespeare, Keats privileges symbolically feminine qualities in a way that challenges notions of masculine endeavour. And concluding his musing on Negative Capability, Keats returns to the realm of Beauty:

This, pursued through Volumes would perhaps take us no further than thus, that with a great poet the sense of Beauty overcomes every other consideration, or rather obliterates all consideration.³⁵¹

Roe argues that this foregrounding of the aesthetic is not a retraction from the world of politics: rather, he suggests, the words "overcome" and "obliterate" present a combative approach to the power of poetry appropriate to an age of revolutionary struggle. Beauty becomes a challenge to current considerations, "to the authorised 'masculine'

³⁴⁹ For a more detailed exploration of Keats' relation to William Godwin's *Political Justice* (1793), see Roe: "Negative Capability was (among other things) a response to the rationalistic version of eighteenth-century mechanistic psychology which informed *Political Justice*. Godwin had been proved wrong, but Shakespearean sympathy might offer a boundless yet human means for social renovation—the negatively capable aspect, as it were, of the over confident and at times irritable belief in revolution as change which dated from the early 1790s." (Roe, *op cit.*, p.247.)

³⁵⁰ Donald Crichlow Goellnicht, "Negative Capability and Wise Passiveness" (1976), Open Access Dissertations and Theses. Paper 4675, pp.12–13.

³⁵¹ Keats, *op cit.*, pp.191–4.

discourses of the political and cultural establishment”,³⁵² and a challenge which mobilises stigmatised feminine qualities as part of an assault on the status quo. Roe is among many recent critics who have set out to reverse the “evacuation” of Keats’ poetry, and who argue for the importance of fervid republicanism and Jacobin intent in his work.³⁵³ These political interests, Roe suggests, are bound up with the receptive, passive principle of Negative Capability, which establishes “a universal hospitality as the prerogative of poetic genius”³⁵⁴ and evokes “a Shakespearean susceptibility to unaccommodated human beings which spoke powerfully for Jacobin aspirations during the 1790s and the Napoleonic period”.³⁵⁵

Keats’ frequent use of swooning in his poetry might be seen, then, alongside his concept of Negative Capability, as an assimilation of passivity that is *symbolically* feminine, deliberately at odds with “men of power”. If swooning was stigmatised as part of *feminised* debility under the rubric of sensibility, Keats engages with these notions of debility when he pivots much of his poetry around the swooning man. The most famous Keatsian swoon is to be found in “Bright Star”, where the poet longs to be as constant as the apostrophised star:

... still stedfast, still unchangeable,
Pillow’d upon my fair love’s ripening breast,
To feel for ever its soft swell and fall,
Awake forever in a sweet unrest,
Still, still to hear her tender-taken breath,
And so live ever—or else swoon to death.³⁵⁶

³⁵² Roe, *op cit.*, p.225.

³⁵³ *Ibid.*, p.4. Roe names other important works re-reading Keats’ poetry in terms of its political commitments as follows: H.W. Garrod, *Keats* (Oxford: 1926); Hebert G. Wright, “Keats and Politics” *Essays and Studies* 18 (1933), 7–23; June Q. Koch, “Politics in Keats’s Poetry” *Journal of English and German Philology* 71 (1972), 491–501. New historicist readings, contextualising Keats’s work, might also be of significant in this vein, including those by Marilyn Butler, *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries: English Literature and its Background 1760–1830* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981); Andrew Bennett, *Keats, Narrative and Audience: The Posthumous Life of Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Theresa M. Kelley, “Keats, Ekphrasis, and History” in Nicholas Roe (ed.) *Keats and History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp.221–32; Paul Magnuson, *Reading Public Romanticism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998), pp.167–210; Jeffrey N. Cox, *Poetry and Politics in the Cockney School: Keats, Shelley, Hunt and Their Circle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp.165, 185–86; and James O’Rourke, *Keats’s Odes and Contemporary Criticism* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1998), pp.75–77. J.H. Prynne might be added to this list, recently giving seminars on Keats’ poetry at the Hangzhou Normal University, China, and at the University of Sussex’s Centre for Creative and Critical Thought (February 2013).

³⁵⁴ Roe, *op cit.*, p.225.

³⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p.236.

³⁵⁶ John Keats, “Bright Star” in *The Complete Poems* (London: Penguin Books, [1838] 1988).

Here we find a swooning death positioned as an alternative, *or* an overwhelming correspondence to, eternal life and love. The poet has rejected the immobile viewing position of stellification in the early part of the poem (“*Not* in lone splendour hung aloft the night/ And watching, with eternal lids apart”), markedly diverging from the ascendant conclusion of Chaucer’s *Troilus and Criseyde* and its final turn away from the lowliness of swooning.³⁵⁷ Instead, we are given an ending of profound ambivalence, an ambivalence that has much to do with the strange temporality of “swoon” here. The swoon might mean the end of life and love³⁵⁸; but its position as an alternative for “live ever” may also give the sense of a continuing after-life in death; or of living now, pillow’d on the lover’s breast, as indistinguishable from already having died: “I’m in heaven”, as we might colloquially put it. This whole poem is a future conditional, which makes “or else swoon to death” the temporally unlimited condition of the future: the state of passivity might also, then, be a kind of eschatology, a new continuous beginning. And the pinnacle of masculine brightness in the future might be to engage swooningly with modes of receptivity (“Still, still to hear”).³⁵⁹

In *Endymion*, Keats’ longest poem, the shepherd’s journey into the realm of the gods begins with a swoon: “His senses swooned off”,³⁶⁰ the poet tells us, and Endymion is left in a trance, to be led away from rustic festivities by his sister. This “magic sleep” “calms” Endymion “to life again”³⁶¹: here the swoon’s absence of consciousness is restorative in the same way that dying might be restorative, *if* one is subsequently revived. Endymion reveals to his sister that his swooning trance-states are occasioned by the visions he has experienced since he first glimpsed the moon goddess, named here Cynthia.³⁶² These visions make him “dizzy and distraught”: he has seen wonderful “colours, wings and bursts of spangly light” and these have become “more strange, and strange, and dim,/ And then were gulfed in tumultuous swim—/ And then I fell asleep.

³⁵⁷ Keats engages directly with the story of *Troilus and Criseyde* in “Endymion”, where he describes “The woes of Troy” fading “Into some backward corner of the brain” compared to the intensity of what we feel for “Troilus and Cressid” (in *The Complete Poems*, II.8–14).

³⁵⁸ And in this context might remind us of Daniel Defoe’s description of dying as a fatal swoon: “This kind of dying was much the same as it was with those of common mortifications, who die swooning, and, as it were, go away in a dream.” (Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year* (London: Penguin Classics, [1722] 2003).)

³⁵⁹ The title of the Keats biopic *Bright Star* (dir. Jane Campion, BBC Films, Screen Australia, UK Film Council, New South Wales Film and Television Office, 2009) makes the biographical figure of Keats synonymous in the contemporary popular imagination with the swooning lover of this poem.

³⁶⁰ Keats, “Endymion” in *The Complete Poems* ([1818] 1988), I.398.

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*, I.453–4.

³⁶² In the Greek myth on which this poem is based, the goddess is named Selene.

Ah, can I tell the enchantment that afterwards befell?"³⁶³ It is in just such a vision that Endymion has first seen the face of Cynthia amongst the celestial bodies, and when she reaches out towards him he thinks he might have "fainted at the charmed touch"³⁶⁴; "I sighed/ To faint once more by looking on my bliss".³⁶⁵ Endymion's response to the beauty of Cynthia is to swoon, or to desire the swoon. And his blissful faint is repeatedly figured as an equivalent of, or a dalliance with, dying ("he a corpse had been/ All the long day"³⁶⁶). The swoon draws Endymion into close proximity with death; but it is also always the deathly renewal of life through his strange love. When Endymion lovingly approaches Cynthia, for instance, he stages it as an approach to death, which unexpectedly brings life: "I was distracted; madly did I kiss/ The wooing arms which held me, and did give/ My eyes at once to death—but 'twas to live".³⁶⁷ In one of the most famous passages of the poem, the most intense "happiness" is described as the product of a potentially deadly "self-destroying": "Richer entanglements, enthrallments far/ More self-destroying, leading, by degrees,/ To the chief intensity: the crown of these/ Is made of love and friendship".³⁶⁸ Throughout the poem, then, new states of being emerge from the self-destroying approach to death, with the swoon as a key figuration of that approach. Finally, Endymion is described progressing towards his end in a "deathful glee"³⁶⁹; but his apprehension of the goddess (who has been disguised from him) means that he is "spiritualized"³⁷⁰ from his "mortal state": his openness to dying in love results in a radical transformation of his state of being. This transformation in Keats' poem should not be thought of as simply abstract or classically removed from material transformations. As Marilyn Butler has suggested, whilst Keats' poetry avoids "an urban contemporary setting" it is nevertheless "anything but immaterial".³⁷¹ Transformations that take place in Endymion's form are also positioned in relation to the real conditions of a world in which those "who lord it o're their fellow-men ... in empurpled vests, /And crowns, and turbans,"³⁷² are famously excoriated. If the material basis of Endymion's material being is so radically changed, might not the alteration of other material forms be conceived through poetry? In his final union with

³⁶³ "Endymion", I.568–574.

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, I.607.

³⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, I.651–2.

³⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, IV.919–20.

³⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, I.653–5.

³⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, I.778–801.

³⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, IV.945.

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, IV.944.

³⁷¹ Butler, *op cit.*, p.124.

Cynthia, Endymion swoons into a new existence: he “knelt adown,/ Before his goddess, in a blissful swoon”,³⁷³ and the couple vanish from sight. The swoon here is part of a poetic process that offers the hope of new life through death: a process that allows the remarkable possibility that one might be, or perhaps must be, “dead-born/ From the old womb of night”.³⁷⁴

So keen is Keats on swooning, that all sorts of things begin to swoon in his poems alongside people: sounds “come a-swooning over hollow grounds”³⁷⁵; scenes will come “swooning vivid through my globèd brain”.³⁷⁶ In their various forms, Keats’ swoons describe the initiating experience of the visionary; and this is further demonstrated in his later (abandoned) epic poem, *The Fall of Hyperion. A Dream*. Here the role of poet as visionary is to be tested during his strange journey; and this test begins with a swoon and subsequent transportation: “The cloudy swoon came on, and down I sunk”.³⁷⁷ The connection between the swoon and a kind of dying is made gruesomely evident by the “shade” who addresses, and tests, the poet when “sense of life returned”³⁷⁸: “Thou hast felt/ What ’tis to die and live again”,³⁷⁹ she tells him, later describing him as half rotted.³⁸⁰ The poet is accused of being “a dreaming thing, A fever of thyself”,³⁸¹ who “venoms all his days”.³⁸² But the poet defends himself against the charge: not by denying his connection with morbidity, but by claiming such “sickness not ignoble”.³⁸³ It is fitting that a poet who lived so briefly, his poetry blooming into “posthumous life”,³⁸⁴ should have given us such a strong sense of the swoon as the transformation of the artist, who might “Die into life”.³⁸⁵ In Keats’ poetry, the swooner is a visionary whose feminine morbidity might disrupt systems of masculine health and power to produce a poetics rich with the possibility of radical transformation.

³⁷² “Endymion”, III.1–12.

³⁷³ “Endymion”, IV.988–9.

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, IV.371–2.

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, I.286.

³⁷⁶ Keats, “The Fall of Hyperion. A Dream” in *The Complete Poems*, 244–5. Keats is one of the earliest proponents of this extension of swooning; from the beginning of the 19th century, all sorts of things start to swoon alongside people: the “languid air” swoons in Alfred Tennyson, “Lotus-eaters” (1832); “the landscape” swoons in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow’s “Amalfi” (1845); ears swoon in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850); sense swoons in George Meredith’s “Modern Love XXXV: It Is No Vulgar Nature” (1862).

³⁷⁷ Keats, *op cit.*, 55.

³⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 58.

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 141.

³⁸⁰ Moneta describes others perishing “on the pavement where thou rotted’st half” (*ibid.*, 153).

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 168–9.

³⁸² *Ibid.*, 175.

³⁸³ *Ibid.*, 184.

³⁸⁴ Andrew Bennett refers to Keats’ posthumous life of writing in the title of his work: *op cit.*

Buried Alive: Poe's Swoon-Aesthetics

If Keats gives us the swoon as a figuration of the possibility of dying into life, his near contemporary, Edgar Allan Poe (1809–1849), gives us the chiasmatic macabre alternative: that the swoon might carry us off, living, into death. I refer initially in this respect to the famously taphephobic fictions of Poe, and to the particular dangers that prolonged swooning connotes in the context of contemporary fears of being buried alive.³⁸⁶ But I want also to suggest that the idea of a *return* from death is crucial to Poe's understanding of artistic sensibility, and to what we might term his swoon-aesthetics.

By the end of the eighteenth century, medical thinkers had advanced the idea that *apparent* death might sometimes be reversible, that a “visibly-dead” individual might be revived. “Humane societies” began to appear, encouraging the public to learn resuscitation techniques, and the first of these was established in 1767 in Amsterdam, where people frequently drowned in the canals. Alexander Johnson wrote about the society's work in *A collection of authentic cases, proving the practicability of recovering persons visibly dead by drowning, suffocation, stifling, swooning, convulsions, and other accidents* (1775).³⁸⁷ The swoon, then, is implicated as one possible “visible” death, a counterfeit which might result in a prolonged swoon being mistaken for a fatality. If the danger of premature burial had become a much-feared peril of everyday life by the early nineteenth century,³⁸⁸ the swoon might also be feared as a potentially deadly precursor to live interment.

Poe's early tales tap into this taphephobia, and the most famous elaboration of it is to be found in “The Premature Burial”,³⁸⁹ which features descriptions of various hazardous swoon states. The story details several supposed cases of revival after over-hasty burial, and of discoveries of the evidence of revival in the tomb. The wife of a respectable citizen, for example, who had the “appearance of death” is discovered, three

³⁸⁵ Keats, “Hyperion. A Fragment” in *The Complete Poems*, III.130.

³⁸⁶ See Jan Bondeson, *Buried Alive: The Terrifying History of Our Most Primal Fear* (New York, London: W.W. Norton Co, (2001), for a fuller account of the historical development of this fear.

³⁸⁷ Alexander Johnson, *A collection of authentic cases, proving the practicability of recovering persons visibly dead by drowning, suffocation, stifling, swooning, convulsions, and other accidents* (Andover: Gale ECCO, Print Editions, [1775] 2010).

³⁸⁸ As argued by Bondeson, *op cit.*, p.156.

³⁸⁹ Edgar Allan Poe, “The Premature Burial” in *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe* (London: Penguin Books, 1982), pp.258 *et seq.*

years after burial in the family tomb, to have escaped her coffin. The vault is opened and “careful investigation” reveals that the revived woman had attempted to escape by the iron door: “while thus occupied, she probably swooned, or died, through sheer terror; and, in falling, her shroud became entangled in some iron-work which projected interiorly. Thus she remained, and thus she rotted, erect.”³⁹⁰ When the husband opens the tomb door, her skeleton falls into his arms, in a ghastly parody of a romantic swoon. Later in the story, our narrator reveals that the cause of his own “all-absorbing”³⁹¹ fear of being buried alive is due to his “positive and personal experience”: he suffers from bouts of catatonia, during which he sinks into a condition of “semi-syncope, or half swoon”.³⁹² These half swoons cause no physical suffering, but “of moral distress an infinitude”: the narrator’s fancy grows “charnel”; he talks of “worms, of tombs, and epitaphs”; he is lost in reveries of death; and “the idea of premature burial held continual possession of my brain”.³⁹³ The narrator’s propensity to swoon here is suggested as heightening his preoccupation with live burial on rational grounds: he fears being mistaken for a corpse and becoming one when buried. But his bouts of unconsciousness also predispose him to morbid, “charnel” thought; to the kinds of preoccupations, in other words, that produce the fictions for which Poe is famous. By the end of the story, the narrator dismisses his “charnel apprehensions, and with them vanished the cataleptic disorder, of which, perhaps, they had been less the consequence than the cause.”³⁹⁴ Here Poe reverses the line of causation, suggesting that morbid fixation might have *produced* the narrator’s swoons. The swoon might therefore be a symptom of the reading and writing of macabre tales such as this very one. But whichever way causation is seen to run, the swoon is bound up in this story with the possibility of a *return* from apparent death and with the relation of fiction to this return.

Elisabeth Bronfen has written of the “risky resemblances” Poe produces in his writing.³⁹⁵ This might be an apt description of the swoon in Poe’s work, as a risky resemblance of death. But Bronfen’s point is a broader one about repetition and representation. Many of Poe’s early fictions feature an apparent female death which is

³⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.259.

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p.258.

³⁹² *Ibid.*, p.264.

³⁹³ *Ibid.*

³⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.268.

³⁹⁵ See Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, femininity and the aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), p.324.

succeeded by some kind of revival or ghostly return. Focussing on “Ligeia”,³⁹⁶ in which a dead wife seems to come back to life in the body of her replacement, Bronfen suggests that Poe’s women are always subject to repetition through doubling: live women are doubled by the dead, just as the female body is doubled by its image in Poe’s work. Artists, working under this rubric, come to stand in for mourners, and representations can be seen as the double of revenants. The love object, Bronfen suggests along Freudian lines, is always a lost object re-found: for the artist and lover alike, then, the favoured object is always based on repetition.

I wish to suggest that the swoon, as a return from death, is another way to think about repetition and representation, and that Poe connects these ideas even more explicitly than Bronfen suggests in his extraordinary disquisition on the swoon and aesthetics in the “The Pit and the Pendulum”.³⁹⁷ This story imagines a scene of highly elaborate torture, our narrator supposedly being incarcerated as part of the Spanish Inquisition.³⁹⁸ Condemned to death, the narrator begins to imagine and to long for the “sweet rest” of the grave; this thought comes to him with considerable beauty, “like a rich musical note”. As the thought steals across him, all other sensations begin to be extinguished and he is engulfed by silence and stillness: “I had swooned.”³⁹⁹ The swoon at the melodious thought of death is not, however, a totality of nothingness:

Arousing from the most profound of slumbers, we break the gossamer web of *some* dream. Yet in a second afterward, (so frail may that web have been) we remember not that we have dreamed. In the return to life from the swoon there are two stages; first, that of the sense of mental or spiritual; secondly, that of the sense of physical, existence. It seems probable that if, upon reaching the second stage, we could recall the impressions of the first, we should find these impressions eloquent in memories of the gulf beyond. And that gulf is—what? How at least shall we distinguish its shadows from those of the tomb? But if the impressions of what I have termed the first stage, are not, at will, recalled, yet, after long interval, do they not come unbidden, while we marvel whence they come? He who has never swooned, is not he who finds strange palaces and wildly familiar faces in coals that glow; is not he who beholds floating in mid-air the sad visions that the many may not view; is not he who ponders over the perfume of some novel flower—is not he whose brain grows bewildered with the meaning of some musical cadence which has never before arrested his attention.

³⁹⁶ Poe, *Ligeia* in *The Complete Tales.*, pp.654.

³⁹⁷ Poe, *The pit and the pendulum* in *ibid.*, pp.246 *et seq.*

³⁹⁸ Although the ritualised torments he faces bear no relation to any historical account of the Inquisition.

³⁹⁹ Poe, *The pit and the pendulum*, p.247.

This exposition presents the swoon through a series of doubles: first, the swoon doubles death, appearing as a premonitory form when the narrator imagines himself dying. Secondly, consciousness takes on a strange secondary nature after the swoon: it is positioned as an after-effect of swooning, an “afterward”, and revealed to be a double of other altered states of consciousness. Consciousness is something “returned” to, suggesting that swooning might make future consciousness a condition of return, a coming “back” to. Thirdly, the swoon state *comes back* to haunt the swooner with “memories of the gulf beyond” consciousness. And this is the beginning of the privilege of being able to experience that world as an aesthetics *of return*. The “mental or spiritual” impressions of the swoon/tomb return in all sorts of apprehensions—in vision, in scent, in sound—which give the swooner a sort of extra-sensory sensibility, doubling his conscious apprehension of the world. “He who has never swooned”, is to be pitied: he will not see the beautiful shapes doubling the flames of the fire, nor be struck by the suggestive scent of a flower, nor experience the intensity of music as a derangement. The doubling inherent to aesthetic experience as the return of the swoon is what we might call Poe’s swoon-aesthetics: and he provides for aesthetic experience here as both a return *from* death and a return *to* death. “The boundaries which divide Life from Death are at best shadowy and vague,”⁴⁰⁰ Poe tells us. It is this shadowy area into which Poe’s swoon-aesthetics falls.

The importance of the return to Poe’s swoon-aesthetics might be seen to correspond with the importance of the return to Freud’s theory of the uncanny. “It is only rarely that the psychoanalyst feels impelled to investigate the subject of aesthetics, even when aesthetics is understood to mean not merely the theory of beauty but the theory of the qualities of feeling,”⁴⁰¹ Freud tells us in his essay *Das Unheimliche*, or “The Uncanny”. Later, in a seemingly glancing remark, he suggests a superlative source of this uncanny “feeling” in the fear of premature burial:

To some people the idea of being buried alive by mistake is the most uncanny thing of all. And yet psychoanalysis has taught us that this terrifying phantasy is only a transformation of another phantasy which had originally nothing terrifying about it at all, but was qualified by a certain lasciviousness—the phantasy, I mean, of intra-uterine existence.⁴⁰²

⁴⁰⁰ Poe, “The Premature Burial”, *op cit.*, p.258.

⁴⁰¹ Sigmund Freud, “The Uncanny” (trans. James Strachey) in *Pelican Freud Library* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, [1919] 1985), Vol.14, pp.339–76.

⁴⁰² *Ibid.*, pp.366–7.

Nicholas Royle, in his reading of “*Das Unheimlich*” and Poe’s “The Premature Burial”,⁴⁰³ shows that in Freud’s original German the emphasis in the above passage is on the uncanniness of the *appearance of death* (“*schientot*”) that might lead to premature burial, rather than on internment per se. Royle retranslates Strachey’s “buried alive by mistake” as “buried because ostensibly dead”. This makes *seeming* to be dead, “as if in suspended animation”,⁴⁰⁴ a crucial component of the “most uncanny thing of all”. Royle reads a “suspension, the sense of being, at the same ‘incomprehensible’ time, both dead and alive, neither dead nor alive”,⁴⁰⁵ as the similar nub of the uncanny in Poe’s “The Premature Burial”. What seems to be described here is just the strange situation of the “semi swoon”, the cataleptic condition that Poe’s narrator describes. Royle highlights the unnerving substitution that goes on in Freud’s thinking on the uncanniness of premature burial, where one fantasy (of live interment) is replaced with another (intra-uterine existence), womb coming to stand for tomb, and tomb for womb. To this rhyming pair of doubles, I would like to add a triplicate: swoon. From swoon to tomb to womb. The *schientot* that is central to the uncanny fantasy of live burial is, I think, profoundly entwined with Poe’s conception of swoon-aesthetics as a deathly return, that is also a return to the fantasised maternal space of the womb. And if Poe figures the return to life from swooning as the source of uncanny artistic sensibility, the power of the aesthetic might, in turn, be the return in life of the beautiful thought of the tomb/womb. Poe’s swoon-aesthetics would then hauntingly coincide with Bronfen’s description of the artistic process as the re-finding of a lost object: the artist is always producing a revenant, which is at the same time the birth of something new.

Modernist Swoons: James Joyce and the Dead

His soul was swooning into some new world, fantastic, dim, uncertain as under sea, traversed by cloudy shapes and beings.⁴⁰⁶

So Joyce describes the conversion of the young man, Stephen Dedalus, into the artist. The transforming swoon here—particularly its poetic rhythm and dim, underwater quality—calls to mind Keats’ description, a century previous, of Endymion’s visionary swoon: “more strange, and strange, and dim,/ And then were gulfed in tumultuous

⁴⁰³ Nicholas Royle, *The Uncanny* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).

⁴⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p.143.

⁴⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p.146.

swim”.⁴⁰⁷ In describing the process of artistic transformation through the swoon, I will argue, Joyce venerates the idea of a partially glimpsed and “uncertain” world over the certainty provided by certain narratives of (national) identity. While it is more usual to note the influence of Byron and Shelley on Joyce,⁴⁰⁸ this “uncertain” world strongly recalls Keats’ figuration of the Negative Capability of the great artist as the capability of “being in uncertainties”,⁴⁰⁹ and I will consider here some of Joyce’s swooning similarities to Keats’ radical poetics.

We might begin by considering an early swoon in Joyce’s career, the soul swoon that memorably brings *Dubliners* (1914) to a close:

It had begun to snow again. He watched sleepily the flakes, silver and dark, falling obliquely against the lamplight... Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was general, all over Ireland. It was falling on every part of the dark central plain, on the treeless hills, falling softly upon the Bog of Allen and farther, westward, softly falling into the dark mutinous Shannon waves. It was falling, too, upon every part of the churchyard on the hill where Michael Furey lay buried. It lay thickly drifted on the crooked crosses and headstones, on the spears of the little gate, on the barren thorns. His soul swooned slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead.⁴¹⁰

Joyce’s “The Dead” is the final story of the collection in which he hoped to record “a chapter in the moral history of my country”,⁴¹¹ that chapter having “hemiplegia or paralysis”⁴¹² in the face of English colonial and Papal subjugation as one of its themes. This is to be no work of tourism, Joyce insists: instead he will give the Irish “one good look at themselves in my nicely polished looking-glass”.⁴¹³ What it means to be Irish, and what it means to write about that national identity, is therefore at stake in all of these stories. That the final sentence of this collection should have as its animating verbs “to swoon” and “to fall” is, I suggest, an indication of the way in which the idea

⁴⁰⁶ James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (London: Jonathon Cape, [1916] 1952), p.177.

⁴⁰⁷ Keats, “Endymion”, l.568–574.

⁴⁰⁸ See, for instance, the gloss of Romantic influences in Michael Schandorf’s “Romantic ‘Ghoststory’: Lingering Shades of Shelley in *Ulysses*” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 51.4 (Winter 2009), 416–425. In *Portrait*, Byron is of course referred to by Stephen as the greatest poet, and the influence of Byron on Joyce is also drawn out by Schandorf.

⁴⁰⁹ John Keats, letter to his brothers (late 1817): in *The Letters of John Keats*, pp.191–4.

⁴¹⁰ James Joyce, “The Dead” in *Dubliners* (London: Penguin Books, [1914] 1992), p.225.

⁴¹¹ Joyce’s letter to Grant Richards of 5 May 1906 in *Letters of James Joyce* (Richard Ellmann (ed.)) (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1966), Vol.II, p.134.

⁴¹² Joyce’s letter to Constantine P. Curran of 1904 in *Letters of James Joyce* (Stuart Gilbert (ed.)) (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1966), Vol.I, p.55.

⁴¹³ Joyce’s letter to Grant Richards of 23 June 1906 in *ibid.*, p.64.

of national identity, and identity more generally, is overwhelmed in Joyce's writing by an epiphany of continuity between the living and the dead.

Gabriel Conroy, the main protagonist of "The Dead", is a man tormented by his own social distinction: the sense both of his own elevated standing, and of his separation from others. He arrives at his aunts' annual Christmas dance with the task of giving a speech weighing heavily upon him. He listens to the sounds of men dancing in the hall above him, and the "indelicate clacking of the men's heels and the shuffling of their soles reminded him that their grade of culture differed from his".⁴¹⁴ He is afflicted by the feeling that he will fail in his attempts at social intercourse, and that by quoting Browning in his speech he will "only make himself ridiculous ... They would think that he was airing his superior education. He would fail with them ... He had taken up the wrong tone. His whole speech was a mistake from first to last, an utter failure."⁴¹⁵ Gabriel experiences himself as catastrophically differentiated from those around him who will form his audience. And this heightened horror of individual distinction seems to be intimately connected to the situation of public speaking. Joyce wrote of the stories in *Dubliners* being presented under four aspects: "childhood, adolescence, maturity and public life. The stories are arranged in this order."⁴¹⁶ If we are to see "The Dead" as, in part, an examination of public life, then we can also see that the production of Gabriel as a public figure, much lauded by his aunts and other revellers, is a constant source of anxiety and humiliation for him.

This humiliation is perhaps most acutely communicated in the exchange about national identity that Gabriel has with Miss Ivors, his friend of many years' standing and erstwhile teaching colleague. With her, we might reasonably expect Gabriel to feel an affinity. But, during his dance with her, he finds himself marked out: to add to his sense of class and educational distinction, he must now also face the accusation that he has separated himself from his compatriots through political treachery to the Irish nationalist cause. Miss Ivors has discovered him as an anonymous literary reviewer for *The Daily Express*, a Dublin-published newspaper with Conservative and Unionist sympathies. "Now, aren't you ashamed of yourself?" she playfully chastises. "I didn't think you were a West Briton."⁴¹⁷ And she continues to tease him, focussing on his decision to holiday on the Continent, rather than within Ireland: "[H]aven't you your

⁴¹⁴ James Joyce, "The Dead", p.179.

⁴¹⁵ *Ibid*, p.179.

⁴¹⁶ Joyce, letter to Grant Richards of 5 May 1906, *op cit.*, p.134.

⁴¹⁷ Joyce, "The Dead", p.188.

own language to keep in touch with—Irish? ... And haven't you your own land to visit ... that you know nothing of, your own people, and your own country?"⁴¹⁸ Gabriel at first meets Miss Ivors' charges with perplexity. He wishes to say that "literature [is] above politics", to refuse the categories of affiliation being projected as his only options.⁴¹⁹ But he decides against risking a "grandiose phrase" and instead opts to murmur "lamely that he saw nothing political in writing reviews of books".⁴²⁰ Gabriel seems unconvinced himself that there is "nothing political" in the act of writing. But he is certainly not persuaded that Miss Ivors is in the right, in her role as persecutor in a nationalist witch-hunt. Gabriel views her as a heckler, and her notion of national identity as "propagandism".⁴²¹ Her exhortation to embrace the culture that is his "own" ("own" being repeated by her over and over in a kind of incantatory call to cultural ownership) makes Gabriel respond with a disavowal of national affiliation: "I'm sick of my own country, sick of it!"⁴²²

When the time to make his speech arrives, Gabriel sees it as an opportunity to respond to Miss Ivors' idea of national identity. He chooses to do so through the concept of hospitality: "our country has no tradition which does it so much honour and which it should guard so jealously".⁴²³ One is reminded again of Keats here, and Roe's description of Negative Capability as "universal hospitality as the prerogative of poetic genius".⁴²⁴ If there is anything to be proud of in a sense of Irish national identity, Gabriel suggests, it is, paradoxically, the welcoming of friends and strangers. It is in the sense that it is always open, that it allows for the admission of others.

But these claims for the virtues of hospitality in terms of national identity are necessarily provocative in the context of English colonial domination. One might read Gabriel's panegyric to hospitality as a tacit acknowledgement of his complicity with English power, as the critic Bonnie Roos does. She believes Gabriel demonstrates a socially-embedded attitude toward hospitality and generosity that is "a codified expression of the myth of self-sacrifice, of grateful oppression, lying at the heart of Joyce's Dublin".⁴²⁵ This would make Gabriel's position on nationalism in the story a

⁴¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.188–189.

⁴¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.188.

⁴²⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴²¹ *Ibid.*, p.192.

⁴²² *Ibid.*, p.190.

⁴²³ *Ibid.*, p.203.

⁴²⁴ Roe, *op cit.*, p.225.

⁴²⁵ Bonnie Roos, "James Joyce's 'The Dead' and Bret Harte's Gabriel Conroy: The Nature of the Feast" *The Yale Journal of Literary Criticism* 15(1) (Spring 2002), 99–126 at 119, quoting Pecora.

suspect deflection of the reality of colonial oppression, an accommodation of the possibility of invasion, which should be, according to Roos, critically challenged rather than assented to. To investigate this charge, which is of crucial importance in terms of how we might read Gabriel's relation to national identity, it is worth considering Roos' argument in some detail, and in particular the connection between "The Dead" and another work of snowy swooning: Bret Harte's *Gabriel Conroy* (1876). Joyce's naming of his own character after Harte's eponymous Conroy makes a link between the works explicit, and Joyce's use of the American novel as a source has been noted in previous Joyce scholarship.⁴²⁶ But since the 1950s, as Roos has more recently written, the relationship between the two works has remained "thoroughly uninvestigated".⁴²⁷ The resemblance between the snowy opening scene of Harte's work and the ending of the "The Dead" is striking. Harte's novel opens as follows:

Snow. Everywhere. As far as the eye could reach—fifty miles, looking southward from the highest white peak,—filling ravines and gulches, and dropping from the walls of canons in white shroud-like drifts; fashioning the dividing ridge into the likeness of a monstrous grave, hiding the bases of giant pines, and completely covering young trees and larches; rimming with porcelain the bowl-like edges of still, cold lakes, and undulating in motionless white billows to the edge of the distant horizon. Snow lying everywhere over the California Sierras on the 15th day of March, 1848, and still falling.⁴²⁸

Alongside this snowy similarity, Roos sees the most significant connection between the two works as the mutual collocation of the themes of national identity and starvation. Harte's novel begins with the predicament of a group of pioneers stranded in the snowy mountains, slowly starving to death. The situation is, Roos suggests, testimony to the history of the Western emigrants who set off to make new homes for themselves, but were lost in crossing the Sierras. Despite his novels often being sentimental, Harte stands out from his contemporary American writers in his refusal to "mythologize the space of the American West. Harte generally uses some of the most gritty, ugly historical events of American Western emigration to expose the depredation often glossed over in more typical romances."⁴²⁹ And the most shocking of these "historical events" is alluded to in a key moment in the novel. The party have long been fantasising

⁴²⁶ See, for instance, Gerhard Friedrich, "Bret Harte as a Source for James Joyce's 'The Dead'" *Philological Quarterly* 33(4) (1954), 443–444.

⁴²⁷ Roos, *op cit.*, p.105.

⁴²⁸ Bret Harte, *Gabriel Conroy* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1881), p.1.

⁴²⁹ Roos, *op cit.*, p.105.

about the food they might eat, obsessively imagining “beefsteak” and “sassage” and “taters”. They are involved in a repetitive process of substituting real food for the imaginary. This “inadequate replacement”, as Roos terms it, culminates in Gabriel observing an horrific scene at the camp, which he fails to articulate and which the novel stops short of describing. But Roos claims that the scene is decipherable from correspondences between Harte’s story and newspaper accounts of an infamous story of Western expansionism of the time:

In the winter of 1846–47—a time coincidentally parallel to the beginning of the Irish Famine—a group of emigrants known as the Donner Party crossed the Sierras and were trapped in the mountains by an early snowstorm. Many of the party starved to death, and those who survived did so by eating the flesh of their dead comrades. ... This is the notorious story upon which Harte draws for the opening book of Gabriel Conroy. ... recognizable to the American reader of the moment and explicitly noted in Harte.⁴³⁰

The “horror that cannot speak its name” in Harte’s story is the cannibalistic apogee of inadequate substitutions that have been “sustained by the deluded, idealist hope that salvation might arrive in time”.⁴³¹ For Roos, this emphasis on starvation, and the concomitant spectre of cannibalism, is key to Harte’s de-romanticisation of the American West. And it is “the will to deromanticize nationalist mythologies and the focus on the issue of starvation” that she believes “appealed to Joyce”.⁴³²

Roos’ reading of Joyce, then, places “The Dead” in intimate connection with Ireland’s own starvation story, the Great Famine. At the time Joyce was writing, Ireland’s population stood at less than half of its pre-Famine level: 700,000 people—almost 30 per cent of the population in some counties—had died as a direct result of the Famine, many more were visited by epidemics related to the Famine, and, between 1846 and 1851, over a million people had emigrated.⁴³³ Roos reminds us of the horrific scenes of starvation that had been encountered:

One example that derives from the unprecedented misery of the Famine ... [is] children sucking at the breasts of their dead mothers ... A further development of this motif gives rise to what Patricia Lysaght describes as “the most horrific image of the Great Hunger”:

“I heard my grandmother saying—she was from the Kenmare side—that the

⁴³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.111.

⁴³¹ *Ibid.*

⁴³² *Ibid.*, pp.105–106.

⁴³³ Christine Kinealy, *A Death-Dealing Famine: The Great Hunger in Ireland* (Chicago: Pluto Press, 1997), p.151.

worst sight she ever saw—she saw the woman laid out on the street [in Kenmare] and the baby at her breast. She died of the Famine fever; nobody would take the child, and in the evening the child was eating the mother’s breast.”⁴³⁴

Despite records of these scenes, they are mostly absent from Irish literature in the fifty years following the Famine. The response of most canonical writers was either to pretend that the Famine did not exist (and here Roos cites Oscar Wilde and George Bernard Shaw), or to romanticise Ireland with Celtic folklore revivals (Bram Stoker and W.B. Yeats). Terry Eagleton suggests more precisely that: “There is indeed a literature of the Famine ... But it is in neither sense of the word a major literature. There is a handful of novels and a body of poems, but few truly distinguished works. Where is the Famine in the literature of the Revival?” he asks. “Where is it in Joyce?”⁴³⁵

Roos’ answer to Eagleton’s question is that it is covertly embedded in the symbolism of “The Dead”. It is not unprecedented to link Joyce’s most lavish and extraordinary feast, the dinner at the Misses Morkan’s Christmas party, with the opposite theme of starvation. In the past this has been achieved by drawing out the story’s allusions to Dante’s *Inferno* 33.⁴³⁶ Roos finds claims in this direction all the more convincing in the light of the story’s allusions to a second tale of starvation, Harte’s *Gabriel Conroy*. But for Roos, this is not just a double allusion to starvation: it is an allusion to starvation’s sister spectre, cannibalism. In a detailed reading of the symbolism of the dishes presented at the Christmas feast, Roos suggests that Irish foodstuffs are displaced by English foods, or by more exotic foods made available to the bourgeois family through British Imperialism:

This Anglophilic display, coextensive with the dehumanization of the Irish by the Irish, brings to mind Kinealy’s claim that “the ships that left Ireland laden with food during the Famine were doing so largely for the financial benefit of Irish merchants and traders...” By this logic, the Morkan sisters’ meal economically feeds the English—and the English oppression of their colonies. The table confirms that the Morkan sisters are *complicit* in their own colonization, which historically led to the deprivation of Ireland’s future. In light of this *symbolic*

⁴³⁴ Account quoted in Patricia Lysaght, “Women and the Great Famine: Vignettes from the Irish Oral Tradition” in Arthur Gribben (ed.), *Great Famine and the Irish Diaspora* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), p.37.

⁴³⁵ Terry Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger: Studies in Irish Culture* (London: Verso, 1995), p.13.

⁴³⁶ See Mary T. Reynolds, for example, who claims that: “Joyce’s setting, a Christmas feast which calls attention to food as dramatically as Dante’s tale of Ugolino portrays starvation, is ... an ironical inversion of *Inferno* 33”: “Toward an Allegory of Art” in *Joyce and Dante: The Shaping Imagination* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981), p.161.

cannibalism—worse, the eating of one’s own—it is significant that Molly Ivors, the true Irish nationalist, will not stay to eat even a little morsel before heading on her way.⁴³⁷

Roos posits the symbolic representation of cannibalism as part of Joyce’s de-romanticisation of Irish national ideals, just as Harte’s exposure of cannibalism might be seen as de-romanticising the American West. Harte’s *Gabriel Conroy* demonstrates the insufficiency of fantasies to compensate for severe lack, suggesting that rather than being a comfort such fantasies might “exacerbate the difficulties faced”. This, Roos claims, is precisely Joyce’s critique of Irish romanticism.⁴³⁸ She compares “miserable emigrants who imagine a feast they cannot eat” to “Irish romantic writers telling hopeful stories that cannot correspond to harsh realities of Ireland’s present”.⁴³⁹ In particular, she sees the national myth of self-sacrifice, common to the Revival movement and to the work of Yeats, being rebuked in Joyce’s story. The debilitating effects of the Famine, she reminds us, hampered Ireland’s ability to resist the British Empire. The Irish were able to be characterised by the English as enduring the Famine with “docility” and “passivity”, “qualities that were perpetuated by the religious ideals of living for the hereafter rather than the present, of giving hospitality to even those who deserved it least, and in the glory of self-sacrifice”.⁴⁴⁰ Roos, then, reads Gabriel’s praise of hospitality in his dinner speech as a shunning of “the people and the nation who have given him the privileges of his own economic station by encouraging their passivity in the British Empire and reproducing the very mindset that originally led to the Irish Famine”.⁴⁴¹ She believes that Gabriel is implicated as cannibalistically complicit in colonial subjugation.⁴⁴²

Whilst acknowledging the importance of critiques of the insufficiency of nationalist romanticism within “The Dead”, I wish to posit an alternative reading of the “princely failing” that Gabriel describes in his version of hospitality, focussing on the final epiphanic swoon of the story. Gabriel, I will argue, is presented at the close of the “The Dead” as rejecting the very terms of national identity upon which colonial relations are structured, rather than complying with them. Closing this story with Gabriel’s swoon,

⁴³⁷ Roos, *op cit.* at 117–118 [my italics].

⁴³⁸ *Ibid.* at 118.

⁴³⁹ *Ibid.* at 110–111.

⁴⁴⁰ *Ibid.* at 101.

⁴⁴¹ *Ibid.* at 118.

Joyce makes a blurring of separate identities the final and most memorable moment of *Dubliners*; he allows a moment of profound disequilibrium to resonate as a final description of national experience.

The precursor to this closing swoon is Gretta's story of a young man, Michael Furey, who she thinks may have died for love of her when she was a girl. Furey, more than any other character, might be thought of as typifying the myth of heroic self-sacrifice that Roos sees, ultimately, as complicit with oppression.⁴⁴³ Gabriel has been "humiliated" by this story, after which a "shameful consciousness of his own person assailed him. He saw himself a ludicrous figure."⁴⁴⁴ He catches a glimpse of himself in the mirror, made strange to himself, a "pitiable, fatuous fellow".⁴⁴⁵ He is made absurd by a process of individuation that separates him from Furey, the figure of romanticised Irish national identity. He is alienated by an apprehension of "his own person", as he has been by the sense of himself as humiliatingly different from everyone at the party. But this sense of differentiation from Furey is softened by the encroachment of the swoon. Gabriel lies beside his sleeping wife, with the growing sense that "one by one they were all becoming shades".⁴⁴⁶ "All" is non-specific and total here, obliterating the singularity of "his own person". "All" share in the same movement towards the ghostly, towards the disembodiment of the shade. When Gabriel looks out of his hotel window, he thinks for a moment that he can see the figure of a young man "standing under a dripping tree",⁴⁴⁷ ghosting the consumptive, love-sick figure of Furey. He imagines other forms drawing near, and then feels the "wayward flickering" of his own existence as an "identity": "His own identity was fading out into a grey impalpable world".⁴⁴⁸ "Gabriel", in the various ways he has experienced himself as individually differentiated, now begins to feel himself dispersed into the "world" around him. And as the successor of his defunct and humiliating identity, Gabriel experiences a swooning sense of a shared generality: "Yes, the newspapers were right: snow was *general*, all over Ireland ... His soul *swooned* slowly as he heard the snow falling faintly through the universe

⁴⁴² *Ibid.* at 119, quoting Pecora.

⁴⁴³ Roos opens her article with the figure of Furey and the "romantic ideal of heroic self-sacrifice [he] embodies", suggesting that through his "romantic" disease (TB compacted with love-sickness), he personifies a "sentimentalised notion of Irish national identity predicated on starvation" (*ibid.* at 99).

⁴⁴⁴ Joyce, *op cit*, p.221.

⁴⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.221.

⁴⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.224.

⁴⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.225.

and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead.”⁴⁴⁹ This is the sense of being that succeeds the humiliation of Gabriel’s individual person: a levelling produced through the general experience of snow and its obliteration of distinct forms; a slow swooning towards all that lives and all that is dead.

This swoon might then be the fulfilment of the openness of Gabriel’s idea of hospitality, a more extreme challenge to national self-certainty and the closed, inward-looking, self-fortifying politics that Miss Ivors promotes. In his earlier speech, Gabriel eulogised a previous age, where hospitality and humanity were at the fore, as “spacious days”.⁴⁵⁰ The refusal to make of nationality a closed or specific spatial construct is emphasised in this unusual metaphor, which corresponds in certain respects with the openness of Keats’ concept of Negative Capability. Remembering a nation through speech or, by implication, through writing, should be done in a way that resists a narrowing down or cordoning off. The Ireland of the past and of the future should be expansive, open, and dealt with *as an experience of uncertainty*. Might Joyce’s writing, then, refuse to stand up straight and assert the facts of the Famine as a refusal to corroborate *national* identity as a definite, defining experience? This would then be a *refusal* of the identity politics that structure all nationalist claims (Irish and British alike), rather than a corroboration of the myth of Irish self-sacrifice. In Gabriel’s swooning epiphany, he experiences a shared, softening continuity with just those characters he might earlier have been thought to stand against (his aunts; Furey; the figure of “Ireland”). They are now an “all”. The epiphany would be that such differentiations are swept away in the final moments of consciousness; that shared continuities might form the basis of a new sense of Ireland, as a spacious amalgam of *all* the living with the dead.

We might turn back to Harte’s *Gabriel Conroy* and the patterning of his snowy terrain as an illuminating comparison here. Harte’s opening scene makes the snow a catastrophic obliterator of personal identity. The individual footprints of the pioneers, making their mark in the journey towards Western expansion, are immediately “obliterated” by succeeding snowfall. Stranded and starved, the social and cultural codes that have regulated their behaviours fall away “in the sense of equality of suffering ... All that had raised them above the level of the brute was lost in the snow.

⁴⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁵⁰ Joyce, “The Dead”, p.204.

Even the characteristics of sex were gone”.⁴⁵¹ Their “equality of suffering” means the obliteration of the principles on which personal differentiation was previously based. The stranded pioneers are frequently to be found on all fours, or prostrate, in their misery, indistinguishable from the “brute”; and a man might easily find himself subject to fainting with “the hysteria of a woman”.⁴⁵²

Harte’s narrative moves away from this opening scene of snowy “equality”: the majority of the novel is set in the aftermath of the disastrous trip, when gendered and racial identities become re-entrenched in the new frontier “democracy”. Characters are frequently essentialised along the lines of sex (women are characterised as the “foolish”, “susceptible”, “inconsistent” and “habitually ailing sex”⁴⁵³) and race (one man’s faithful servant, Pete, is described as responding to his death with “the hysterical pathos of his race”⁴⁵⁴). But the snowy primal scene is frequently revisited in the novel, and these returns often result in swoons and faints, a softening towards shared experience.⁴⁵⁵ Significantly, Joyce’s narrative moves in the opposite direction: from the tendentious distinctions that structure certain social and national identities *towards* the final obliteration of those distinctions at the close of his story in a swoony, snowy sense of shared being.

Rather than remaining “unsuccessful in expressing the truth”⁴⁵⁶ of the Famine, as Roos suggests, or presenting Gabriel in the act of euphemising colonialism, Joyce might, through the swoon, propose a profound instability as the basis of collective memory. Joyce’s refusal to represent the Famine in a straightforward manner might then be a “princely failing” indeed: a refusal to build a national literature from the Famine as part of a refusal to substantiate national forms of identity. And this refusal would be a significant veering away from certain positions that, like Miss Ivors’, venerate art as a means of strengthening a nationalist agenda. David Bromwich, writing alongside Roos in a journal issue devoted to Irish cinema,⁴⁵⁷ is deeply skeptical about the value of art as a ratification of national identity, questioning the claims for political

⁴⁵¹ Harte, *op cit.*, p.5.

⁴⁵² *Ibid.*

⁴⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp.365, 369, 437, 287.

⁴⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p.490.

⁴⁵⁵ When two long-lost snow-bound lovers re-encounter one another, for instance, the upright Phillip Ashley (who does not recognise his lover) is described as experiencing “[a] sudden sense of some strange, subtle perfume ... swooning over him. And then the blessed interposition of unconsciousness and peace” (*ibid.*, p.176.).

⁴⁵⁶ Roos, *op cit.* at 124.

⁴⁵⁷ David Bromwich, “Comment: On Art and Nationalism” *The Yale Journal of Literary Criticism* 15(1) (Spring 2002), 211–216.

radicalism that are made along these lines. He describes the influential work of Benedict Anderson⁴⁵⁸ as highlighting the status of all nations as narrative, or “mental” constructs, suggesting that, while there is “no doubt that Irish Studies have benefited from a disposition to sympathize with imagined communities”, the fervent advocacy for the recognition of certain nations alongside the interrogation of the legitimacy of others might be philosophically problematic. He describes a recent tendency to:

ratify or, anyway, upgrade the claim of tribes of confederacies pressing for national recognition, no matter how slender their foundation in history or circumstance, while depressing the prestige of older faiths, which have passed from that of militancy into the dubious triumph of nationhood. There are those who find it natural to accept such a theoretical double stance: good-natured and receptive nominalism exerted on behalf of nations-in-the-making, extreme rigor and skepticism deployed against the established and recognized states. But is it plausible to infer from this stance a radical politics, as is now widely supposed?⁴⁵⁹

This conflation—of an agenda for the recognition of *certain* national identities with radicalism—seems to be one that characterises much of our current thinking about politics and nation-making.⁴⁶⁰ Bromwich cautions against instinctively equating such forms of nationalism with radical politics, asking instead if a “truer radicalism” might lie in “rejecting the claim of any community to bestow meaning on the lives of men and women”.⁴⁶¹ “A nation”, he tells us “is a necessary fiction, to be distrusted as soon as it clamours for approval as a cherished fact”.⁴⁶² This formulation echoes Leo Bersani’s more general scepticism about identity-hardening narratives: “The self is a practical convenience,” Bersani cautions, which, “promoted to the status of an ethical ideal, [becomes] a sanction for violence”.⁴⁶³ And one might also think here of Franz Kafka’s famous double rejection of structured identities: “What have I in common with Jews? I hardly have anything in common with myself”.⁴⁶⁴ Might Joyce’s swooning narrative be radical in the way that Bromwich and Bersani suggest, refusing to sustain the hardened

⁴⁵⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso Books, [1983] 2006).

⁴⁵⁹ Bromwich, *op cit.*, at 212.

⁴⁶⁰ This is also discussed by Jonathon D. Culler, *The Literary in Theory* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2007).

⁴⁶¹ Bromwich, *op cit.*, p.212.

⁴⁶² *Ibid.*, p.212.

⁴⁶³ Leo Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?” in *Is the Rectum a Grave? And Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, [1987] 2010), p.30.

⁴⁶⁴ Franz Kafka, diary entry January 8, 1914, quoted in Franz Kafka, *Diaries 1910–1923* (New York: Schocken Books, [1914] 1988).

identity of the individual or to support the communitarian value of national identity? Gabriel Conroy's swooning epiphany is the recognition of continuity above difference; it offers, instead of an upright nationalism, the parabola of the gentle fall, a giving-way to a snow-levelled, hospitable affinity between *all* the living and the dead, rather than a partisan corroboration of any clearly demarcated subject position.

The swoon's imaginative connection to the dying away of fixed identities in my reading of "The Dead" shares certain continuities with the work of the French philosopher Georges Bataille, who positions "the swoon" as the obliteration of the individual. "The longed-for swoon [*la défaillance*] ... the desire to fall, to fail, to faint and to squander all one's reserves until there is no firm ground beneath one's feet... a moment of disequilibrium",⁴⁶⁵ is presented as the ultimate vertiginous prize in Bataille's extended essay *Eroticism*.⁴⁶⁶ Here, Bataille critiques the concept of the individual when imagined as a discontinuous entity: discontinuity is the mundane experience we have of ourselves, he suggests; we feel alone in the world, trapped in the "inanity of the separate individual".⁴⁶⁷ And yet we "yearn for our lost continuity ... there stands our obsession with primal continuity linking us with everything that is."⁴⁶⁸ We seek ways of re-experiencing the continuity from which we came and to which we shall return in death. Rather than *death* being figured as a discontinuous break with life, in Bataille's scheme it is life, or "existence" as experienced as an individual, that is a discontinuity. Bataille insists on death as the ultimate form of continuity:

[D]eath, in that it destroys the discontinuous being, leaves intact the general continuity of existence outside ourselves. ... death does not affect the continuity of existence, since in existence itself all separate existences originate; continuity of existence is independent of death and *is even proved by death*.⁴⁶⁹

An experience of the continuity that is proved by death is, for Bataille, profoundly tied to the erotic. "Eroticism," Bataille tells us, in his extended examination of the term, "is assenting to life up to the point of death".⁴⁷⁰ The suggestion here is that assenting to life necessitates, or inexorably leads to, an assent to death; that the uppermost measure of

⁴⁶⁵ Georges Bataille, *Eroticism* (trans. Mary Dalwood) (London: Penguin Books, [1957] 2001), p.240.

⁴⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p.7.

⁴⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p.120.

⁴⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p.15.

⁴⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.21.

⁴⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.11.

life is death. The latent continuity of life is brought to full term in death. Eroticism, in Bataille's thought, is the way in which we approach continuity whilst we are in existence, whilst still alive in our discontinuous forms: "Eroticism opens the way to death. Death opens the way to the denial of our individual lives."⁴⁷¹ Colin MacCabe claims support for Bataille's analysis of eroticism in the vocabulary of both modern French and early modern English, where a common synonym for orgasm is death.⁴⁷² Eroticism is figured similarly by Bataille as a violence towards the self, a violence that is an assault on individuality and always threatens to be fatal. When applied to sexuality, or "physical eroticism" as Bataille terms it, it signifies a violation of the very being of its practitioners, a violation which is "bordering on death ... The whole business of eroticism is to destroy the self-contained character of the participators as they are in their normal lives."⁴⁷³ In Bataille's thought, human sexuality (that which incorporates the erotic, as distinguished by Bataille from animal sexuality) is seen as something that violently disperses individual identity. He describes a coherence in the seemingly contradictory forms of sexual activity in that they "harmonise in the nostalgia for a moment of disequilibrium".⁴⁷⁴

Physical eroticism is, for Bataille, just one means of erotically striving for continuity. He finds a similar desire expressed in the mystical element of religion: "The bond between life and death has many aspects. It can be felt equally in sexual and mystical experiences."⁴⁷⁵ Both the sexually erotic and the mystical experience have a degree of intensity which means that they overwhelm the individual's isolate sense of self. Bataille examines how this might work for some of the religious experiences that are most familiar to us, for instance in Western Christianity and the Buddhism of the East. He also refers to the historic practice of human sacrifice, which is a recurrent theme in his work.⁴⁷⁶ It is references like these, which might seem to veer dangerously close to venerating murder, that have led critics such as Dollimore to caution that Bataille's work is "speculative, controversial and to be assented to critically, if at all".⁴⁷⁷

⁴⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p.24.

⁴⁷² Colin MacCabe (2000) "Introduction" in *ibid.*, pp.xiii–xiv.

⁴⁷³ Bataille, *op cit.*, p.17.

⁴⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p.240.

⁴⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p.230.

⁴⁷⁶ In *The Accursed Share*, for instance, the human sacrifices of the Aztecs are described as the practise of expenditure, squander and waste, in a way which might be interpreted as valorising murder (Bataille ([1967] 1991) *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy* (New York: Zone Books)).

⁴⁷⁷ Jonathon Dollimore (1998) "Sexual Disgust" 20 *Oxford Literary Review* 47–78, p.65. The controversy surrounding a piece of performance art at the San Francisco Art Institute in 2000 might highlight the need for this "critical" approach. Jonathon Yegge, a student in the "New Genres" department, describes his

However, Dollimore still sees value in reading Bataille as a chthonic thinker who reinfects familiar fantasies of losing oneself in a larger totality. These fantasies, abiding in religion, mysticism and Romanticism, are described by Dollimore as usually offering “clean” annihilation or assimilation as an aspect of transcendence, for instance through the “ethereal transcendent of western metaphysics” and the “equally ethereal unity of a romantically refined ‘nature’”.⁴⁷⁸ But what Bataille gives us is an ambivalent self-obliteration that is an “immolation in natural process—‘and of the putrefaction that follows it’. In other words, we are attracted to the death and putrefaction which equally profoundly disgusts us”.⁴⁷⁹ Bataille’s sense of individual-shattering continuity is an altogether more subterranean affair than familiar Romantic and mystical concepts of self-annihilation.

And this might return us to the swoon, to its relationship with the possibility of live burial and putrefaction. The swoon is the apogee of the eroticism that for Bataille, in all its forms, is the end of the identity of the individual: “The longed-for swoon [*la défaillance*] is ... the salient feature not only of man’s sensuality but also of the experience of the mystics... to fall, to fail, to faint and to squander all one’s reserves until there is no firm ground beneath one’s feet.”⁴⁸⁰ “*La défaillance*”⁴⁸¹ is used in French to refer to a faint or to a failure. In Mary Dalwood’s translation, the English word “swoon” therefore functions as a nexus of these two things. Sensuality and mysticism are akin in producing a moment of such intensity that isolate discontinuity is fleetingly overcome in a faint that is also *the failure* of the individual. And Bataille’s work privileges the moment of swooning inundation as the meeting place of mystical and sexual experience.

performance as follows: “I engaged in oral sex with [a bound and gagged participant] and he engaged in oral sex with me. I had given him an enema, and I had taken a shit and stuffed it in his ass. That goes on, he shits all over me, I shit in him. There was a security guard present. There was an instructor from the school present. It was videoed, and the piece was over.” Yegge cited Bataille (alongside Heidegger and Derrida) as inspiration for the piece: “During your tenure in this school you’re required to read *The Tears of Eros* by Georges Bataille, where he discusses pain and the history of erotic art. ... You might present this performance art, then the students might read Bataille and it might make sense.” The bound participant later developed misgivings, made a formal complaint and legal action was mooted. (Matt Smith (February 23, 2000) “Public Enema No.2” in *San Francisco Weekly*; available at <http://www.sfweekly.com/2000-02-23/news/public-enema-no-2/> [Accessed December 15, 2011].)

⁴⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p.67.

⁴⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸⁰ Bataille, *op cit.*, p.240.

⁴⁸¹ Georges Bataille, *L’Érotisme* (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1957), p.240.

The swoon as a moment in which individual identity is overwhelmed, as a feint towards the continuity of death, might, then, be the beginning of a new way of understanding living in Bataille's work. Joyce shares a similar apprehension of the power of the swoon in the closing moments of the "The Dead". And the swoon continues to have a crucial role in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, where it symbolises the potential for the submersion of the individual as part of the transformation that art might produce. The swoon continues to figure through this work in a Bataillean sense, to connote the experience of being overwhelmed that is common to both mystical and sexual experience. The young protagonist (and autobiographical alter-ego), Stephen Dedalus, is sent away to school, where he takes exception to the nationalistic and religious identities that he is encouraged to foster in himself. He finds he prefers the "intangible phantoms" and "irresolution" of his imagination to the exhortations from his father and his masters "to be a gentleman" and "a good catholic"; their voices sound hollow, as do the ones bidding him "to be true to his country and to help raise up her fallen language and tradition" as part of the "movement towards national revival".⁴⁸² He is drawn instead into "mortal sin" by the orgiastic riot of his nighttime thoughts:

He wanted to sin with another of his kind, to force another being to sin with him and to exult with her in sin. He felt some dark presence moving irresistibly upon him from the darkness... He stretched out his arms to hold fast the frail swooning form that eluded him and incited him: and the cry that he had strangled for so long in his throat issued up from his lips ... a cry which was but the echo of an obscene scrawl which he had read on the oozing wall of a urinal.⁴⁸³

It is the swooning figure that "incites" him away from the matrix of religious and nationalistic identification and towards sinful irresolution. And when he acts upon these impulses, finding a girl and retiring with her to a room, her kiss is even "darker than the swoon of sin", an even deeper intensification of the experience of being overwhelmed.⁴⁸⁴ Stephen takes to regularly visiting whores, and gives up on the idea of prayer: "[W]hat did it avail to pray when he knew that his soul lusted after its own destruction?"⁴⁸⁵ The swoon of sin, then, is part of a spiritual, and perhaps Keatsian, "self-destroying" that is desirous of damnation, of the shattering of the soul's integrity.

⁴⁸² James Joyce, *Portrait*, p.86.

⁴⁸³ *Ibid.*, pp.102–103.

⁴⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p.104.

⁴⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p.107.

But if the sin of physical eroticism is typified by the swoon, so too will be the religious fervor that follows for Stephen as he sets out on a course of repentance. We may think again of Bataille here, and his claim that the ascetic and voluptuary share the same passion⁴⁸⁶: both are engaged in an eroticism that seeks for the individual to be overwhelmed, both long for the swoon. Finally taking confession, Stephen repents of his most shameful of sins. God, he feels, has pardoned him, and his soul feels lighter. So light, in fact, that it begins again to risk disequilibrium. The repentant soul is repeatedly described as feminine (“her”), and as a woman faint before her masculine God: “The attitude of rapture in sacred art, the raised and parted hands, the parted lips and eyes as of one about to swoon, became for him an image of the soul in prayer, humiliated and faint before her creator.”⁴⁸⁷ Stephen, now feeling the vertigo of the mystical swoon, sets out to mortify his senses, and considers the calling of the priesthood. But this intoxication with the mystical swoon is to be short-lived. Stephen feels that he will finally “fall” in a different direction, back towards the irresolution of sin:

His destiny was to be elusive of social or religious orders The snares of the world were its ways of sin. He would fall. He had not yet fallen, but he would fall silently, in an instant. Not to fall was too hard, too hard: and he felt the silent lapse of his soul, as it would be at some instant to come, falling, falling but not yet fallen, still unfallen but about to fall.⁴⁸⁸

The “falling, falling” of this passage echoes the “falling faintly ... faintly falling” of the swooning close of *Dubliners*, and the desire “to fall, to fail, to faint”⁴⁸⁹ that Bataille sees in the longed-for swoon. Stephen, still unfallen, longingly looks forward to his lapse. And the final part of *Portrait* sees Stephen enter the University and begin to move towards the pursuit of art, towards the creation of something “soaring” and “impalpable”,⁴⁹⁰ something that would, then, be “elusive of social or religious orders”. This vocation, Stephen thinks, is foretold in his name: “Dedalus” echoes the name of Daedalus,⁴⁹¹ a skilled craftsman and artisan in Greek mythology. His “strange name”

⁴⁸⁶ Bataille, *op cit.*, p.7.

⁴⁸⁷ Joyce, *op cit.*, p.153.

⁴⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p.165.

⁴⁸⁹ Bataille, *op cit.*, p.240.

⁴⁹⁰ Joyce, *Portrait*, p.173.

⁴⁹¹ In *Stephen Hero*, the more verbose text out of which *A Portrait* is excised, the protagonist’s name has the exact Greek spelling.

now seems to Stephen to be the possibility of “a prophecy ... a symbol of the artist”.⁴⁹² At this point Joyce employs a remarkable metaphor for the rebirth of Stephen’s adult, artist soul; that of revivification in the grave: “His soul had arisen from the grave of boyhood, spurning her graveclothes. Yes! Yes! Yes! He would create proudly out of the freedom and power of his soul, as the great artificer whose name he bore, a living thing new and soaring and beautiful, impalpable, imperishable.”⁴⁹³ The beginning of his writing career is figured, then, as the aesthetic return from death, and the phonic resonance of his name in this direction begins to sound. Stephen Dedalus the artist will no longer serve the identity politics in which he does not believe, “whether it call itself my home, my fatherland or my church”; rather he “will try to express myself in some mode of life or art as freely as I can and as wholly as I can”.⁴⁹⁴ Nationalism is here given even shorter shrift than in “The Dead”, with the suggestions of cannibalism within that story being made horrifically explicit: “Do you know what Ireland is? asked Stephen with cold violence. Ireland is the old sow that eats her farrow.”⁴⁹⁵ The possibility of art, for Stephen, would be exactly the possibility of interring notions of national identity and the murderous violence they engender. It is the impalpable ambiguity, the overwhelming of national identity, that is the appeal of “the fall” and “the swoon” for Stephen as he sets out as an artist. One might think here of Bataille’s formulations of literature as, “religion’s heir. A sacrifice is a novel, a story, illustrated in a bloody fashion.”⁴⁹⁶ This has led some critics to describe the scene of the production of literature as “abject” in Bataille’s thought: literature might then open “on to an indefinable arena where expenditure becomes loss without profit or return, where *negativity dissolves identity* and reason without the assurance of a dialectic that promises to give them back”.⁴⁹⁷ The swoon is essential for Joyce, as it is for Bataille, as a way to figure an ambiguation of identity, a potential loss of the isolate self which brings the individual into communion with the dead; and swoon-aesthetics attests to the possibility for literature to enact that transforming loss. Stephen Dedalus’ swoon is, finally, the rejection of the identities proffered to him (nationalist, religious and gendered) and a faint towards the shady region of communion with the dead. It is also

⁴⁹² Joyce, *Portrait*, p.173.

⁴⁹³ *Ibid.*, p.174.

⁴⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.251.

⁴⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.208. Roos also cites this, suggesting that it is a likely reference to the Catholic belief in transubstantiation, which, carried to its “logical conclusion” is “cannibalism”: Roos, *op cit.*, at 118.

⁴⁹⁶ Bataille, *Eroticism*, p.87.

⁴⁹⁷ Fred Botting and Scott Wilson, *Bataille* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), p.35 [my italics].

the *return from death* into a new mode of perceiving and creating, a mode that prefers the apprehension of an uncertain world to the defensive boundaries provided by certain identities. And this is what we might call, after Keats, the swoon into Negative Capability that is the prerogative of radical poetics: “His soul was swooning into some new world, fantastic, dim, *uncertain* as under sea, traversed by cloudy shapes and beings.”⁴⁹⁸

⁴⁹⁸ Joyce, *Portrait*, p.177 [my italics].

Chapter Four

Vampiric Swoons and Dark Ecology

I did not want to hinder him. I suppose it is a part of the horrible curse that such is, when his touch is on his victim ... He placed his reeking lips upon my throat ... I felt my strength fading away, and I was in a half swoon.

Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (1897)

Vampire fiction refuses to die. Its literary popularity was inaugurated in the early nineteenth century, rising to a peak with Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897).⁴⁹⁹ Over a century later, the all-pervading presence of vampires in popular fiction, TV series and block-buster film franchises is often referred to as a vampire "revival".⁵⁰⁰ Christopher Frayling has described the ever-expanding plethora of literary critical approaches to vampirism since the 1970s as "shape-shifting" beyond all recognition: *Dracula* has been related to "civilisation and its discontents, the return of the repressed, sex from the neck-up, homoeroticism, bisexuality and gender bending; reverse colonialism ... hysteria, the empowerment of women, the disempowerment of women ... And so on."⁵⁰¹ Whilst Frayling's indexical approach here suggests that we might be somewhat oversupplied with analyses of the vampire, one important element of the tradition that is overlooked in his gloss, and by critics more generally, is the vampiric swoon. In this chapter I will posit the importance of the swoon to the English-language vampire tradition from its beginnings, arguing that *fascination* and *immobility* are crucial

⁴⁹⁹ Albeit that the popularity of *Dracula* grew over time: the novel was a bestseller in Stoker's lifetime, going into paperback in 1901, but its importance was increasingly felt through the 20th century, when the story was embraced in popular myth and film. See Christopher Frayling's "Preface" to Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (London: Penguin Classics, [1897] 2011), p.xi.

⁵⁰⁰ It is questionable whether vampire literature has ever passed into dormancy. However, a 2013 special issue of *Gothic Studies* suggests that while "vampires have been continually reborn in modern culture" there is a renewed "recent vogue for vampires and all things undead", which has led projects such as *Open Graves*, *Open Minds: Vampires and the Undead in Modern Culture* (established in 2010) and to the growth of "Vampire Studies" as an academic field (Sam George and Bill Hughes, "Introduction: Undead Reflections" *Gothic Studies* 15(1) (May 2013), 1–7). Much of the literature suggests that the upsurge in vampire offerings in fiction, TV series and films begins with the work of Anne Rice in the 1970s and continues to grow in relation to the AIDS epidemic of the 1980s.

⁵⁰¹ Frayling, *op cit.*, pp.xi–xii.

components of the literary depiction of vampirism. The swoon will be seen to dramatise a sensuous giving-in to the pull of the vampire, as suggested in the description of swooning submission to predation given by Dracula's victim in the opening epigraph. This giving-in will be seen as the initiation into a polymeric reimagining of mind: the vampiric swoon leads to a mesmerised continuity between victim and vampire which is, at its most extreme, telepathic.

A new attentiveness to the vampiric swoon will also lead us to revisit and refocus some of the common critical approaches to vampirism: where the vampire has been theorised as a figuration of the force of capital, for instance, the dreamy swoon will cause us to consider the significance of the pleasurable capitulation of the half-willing victim⁵⁰²; and where the vampire has been conceptualised as a symbol of the spread of disease, the swoon might make us wonder about the temptation of succumbing to infection. Finally, I will suggest that the vampiric swoon might now be understood in the context of current theorisations of "dark ecology": a deconstructive refutation of "nature" as a "force of law"⁵⁰³ that reimagines life forms *and* texts as an overlapping series of violent interrelations. The critic Timothy Morton encourages us to see the world as ecology in motion, where ecology is defined as a multiplying series of interconnections. This would involve reimagining the human as existing in symbiotic series, rather than as a single entity. The "post-human" here might mean the abolition of the idea of "the human" as an ipseity; but it also coincides with a moment of ecological catastrophe in which we recognise that the human is already past the moment of no return: that we are already, in some senses, dead.⁵⁰⁴ The swooning vampire victim, poised on the brink of transformation into the "undead", might provide a model for the importance of the "ambo", the "in both sides", to Morton's amphibious reconception of the human. The amphibian represents to Morton a liminality that we must protect, a both-at-once that is constitutive of the post-human. I will suggest that the vampire is one of the most powerful ways of imagining an amphibious "non-human" human. And in the context of dark ecology, the vampiric swoon will be seen as a flirtatious tarrying

⁵⁰² Franco Moretti's classic Marxist essay "The Dialectic of Fear" *New Left Review* (November–December 1982), would be one prominent example of this approach.

⁵⁰³ I refer here specifically to Timothy Morton's *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England: Harvard University Press, 2007), which will be explored in more detail later in this chapter.

⁵⁰⁴ As Morton suggested in his lecture, "The Only Emergency is the Lack of Emergency: Reflections on Creativity in the Anthropocene" (University of Sussex Centre for Creative and Critical Thought: 21 May 2013); see also *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), p.7.

with the possibility of death, manifesting the amphibious desire to linger, undead, in a dying world.

The first English Vampyre

John Polidori's *The Vampyre* (1819) is often cited as the founding text of the modern tradition of vampire fiction in English. Drawing on a literary lineage of East European folk beliefs, this story "launched a vampire craze that still shows no signs of subsiding".⁵⁰⁵ Not only was Polidori's tale the first sustained fictional treatment of vampirism in English,⁵⁰⁶ it also introduced certain refined elements into the mythology that would have a profound impact on the vampire literature that followed, setting in motion the "glorious career of the *aristocratic* vampire".⁵⁰⁷ The close relation between this tale and the figure of Lord Byron is well-known: *The Vampyre* was written as part of that famous creative-writing exercise by Lake Geneva in the summer of 1816, when Polidori was accompanying Byron as a paid companion. When the story was received in 1818 and published in 1819 by the *London New Monthly Magazine*, it was initially attributed to Byron, a canny, perhaps disingenuous speculation by the magazine to generate maximum publicity. The history of *The Vampyre* therefore attests to the power of that so-called "first modern celebrity"⁵⁰⁸ in a number of ways: not only was Byron's reputation used to establish its popularity (a kind of literary vampirism, in effect), but the story is now often read as an account of Polidori's hypnotic tie to Byron and the dangerous thrall of the libertine's seductive literary celebrity.

The tale recounts the arrival of "a nobleman", Lord Ruthven, in London. Ruthven is notable for his social magnetism and even those suffering the most profound ennui desire his company: he is, we are told, able to "*engag[e]* their attention".⁵⁰⁹ He particularly fascinates a young man named Aubrey, a naïf with "that high romantic

⁵⁰⁵ Robert Morrison and Chris Baldick (eds), *The Vampyre and Other Tales of the Macabre* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, Oxford World Classics, 1997), p.viii.

⁵⁰⁶ There had been fleeting references in earlier Romantic poetry, for instance, Samuel Taylor Coleridge's *Christabel* (1800) (which was supposedly read by the party at Lake Geneva, and may therefore have been a direct influence on the vampire narrative); Byron's *The Giaour* (1813); and Keat's *Lamia* (1819), which appeared in the same year as *The Vampyre*.

⁵⁰⁷ Morrison and Baldick tell us that in anthologies of previous reported sightings, vampires had usually been peasants (*op cit.*, p.xii). Many of the most famous vampires followed in this aristocratic mould, for instance Rymer's *Varney the Vampyre* (1847); Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1872); and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897).

⁵⁰⁸ For an exploration of this attribution, see Tom Mole, *Byron's Romantic Celebrity: Industrial Culture and the Hermeneutic of Intimacy* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan: 2007).

⁵⁰⁹ John Polidori, *The Vampyre* (1819) in Morrison and Baldick *op cit.*, p.3.

feeling of honour and candor, which daily ruins so many milliners' apprentices."⁵¹⁰ Aubrey sets out to travel on the continent with Ruthven, despite his guardians' protestations about the danger of Ruthven's "possession of *irresistible* powers of seduction", which render his licentious habits all the more dangerous to society.⁵¹¹ When Aubrey sees this seduction in action, and Ruthven's "ruin" of a young lady in Italy, he balks, and leaves for Greece. Here, he is captivated by a young Greek girl who tells him tales of a "living vampyre, who had passed years amidst his friends, and dearest ties, forced every year, by feeding upon the life of a lovely female to prolong his existence for the ensuing months".⁵¹² Aubrey refuses to believe these tales, and strays into a forest he has been warned away from by the local people; here he witnesses the girl he loves being attacked by a vampyre. Aubrey is thrown to the ground by a creature with superhuman strength, and is left "incapable of moving".⁵¹³ The dead girl, discovered with bloodied neck and breast, is described as having "a stillness about her face that seemed almost as attaching as the life once dwelt there".⁵¹⁴ The vampire fits the description of Ruthven to a tee, and Aubrey is seized by a "most violent fever, and was often delirious".⁵¹⁵ The tale concludes back in London, with Ruthven, who has appeared to die earlier in the tale, reappearing to marry Aubrey's sister. Aubrey is rendered helpless, unable to intervene in the proceedings due to a promise he has made to Ruthven not to speak of him for a year. He lies prostrate for days and "again sank into a state" from which no one could rouse him.⁵¹⁶ When he finally comes to, it is too late: "Lord Ruthven had disappeared, and Aubrey's sister glutted the thirst of a VAMPYRE!"⁵¹⁷

Alongside instituting the trope of the aristocratic vampire, I suggest that this tale is paradigmatic in describing the *fascination* and concomitant *immobility* that the vampire produces. His charisma is here the power to compel, and then to render prone and immobile; to produce a languorous, seduced helplessness which will find fuller expression in the swoons of later vampire accounts. The cover of the Oxford World Classics edition of *The Vampyre*, featuring *The Kiss* by G. Baldry,⁵¹⁸ might point us

⁵¹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.7.

⁵¹² *Ibid.*, p.9.

⁵¹³ *Ibid.*, p.12.

⁵¹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.13.

⁵¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.20.

⁵¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.23.

⁵¹⁸ The full name of the artist is unknown.

towards the downward direction in which the vampire's victims will continue to proceed (see Figure 1, p.220). A woman, elegantly dressed in white, with pearls around her neck, leans backwards, so that her whole throat is exposed, as a man in black looms in from behind to kiss her. Her pose is an extreme backbend; a decadent shadow swoon.⁵¹⁹ The "Romantic agony" seen by some to be trammelled into the vampire victim,⁵²⁰ expresses itself pictorially here as the seductively aching arch of the swoon-pose. And whilst this cover art might seem to pander to a soft-pornography of the specifically *feminine* and debilitated swoon, reflecting the tendencies discussed earlier in relation to feminine sensibility,⁵²¹ in consequent vampire narratives seductive immobility works in *all* directions. Women and *men* are prone to immobility in the face of both male and female vampires, who might be lady killers or femme fatales; the vampiric swoon will threaten *and excite* Victorian readers with the possibility of men being subject to a symbolically feminine passivity.

Before we go on to discuss these later vampiric swoons in more detail, I want to return to the claim that Polidori's is the "first" aristocratic vampire, removing the "blood sucker from the village cowshed to the salons of high society and the resorts of international tourism".⁵²² Whilst it is true that Polidori's is the first sustained fiction of an aristocrat vampire in English, there is a long European history of the deployment of the folkloric vampire figure in order to excoriate the bloodsucking economic practices of the privileged classes, which has been catalogued by Christopher Frayling.⁵²³ In France, for instance, Voltaire's supplement to the *Dictionnaire Philosophique* (XX) (1765), describes the "true vampyres" as "the churchmen who eat at the expense of both the king *and* the people".⁵²⁴ Rousseau takes up the trope in a more extended form: in a draft of the fourth book of *Émile* (written 1758–9), he tells us that, "For some time now,

⁵¹⁹ It is remarkable how many vampire/gothic treatises reproduce a variation of this pose. Christopher Frayling's *Vampyres: Lord Byron to Count Dracula*, for instance, presents a glamorous young woman in white, arching backwards, unconscious, as a vampire supports her, looming in darkly to drink the trickle of blood that run across her neck and décolletage. James B. Twitchell's *The Living Dead: A Study of the Vampire in Romantic Literature* (United States: Duke University Press, 1981), Markman Ellis' *The History of Gothic Fiction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003) and Elisabeth Bronfen's *Over Her Dead Body: Death, femininity and the aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), all use the same cover image: a woman robed in white lies across a bed, unconscious, her head and arms falling languorously over the side and her blonde hair spilling to the floor; atop her sits a troll-like beast (the image is Johann Heinrich Fuseli, *The Nightmare* (1827)—see Figure 2, p.221).

⁵²⁰ See Mario Praz, *The Romantic Agony* (trans. Angus Davidson) (London; NY; Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1968), 2nd edn, quoted in relation to vampires by Christopher Frayling, *op cit.*, p.4.

⁵²¹ See Chapter 3.

⁵²² Morrison and Baldick, *op cit.*, p.xii.

⁵²³ That very "Baedeker of vampirism", as his book jacket tells us: Frayling, *op cit.*

⁵²⁴ Quoted *ibid.*, p.31.

the public news has been concerned with nothing but vampires”.⁵²⁵ The interesting question for Rousseau is not the issue of “proof” for these tales, but rather “why the vampire (or miracle) should have become such an important article of popular belief in the first place”.⁵²⁶ For Rousseau, the power of the vampire is as a symbol of the ways in which man has become carnivorous (and then cannibalistic) under the rubric of “civilisation”. For every one of us living under these conditions, Rousseau, tells us, “*Le vampire, c’est les autres*”.⁵²⁷ In Russia, Nikolai Gogol, Alexis Tolstoy and Ivan Turgenev all wrote folkloric vampire tales under tsarist censorship, using the vampire figure as a means to criticise the privilege of the cossacks or landlords.⁵²⁸

The most overtly excoriating use of the vampire figure comes a little later, in the work of Karl Marx. In *Das Kapital*, Marx deploys a series of figures to describe the attributes of capital which have the consumption of blood as their common theme. “Capital is dead labour,” he writes, “that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks.”⁵²⁹ He refers to the “were-wolf’s hunger for surplus labour,”⁵³⁰ and to the fact that “the prolongation of the working day quenches only in a slight degree the vampire thirst for the living blood of labour.”⁵³¹ In the same chapter on the working day, Marx describes the continuity between the historical evolution of the factory system and earlier sets of historical economic relationships, turning to the lord–peasant relationships in the Danubian principalities as a prior example:

Capital has not invented surplus labour. Wherever a part of society possesses the monopoly of the means of production, the labourer, free or not free, must add to the working-time necessary for his own maintenance an extra working-time in order to produce the means of subsistence for the owners of the means of production ... Wallachian Boyard, modern landlord or capitalist.⁵³²

The epitome of the power wielded by “the Wallachian Boyard” is, Frayling argues, the figure of Vlad the Impaler, also known as Vlad Dracula (initially meaning son of the

⁵²⁵ Quoted *ibid.*, p.32.

⁵²⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵²⁷ Rousseau’s position is summarised by Frayling, *op cit.*, pp.32–4.

⁵²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.80.

⁵²⁹ All quotations taken from the first English translation of Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy Capital* (trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, ed. Frederick Engels) (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1887; pdf version available through www.marxists.org at <http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/download/pdf/Capital-Volume-I.pdf>), p.160.

⁵³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.165.

⁵³¹ *Ibid.*, p.172.

⁵³² *Ibid.*, p.161.

dragon, but later also connoting the Devil). Ten years before the publication of Bram Stoker's most famous work, then, Karl Marx is responsible for the first allusion to Dracula in the English language.⁵³³

Sharpening the importance of the vampire-as-cannibal for an understanding of Marx's work, Keston Sutherland has recently described *Das Kapital* as an "aggressively satiric" attack on wage labour "as the fundamental savagery leading to compulsory everyday cannibalism".⁵³⁴ *Das Kapital* describes this "everyday cannibalism" being practised through the consumption of *Gallerte*, a common German meat product at the end of the nineteenth century. *Gallerte* might not be a familiar substance to Marx's English readers, Sutherland tells us, because it is replaced in the English translations of *Capital* with "congelation"; thus, we have the misdirecting translation that through the commodity, "human labour in the abstract" becomes "a mere congelation of homogenous human labour".⁵³⁵ *Gallerte* differs from congelation in being a "semisolid, tremulous mass gained from cooling a concentrated glue substance"; an animal product that was literally bought and eaten every day by Marx's German readers. For Sutherland, understanding the composition of this *Gallerte* is crucial for understanding Marx's satirical (rather than merely conceptual) work in *Capital*. *Gallerte* is the "living hands, brains, muscles and nerves of the wage labourer ... mere 'animal substances', ingredients for the feast of the capitalist. The capitalist in turn is the great devourer of this undifferentiated human labour"⁵³⁶; and it is in this sense that capital is the "vampire thirst for the living blood of labour".⁵³⁷ Sutherland refocuses our attention on *Gallerte* and the figure of the vampire in order to show that the object of Marx's satire is not the human labourer reduced to "a condiment", but the bourgeois consumer "who eats him for breakfast."⁵³⁸ So when Marx tells us that the capitalist "vampire will not lose its hold on [the worker] 'so long as there is a muscle, a nerve, a drop of blood to be exploited'",⁵³⁹ we should not, Sutherland cautions us, take Marx's imputation of the existence of the vampire as a joke. Rather, the vampire's existence must be taken seriously as the basis for revolution: "Marx says in the *Communist Manifesto*, the point is that the vampire is not yet impossible, and it remains the task of revolution to see to it

⁵³³ The first English edition of *Capital* appeared in 1887: see Frayling, *op cit.*, p.84.

⁵³⁴ Keston Sutherland, *Stupefaction: A Radical Anatomy of Phantoms* (London; New York; Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2011), p.49.

⁵³⁵ Marx, *op cit.*, p.28.

⁵³⁶ Sutherland, *op cit.*, p.44.

⁵³⁷ Sutherland quoting Marx, *ibid.*, p.45.

⁵³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.47.

that he is ‘made impossible’.”⁵⁴⁰ In Sutherland’s reading, the vampire is not Rousseau’s “other”, but is *us*, *Capital*’s bourgeois readers. We may attempt to be the “Olympian diagnosticians” of Marx’s work (“theorists of the sign, psychoanalysts, ethnographers, moralists”⁵⁴¹), but we are instead the focus of Marx’s satirical hailing: “we are instead the person, like the infant vampire who licks clean the cauldron of Gallerte, sucking the blood off his milk teeth, who is real by negative virtue of not yet being impossible.”⁵⁴² We, Marx’s readers, are entrenched in our cannibalistic vampirism, eating “human beings transubstantiated by industrial reduction into the base of *Gallerte* in every single commodity on the market”.⁵⁴³

Queer dreams and Dracula

If the suggestive and satiric significance of the vampire to critique the violence of economic interrelation and inequality is well-attested to, before Polidori’s *The Vampyre* and after him, what remains relatively unexplored by critics is the importance of the *swoony immobility* of the victim to the developing literary genre of vampire fiction. Attending to this might extend our thinking about victimhood in the context of capitalist and other potentially violent modes of interrelation. In order to explore the literally fascinating or mesmeric aspect of the power of the literary vampire, I turn now to the most famous epicure of blood, Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897).

When the first narrator of *Dracula*, Jonathon Harker, is making his journey east to visit the Count—to “one of the wildest and least known portions of Europe”,⁵⁴⁴ the gothic sublime landscape of the Carpathian mountains—he does not “sleep well, though my bed was comfortable enough, for I had all sorts of queer dreams”.⁵⁴⁵ Harker initially blames the paprika in the local food, but these “queer dreams” are a foreshadowing of the dreamy state in which he will soon exist, imprisoned in Count Dracula’s castle: a sort of prolonged nightmare is to follow, for Harker and for us as readers. And this nightmare is pleasurable and terrifying by turns, as agency and mobility begin to seem

⁵³⁹ Marx, *op cit.*, p.193, quoting Friedrich Engels.

⁵⁴⁰ Sutherland, *op cit.*, p.48.

⁵⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.69.

⁵⁴² *Ibid.*

⁵⁴³ *Ibid.*, p.75.

⁵⁴⁴ Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (London: Penguin Classics, [1897] 2011), p.8.

⁵⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

impossible in the “paralysis of fear” produced by the vampire.⁵⁴⁶ In the opening stages of the novel, Harker describes himself in thrall to the Count, existing in a strange sleep-deprived state, in which he often wonders if he is dreaming. He falls asleep in a room in the castle he has been warned away from, and what follows is an exquisite description of the erotic pleasures of immobility, the paralysis of the dreamer sliding into a fantasised sexual immobility. Three finely-dressed young women appear before Harker, with “brilliant white teeth, that shone like pearls against the ruby of their voluptuous lips.”⁵⁴⁷ Harker feels for them an uneasy “longing” that is “at the same time some deadly fear.” And he confesses to feeling in his heart “a wicked, burning desire that they would kiss me with those red lips.”⁵⁴⁸ The “wickedness” he self-diagnoses here seems to be not just the desire for women other than his betrothed, the virtuous Mina; it seems also to be a more profoundly interdicted desire for *passivity*, to be sexually predated by three “voluptuous” women. Harker describes himself “looking out under my eyelashes in an agony of delightful anticipation” as the three advance upon him. As the fairest of them approaches, he can smell on her “sweet breath” an “offensiveness, as one smells in blood”; he can then feel the “supersensitive skin of my throat, and the hard dents of two sharp teeth, just touching and pausing there. I closed my eyes in a languorous ecstasy and waited—waited with beating heart”.⁵⁴⁹

The count intervenes at this point, claiming Harker for himself and depriving him and the female vampire of their consummation. Harker is overwhelmed by what he has experienced—“the horror overcame me, and I sank down unconscious”⁵⁵⁰—leaving the Count to carry him to bed. The sinking man seems here to be subject to a decidedly queer fall; his sinking represents the male desire to be erotically overwhelmed, made passive by the vital, predatory vampire. When Van Helsing, a model of vigorous masculine endeavour, storms Dracula’s castle and encounters these same sleeping female vampires, he records the same languorous effects of their “voluptuous beauty”: in his idiomatic English, he describes them producing the desire for immobility in a man, a desire for

delay, til the mere beauty and fascination of the wanton Un-Dead have hypnotize[d] him ... and the voluptuous mouth present to a kiss—and man is

⁵⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.19.

⁵⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p.45.

⁵⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.46.

⁵⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.47.

weak. ... I was moved to a yearning for delay which seemed to paralyse my faculties and to clog my very soul.⁵⁵¹

At this point Van Helsing describes a “strange oppression” beginning to “overcome” him: “Certain it was that I was lapsing into sleep, the open-eyed sleep of one who yields to a sweet fascination.”⁵⁵² The waking dream/nightmare of fascinated immobility at the advance of the beautiful vampire threatens to overwhelm Van Helsing, the upright scientist, too. The figure of the vampire renders the male characters of the novel prone to all sorts of queer sinkings: to faints, coyly termed “falls”⁵⁵³; to hysterics⁵⁵⁴; and, most profoundly, to the desire for a yielding, erotic immobility. The lunatic Renfield, the male character drawn into closest relation to his “Master”, Dracula, “falls” spectacularly into paroxysms, which exhaust him until he “swooned into a sort of coma”.⁵⁵⁵

Vampirism, then, makes *men* subject to the kind of languorous immobility which, as we have seen, symbolically corresponded with specifically *feminine* forms of pathology by the end of the eighteenth century. We might read *Dracula*, then, as a kind of lurid erotophobia: it suggests the dangers of the vampiric overwhelming of its male subjects, while revelling in describing the temptation towards “delay”. Timothy Morton describes erotophobia as “the fear of and fascination with a feminized state”.⁵⁵⁶ The possibility of passive (feminised) masculine states here is a source of terror, which nevertheless betrays erotic fascination. Dracula threatens *all* of his victims with the desire to be immobile, to be subject to “a languorous ecstasy” which might seem dangerously close to desiring a “feminized state”; the queerest of dreams.

If the erotic, paralysing effects of the vampire symbolically threaten men with feminine states of passivity, then these states are, as we might expect, exhibited in exemplary form by Dracula’s female victims. And the term “swoon” is frequently used to denote his female victims’ states of sickly, languorous ecstasy. When Mina discovers her somnambulant friend Lucy on the Whitby cliff-tops at night, she twice describes the

⁵⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.393.

⁵⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵⁵³ When Jonathon sees Dracula in London he clings to Mina, who tells us that, “if he had not had me to lean on and to support him he would have sunk down” (*Ibid.*, p.184); similarly, when Arthur sees his fiancée Lucy as an unnaturally beautiful corpse, he “fell a-trembling” (p.180); later, her vampiric “voluptuousness” makes him faint: “Arthur was next to me, and if I had not seized his arm and held him up, he would have fallen” (p.225).

⁵⁵⁴ Van Helsing is described as giving way to “a regular fit of hysterics just as a woman does” (*Ibid.*, p.180) under the pressure of dealing with the vampire Lucy.

⁵⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p.118.

repose we find so often on vampire book-jackets: “There was undoubtedly something, long and black, bending over the half-reclining white figure [of Lucy].”⁵⁵⁷ Lucy is described as “still asleep” as she reclines, and her breathing is ecstatic, coming in “long, heavy gasp[s]”. The real eeriness of these scenes is the sense they impart of Lucy unconsciously *enjoying* her mesmerised excursions, her own swooning predation.

Lucy’s swooning states merge imperceptibly with other drowsy conditions. Mina discovers Lucy leaning out of their bedroom window, towards a bat; but Mina cannot rouse her, as she is in “a faint”.⁵⁵⁸ That Lucy is simultaneously described as “fainting” and “leaning” here reveals the strange way in which her body’s ability to move with volition is affected. Lucy begins to look paler and paler, and expert help is sought in the form of Dr Seward and his old mentor, Van Helsing. After unsuccessfully attempting to keep the vampire away, they discover her “on the bed, seemingly in a swoon ... more horribly white and wan-looking than ever”.⁵⁵⁹ They administer morphia to her, and “the faint seemed to merge subtly into the narcotic sleep”.⁵⁶⁰ These dreamy swoons lead up to a mass female unconsciousness event in the novel: the next morning Van Helsing arrives to find the house-maids all knocked out by laudanum, Lucy’s mother dead in Lucy’s bed, and Lucy laid out beside her, white and deathly. When revived, Lucy recounts waking in the night, to see wolves at her bedroom window. The window smashes, and the wolves enter. Her mother, who has a weak heart, has been literally frightened to death. Lucy describes trying to “to stir, but there was some spell on me ... I remembered no more for a while”.⁵⁶¹ The somnambulant, swooning spell cast on the beautiful Lucy and her household here seems to resonate with the unconscious heroines of fairy tales—with the languorous Sleeping Beauty, and the dead-still Snow White—and also prefigures the modern phenomenon of “sleepy” pornography.⁵⁶²

When Mina hears the full story of what has happened to Lucy, through the “forked metal” of the modern phonograph, she describes herself lying back in her chair

⁵⁵⁶ Morton, *Ecology Without Nature*, p.137.

⁵⁵⁷ Stoker, *op cit.*, p.101.

⁵⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p.106.

⁵⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p.137.

⁵⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p.138.

⁵⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p.163.

⁵⁶² Feona Attwood and Caroline Walters, “The Fifty Shades Effect: Sex Media and the Law”, presented at *Fifty Shades of Grey: An Enquiry into ‘Dangerous Things’* (University of Brighton: 4 April 2013), refer to recent case law on “sleepy porn”, which depicts unconscious women as the recipients of sexual advances.

“powerless. Fortunately I am not of a fainting disposition”.⁵⁶³ But, of course, Dracula will prove *everyone* to be of a fainting disposition. Mina is effectively confined to the house for her own protection, while the men set out to hunt the vampire. The consequent irony is that this “protective” confinement places Mina in the perfect position for vampiric predation. Mina begins to sleep particularly heavily, and wakes as though from bad dreams; we are led to believe that Dracula has been striking up a nocturnal relationship with Mina, unbeknownst to her. The others finally discover Dracula in the Harkers’ bedroom: Jonathon is found “in a stupor such as we know the Vampire can produce”,⁵⁶⁴ while Mina, with the tell-tale puncture marks on her neck, is being forced to drink blood from Dracula’s breast. Mina later describes how this moment felt: “I was bewildered, and, strangely enough, I did not want to hinder him. I suppose it is a part of the horrible curse that such is, when his touch is on his victim ... He placed his reeking lips upon my throat ... I felt my strength fading away, and I was in a half swoon”.⁵⁶⁵ The half-swoon here is a yielding to seduction, a cessation of hindrance that is pleasurable.

The importance of this dreamy, swooning state might open up a weird dimension on the vampire trope as an exploration of the power dynamics of violent economic interrelation, or capitalism. For whilst Marxist accounts of “Dracula” reference the violent blood-sucking *force* of the privileged classes, here we might see an exploration of the *power* of capital to compel its victims. I am thinking here of the sort of distinction Norman O. Brown makes when elaborating Marx’s early formulations of alienation. “The alienated consciousness,” Brown tells us, “is correlative with a money economy” in Marx’s thinking.⁵⁶⁶ Focussing, however, on Marx and Engel’s *Kleine ökonomische Schriften*,⁵⁶⁷ Brown argues that Marx’s thinking of alienation mistakes force, a material reality, with power, a psychological category, as the progenitor and sustainer of capitalism:

Marx comes close to recognizing alienated (compulsive) work as an inner psychological necessity ... But the psychological implications of this line of thought are too bewildering; and Marx withdraws to the position that the primary datum is the domination of man over man. ... The ultimate category

⁵⁶³ Stoker, *op cit.*, p.238.

⁵⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p.300.

⁵⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p.306.

⁵⁶⁶ Norman O. Brown, *Life Against Death* (New England: University Press of New England, 1985), p.237.

⁵⁶⁷ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Kleine ökonomische Schriften* (Berlin: Dietz, 1955).

[for Marx] is presumably force, the force which appropriates another man's labour. ... If the cause of the trouble were force, to 'expropriate the expropriators' would be enough. But if the force did not establish the domination of the master, then perhaps the slave is somehow in love with his own chains. If there is such a deep psychological malady, then a deeper psychological regeneration is needed ... The ultimate category of economics is power; but power is not an economic category. Marx fills up the emergent gap in his theory with the concept of force (violence)—i.e., by conceiving power as a material category. ... this is a crucial mistake; power is in essence a psychological category.⁵⁶⁸

The altered, swooning states of Bram Stoker's vampire victims vividly attest to the *power* wielded over the weakening individual, who comes to queerly enjoy his or her own exsanguination. The vampiric swoon might, then, dramatise the kind of perverse adaptation to capitalism that Brown describes as a slave "somehow being in love with his own chains"⁵⁶⁹; or that Max Horkheimer describes the majority of the "ruled" engaging in.⁵⁷⁰ It might also make the idea of "free choice" under certain economic and social circumstances seem spectacularly defunct, reminding us, perhaps, that the idea that "our consciousness floats, with free choice, among various ideas that can be selected at will, like so many different bottles of shampoo, or magazines—is itself the ideology of consumer capitalism".⁵⁷¹ The trickery is laid bare in the vampire: the victims of Dracula abnegate choice; their strength is fading; their consciousness is a helpless blur, smudged inside a swooning body.

Polymeric perversity and mind reading

Appearing eighty years after the publication of *Dracula*, Ann Rice's *Interview with a Vampire* (1976) is often described as an initiatory text of the current vampire vogue. In Rice's series of novels, the swoon-state remains a crucial element of the vampire experience. Louis, the central character, describes himself being "spellbound" by the vampire Lestat, who provides him with "the most overwhelming experience [he]'d ever had".⁵⁷² When Lestat drinks from him, Louis becomes "weak to paralysis",

⁵⁶⁸ Brown, *op cit.*, pp.241–251.

⁵⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p.242.

⁵⁷⁰ "Among the vast majority of the ruled there is the unconscious fear that theoretical thinking might show their painfully won adaptation to reality to be perverse and unnecessary." (Max Horkheimer, "Traditional and Critical Theory" in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (New York: Continuum, [1937] 2002), p.232.)

⁵⁷¹ Morton, *Ecology Without Nature*, p.126.

⁵⁷² Anne Rice, *Interview with a Vampire* (London: Sphere, [1976] 2001), p.27. The more recent TV series *True Blood* describes a similar experience of trance-like suggestibility under the power of a vampire as

characterised by “helplessness”.⁵⁷³ Powerful vampires put their victims under a “spell”⁵⁷⁴; they “hypnotise”; they have an “eerie magnetism”⁵⁷⁵; they put victims in a “trance”⁵⁷⁶; they are “like the sea drawing something into itself from the land”.⁵⁷⁷ “[T]races of vampirism are to be found in most cultures”, Frayling tells us. “The vampire is as old as the world. Blood tastes of the sea—where we all come from”.⁵⁷⁸ The connection of the vampire with the salt-sea here puts one in mind of Freud’s discussion of the “oceanic” feeling: the feeling of “something limitless, unbounded” that his correspondent Romain Rolland suggests is the cause of continued religious *feeling*, even in those who reject religious *belief*.⁵⁷⁹ Freud does not recognise this feeling in himself, but speculates on it as a possible residual sense of infantile connection to the world: “The new-born child does not at first separate his ego from an outside world that is the source of the feelings flowing towards him. ... the ego is originally all-inclusive”.⁵⁸⁰ “The role of the oceanic feeling”, might then be to “restore unlimited narcissism”⁵⁸¹ and this would “suggest connections with many obscure psychical states such as trance and ecstasy”.⁵⁸² Although Freud goes on to push the oceanic feeling into the background as the origin of religiosity,⁵⁸³ his discussion here excavates an early feeling of connection and “belonging to the whole of the world outside oneself”.⁵⁸⁴ This state, he suggests, is often refound at “the height of erotic passion” when “the borderline between ego and object is in danger of becoming blurred” and, “[a]gainst all the evidence of the senses, the person in love asserts that ‘I and ‘you’ are one and is ready to behave as if this were so.”⁵⁸⁵ A similar abolition of separation might also be seen in certain “morbid processes”.⁵⁸⁶ Might the morbid

“glamouring”: Alan Ball’s *True Blood* (HBO, 2008–continuing), based on Charlaine Harris’ vampire-novel series, *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* (2001–2013).

⁵⁷³ *Ibid.*, p.22.

⁵⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p.225.

⁵⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p.249.

⁵⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p.226.

⁵⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p.206.

⁵⁷⁸ Frayling, *op cit.*, p.4.

⁵⁷⁹ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* (trans David McLintock) (London: Penguin Books, [1930] 2002), p.3.

⁵⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.5–6.

⁵⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p.10.

⁵⁸² *Ibid.*, p.11.

⁵⁸³ Freud foregrounds instead the helplessness of the child and a longing for its father as the primary needs that would be met by the illusion of religion (*ibid.*, p.10).

⁵⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p.3.

⁵⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p.5.

⁵⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

attraction of the vampire, metaphorised as the pull of the ocean, as “the sea drawing something into itself”,⁵⁸⁷ be another way of describing this oceanic feeling?

In *Interview*, it seems that the vampire victim is pulled irresistibly back towards a sense of unlimited connectedness. And the delicious giving-in of the victim to this feeling finds its fullest expression in the swoon. Louis describes, for example, a beautiful victim at the Parisian Théâtre des Vampires: “She was languid ... her yearning towards him, seeing her dying now ... her swoon ... She was giving herself over”.⁵⁸⁸ In the swoon, the victim gives herself into that familiar position: she lets herself go in the vampire’s arms, “he was lifting her, her back arching as her naked breasts touched his buttons, her pale arms enfolded his neck ... He lifted her off the boards as he drank, her throat gleaming against his white cheek ... displaying her, her head falling back as he gave her over”.⁵⁸⁹ And in *Interview*, this swooning state is not just the experience of the victim: it is also the experience of the drinking vampire. Louis tells us that his first suck “mesmerised [him]”,⁵⁹⁰ and that killing produces in him a “near swoon”.⁵⁹¹ When he gives in to his own desire to drink blood, he describes something “glimmer[ing] in my swoon”.⁵⁹² The swoon, then, seems here to suggest a softening into fluidity that is the response to the oceanic pull of merger with another, and with the “world outside oneself”. Mind and body extend themselves, or spill over, in unlimited directions in the vampiric experience. Lestat, for instance, describes his body *becoming* his mind in moments of trance,⁵⁹³ and also suggests that he can *feel* the thoughts of potent vampires, “as if they were palpable in the air like smoke”.⁵⁹⁴ The power of the vampire here is to blur the separation of individual minds and bodies, so that something as private and internal as a thought might be silently, physically impressed upon someone else. This is a new telepathic plane in which the oceanic meets physicalism: all things might be swooningly shared in this polymeric reconfiguration of body and mind.

And there is a danger for both the victim and the vampire in this *shared* swoon. The victim’s risks are obvious enough, but if the vampire carries on drinking until the victim is dead, he too will be drawn down into mortality. Louis describes himself in the attempt to transform a victim into a vampire, “trying desperately to break my swoon;

⁵⁸⁷ Rice, *op cit.*, p.206.

⁵⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p.204.

⁵⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.31.

⁵⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p.37.

⁵⁹² *Ibid.*, p.177.

⁵⁹³ *Ibid.*, p.37.

and then I felt her powerful pull”.⁵⁹⁵ When the “swoon is strongest”, he can feel the beat of the victim’s heart like a drum through his own undead veins.⁵⁹⁶ Victim and vampire are locked together in this swooning embrace, drawn into an oceanic connection that also risks pulling them both into the death of the other.

Alongside the oceanic pull, we might consider the swooning merging of mind between vampire and victim in relation to another element of Freud’s work, and another treacherous form of mutual interference: the use of hypnosis to treat hysteria. Here we must return to *Dracula*, appearing as it does during the “golden age” of hysteria⁵⁹⁷ and during the early stages of the development of psychoanalysis. Elisabeth Bronfen suggests that the victims of Dracula exhibit a split consciousness (daytime lucidity/nocturnal semi-conscious irrationality) that mirrors the patterning of the hysteric’s “double conscience” in Freud and Breuer’s early formulations.⁵⁹⁸ A “proclivity towards semi-consciousness”, so common, as we have seen, in swooning vampire victims, is, Bronfen tells us, a “descriptive trait” of the hysteric character for early psychoanalysis,⁵⁹⁹ alongside other altered states, such as “hypnoid conditions, somnambulism, hallucinations and amnesia”.⁶⁰⁰ These labile states of mind, the “fluidity between various states of self”,⁶⁰¹ meant that the hysteric was thought of as being particularly susceptible to “‘suggestibility’ as an acceptance and acting out of the desires others have induced in hypnosis”.⁶⁰² I wish to propose here a set of correspondences between the vampiric swoon states of *Dracula*, the early hypnotic treatment of hysteria, and psychoanalysis’s anxious relation to telepathy.

In *Dracula*, swoon and trance states make possible various excursions into various minds, through vampiric *telepathy* and “medical” *hypnosis* respectively. By making Mina drink his blood while she is in a trance, Dracula claims control of Mina’s mind: “now you shall come to my call. When my brain says ‘Come!’ to you, you shall

⁵⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.215.

⁵⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.244.

⁵⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.243.

⁵⁹⁷ This designation is Elaine Showalter’s and refers to the period “between 1870 and World War I”: Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830–1980* (London: Virago, 1985), p.129.

⁵⁹⁸ Bronfen, *op cit.*, p.315.

⁵⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p.316.

⁶⁰² *Ibid.*, p.315.

cross land or sea to do my bidding”.⁶⁰³ But Van Helsing is able to exploit this connection of minds through his own art of telepathy: hypnosis. Placed in a “hypnotic trance” by Van Helsing,⁶⁰⁴ Mina is also able to enter the Count’s mind, which is the place of death: “I am still—oh, so still. It is like death!”⁶⁰⁵ Hypnosis is, in the novel, figured as the facilitator of Mina’s telepathy with Dracula; but it is also figured as an *intrinsically telepathic* trance-state itself. Van Helsing discusses his belief in the practices of telepathy and hypnosis with the sceptical Dr Seward, chiding Seward for his lack of belief in “the reading of thought. No? Nor [do you believe] in hypnotism”.⁶⁰⁶ At this point Seward interrupts Van Helsing to protest that he does believe in hypnotism, since it has been proved “pretty well” by Dr Charcot.⁶⁰⁷ Previous claims have been made for Stoker’s possible familiarity with Freud’s early use of hypnosis in treating hysterical patients⁶⁰⁸; whilst these remain speculative, we have clear evidence here of Stoker’s engagement with Freud’s most influential teacher and forerunner: Jean-Martin Charcot. Bram Stoker was personally acquainted with Charcot, the famous French neurologist who exhibited his hysterical patients in hypnotic trances in his “Tuesday Lectures”.⁶⁰⁹ The best-known image of these lectures is the painting by Pierre Andre Brouillet, *A Clinical Lesson with Doctor Charcot at the Salpêtrière, 1887*, which depicts Charcot lecturing to a room full of men with a female hysteric swooning at his side, supported by one of his students. One of Charcot’s students himself, Freud was so profoundly influenced by these lectures that this painting hung above the couch in his consulting room.⁶¹⁰ We might go on to suggest here, as Frayling does,⁶¹¹ that Charcot, a major influence on Freud, is also the major source of Stoker’s interest in trance-states; the mesmeric power of the vampire is drawn into close correspondence with the

⁶⁰³ Stoker, *op cit.*, p.307.

⁶⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p.229.

⁶⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p.333.

⁶⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p.204.

⁶⁰⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰⁸ Nina Auerbach, *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), explicitly draws an analogy between Lucy mesmerised by Dracula and the hysteric woman hypnotised by Freud, suggesting that Stoker could have known the work of the Viennese doctor through reports at the Society for Psychical Research in London in 1893; quoted by Bronfen, *op cit.* p.323.

⁶⁰⁹ Charcot visited the Lyseum theatre where Stoker worked for Henry Irving, and is described in Stoker’s *Personal Reminiscences of Henry Irving* (London: Heinemann, 1906), Vol.I, p.316; for an account of the Tuesday Lessons see Vicky Lebeau, *Psychoanalysis and Cinema: The Play of Shadows* (London: Wallflower Press, 2001), p.20.

⁶¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp.19–20, 30.

⁶¹¹ “Charcot seems to have been a major source for Stoker’s interest in trance-like states, which feature so much in the novel”: Frayling, *op cit.*, fn.4 to Ch.XIV, p.448.

mesmeric possibility of hypnosis.⁶¹² The swoon of the vampire victim, the swoon of Charcot's hysteric, and the depiction of that swoon on Freud's wall, all seem to connote a similar mesmerised *softening into receptivity* for incursions of one mind into another.

As depictions of various states of receptivity, then, these swoons (Brouillet's and Bram Stoker's) must also iconise the hypnotised woman's vulnerability to influence from the male figure of authority, an anxiety that dogged the early studies of hysteria.⁶¹³ This risk was theorised and ostensibly accounted for in the psychoanalytic concepts of transference and counter-transference: but there remained the danger that transference might be "unresolved and *unresolvable*", making it impossible to distinguish between the analysand's thoughts and the power of the analyst's suggestion.⁶¹⁴ Carl Jung demonstrates this jeopardy for psychoanalysis: he suggests that objections to hypnosis are reducible to the fear of transference, which is no bar to useful analysis per se—"What has disgusted you in hypnotism is at bottom nothing but the so-called 'transference' to the doctor"⁶¹⁵; but he later admits the potentially disastrous consequences of uncontrolled transference for psychoanalysis—in "cases of counter-transference when the analyst really cannot let go of the patient ... both fall into the same dark hole of unconsciousness".⁶¹⁶ Freud's own famous belief in telepathy⁶¹⁷ might be understood as a hyperbolic intuition of the impossibility of controlling and limiting influence; and it is fitting that Freud the fainter⁶¹⁸ renders himself *prone* to the

⁶¹² The theory of mesmerism might be seen as the common predecessor of both the telepathic and the hypnotic trances that so interest Stoker. Charcot's work on hysteria and hypnosis developed at a time when the public was fascinated by the work of the Austrian physician Anton Mesmer (1734–1815), who posited a connective "universal fluid" animating the world: Franz Anton Mesmer, *Mémoire sur la découverte du magnétisme animal* (Geneva and Paris: Didot le jeune, 1779); in English: "Dissertation on the Discovery of Animal Magnetism," in George Bloch (trans. and ed.), *Mesmerism* (Los Altos, California: William Kaufmann, 1980).

⁶¹³ Charcot's swooning displays were often suggested by detractors to be staged, with Charcot as the master choreographer of his hysterics. Showalter describes these contemporary accusations of undue influence, with the "performances" being attributed to "suggestion, imitation, or even fraud": *op cit*, p.150.

⁶¹⁴ For an investigation of potentially "unresolved and unresolvable transference" in analysis, which might risk the transmission of the analyst's own images into the analysand's mind, see Ned Lukacher, *Primal Scenes: Literature, Philosophy, Psychoanalysis* (Cornell University Press, 1986), p.20

⁶¹⁵ Carl Gustav Jung, *Collected papers on analytical psychology* (trans. Constance Ellen Long) (London: 1916), p.245.

⁶¹⁶ Jung, *Analytical Psychology: its Theory and Practice* (London: 1976), pp.159 and 157.

⁶¹⁷ For an exploration of this, and the wider critical ramifications of a belief in telepathy, see Nicholas Royle, "The Remains of Psychoanalysis (I): Telepathy" in Martin McQuillan (ed.) *Deconstruction: A Reader* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), pp.361–369.

⁶¹⁸ Freud famously fainted twice in the presence of Jung, who on the second occasion had to carry him to a sofa. Freud, in a letter to Ernest Jones, in part attributed the faint to an "unruly homosexual feeling," which involved a transference from his earlier and intense friendship with Wilhelm Fliess to Jung. The aftermath of this faint was the immediate precursor to the termination of Freud and Jung's friendship: for details of this incident see Martin S. Fiebert, "Sex, Lies and Letters: A Sample of Significant Deceptions

possibility of telepathy, describing his “fall” into the sin of a belief in it.⁶¹⁹ Stoker’s version of the hypnotic mind-doctor, Van Helsing, presses the point that notions of telepathy and hypnosis cannot be kept separate: Charcot, he tells us, moves his mind “into the very soul of the patient that he influence[s]”. As a “student of the brain” one cannot “accept the hypnotism and reject the thought-reading.”⁶²⁰ Van Helsing might therefore be read as a fictional foreshadowing of Freud’s predicament, suggesting as he does that an admission of Charcot’s method might also lead to a dangerous admission of the possibility of “thought-reading”.⁶²¹

The dangers of psychoanalytic transference and counter-transference, and of uncontrolled influence, might, then, be seen to be proleptically explored through the different streams of hypnotic and telepathic influence in *Dracula*. Telepathy in *Dracula* is never a one-way stream: telepathic interference is met by counter-interference. The influence that Dracula claims over Mina’s mind is also a symbiosis that allows her to enter *his* mind. As a result of this, the party are able to trace the Count’s whereabouts, tracking and eventually destroying him. The swooning merging of mind opened up between Count Dracula, Mina and Van Helsing makes for a dangerously unresolvable network of influence: if the hypnotised/vampiric swooner is made vulnerable to telepathic incursions, her counter-telepathy might travel in the most unexpected directions, causing the most upright of men to “fall”. And this might in turn tell us something about the early diagnoses of hysteria: if the hysteric is seen as constitutionally open to influence, quite where hysteria begins or ends becomes impossible to account for. Hysteria, that most feminine malady,⁶²² might stem from the male doctor’s direction and influence. And the great doctor might find himself counter-influenced by a feminine flow; might become prone to falling (into hysterics; into faints; into a belief in telepathy), “just as a woman does”.⁶²³

in the Freud-Jung Relationship” *Psychology* 1 (2010), 113–115. For a creative account of Freud’s documented faints, see Sam Rosenberg, *Why Freud Fainted* (Bobbs-Merrill, 1978).

⁶¹⁹ Freud’s letter to Ernest Jones of 7 March 1926, quoted by Royle, *op cit.*, p.364.

⁶²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.204.

⁶²¹ Bram Stoker, *op cit.*, p.204.

⁶²² Showalter suggests that hysteria had been the quintessential female malady for centuries, but that during the “golden age” of hysteria it assumed an especially central role in definitions of femininity and female sexuality, such that by the end of the 19th century, “hysterical” had become almost interchangeable with “feminine”. Even where doctors, such as Charcot, treated male hysterics, “hysteria remained symbolically, if not medically, a female malady” (*op cit.*, pp.129,148).

⁶²³ Seward describes Van Helsing falling into “a regular fit of hysterics... just as a woman does”: Stoker, *op cit.*, p.180.

Blood relations

The telepathic transference possible in the vampiric swoon might, then, mean that the swooner is never entirely, or singly, herself; and that the vampire or doctor also risks incursions into his mind and body. The vampiric drinking of blood and the telepathic swoon it produces are, I have suggested, the main ways in which interrelation, or interference, are explored in *Dracula*. But there are many others. The blood transfusions given to Lucy in an attempt to save her from anemia provide a parallel circulation of blood between the ostensibly non-vampiric characters in the novel. Arthur, Lucy's betrothed, has given her his blood for this purpose, and feels that, even though her premature death has prevented an actual marriage ceremony, the mingling of their blood has made her "his wife in the sight of god".⁶²⁴ At this suggestion, Van Helsing's face grows "white and purple by turns"⁶²⁵; the Professor's intermittent floridity and blanching here reveals his dis-ease at this blood-tie version of marriage: all the strong young men in the novel (who have also mostly been in love with Lucy), have donated their blood to her, unbeknown to Arthur. And this blood promiscuity means that all the men are now married to the polyandrous Lucy; and also, by blood-mingling extension, to each other, to the Count, to Mina, and to Jonathon Harker. The medical blood-letting that has made even the most virile among them feel "faint"⁶²⁶ has also bound them all together in an erotic mass-transfusion. This is the kind of pan-erotic connection that Frayling refers to as "haemosexuality",⁶²⁷ working from Maurice Richardson's description of the characters in *Dracula* constituting one big incestuous family: a "kind of ... necrophilius, oral-anal-sadistic all-in wrestling match".⁶²⁸ In Richardson's account, the "morbid dread" of the vampire stands in, following Freud's dictum, "for repressed sexual desire" and the desire suggested here is for a multilateral, sexual overwhelming in undifferentiated heamosexuality.

The dis-ease with which Van Helsing, the medical professional, encounters this desire for erotic blood mingling is, I wish to suggest, also intimately connected with the imagining of disease. And it is in this respect that I believe certain vampire accounts correspond with recent explorations of "dark ecology". There have long been

⁶²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.185.

⁶²⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.138.

⁶²⁷ Frayling, *op cit.*, p.xx.

anthropological accounts of vampire stories that link their appearances to altered physical states and to outbreaks of disease. Frayling tells us that when vampire epidemics were reported across Eastern and Central Europe between 1672 and 1772, the Age of Reason and enlightenment thinking adduced medical explanations that might correspond with contemporaneous scientific ideas: some suggested food poisonings might be responsible for the belief in vampires (too much paprika?); or that communities were embroiled in a collective nightmare following opium use (“It all seemed like a horrible nightmare to me”⁶²⁹). But it has also been suggested that plague was re-imagined as vampirism:

the symptoms of the victim—pallor, listlessness, fever, nightmare—were thought to be those of the plague. The transmission of the ‘vampire’s curse’ from predator to victim, who then became predator in turn, was a graphic way of explaining the rapid spread of plague germs. Vampires and rats tended to be close companions in European folklore from an early stage, and there was an epidemic of the plague in East Prussia in 1710 [coinciding with a reported vampire epidemic].⁶³⁰

The possibility of vampirism as an account of Rabies outbreaks has also been considered, and Frayling suggests that most recent folklorist analyses of the reported vampire outbreaks of 1731–2 have concluded that the “manifestations” represent, at least in part, “attempts by preliterate communities to make sense of what we would today call ‘contagion’”.⁶³¹ Ernest Jones, in *On the Nightmare*, makes the same point: “In the Middle Ages there was a close correlation between visitation of the Black Death and outbreaks of vampirism, and even as late as 1855 the terrible cholera epidemic in the Dantsic revived such a widespread belief in the dead returning as vampires to claim the living that, according to medical opinion, the fears of the people greatly increased the mortality from the disease.”⁶³² The vampiric *swoon*, as the desire for delay, might in this context tell us something about the imagined desire to *succumb* to disease. It is interesting that Jones mentions cholera here, given the accounts of the horrific

⁶²⁸ Maurice Richardson, “The psychoanalysis of ghost stories” (1959), excerpt reprinted as “The psychoanalysis of Count Dracula” in Frayling, *op cit.*, p.387.

⁶²⁹ Stoker, *op cit.*, p.22.

⁶³⁰ Frayling, *op cit.*, p.25.

⁶³¹ *Ibid.*, p.26: although Frayling tells us that “it is well to consider the initial reactions of *post-literate* societies to the AIDS epidemic. The resemblances are startling to say the least” (p.27), particularly in their emphasis on an accusatory “who did it” rather than an exploratory attempt to understand the mechanisms of the virus.

epidemics in Ireland which Bram Stoker's mother wrote for him. In these she describes to Stoker the disease's "bitter strange kiss" and the fact that many were buried alive, "stultified from opium".⁶³³ The double meaning of pathology can be felt to resonate here, as both the apprehension of disease, and the sense of feeling that might come from its strange and bitter kiss.⁶³⁴ The dangerously seductive vampire embrace and its resultant narcotic, swooning states have a dark resonance with this seductive aspect of disease.

Erotic contagion and the host organism

To further explore the ramifications of erotic contagion in the context of "dark ecology", I wish to turn to a slightly earlier vampire tale; and it is perhaps no coincidence that this tale was also written by an Irish writer, who had lived through the cholera outbreaks as well as the horrific sights of starvation and cannibalism of the Great Famine.⁶³⁵ Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* was originally published in 1872 as part of his popular *In a Glass Darkly* collection, which ostensibly presented the posthumous papers of an occult detective. This particular case is narrated by its central character, Laura, who recounts the visit she and her father received in their "lonely" forest mansion in Styria⁶³⁶ from a beautiful, refined young woman, who is unexpectedly placed in their care. The two young women, Laura and Carmilla, seem instantly to remember one another other: Carmilla claims to share a traumatic "dream" that Laura had as a young child, in which a beautiful woman caressed her; she "lay down beside me on the bed, and drew me towards her, smiling; I felt immediately delightfully soothed, and fell asleep again. I was wakened by a sensation as if two needles ran into my breast very deep at the same moment, and I cried loudly."⁶³⁷ The two girls begin to share a reciprocal trance-like attraction: "I wonder whether you feel as strangely drawn towards me as I do to you?" Carmilla asks Laura. "Now the truth is, I felt rather unaccountably towards the beautiful stranger," Laura tells us. "I did feel, as she said,

⁶³² Ernest Jones, *On the Nightmare* (1931), excerpt reprinted as "On the Vampire" in Frayling, *op cit.*, p.413.

⁶³³ "Charlotte Stoker's Account of 'The Cholera Horror' in a Letter to Bram Stoker (c.1875)" reproduced as Appendix II in Stoker, *op cit.*, p.412.

⁶³⁴ The *OED* gives as the first meaning of pathology as the (now rare): "Senses to do with feelings."

⁶³⁵ See Chapter 3 for more detail on the Irish Famine in relation to James Joyce's work.

⁶³⁶ Now part of Austria.

⁶³⁷ Sheridan Le Fanu, *Carmilla*, reproduced in *Three Vampire Tales* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co, 2003 [1872]), p.90.

‘drawn towards her,’ but there was also something of repulsion. In this ambiguous feeling, however, the sense of attraction immensely prevailed. She interested me and won me, she was so beautiful and indescribably *engaging*.”⁶³⁸ The mesmeric fascination common to the vampire experience is exhibited by Laura here. And this sense of captivated immobility is deepened and inflected through the repeated use of the term “langour”. Carmilla’s “bodily langour” is often remarked upon, and becomes part of her attractiveness to Laura: “Her beauty was, I think, enhanced by that graceful langour that was peculiar to her”.⁶³⁹ Susan Sontag has described the nineteenth-century vogue for looking consumptive: “romantic agony”, she tells us, was during this period directed into a glamorisation of specific kinds of debilitation, which was itself transformed into the desirable state of “langour”.⁶⁴⁰

This particular version of debility as langour seems to be modelled specifically by the beautiful, delicate aristocratic woman, and the morbid tendencies of the cult of feminine sensibility can be seen to extended here in gothic directions.⁶⁴¹ When Carmilla’s attentions to Laura become particularly ardent, she briefly wonders, in a Shakespearean turn of mind, if Carmilla might be a man dressed as a woman, come to woo her. But, she decides, this is implausible: “I could boast of no little attentions such as masculine gallantry delights to offer ... there was always a langour about her, quite incompatible with a masculine system in a state of health”.⁶⁴² Carmilla’s attractiveness is bound up with her langour and the exquisite feminine illness it connotes. And the possibility of this langour being infectious is the basis for reciprocal feminine erotic attraction in this text. Laura describes Carmilla’s embraces becoming “foolish”, i.e. over-intimate, and wishes to extricate herself from them. But her energies seem “to fail” her and she describes Carmilla’s murmured words sounding “like a lullaby in my ear ... sooth[ing] my resistance into a trance”.⁶⁴³ The dangerousness of this seductive langour is made manifest as young girls in the surrounding area begin to die. Young women

⁶³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.101.

⁶³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.123.

⁶⁴⁰ Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor and Aids and its Metaphors* (London: Penguin Books, [1979] 2002), p.30.

⁶⁴¹ Ann Radcliffe’s work probably contains the most notable examples of a feminine excess of sensibility carrying over into gothic morbidity: in her first novel, *The Castles of Athlin and Dunbayne* (Gloucestershire, Alan Sutton Publishing Ltd, [1789] 1994), the queen and princess figures are almost permanently “overcome” with dreadful sensations, and are frequently to be found succumbing to the sensitivities of their minds, “lifeless”, “insensible”, “senseless”, “languorous”. Unconsciousness places the young princess several times into the hands of marauders who kidnap her and threaten her virtue. All of this is countered by the “nerves of resistance” and “firmness” of the young prince.

⁶⁴² Le Fanu, *op cit.*, p.105.

⁶⁴³ *Ibid.*, p.104.

report seeing a ghost, or a figure that seizes them by the throat, and the process of their decline is described as “sinking”: “She sank afterwards, and died before a week”⁶⁴⁴; she was “slowly but steadily sinking”.⁶⁴⁵ Laura’s father thinks they are in the midst of an epidemic fever, and both girls wear charms as an “antidote against the malaria”.⁶⁴⁶ However, it becomes clear that Laura is suffering from the illness. Every morning she feels an increased “lassitude and langour”, and believes that she is darkly transforming: “I feel myself a changed girl”. Her apprehension of this sickness arrives as an apprehension of the swoon-state, like the later descriptions in *Dracula* of Mina yielding to the vampire’s kiss:

[A]n idea that I was *slowly sinking* took gentle, and, somehow, not unwelcome possession of me. ... Without knowing it, I was now in a pretty advanced state of the strangest illness under which mortal ever suffered. There was an unaccountable fascination in its earlier symptoms that more than reconciled me to the incapacitating effect of that stage of the malady.⁶⁴⁷

The erotic immobility of the vampire/contagion victim is attested to in Laura’s nightly dreams, where strange sensations visit her, in particular the “peculiar cold thrill which we feel in bathing, when we move against the current of a river”⁶⁴⁸ succeeded by the feeling that “warm lips kissed me, and longer and more lovingly as they reached my neck and throat ... My heart beat faster, my breathing rose and fell rapidly and full drawn; a sobbing, that rose into a sense of strangulation, supervened, and turned into a dreadful convulsion, in which my sense left me, and I became unconscious.”⁶⁴⁹ Sexual ecstasy and horror in the midst of disease/predation climax here into a swoon. And Laura refuses medical help for her dreadful/ecstatic complaint, she tells us, because of the “narcotic”⁶⁵⁰ influence that is acting upon her.

Carmilla is the contagion. She admits that she has herself “suffered from this very illness”.⁶⁵¹ Discussing the spread of the fever with Laura’s father she tells him that the “disease that invades the country is *natural*. *Nature*. All things spring from Nature—don’t they? All things in the heaven, in the earth, and under the earth, act and

⁶⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.106.

⁶⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.109.

⁶⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.118.

⁶⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.119.

⁶⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.109.

live as Nature ordains? I think so.”⁶⁵² Vampirism, contagion, *is* nature in Carmilla’s account of it. And Carmilla’s philosophy of the natural involves a version of the erotic that is at once a disintegrative and deadly fusion of the lovers *and* their transformation into other organic forms: “[Y]ou shall die,” she murmurs to Laura, who is immobilised in her embrace, “die, sweetly die—into [my life]. I cannot help it; as I draw near you, you, in your turn, will draw near to others, and learn the rapture of that cruelty, which yet is love.” And she kisses her. This description might recall us to Jones’ reading of vampirism as the continued relation between the living and the dead, a re-union which might transform individuals into conjoined organisms (and the same desire might be heard to echo in a slightly different voice in the fantasy of swooning telepathy in *Dracula*). For Jones, vampiric conjoining corresponds with the desire of lovers to die together, as commonly expressed in great art, and specifically in Wagner’s *Liebtestod in Tristan and Isolde*: “our being we might blend/ in love without an end”.⁶⁵³ Le Fanu’s description might also put in mind of the many other ways in which blood is imagined to bind individuals into strange new amalgams: the childhood rituals of cutting fingers and rubbing blood on blood, to produce playground “blood brothers”; or the old folk-magic belief that secreting menstrual blood in a man’s food would bind the beloved to the bleeding woman forever⁶⁵⁴; or the continuing belief in menstrual synchronicity.⁶⁵⁵

Later, Carmilla extols to Laura the virtues of the opportunity “to die as lovers may—to die together, so that they may live together. Girls are caterpillars while they live in the world, to be finally butterflies when the summer comes; but in the meantime there are grubs and larva, don’t you see—each with their peculiar propensities, necessities and structure”.⁶⁵⁶ This vision of the erotic as the propensity towards merger and metamorphosis is followed by a striking description of the vampire as an

⁶⁵² *Ibid.*

⁶⁵³ Jones, *op cit.*, p.405.

⁶⁵⁴ See, for just one cultural incarnation of this superstition, the stories quoted by Elon A. Kulii in “Root Doctors and Psychics in the Region” in Linda Dégh (ed.), *Indiana Folklore: A Reader* (Indiana University Press, 1980); Kulii recounts the Hoodoo belief that menstrual blood when mixed with a man’s food will cause a him to fall madly in love, and provides juicy stories of women being discovered soaking steaks in their own blood.

⁶⁵⁵ For a review of recent research on this phenomenon see Anna Gosline, “Do Women Who Live Together Menstruate Together?” *Scientific American* (7 December 2007), available online at <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=do-women-who-live-together-menstruate-together> [Accessed 12 June 2013]; the review suggests that this phenomenon is an enduring myth rather than a scientifically verifiable phenomenon, which begs Rousseau’s question: “why [should menstrual synchronicity] have become such an important article of popular belief in the first place”?

⁶⁵⁶ Le Fanu, *op cit.*, p.110.

“amphibious existence”.⁶⁵⁷ The vampire is both at once: it is symbiotically doubled rather than single; it is an ever-changing “existence” rather than a solitary life form. In Le Fanu’s imagining of the vampire as amphibian, as the contagious metamorphosis that *is* nature, we can discern the beginnings of a dark understanding that has been more recently expounded by the critic Timothy Morton as “dark ecology”. In *Ecology Without Nature*, Morton calls for a re-estimation of “nature”, demonstrating that “the term collapses into impermanence and history—two ways of saying the same thing. Life-forms are constantly coming and going, mutating and becoming extinct”.⁶⁵⁸ “Nature” as a static, independent entity, as the “force of law, a norm against which deviation is measured”,⁶⁵⁹ deconstructs under the pressure of its own deviating impermanence. Those “unnatural” terms against which it might seem to stand, for instance “disease”,⁶⁶⁰ might instead be drawn into its purview: “disease ... is *natural*. *Nature*. All things spring from Nature—don’t they?”⁶⁶¹; we might hear the vampire Carmilla’s plaintive question echo through Morton’s work. Rather than venerating nature as a single, identifiable “sadistic fetish object”, then, Morton encourages us to see the world as ecology in motion; as a multiplying series of violent interconnections, which would involve humans in fractal symbiotic series. The Latin “ambo”, “in both sides”, infuses Morton’s account of how aesthetics might be rethought along these ecological lines, in particular through the ideas of ambiguity and ambience: “Ecological writing shuffles subject and object back and forth so that we may think they have dissolved into each other, though what we normally end up with is a blur this book calls ambience”.⁶⁶² This “rethinking” of aesthetics is bound up for Morton with an ethical imperative to value and protect the marginal, the ambivalent, and in particular the *amphibious*:

Margin (French *marge*) denotes a border or an edge, hence “seashore.” Indeed, if current industrial policies remain unchecked, these very spaces, such as coral reefs, and liminal spaces (Latin, *limen*, boundary) such as *amphibians*, will be

⁶⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.147.

⁶⁵⁸ Morton, *Ecology Without Nature*, p.21.

⁶⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p.14.

⁶⁶⁰ The “nature” writer Kathleen Jamie has recently questioned these distinctions too, describing her visit to the pathology department of a hospital in order to challenge what she calls “foreshortened” definitions of nature, which institute “otters and primroses” over “our own intimate, inner natural world, the body’s weird shapes and forms [which] sometimes go awry ... the bacteria that can pull the rug from under us”, the “rubbery brownish-pink” of a segment of colon and the “hard whitish deposit” of a tumor (“Pathologies” in *Sightlines* (London: Sort Of Books, 2012), pp.24, 26–27).

⁶⁶¹ Le Fanu, *op cit.*, p.109.

⁶⁶² Morton, *Ecology Without Nature*, p.15.

increasingly at risk of being wiped out ... I mean here to support these margins. As a matter of urgency, we just cannot go on thinking of them as in “between”. We must choose to include them on this side of human social practices, to factor them into our political and ethical decisions. As Bruno Latour states, “Political philosophy ... finds itself confronted with the obligation to internalise the environment that it had viewed up to now as another world.”⁶⁶³

The amphibian must, for Morton, be brought into our view of what it means to be human, just as in *Carmilla* the amphibious vampire is the spread of disease; which is nature; which is metamorphosis; which is us and all other existences. To see this, to undo the habitual conceptual distinction between nature and ourselves, is, for Morton, to provide a working model for dissolving the difference between subject and object, the dualism which he posits as the “fundamental philosophical reason for human beings’ destruction of the environment”.⁶⁶⁴

The concepts of “hosting” and “hospitality” might be helpful here as ways to further explore the notion of vampiric/ecological/deconstructive symbiosis. The risk of contagion in *Carmilla* can be seen to simultaneously operate through the idea of the body as the host of disease (of fever, of “malaria”, of “the strangest illness”); and of the home as hosting the self-replicating vampire. Hosting and hospitality have long played an important part in vampire mythology,⁶⁶⁵ with vampires often needing to be *invited* across the threshold into a victim’s home, a symbolic invitation to infection. In the case of *Carmilla*, the vampire is handed over into the care of various aristocratic homes and thanks each host heartily for their “hospitality”,⁶⁶⁶ later being described as a “perfidious and beautiful guest”.⁶⁶⁷ This might put us in mind of J. Hillis Miller’s incendiary deconstruction of the terms “parasite” and “host”. “Parasite” originally had a positive meaning, Hillis Miller tells us, referring to “a fellow guest, someone sharing the food with you, there with you beside [para] the grain.”⁶⁶⁸ As the meaning of the term “parasite” modulates towards predation, “The host and the somewhat sinister or subversive parasite are fellow guests beside the food, sharing it. On the other hand, the

⁶⁶³ *Ibid.*, p.51.

⁶⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶⁵ Frayling notes that one of the earliest vampire accounts, contained in the Istrian *Ehre des Herzogtum Krains* of 1672, describes a male vampire who likes to be invited across the threshold, after knocking; this is repeated in many later accounts, where the vampire must be invited into a victim’s house (Frayling, *op cit.*, p.42).

⁶⁶⁶ Le Fanu, *op cit.*, p.114.

⁶⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p.145.

⁶⁶⁸ J. Hillis Miller, “The Limits of Pluralism III: The Critic as Host” *Critical Inquiry* 3(3) (Spring, 1977), 439–447 at 442.

host is himself the food, his substance consumed without recompense, as when one says, ‘He is eating me out of house and home.’”⁶⁶⁹ This sense also echoes through the use of “host” to refer to the Eucharist bread: the host as sacrifice, or symbolic victim. But if the host is both the eater and the eaten, he also contains in himself “the double antithetical relation of host and guest, guest in the bifold sense of friendly presence and alien invader”, because host and ghost share the same etymological root:

ghos-ti, stranger, guest, host, properly; someone with whom one has reciprocal duties of hospitality... A host is a guest, and a guest is a host. A host is a host. The relation of ... host and parasite in the original sense of ‘fellow guest,’ is inclosed within the word ‘host’ itself. A host in the sense of a guest, moreover, is both a friendly visitor in the house and at the same time an alien presence.⁶⁷⁰

Working through these terms as an example of deconstruction, Hillis Miller suggests that there is always already an alien guest in the home of the *text*; each reading of a poem contains “its enemy within itself, is itself both host and parasite”.⁶⁷¹ Deconstruction is, then, itself bound up with the strange logic of the welcomed parasite; “deconstruction,” Derrida famously remarked, “is just visiting”.⁶⁷² The idea of deconstruction as the welcome alien is perhaps even more pronounced in Derrida’s concept of “autoimmunity”.⁶⁷³ The term “autoimmunity” is best known to us through autoimmune diseases such as Multiple Sclerosis and AIDS, wherein the body treats its own material as alien, producing an immune response against its own cells and tissues. In Derrida’s thinking, Michael Naas explains, the autoimmune “entails an attack not simply on the self through some kind of self-destructive behaviour, but an attack on those things that protect and defend the self, leaving it open, vulnerable, hospitable to outside forces”.⁶⁷⁴ This is at once “a threat and an opportunity”:

The threat or danger is that in compromising the self ... [it] may allow within it something that will eventually destroy it, a virus, a would-be assassin, a terrorist cell. But the opportunity consists in the fact that by compromising the *autos* in this way, by opening the self to what is other than and outside it, beyond its

⁶⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷⁰ *Ibid.* at 442–3.

⁶⁷¹ *Ibid.* at 447.

⁶⁷² Jacques Derrida, “The Time is Out of Joint” in Anselm Haverkamp (ed.), *Deconstruction is/in America: A New Sense of the Political* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1995), p.29.

⁶⁷³ See, inter alia, Jacques Derrida, *Rogues: Two Essays on Reason* (trans. Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas) (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2005), p.45.

⁶⁷⁴ Michael Naas, *Derrida From Now On* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p.162.

borders, it has the chance of welcoming something that may help it go beyond itself.⁶⁷⁵

The questioning of the integrity of the self that is inherent in the concept of autoimmunity therefore leads Naas to think of deconstruction “*as* autoimmunity”.⁶⁷⁶

Derrida’s concept of autoimmunity might then be the continuation of Hillis Miller’s earlier account of deconstruction and the welcome parasite. Hillis Miller describes deconstruction as an investigation of the *inherence* of “figure, narrative and concept *in one another*”⁶⁷⁷; and from this we get a sense of the way in which deconstruction might be a discipline of ecological symbiosis, a study of interrelations and symbiotic interdependences, and a critique of the coherence of individual selves. This is also suggested by Morton, who argues that life forms cannot be said to differ in a “rigorous” way from texts: both exist as series of non-unitary *interrelations*, as ecology and deconstruction might simultaneously demonstrate to us. To develop an ecological culture, Morton suggests, we would benefit from “concepts that ruthlessly denature and de-essentialise: they are called deconstruction”.⁶⁷⁸

Deconstructing the notion of “nature” out of its “naturalness”, Morton’s “dark ecology” performs the same kind of “queer” and “contingent”⁶⁷⁹ reimagining of nature-as-ecology that is exemplified in Carmilla’s notion of the “natural” vampire. And dying is imaginatively posited as the high-point of collapse and interconnection in both of these ecological accounts: for Morton, “dying is becoming the environment”⁶⁸⁰; for Carmilla, dying is entering into new vampiric life, the girlish larvae metamorphosed into the undead butterfly. Vampire accounts have long made dying mesmerisingly beautiful. Dracula’s first victim, Lucy Westenra, “is a very beautiful corpse ... All [her] loveliness had come back to her in death ... God! How beautiful she was.”⁶⁸¹ “Lingering” with death as a beautiful possibility is at the heart of dark ecology; and, similarly, tarrying with death might be thought to be dramatised in the languorous vampiric swoon. The ecological thought, Morton tells us, as “the thinking of interconnectedness”, has a lingering darkness which has nothing to do with “a hippy aesthetic of life over death, or

⁶⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p.165.

⁶⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p.166

⁶⁷⁷ Miller, *op cit.* at 443.

⁶⁷⁸ Morton, “Ecology as Text, Text as Ecology” *Oxford Literary Review* 32.1 (2010), 1–17 at 1.

⁶⁷⁹ Morton, *Ecology Without Nature*, p.143.

⁶⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p.71.

⁶⁸¹ Stoker, *op cit.*, pp.174, 180.

a sadistic-sentimental Bambification of sentient beings”; it has more in common with the “goth assertion of the contingent and necessarily queer idea that we want to *stay* in a dying world: dark ecology”.⁶⁸² Thinking about the swoon might also, then, be thinking about *staying with* the process of dying, in life. “Lingering” with death, with something “painful, disgusting, grief-striking” is, Morton argues, “exactly what we need right now, ecologically speaking”⁶⁸³, given that the looming ecological catastrophe has in some sense already happened: we have already entered the sixth mass extinction event, Morton argues, and must imaginatively accept, whilst staying in the world, that we are already dead.⁶⁸⁴ We should, then “be finding ways to stick around with the sticky mess that we’re in and that we are, making thinking dirtier, identifying with ugliness, practicing ‘hauntology’ (Derrida’s phrase)”.⁶⁸⁵ Dark ecology in this sense has more in “common with the undead than with life”.⁶⁸⁶ In his most explicitly vampiric formulation Morton tells us that: “The task is not to bury the dead but to join them, to be bitten by the undead and become them”.⁶⁸⁷ *We are already* the amphibious undead stalking the diluvian world, and vampire literature might show us this strangeness in its lingering, languorous ecology of swoons.⁶⁸⁸

⁶⁸² Morton, *op cit.*, p.185.

⁶⁸³ *Ibid.*, p.197.

⁶⁸⁴ Morton, “The Only Emergency is the Lack of Emergency”; see also *Hyperobjects*, p.7.

⁶⁸⁵ Morton, *Ecology Without Nature*, p.188.

⁶⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p.201.

⁶⁸⁷ *Ibid.*

⁶⁸⁸ Morton expresses the power of literature as vampiric contagion in his suggestion that the gothic tackiness of Coleridge’s *Ancient Mariner* is aesthetics as ecology in the sense that its point is to “infect others”, rather than providing a “moral” (“don’t shoot albatrosses!”); it perpetuates violent interrelation through *literature* as contagion (*ibid.*, p.159).

Chapter Five

Bathetic Masochism: *Fifty Shades of Grey* and the Feminine Art of Sinking

“If he wasn’t clutching me so tightly, I’m sure I would swoon at his feet.”

EL James, *Fifty Shades of Grey* (2012)

“Many there are that can fall, but few can arrive at the felicity of falling gracefully.”

Alexander Pope, *Peri Bathous, or the Art of Sinking in Poetry* (1728)

Vampire fiction refuses to die. In the twenty-first century, alongside various highly successful cultural franchises, vampire fiction has produced a new publishing phenomenon: EL James’ *Fifty Shades of Grey* trilogy (2012) began life as *Twilight* (2004) fan fiction.⁶⁸⁹ Stephanie Meyer’s popular vampire romance series therefore provides the generic basis for the *Fifty Shades* novels, and this borrowed context highlights the vampiric process of recirculation that is at the heart of contemporary fan-fiction culture.⁶⁹⁰ The published version of *Fifty Shades* redacts the overtly vampiric elements incorporated from Meyer’s novels; but several tell-tale signs of the vampire narrative survive, including the heroine’s propensity to swoon in front of a powerful, pseudo-telepathic character. In the previous chapter, I described the power of the vampiric swoon in Victorian literature to affect both men *and* women; to erotically engage both sexes in feminised states; to challenge the distinctions between differently gendered behaviours and even between different life forms. In the contemporary *Fifty Shades* novels, however, the suggestive power of the vampiric swoon is severely

⁶⁸⁹ Stephanie Meyer’s *Twilight* series consists of four bestselling YA “vampire romance” novels, first published by Little, Brown and Co in 2004.

⁶⁹⁰ Increasing attention is being paid to the phenomenon of fan fiction (fictional extrapolations from published/broadcast work, produced by fans and mostly posted online) in cultural and literary studies; see, for example, Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse (eds), *New Essays: Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet* (North Carolina: McFarland, 2006).

curtailed. EL James trammels the swoon's potential power into the conventions of romance fiction, producing swooning as a specifically feminine habit. In these novels, the girls-only swoon has made a spectacular come-back: swooning is the feminine art of sinking in front of a rich and powerful man.

In this chapter, I will discuss EL James' depictions of feminine sinking in relation to certain claims made in terms of female liberation, suggesting that such sinking might be understood as a form of bathos, or disappointed hope. "Romantic, *liberating* and totally addictive,"⁶⁹¹ is how the large-type blurb of the *Fifty Shades of Grey* novels promotes the trilogy. The contradictory coincidence of "liberation" and "addiction", the chiasmatic convergence of freedom and compulsion in this seemingly banal bit of cover copy, intimates some of the problems of the branding of female "emancipation" in these novels. The improbably virginal 21-year-old literature student Anastasia Steele, meets the "hot, sexy billionaire"⁶⁹² Christian Grey, a sexual "Dominant" in need of a submissive, and discovers sexual pleasure through her orgasmic experiences in his "Red Room of Pain". This pleasure, we are encouraged to infer, is the source of her (and the reader's vicarious) "liberation". "Free your mind",⁶⁹³ Grey instructs Ana; and presumably the rest will follow. Given the novel's prominent invocation of liberation, I will read *Fifty Shades* in the context of recent theorisations of masochism that give serious consideration to its radical, progressive and emancipatory potential. I will concentrate on the work of Leo Bersani, already briefly visited in Chapter One, as the most aspirational proponent of masochism in this respect, exploring his suggestion that masochistic self-shattering might produce a revolutionary transformation of our relational modes and create the opportunity for new communal possibilities.

Masochism becomes the bathos of liberation, I will argue, when it functions as an eroticised submission to commodity capitalism. I use the term bathos to highlight certain effects that James' text shares with the kinds of "low" writing lampooned in Alexander Pope's famous satirical treatise, *Peri Bathous, or the Art of Sinking in Poetry* (1728).⁶⁹⁴ A number of Pope's descriptions of the ways in which bathos operates will be particularly relevant here: firstly, the mock-treatise tells us, bathos, like the Greek

⁶⁹¹ EL James, *Fifty Shades of Grey* (London: Arrow Books, 2012) ("FS") [my italics].

⁶⁹² *Ibid.*, p.85.

⁶⁹³ *Ibid.*, p.294.

⁶⁹⁴ Alexander Pope, *Peri Bathous, or the Art of Sinking in Poetry* in *The Major Works* (ed. Pat Rogers) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp.195–239.

Altitudo, “implies equally *height* and *depth*”.⁶⁹⁵ Pope uses this altitudinous ambivalence to demonstrate that bathos consists of a contrast between the high and the low, from whence we get the still-current definition of bathos as the “ludicrous descent from the elevated to the commonplace in writing or speech; anticlimax”.⁶⁹⁶ Keston Sutherland has recently emphasized the destitution that is the lowest point in this formulation of the “downhill way to the *Bathos*; the bottom, the end”⁶⁹⁷: bathos is, Sutherland argues, the evacuation of the high ideals of “truth or beauty” from poetry.⁶⁹⁸ To render this effect as merely “anti-climactic” is itself anti-climactic in Sutherland’s account: in Pope’s hands, he argues, bathos represents a brutal destitution of poetry’s promise to deliver truth. This sense of bathos as total disappointment will be explored in relation to *Fifty Shades*’ promise of “liberation”.

The second feature of Pope’s bathos of particular interest here is the confusion of relative size which he describes as endemic to the effect. Pope lists, amongst other characteristics of bathos, “Magnifying and Diminishing Figures”.⁶⁹⁹ These rhetorical figures include “amplification”, which is described as the “spinning wheel of the *Bathos* ... There are amplifiers who can extend half a dozen thin thoughts over a whole folio; but for which, the tale of many a vast romance, and the substance of many a fair volume might be reduced to the size of a primer”.⁷⁰⁰ Elsewhere Pope describes the bathetic combination of the “the superfluity of words and vacuity of sense”.⁷⁰¹ What seems to be at stake here is the question of proportion and the bathetic ways in which literature might exaggerate or diminish its subjects. Certainly, one might make the argument that, at three volumes, the *Fifty Shades* novels cynically and bathetically “spin out” a vacuous romance plot. But I seek in this chapter to extend our thinking of bathos as an effect of disproportion: I will explore the ways in which the romance heroine might be “shrunk” or “diminished” in these novels, comparing this to other, purportedly radical explorations of the size of the masochistic subject.

⁶⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.196.

⁶⁹⁶ *OED*, sense 2.

⁶⁹⁷ Pope, *op cit.*, p.196.

⁶⁹⁸ Keston Sutherland, “What is called ‘Bathos?’” in *Stupefaction: A Radical Anatomy of Phantoms* (London, New York, Calcutta: Seagull Press, 2011). Here Sutherland suggests that the well-known *OED* definition of bathos as “ludicrous descent from the elevated to the commonplace in writing or speech; anticlimax”, fails to capture the concept’s complexity, and is a misreading of Pope’s deployment of the term. For Sutherland, both Pope and Marx deploy bathos as an instrument of public attack, to lambast work which has the absolute value nil: bathos is “put into words by the satirist who attackingly discovers to public view the absolute destitution of truth or beauty” (p.208).

⁶⁹⁹ Pope, *op cit.*, p.218.

⁷⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p.211.

⁷⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p.231.

Finally, this chapter will explore the bathetic relationship of *Fifty Shades* to certain literary works that it cites and draws upon. Alongside their vampire precedents, the *Fifty Shades* novels make frequent allusions to other literary works, in particular Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, and I will argue that *Fifty Shades* exhibits a bathetic tendency towards travesty. Pope describes the manner in which "*alamode*" work, which seeks "profit or gain ... by administering pleasure to the reader",⁷⁰² frequently discards the "rules of the ancients" while also having a magpie eye for the reuse of material. Bathetic literary borrowing distorts and travesties its materials: the "Parrots" of the literary world, for instance, "repeat another's words in such a hoarse, odd voice, that makes them seem their own",⁷⁰³ while the ironic figure of the "true genius ... when he finds anything lofty or shining in [previous work], will have the skill to bring it down, take off the gloss, or quite discharge the colour, by some ingenious circumstance, or periphrase, some addition."⁷⁰⁴ Bathetic writing, then, evacuates past literary moments of their character, or "colour". And this evacuation is achieved by the bathetic work's insistent sense of its temporal superiority, by a privileging of "*alamode*" pleasures over the specificities of the past. In the final part of this chapter, I will argue that *Fifty Shades* produces a travesty of past literary moments in the production of a bathetic contemporary.

The different bathetic effects of James' writing are complemented by a preoccupation in the novels with the art of a specifically feminine sinking: the novels repeatedly figure the fainting female form, literalising the "felicity of falling gracefully" that Pope satirises. The swoons and faints in James' work metonymically figure a journey to the nadir that is bathos, and give this bathos a symbolic gender.⁷⁰⁵ To "fall" in love in these novels is an admission of female physical insufficiency in the face of masculine financial protection and power, a process of feminine disequilibrium that is rebalanced in romance clichés in thrall to the erectness of capital. To fall in love in EL James' world is to faint into the bathetic void of the promise of liberation.

⁷⁰² *Ibid.*, p.198.

⁷⁰³ *Ibid.*, p.206.

⁷⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p.212.

⁷⁰⁵ In fact Pope's work seems to gender a certain type of bathos as an effect produced by pandering to the degraded taste of female readers: he describes the "principal branch of the *Alamode*" as "the Prurient, a style greatly advanced and honoured of late by the practice of persons of the first quality, and by the encouragement of the ladies not unsuccessfully introduced into the drawing-room" (*ibid.*, p.228). Pope's designation here smacks of the kind of misogyny that infuses denigrations of the sentimental; in

The felicity of falling

When Anastasia Steele first meets the billionaire CEO Christian Grey, she falls head over heels: tripping at the threshold she finds herself, “on [her] hands and knees in the doorway to Mr Grey’s office”.⁷⁰⁶ It is this prone introduction that leads Grey to pursue Ana as a candidate for the role of submissive, and it is her physical fall that begins the domino-clatter of her “falling” for Grey. This is the first of an array of somatic demonstrations that Ana’s control of her body is now ceded to Grey. She admits frequent paralysis in his presence, or in the presence of demonstrations of his wealth, and her first few meetings with him are characterised by repeated expressions of her errant physical reactions to him: she blushes and flushes, she shivers, she quivers, her heart rate accelerates, she flutteringly blinks, her “eyelids matching [her] heart rate”,⁷⁰⁷ her legs turn to “Jell-O”.⁷⁰⁸ “Desperately I scrabble around for my equilibrium,” she tells us; but she is rendered profoundly incapable of physically composing herself. And the most extreme example of this disequilibrium is her liability to lose physical balance, and then consciousness. Her very first experience of desire is articulated in the context of a physical fall: “It all happens so fast—one minute I’m falling, the next I’m in his arms and he’s holding me tightly against his chest... And for the first time in twenty-one years, I want to be kissed.”⁷⁰⁹ Grey does not kiss her at this point, and Ana experiences extreme humiliation as a result. She goes to a nightclub with friends and gets drunk to the point of extreme physical disarray. Grey arrives (like the millionaire vigilante Batman, apparently able to track her down whenever and wherever she might be in distress) and she vomits spectacularly in front of him. Her humiliation and abjection in the face of the loss of physical control are now revealed as crucial factors in her experience of their courtship: she describes herself as “swamped with shame, disgusted with myself ... this is so, so many shades darker [than him not kissing her] in terms of humiliation”.⁷¹⁰ And this humiliation is the beginning of sexual pleasure for Ana: “I feel weak, still drunk, embarrassed, exhausted, mortified, and, on some strange level, absolutely off-the-charts thrilled ... somewhere deep, deep down my muscles

literalising gender-specific sinking, EL James perpetuates this tendentious association of female taste with bathos.

⁷⁰⁶ *FS*, p.7.

⁷⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p.8.

⁷⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p.27.

⁷⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p.48.

⁷¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.60.

clench deliciously”.⁷¹¹ Her physical mortification continues and she begins, “to feel faint. He notices my dizziness and grabs me before I fall and hoists me into his arms, holding me close to his chest like a child ... if he wasn’t clutching me so tightly, I’m sure I would swoon at his feet”.⁷¹² As soon as he lets go of her, Ana swoons: “My head begins to swim, oh no ... and I can feel the floor coming up to meet my face ... I pass out in Christian Grey’s arms.”⁷¹³

When Ana’s relationship to Grey becomes sexual, she describes her newly-discovered orgasmic potential in terms of a climax of this initiatory disequilibrium, where falling in love becomes falling apart. As Grey pins her down, pulling her hair and violently kissing her, he puts all her senses into “disarray”⁷¹⁴; when she first comes, she “fall(s) apart in his hands, [her] body convulsing and shattering into a thousand pieces”⁷¹⁵; she “splinter(s) into a million pieces underneath him”⁷¹⁶; she is “coming apart at the seams”.⁷¹⁷ Her orgasms are repeatedly described as the experience of shattering and disintegration, terms that recall Leo Bersani’s descriptions of sexuality as constitutionally masochistic.

Might we, then, read Ana’s masochistic pleasure in the potentially liberating and radical terms suggested by Bersani? As discussed earlier, Bersani rereads Freud’s key texts on the development of infantile sexuality to suggest that sexuality is the byproduct of experiences when they reach a certain level of *intensity*. This intensity, Bersani tells us, is experienced as a shattering for the infant, and any intensity will be experienced as a sexual pleasure when it is strong enough to shatter a certain stability or equilibrium of the self. Sexuality might, therefore, “be thought of as a tautology for masochism”.⁷¹⁸ And if sexuality is “constituted as a kind of psychic shattering, as a threat to the stability and integrity of the self”,⁷¹⁹ Bersani argues, then: “sexuality would be that which is intolerable to the structured self”.⁷²⁰ We are “‘shattered’ into an ego-shattering sexuality”⁷²¹ that is a kind of disintegration of the self rather than its triumph.⁷²² For

⁷¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.62.

⁷¹² *Ibid.*, pp.61, 63.

⁷¹³ *Ibid.*, p.64.

⁷¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.80.

⁷¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.116.

⁷¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.118.

⁷¹⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷¹⁸ Leo Bersani, *The Freudian Body: Psychoanalysis and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), pp.38–39.

⁷¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.60.

⁷²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.38.

⁷²¹ Bersani, describing in Laplanchean terms his work in the *Freudian Body* in “Sociality and Sexuality” in *Is the Rectum a Grave?*, pp.102–119, at p.108.

Bersani, this shattering of the self, through sex as “self-abolition”, opens the way for radical new modes of selfhood and society. In his recent work, *Intimacies*, co-written with Adam Phillips, Bersani proposes new modes of relatedness, connecting the thought of Freud and Foucault to arrive at the moral imperative for the shattered self as the gateway to new communal possibilities:

[N]o recognizably political solution [and here the problem to be solved is that of the sexualised aggression that Bersani sees as leading to all kinds of contemporary violence, from serial killing to genocide, government-sponsored mass murder, and the imperialist war in Iraq] can be durable without something approaching a mutation in our most intimate relational system. Foucault’s call for ‘new relational modes’ struck some of his readers as politically evasive; it seems to me, on the contrary, that his summoning us to rethink relationality is at once an instance of political realism and a moral imperative.⁷²³

Bersani’s hope is for the redevelopment of our forms of intimacy towards a “universal relatedness”⁷²⁴ of “unlimited intimacy” which would register a profound shift away “from our heterosexual culture’s reserving of the highest relational value for the couple to a communal mode of personal intimacy”.⁷²⁵

Bersani’s fullest imagining of how this transformation might work is provided in his concept of impersonal narcissism. Tracing an impersonal psychic dimension through the work of Freud, Lacan and Plato, Bersani suggests that we might achieve a “reciprocal self-recognition” with other forms of being, through which

the very opposition between sameness and difference becomes irrelevant as a structuring category of being. ... If we were able to relate to others according to this model of impersonal narcissism, what is different about others (their psychological individuality) could be thought of as merely the envelope of the more profound (if less fully realized or completed) part of themselves which is our sameness.⁷²⁶

⁷²² “The self which the sexual shatters provides the basis in which sexuality is associated with power. It is possible to think of the sexual as, precisely, moving between a hyperbolic sense of self and a loss of all consciousness of the self. But sex as self-hyperbole is, perhaps, a repression of sex as self-abolition. It inaccurately replicates self-shattering as psychic tumescence.” (Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?” in *Is the Rectum a Grave?*, pp.3–30, at p.25.)

⁷²³ Leo Bersani and Adam Phillips, *Intimacies* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2010), pp.76–77.

⁷²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.38.

⁷²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.42.

⁷²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.85–86.

Impersonal narcissism, in privileging impersonal sameness, might do away with the anecdotal violence of personal history, and instead establish a radically transformed relational field:

The relationality I have just sketched could amount to a revolutionary reversal of the relational mode dominant in our culture, one that nourishes the powers of evil that govern us and with which, as long as we remain in this relational field, we are all complicit.⁷²⁷

Masochism, as an “ego-divesting ascesis”, is an essential structural precursor to the idea of impersonal narcissism and its radical implications for the relational (and therefore political) field in Bersani’s thinking. As Phillips advises us: “we need to look at Bersani’s abiding preoccupation with the self-shattering ego. It is through the self-shattering of the ego—and of this being, in a sense, the desire of the ego—that ‘impersonal narcissism’ begins to make its own unsensible sense.”⁷²⁸

Might we, then, see Ana’s introduction to masochism in *Fifty Shades* as an initiation into the radical possibility for transformation that Bersani tracks through the self-shattering ego? The source of Ana’s “delicious” pleasure could certainly be seen to reside in the *intensity* of her experience of Grey, and the intensity of her somatic reactions to him: blushing, vomiting, swooning and ecstatic shattering. And perhaps these descriptions of sexual shattering, or *ébranlement*, are the reason these books seem to have reverberated so spectacularly with female readers. There have been claims made that the novels are indeed progressive and potentially transformatory: alongside the blurb’s promise of “liberation”, the writer Caitlin Moran has suggested that the opening-up of the realm of pornography to the female writer and reader is progressive in a feminist sense: it doesn’t have to be “the *Finnegans Wake* of female pornography” to make it a good thing for women individually and politically, she argues.⁷²⁹

However, I will argue that a detailed reading of the *Fifty Shades* novels highlights the bathetic failure of a radical or liberatory charge to self-shattering in the *female* subject, when an imputed propensity to shatter becomes the pretext for the patriarchal status quo to *protect* (control) women and their bodies. And it is here, I think, that it becomes necessary to inflect Bersani’s claims for the radical potential of

⁷²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.87.

⁷²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.92.

⁷²⁹ Caitlin Moran, “Caitlin Moran talks to Sarah Crompton” (Hay Festival: June 3, 2012).

“self-abolition” with a bathetic counter-history of the exploitation of woman’s imputed “masochism” and lack of self-possession.⁷³⁰ One is reminded in this context of Hélène Cixous’ warning: “One can, of course, as History has always done, exploit feminine reception through alienation. A woman, by her opening up, is open to being ‘possessed’, which is to say, dispossessed of herself.”⁷³¹ The kind of radical potential that Bersani glimpses in the “self-abolition” of the masochistic subject, is, I wish to suggest, a potentiality which can also be exploited. In the disintegrative self-abolition that is Ana’s sexual pleasure, there is the risk of a take-over: that following the breaking down of her orgasm, Ana will be reconstituted according to Grey’s specifications. And it is in dramatically demonstrating this risk that her tendency to sink becomes crucial.

The remaking of Miss Anastasia Steele

Ana, and all other women who encounter Grey, are described as being perpetually on the verge of swooning in his “swoon-worthy”⁷³² presence: Ana gets tired of “watching [the women] all swoon”.⁷³³ But when Ana swoons, Grey always *catches* her, rebalancing her according to his equilibrium—just as when she explodes into orgasm, he pieces her back together into an ever more submissive shape. Ana’s pleasure in passing out becomes synonymous with ceding control to Grey: “I think I’m going to faint,” she tells us early in the first novel, as Grey pilots her in a helicopter, “My fate is in his hands.”⁷³⁴ This possible faint foreshadows her ceding her “fate” to him in all directions as the novels progress; falling in love is also, for Ana, falling into Grey’s hands. In the first novel, for example, Ana is described at a transformative point in her life: finishing college, giving up her job, her apartment and her car in an attempt to start

⁷³⁰ Critics such as Paula J. Caplan, for example, have described the way masochism has been tendentiously applied to women as a social and medical term to serve dominant interests: “A misogynist society has created a myriad of situations that make women unhappy. And then that same society uses the myth of women’s masochism to blame the women themselves for their misery.” (*The Myth of Women’s Masochism* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), p.9.) Feminist objections to the tendentious medical application of the term “masochism” to women were made when psychiatrists and psychologists in the United States lobbied against the creation of the diagnostic category “Masochistic Personality Disorder” by the American Psychiatric Association; protestors argued that it would be applied pejoratively, and near-exclusively, to female patients (John Leo, “Behavior: Battling over Masochism” in *Time* (June 21, 2005), available at <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1074806-1,00.html> [Accessed October 17, 2012]).

⁷³¹ Hélène Cixous, “Sorties” in Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987), pp.85–86.

⁷³² EL James, *Fifty Shades Freed* (London: Arrow Books, 2012) (“FSF”), p.160.

⁷³³ EL James, *Fifty Shades Darker* (London: Arrow Books, 2012) (“FSD”), p.347.

⁷³⁴ FS, p.91.

a working life in a new city (Seattle), she nevertheless describes “the biggest change of all” as “Christian Grey”.⁷³⁵ The change Grey initially proposes is a sado-masochistically codified one: that Ana be the submissive to his Dominant, “to willingly surrender yourself to me in all things ... To please me.”⁷³⁶ The first novel revolves around Ana’s misgivings about such an arrangement, specifically focussing on the contract of sexual submission (reproduced in detail). As the trilogy progresses, the couple move towards a married life through which Grey is emotionally “rehabilitated”, dispensing with the need for a sado-masochistic contract, which is symbolically superseded by the marriage contract. The dominant/submissive dichotomy remains the blueprint of their relationship, and Ana has realised that what she most wants is to “please him”: “[Y]es, that’s exactly what I do want to do. I want him to be damned delighted with me. It’s a revelation.”⁷³⁷

The later novels, revealing her series of faints and swoons to have been moments of transformative possibility, chart a sort of neo-Pygmalion remaking of Ana according to Grey’s turbo-capitalist version of female beauty and civility. This begins with a process of initiation into the rituals of the female beauty regimen. Ana’s wealthier and worldlier best friend, Kate, takes her in hand before her first date with Christian:

Under Kate’s tireless and frankly intrusive instruction, my legs and underarms are shaved to perfection, my eyebrows plucked, and I am buffed all over. It has been a most unpleasant experience. But she assures me that this is what all men expect these days.⁷³⁸

It is certainly what the body-fascistic Grey expects, and his submissive contract includes clauses on mandatory exercise (a personal trainer four times a week), clothes (all items to be approved by Grey), and “Personal Hygiene/Beauty” (“The Submissive will keep herself clean and shaved and/or waxed at all times. The Submissive will visit a beauty salon of the Dominant’s choosing ... and undergo whatever treatments the Dominant sees fit”).⁷³⁹ By the end of the novels Ana has capitulated to the punishing regime of “grooming” that she initially felt was “time consuming, humiliating and

⁷³⁵ *Ibid.*, p.302.

⁷³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.100.

⁷³⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.85.

⁷³⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.172–173.

painful”,⁷⁴⁰ and records the results in a way that would make any TV make-over show producer proud:

My body is so different these days. It’s changed subtly since I’ve known him... I’ve become leaner and fitter, and my hair is glossy and well cut. My nails are manicured, my feet pedicured, my eyebrows threaded and beautifully shaped.⁷⁴¹

Grey’s control of Ana’s body is yet more invasively exercised in relation to her fertility. He arranges for a gynaecologist to come to his apartment to administer contraception, and despite her initial grumblings (“It’s my body”), she relents (“Yes, my body is his... he knows it better than I do”),⁷⁴² succumbing to the contraceptive injection. That both Grey and Ana see her body as his property is emphasised and eroticised everywhere in the novels. He repeatedly touches her intimately, mouthing the claim “Mine”, and by the third novel she joyously claims: “You own my body and my soul.”⁷⁴³ “He is master of my universe,” Ana remarks elsewhere, playing on the original title of the online serialisation that preceded the publication of *Fifty Shades*, and on the fantasy of masculine omnipotence it perpetuates.⁷⁴⁴ This omnipotence is primarily exercised through Grey’s power to own everything around him, including Ana. When Grey buys the publishing company that employs Ana, for instance, making him her “boss’s boss’s boss”,⁷⁴⁵ Ana becomes his employee as well as his “asset”. He insists that she change her professional name upon their marriage: “I’m just looking after my assets ... Some of them need rebranding.”⁷⁴⁶

“Magnifying and Diminishing Figures”: The “little woman” and the desire for diminution

How can such extreme commodification and asset-management of the female body seem palatable and even erotically desirable to contemporary female readers? In order for Grey’s possession and control of Ana’s body to seem *necessary* within the world of

⁷⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.85.

⁷⁴¹ *FSF*, p.41.

⁷⁴² *FSD*, p.168.

⁷⁴³ *Ibid.*, p.232.

⁷⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.376. As mentioned earlier, the *Fifty Shades* novels appeared in an earlier serialised version online as *Masters of the Universe*. There are resonances here with the financial power as the delusion of omnipotence as described by Thomas Wolfe in his *Bonfire of the Vanities* (1987), in which a Wall Street financial trader thinks of himself as “Master of the Universe”.

⁷⁴⁵ *FSD*, p.58.

the novels, it is incumbent on the reader to see Ana, as female romantic love object, as perpetually at physical risk. This risk hysterically increases over the course of the novels in order to necessitate Grey's position of control, so that the novels progress as exercises in female jeopardy. At the beginning of the romance, Ana's inability to stay conscious therefore functions as the early sign of a developing symptomatology of female fragility and insufficiency that will narratively necessitate Grey taking control of Ana's body for her *own good*. Grey is there to catch Ana when the ground rushes towards her in her swoons; he is there to repeatedly instruct her, "Breathe, Anastasia," when her body fails, and her "medulla oblongata has neglected to fire any synapses to make [her breathe]".⁷⁴⁷ The novels suggest that our hapless heroine might actually expire without Grey's timely interventions and instructions regarding basic physical processes, like remaining upright and respiring. Perhaps most remarkable in this regard is Grey's constant insistence that Ana eat more. His near-constant exhortations and threats in this regard are so numerous that some commentators have suggested the novel's primary erotic charge for weight-embattled contemporary female readers is the fantasy of a masterful man forcing stacks of pancakes upon a woman.⁷⁴⁸ Even if *Fifty Shades* were primarily a fantasy of calorific orgy, the necessity of male approbation for such eating would be enough to make one sick to one's stomach. But I think the fantasy works in an altogether more anorectic direction. The conversations around food are designed to reveal to us that Ana neglects to eat when she is left to her own devices (at one point she is described as ingesting only coffee and cola for five days, then breaking her fast with "a cup of yoghurt").⁷⁴⁹ What Grey describes in his insistence on Ana's eating is her inability to take care of herself, her propensity to self-derelection, her inherent physical fragility (her "gauntness"⁷⁵⁰) which necessitates him taking control of her body.

The numerous exchanges around Ana's weight also serve to indicate her tendency towards *smallness* in a way that deepens the unsettling, anorectic rendering of

⁷⁴⁶ *FSF*, p.143.

⁷⁴⁷ *FS*, p.68.

⁷⁴⁸ "[W]hat kind of a hussy says openly that she'd like a stack of pancakes and syrup? As if she cared not a fig for social rules of weight and waistline? The unabashed satisfier of calorie cravings: she is today's outlier, outsider and outcast.

If a masterful stranger instructs us to eat pancakes, however, we're not sluts at all. Not our fault! Just following orders! Dear oh dear, *another* big mouthful? Must I really? That, I posit, is the erotic charge of *Fifty Shades Of Grey*." (Victoria Coren, "Finally, I get the sex in Fifty Shades of Grey" *The Observer* (Sunday July 29, 2012).)

⁷⁴⁹ *FSD*, p.7.

⁷⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.12.

female appetite: “I don’t want to think about my weight,” Ana admits at one point, “truth is, I like being this slim.”⁷⁵¹ Ana is presented as absent of desire for either food or sex, unless these desires are instigated by Grey (Ana starves without Grey and is similarly described as inorgasmic before meeting him, never admitting sexual desire unless it is occasioned by him). Ana’s propensity to thinness is therefore part of an elision of any female appetite independent of heteronormative male instruction. And it is also part of a practice of diminution of self which is simultaneously a journey back towards the diminution of childhood: Grey’s admonishments and instructions about eating are noticeably infantilising and Ana’s imputed inability to take care of herself require him to take charge of her eating as the disciplinary father (“So help me God, Anastasia, if you don’t eat, I will take you across my knee”).⁷⁵² Ana regularly describes herself as small and childlike in her interactions with Grey: “I begin to feel faint. He notices my dizziness and grabs me before I fall and hoists me into his arms, holding me close to his chest like a child”⁷⁵³; “He patiently caresses me as if I’m a small child”⁷⁵⁴; “Why does he always make me feel like an errant child?”⁷⁵⁵ And when, for instance, Grey fails to kiss her, she “sinks” to her knees, “wanting to make myself as small as possible. Perhaps this nonsensical pain will be smaller the smaller I am.”⁷⁵⁶

The question of Ana’s complicity in making herself smaller returns us to those questions of a radicalised subjectivity in relation to masochism that so interest Bersani, and to questions of size that have informed other thinkers of the “the radical”. Keston Sutherland has demonstrated how the subject has been “made available as an object for ‘radical thinking’ through either the implicit or the directly presented question of what *size* he is and what *size* his world is”.⁷⁵⁷ Radical thinking is defined by Sutherland through Marx: “To be radical is to grasp things by the root. But for man the root is man himself.”⁷⁵⁸ Such radical thinking, Sutherland tells us, is never a straightforward grasping or estimation of size: it is an act that “at once increases and diminishes its

⁷⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.433.

⁷⁵² *Ibid.*, p.31.

⁷⁵³ *FS*, p.61.

⁷⁵⁴ *FS*, p.330.

⁷⁵⁵ *FSD*, p.13.

⁷⁵⁶ *FS*, p.51.

⁷⁵⁷ Keston Sutherland, “XL Prynne” in S. Ladkin and R. Purves (eds), *Complicities: British Poetry 1945–2007* (Prague: Literaria Pragensia, 2007), p.8 (my italics).

⁷⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p.1.

proper object of enquiry”.⁷⁵⁹ It inevitably involves reversal and transformation of size, both of the object and of the subject:

I am greater by the measure of what I lose. For radical thinking ... man is greater [than in religious thinking] because he is the world; but for the same thinking, the world is smaller because it is man... world and man are the root that must be grasped, greater and smaller at once... I am smaller by the measure of what I gain.⁷⁶⁰

For Bersani, too, size becomes a controversy in radically rethinking the subject. In thinking about what a “radical” self-shattering sexuality might mean he wonders:

Might there be forms of self-divesture not grounded in a teleology (or a theology) of the suppression of the ego and, ultimately, the sacrifice of the self? Perhaps self-divesture itself has to be rethought in terms of a certain form of self-expansiveness, of something like ego-dissemination rather than ego-annihilation.⁷⁶¹

This notion of self-expansion through self-divesture might be understood to be radical in a similar way to Sutherland’s investigation of the size of the subject: in Bersani’s thinking, the petty, individuated ego must be foregone in order to gain a larger experience of a “general, universal, individuation”, as part of a project of commensuration.⁷⁶² The outcome of self-shattering masochism might be a *transformative* obliteration of relative position and size: the petty, anecdotal individual is exploded into a universal, communal individual. Masochism is figured by Bersani as the most effective way to disrupt an idea of selfhood that supports current political and cultural violence. Phallocentrism, for Bersani, is that which denies the structurally disruptive value of a sexuality that finds pleasure in powerlessness:

Phallocentrism is ... not primarily the denial of power to women (although it has obviously led to that, everywhere and at all times), but above all the denial of the *value of* powerlessness in both men and women. I don’t mean the value of gentleness, or nonaggressiveness, or even of passivity, but rather of a more radical disintegration and humiliation of the self.⁷⁶³

⁷⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p.2.

⁷⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p.3.

⁷⁶¹ Bersani, *Intimacies*, pp.55–56.

⁷⁶² *Ibid.*, p.82.

⁷⁶³ Bersani, “Is the Rectum a Grave?”, p.24.

The pleasure of masochism is, then, for Bersani *the* fundamental radical challenge to a violent, phallogentric hegemony. In fact, a sexuality constituted masochistically can be thought of as “our primary hygienic practice of nonviolence”.⁷⁶⁴ It might also be an important step towards what Bersani calls an ecologic ethics, with the subject, “having willed its own lessness”,⁷⁶⁵ learning to live less invasively in the world. Bersani’s notion of “lessness” here echoes down a line of diminution proposed by other writers who imagine radically smaller subjects: the “little body ... little holes .. all gone” of Beckett’s “Lessness”,⁷⁶⁶ for instance; or Camus’ description of the sliding scale of art, a simultaneously gratuitous and modest act: “The true work of art is always on the human scale. Is essentially the one that says ‘less’”.⁷⁶⁷

But Ana’s masochistic “smallness” seems quite different to the “lessness” that these thinkers propose as radical possibilities, and gender and bathos play a conjoined role in *Fifty Shades*’s depiction of changing sizes. If a re-commensuration of sizes is imagined to be part of radical thinking, distortions in proportion can in other contexts be bathetically conservative: magnifying and diminishing figures, for instance, might be used to perpetuate the shrunken scope of women. The New York psychoanalyst Natalie Shainess, writing in *Sweet Suffering: Woman as Victim*, makes the remarkable claim, for example, that she has “virtually never” seen “expansiveness” exhibited by a woman, whereas this is a quality “men frequently possess”. “The world”, she argues, “creates conditions that ... foster benign and joyous growth—and expansiveness” for men; but women are often denied an environment that enables them to enlarge.⁷⁶⁸ Ana’s smallness might then model this failure to thrive. And Ana’s liability to shrink might be a capitulation to current constructions of female subjectivity that spatially diminish women alongside mythologising their tendency towards masochistic self-diminution (the “little woman”; the “shrinking violet”).⁷⁶⁹ Ana’s shrinking would then be a bathetic diminution of the radical possibility of a re-estimation of size. Erich Fromm’s work in

⁷⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p.30.

⁷⁶⁵ Leo Bersani, “Sociability and Cruising” in *Is the Rectum a Grave?*, pp.45–62, at p.62.

⁷⁶⁶ Samuel Beckett, “Lessness” in S.E. Gontarski (ed.), *The Complete Short Prose: 1929–1989* (New York: Grove Press, [1969] 1995).

⁷⁶⁷ Albert Camus, “Absurd Creation” in Justin O’Brien (trans.), *The Myth of Sisyphus* (London: Hamish, Hamilton, 1955).

⁷⁶⁸ Natalie Shainess, *Sweet Suffering: Woman as Victim* (Indianapolis/New York: Bobbs-Merrill Co Inc, 1984), pp.243–244.

⁷⁶⁹ Inevitably, there are fetish websites devoted to the erotic appeal of the “shrinking woman”: see, for example, “The Minimizer’s SW [shrinking woman] Site”, where “the ladies seem to just keep getting smaller and smaller!” (<http://www.the-minimizer.com> [Accessed February 26, 2014]).

*Escape from Freedom*⁷⁷⁰ on the question of masochism in connection to the shrinking size of the subject might take us further down this narrowing track. In Fromm's analysis, modern capitalism has freed us from certain historical forms of oppression, but has failed to realise a positive freedom for the individual. The old certainties (religion, community and a connection to the natural world) that once conferred a sense of belonging and security have been stripped away, but there has been no successful establishment of a modern, connected society to replace them. Man therefore "necessarily feels his insignificance and smallness in comparison with the universe and all others who are not 'he'".⁷⁷¹ In the face of mechanisation, digitalisation, atomic threat and population explosion, man feels himself to be "a particle of dust" and is "overcome by his individual insignificance". Masochism, Fromm suggests, is a pathological attempt to remedy this, by which the individual strives to overcome his alienation (the masculine pronoun is Fromm's) by fusing himself with somebody or something bigger in the world outside himself, renouncing his own alienated freedom and finding pleasure in his subjection. This is, for Fromm, an ultimately futile strategy, which fails to challenge the underlying structures of capitalist alienation and which finds its most heinous expression in the willing submission to Fascism. The masochist, Fromm suggests, already feeling small, makes himself yet tinier.

The process applied to the sadistic dominant is, conversely, one of magnification. In *Fifty Shades*, the "somebody" bigger with whom the disappearing Ana can be seen to masochistically "fuse", is Grey, the billionaire giant-among-men. Alongside Ana's descriptions of herself as small in comparison to him, the imputation of him as "Daddy" to her as "Baby", there are many other ways in which Grey looms in these texts. He owns and occupies massive physical spaces, from his "huge twenty-storey office building", with its "enormous—and frankly intimidating"⁷⁷² dimensions, to the capacious suites of the hotels he inhabits, to his home, where the main room is "enormous", making it more like a "mission statement" than a domestic space⁷⁷³; even his shower is "oversized".⁷⁷⁴ And when Grey takes Ana to see a home that he is intending to buy for the two of them, "The Big House",⁷⁷⁵ its proportions are

⁷⁷⁰ Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (New York: Henry Holt and Co Inc, [1941] 1994).

⁷⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p.20.

⁷⁷² *FS*, p.4.

⁷⁷³ *Ibid.*, p.94.

⁷⁷⁴ *FSD*, p.469.

⁷⁷⁵ *FSF*, p.533.

“palatial”,⁷⁷⁶ “enormous: twelve thousand square feet on six acres of land”,⁷⁷⁷ and it threatens to overwhelm Ana in a faint: “Somehow I remain upright.”⁷⁷⁸ Grey’s immoderate occupancy of physical space is inextricably linked to the exorbitance of his wealth: “Anastasia, I earn roughly one hundred thousand dollars an hour”,⁷⁷⁹ he immodestly tells her, the statement’s gratuity underscored by the fact that the size of his buildings has already done the talking for him: “This is seriously rich,” Ana has remarked, seeing his monstrous apartment for the first time.⁷⁸⁰

In these enormous spaces, and in their vertical positions, significant distortions of scale are allowed to take place. Grey is always at the top, in the penthouse, the perspectival position from which the people below are rendered tiny: Ana remarks, “Life in the clouds sure feels unreal. A fantasy—a castle in the air, adrift from the ground”.⁷⁸¹ And then, looking down on the people below them: “[Grey is] too beautiful for the little people below; too beautiful for me”.⁷⁸² EL James draws here on the tropes of masculine size and elevation through money that are familiar to the point of exhaustion in romantic films and TV series marketed to women in recent decades: the big, powerful, rich man, typified in the moniker “Mr Big”, and then just “Big”, in contrast to the female protagonist as “Kid”, in the *Sex and the City* series,⁷⁸³ for example; or the melancholy pent-house-dwelling millionaire looking down on the untroubled, quotidian little people, typified by Edward Lewis in *Pretty Woman*.⁷⁸⁴ Unlike the more ambivalent and likeable Lewis, however, Grey never experiences vertigo in his penthouse. He is utterly delighted by his size, his great ascendancy, the diminution of those around him, and other people in his home being “dwarfed by its sheer size”.⁷⁸⁵ One thinks here of Mike Leigh’s film *Career Girls*,⁷⁸⁶ in which the new

⁷⁷⁶ FSD, p.423.

⁷⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p.426.

⁷⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p.425.

⁷⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p.109.

⁷⁸⁰ FS, p.94.

⁷⁸¹ FS, p.369.

⁷⁸² FS, p.370.

⁷⁸³ Darren Star, *Sex and the City* (New York City: Darren Star Productions; HBO Original Programming; Warner Bros Television, 1998–2004).

⁷⁸⁴ Garry Marshall, *Pretty Woman* (Silver Screen Partners IV, 1990). The points of similarity between Grey and *Pretty Woman*’s Lewis are numerous: the mergers-and-acquisitions business; the interest in ship-building companies; the melancholy piano playing; the introduction to choral music/opera; the buying of designer clothes; the opportune production of the jewellery box. But where *Pretty Woman* presents a witty and resourceful female protagonist who has the effect of changing the hero’s approach towards his capitalist endeavour, Ana is seduced by Grey’s “philanthropic” brand of affluence, rather than ever seriously challenging it.

⁷⁸⁵ FSD, p.453.

⁷⁸⁶ Mike Leigh, *Career Girls* (October Films, 1997).

affluence of one of the main characters is marked by her looking round an apartment in the sky: “I suppose on a clear day, you can almost see the class struggle from here,” she quips, revealing the fantasy of social ascendancy such an elevated city residence connotes, and the tensions it effectively euphemises through the distortions of scale. For Ana’s exalted, enormous Grey, the “class struggle” would be a distant, indecipherable skirmish below, the barely perceptible concern of the “little people”.

The bathos of rape nostalgia

Ana’s pursuit of smallness in relation to Grey’s largesse is not only a masochistic submission to the exorbitant size he assumes in consumer capitalism, but is also a deliberate form of gender anachronism. It is a nostalgia for child-like proportion and powerlessness in relation to a father figure; but it is also, for Ana, a nostalgia for a romanticised re-imagining of past female powerlessness, largely produced from travestied readings of iconic moments of literary “romance”. Ana’s frequent use of the word “swoon” as a singularly feminine action is one of the ways in which the novels mark themselves as works of literary nostalgia (harking back here to the vogue for feminine delicacy at the end of the eighteenth century, as discussed in Chapter Two). Anastasia’s lexicon of female sexual experience (a woman might “succumb”, or be “comely” and “compliant”) deliberately bypasses late-twentieth-century vocabulary, positing earlier precedents as the immediate imaginative context for Ana’s twenty-first-century romance. This is made overt in the references to Ana’s favourite book, Hardy’s *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, that are laced through the novels. At first, Ana seems to straightforwardly lament Tess’ fate: “Damn, that woman was in the wrong place at the wrong time in the wrong century.”⁷⁸⁷ But her comparisons of herself to Tess become increasingly significant for the development of her relationship with Grey and her experience of the erotic. A set of valuable Hardy first-editions is one of the first gifts Grey makes to Ana. When she first visits his enormous apartment her awe at his wealth echoes Tess’ first sight of the d’Urberville mansion: “I feel like Tess Durbeyfield looking at the new house that belongs to the notorious Alec d’Urberville.”⁷⁸⁸ And the possibilities for her relationship to Grey are apparently the rock and the hard place offered to Tess: “I could hold you to some impossibly high ideal like Angel Clare or

⁷⁸⁷ *FS*, p.21.

⁷⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p.95.

debase you completely like Alec d'Urberville," Grey generously suggests. "If there are only two choices, I'd take the debasement," Ana replies. "That's why I'm here."⁷⁸⁹ Later, following a dream in which Grey feeds Ana strawberries and she is tethered and "mute",⁷⁹⁰ the strawberry scene in *Tess* "crosses [Ana's] mind".⁷⁹¹ And when Grey proposes their dominant/submissive relationship, the range of Ana's possible responses is once again confined to her (mis)reading of the minds of bygone literary heroines: "Elizabeth Bennet would be outraged, Jane Eyre too frightened, and Tess would succumb, just as I have."⁷⁹² After Grey first spans her, Ana tells him she feels "demeaned, debased, abused and assaulted—"⁷⁹³ "How very Tess Durbeyfield of you," Grey interposes. "Do you really feel like this or do you think you ought to feel like this?"⁷⁹⁴ Grey's suggestion here is that Ana's emotional response to his physical domination is conditioned by nineteenth-century mores. "Don't waste your energy on guilt, feelings of wrongdoing, etc.," he counsels. "We are consenting adults and what we do behind closed doors is between ourselves. You need to *free your mind* and listen to your body."⁷⁹⁵ But it is not Ana's *reluctance* about Grey's sadistic proposition that is anachronistic: in fact, her willingness to experience this as erotic is mediated through the fantasies she produces from romanticised readings of past female sexual powerlessness; her anachronistic travesties are the necessary precondition for their relationship.

Perhaps this begins with Ana's descriptions of Grey as her "knight" ("a white knight in shining, dazzling armor—a classic romantic hero—Sir Gawain or Sir Lancelot"⁷⁹⁶). That this description rapidly admits the possibility of "darkness" in the role of the knight ("Dark knight and white knight, it's a fitting metaphor"⁷⁹⁷; "My shining white-and-dark knight"⁷⁹⁸), unwittingly hints at Jill Mann's description of the problem of "classic romantic" courtship as a problem of mutuality. Mann has described the ritualisation of female sexual reluctance as embedded in some of the earliest Western precedents for our ideas of romantic love: the founding texts of courtly love.⁷⁹⁹

⁷⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.442.

⁷⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p.444.

⁷⁹² *Ibid.*, p.225.

⁷⁹³ *Ibid.*, p.293.

⁷⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.294 (my emphasis).

⁷⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.69.

⁷⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.92.

⁷⁹⁸ *FSF*, p.89.

⁷⁹⁹ Jill Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2002).

Describing Andreas Capellanus' *Treatise on Love* (c.1186), widely regarded as expressing "the thought of a great epoch, which explains the secret of a civilization,"⁸⁰⁰ Mann describes a cynical guide, containing "none of the behaviour which is now routinely ascribed to 'the medieval code of courtly love'". This sort of courtship, typified by male sexual aggression and female reluctance, suggests Mann, feeds the male fantasy that "female acquiescence retrospectively sanctions male coercion, and reveals reluctance to have been a merely ritual female role". Ritualised male aggression and ritualised female reluctance in certain courtly texts therefore "preserves the fiction that the woman yields to the man's sexual desire, not her own".⁸⁰¹

Written over 700 years later, ritualised female sexual reluctance might be seen as a key problem of courtship as depicted in Hardy's *Tess*. At Tess' first meeting with Alec d'Urberville, the "strawberry scene" which is the referent of Ana's erotic dream, Alec "insists" on forcing a strawberry into Tess' mouth. She parts her lips "in a slight distress" and takes the strawberry, "half-pleased, half-reluctant".⁸⁰² The possibility for this ambivalence to be interpreted as part of the ritual of courtship forms the background to Alec's disastrous coercion of Tess. And her indebtedness to him allows her manner to suggest ritualised reluctance to his imagination even when she is most definite in her feelings: she emphatically fails to develop any "tender feelings" for Alec, we are told, "But she was more pliable under his hands than a mere companionship would have made her, owing to her unavoidable dependence upon his mother, and ... upon him."⁸⁰³ The potentially treacherous terrain around perceived female "coyness" is later traversed when Angel Clare attempts to court Tess: "His experience of women was great enough for him to be aware that the negative often meant nothing more than the preface to the affirmative; and it was little enough for him not to know that in the manner of the present negative there lay a great exception to the dallying of coyness."⁸⁰⁴ While Hardy's narrator here seems to present the dallying of "coyness" as an accepted ritual of courtship, the obfuscation of female intent or desire such rituals create is made clear in Clare's category failure here. The categorisation of female coyness is itself part of the brutal violence perpetuated against Tess. "Her seeming indecision was, in fact,

⁸⁰⁰ For instance, John Jay Parry, "Introduction" to Andreas Capellanus, *The Art of Courtly Love* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990).

⁸⁰¹ Mann, *op cit.*, p.80.

⁸⁰² Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the d'Urbervilles: A Pure Woman* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions Ltd, [1891] 1992), p.52.

⁸⁰³ *Ibid.*, p.75.

⁸⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p.200.

more than indecision: it was misgiving,⁸⁰⁵ the narrator tells us elsewhere; but in relation to Alec's ardent pursuit, Tess is forced to develop a "strategic silence",⁸⁰⁶ and is led into a situation in which clearly communicated female consent becomes impossible: "[H]ow can I say yes or no—"⁸⁰⁷ The broken impossibility of her expression of consent is the background to Tess' rape, and reflects the sort of imbalance of expressive power that leads to Andrea Dworkin's conclusions about heterosexual sex in the context of extreme gender inequality: there can be no meaningful difference here between seduction and rape.⁸⁰⁸

In this social and romantic context, the impossibility of effective female expression might be thought of as a kind of death (Tess is "Maiden no More"), and male desire is haunted by the possibility of its necrophilic urge. The woodland space ("The Chase") in which Alec assails Tess thereby becomes a site of what Joyelle McSweeney has termed the "necropastoral"⁸⁰⁹; the woodland is a treacherous place of death and sylvan transformation, from which Tess' sobs have been heard to echo.⁸¹⁰ And when Angel Clare discovers Tess' past, the experiences hidden behind his imputation of "coyness", she is poised to become the dead wife he then fantasises. His altered view is "deadening" to her, so much that "she staggered".⁸¹¹ Angel steps forward, and Tess' swoon and his desire to catch her become a kind of dumb-show of her death. A few nights later, Clare sleep-walks into his new wife's bedroom, murmuring, "Dead, dead, dead!" He wraps her in "a sheet as in a shroud. Then lifting her from the bed with as much respect as one would show to a dead body, he carried her across the room".⁸¹² Tess suffers herself to be borne out of the house in the manner of a corpse, and "she lay in his arms in this precarious position with a sense rather of luxury than of terror. If they could only fall together, and both be dashed to pieces."⁸¹³ Angel holds her on the edge of a river and she is briefly poised at the point of becoming a drowning Ophelia. But he proceeds with her to a ruined church, places her in an empty stone coffin and kisses her. To fetishise Tess' relation to Alec, as EL James' Ana does,

⁸⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p.63.

⁸⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p.68.

⁸⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p.87.

⁸⁰⁸ I refer here to Andrea Dworkin's position on heterosexual sex in the context of female subordination and her famous description of its concomitant violence: "violation is a synonym for intercourse": *Intercourse* (Basic Books, 1987).

⁸⁰⁹ Joyelle McSweeney, *The Necropastoral* (Spork Press, 2011).

⁸¹⁰ Hardy, *op cit.*, p.109.

⁸¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.260.

⁸¹² *Ibid.*, p.280.

⁸¹³ *Ibid.*, pp.280–1.

is to entirely miss the darkest elements of masochism in Hardy's account: that the impossibility of female expression makes corpses of women and symbolic murderers of men. The result of this is Tess' desire for both her and Angel to be smashed to death. Tess' masochism is most profound in her continued desire for Angel despite this deathly context. She begs him to kill her ("It is you, my ruined husband, who ought to strike the blow. I think I should love you more if that were possible, if you could bring yourself to do it"⁸¹⁴) and glories in their somnambulant death procession, hoping for the mutual destruction of them both.

Ana's fetishisation of Tess' desire for Alec is therefore a bathetic travesty of Hardy's *Tess*: James re-tells Hardy's tale in the tone-deaf voice that Pope describes as bathos, distorting the earlier novel for the purposes of her own narrative and eroticising the relation that Hardy describes as abhorrent. EL James' Ana is in many ways the antithesis of Hardy's Tess: Tess is frequently described as physically robust, and refuses to swoon or give way in front of men even when she is at the point of collapse; she refuses to take any financial support from Alec until she is forced to do so by her poverty, entering into a relationship that she clearly views as sexual coercion; she undergoes a self-imposed process of unbeautifying in order to try to repel male attention, attacking her eyebrows and covering her hair so that she resembles a "mommet"⁸¹⁵ (a scarecrow); she realises that the greatest risks to her come from the men who love her; she murders her "true" rapist husband, and is hanged. This is at total odds with the depiction of Ana persistently passing-out, luxuriating in her new-found wealth, revelling in her make-over, and seeking marriage and protection from the man who violently controls her.

Female jeopardy and the eroticisation of risk

In seeking protection from Grey, Ana re-enacts the vulnerability that her smallness-through-thinness also suggests. The risk of swooning, suffocation and emaciation, are, as I have previously suggested, part of a generalised and steadily rising risk attendant on Ana as her relationship with Grey develops. External risks increasingly threaten our unhappy couple, structuring the plot of the two later novels. And Ana is presented as being permanently subject to unwanted male attention, from which Grey always rescues

⁸¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.271.

⁸¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.316.

her. These risks necessitate Ana being permanently accompanied by a security team, her confinement to Grey's apartment in his absence, and her obeying Grey's safety instructions. After evading a workplace assault, Ana literally falls into Grey's arms outside her office: "I haven't eaten all day, and as the very unwelcome surge of adrenaline recedes, my legs give out beneath me and I sink to the ground ... all I can think is *He's here. My love is here* ... He scoops me up into his lap."⁸¹⁶ Here Ana's faintness, her failure to eat, and her sexual assailability all converge to necessitate Grey's violent intervention on her behalf. One thinks here of Germaine Greer's description of the tendentious production of female fear in *The Whole Woman*, where she provides an analysis of international crime statistics to demonstrate that:

[M]ales are always and everywhere more likely to die a violent death than females ... Our sons are always and everywhere in more danger than our daughters, both of committing crimes and of violence and being the victims of crime of violence, but it is our daughters we are afraid for and whom we teach to be afraid for themselves.⁸¹⁷

Fear, Greer suggests, has been "taught" to women by those who claim to protect them. This focus on women as targets for attack by strangers (rather than as targets for attack within the domestic and family setting, where women more often face violence) functions for Greer as an instrument of social control: "The object is not protection but the engenderment and maintenance of fearfulness ... The myth of female victimhood keeps women 'off the streets' and at home, in the place of more danger."⁸¹⁸

⁸¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.370.

⁸¹⁷ Germaine Greer, *The Whole Woman* (London: Doubleday, 1999), p.273.

⁸¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.274, 276. Whilst much of the protective control exerted in *FS* would suggest the failure of female emancipation that Greer laments in *The Whole Woman*, there is one area in which *FS* suggests progress in terms of the liberation Greer hoped for in *The Female Eunuch*: that is, through a progressive menstrual activism. Greer famously challenged "if you think you are emancipated, you might consider the idea of tasting your own menstrual blood – if it makes you sick, you've a long way to go, baby" (Greer, *The Female Eunuch* (Harper Perennial, ([1970] 2006)). In *The Whole Woman* she restates this challenge for emancipation: "When we come to recognize the taste of our menstrual blood on the lips or fingers or penis of a lover, perhaps then we will realize that it is not putrid, not dangerous, not in the least disgusting. ... For thirty years feminists have struggled to develop a positive imagery of the womb and ovaries" (pp.37–38). *FS* does perhaps do something unusual in attempting to rehabilitate menstruation into the erotic: "I'm bleeding," Ana tells Grey, "Doesn't bother me," Grey replies, "Does it bother you?" Ana considers this for a moment, and then replies "No, not at all" (*FS*, p.431). Perhaps this scene would feel more convincingly emancipatory if it weren't Grey who initiated the acceptance of menstruation as part of his all-consuming, penetrative erotic purview, and if it weren't accompanied by declarations of Ana's total erotic submission to him: "Truly I am a marionette and he is the master puppeteer" (*Ibid.*, p.429).

“Christian is still treating me like I’m made of glass,” Ana tells the reader towards the end of trilogy, by which time they have two children. “He still won’t let me go to work.”⁸¹⁹ Female physical vulnerability—exemplified over and over in these novels in Ana’s disintegrative orgasms, her propensity to swoon and faint, her physical diminution, and her vulnerability to rape—is posited in order to justify the exercise of masculine power to protect her. The exclusivity of the heterosexual couple and family unit is only bolstered through Ana’s masochistic shattering, as is Grey’s vision of her as permanently endangered, liable to shatter like glass. Grey’s notion of the couple and of family is inherently defensive, rendering outsiders as automatic threats to be dealt with brutally. And Grey and Ana’s relationship in its final stage has developed into just that prideful and violently defended version of the couple (and then the family unit) that Leo Bersani identifies as concomitant with “ego-driven intimacy”; their relationship privileges “the prideful exclusiveness of the family as socially blessed, closed unit of reproductive intimacy”, and the aggressive “ego-hyperbolism of racial, national, ethnic and gendered identities”.⁸²⁰ If Ana’s shattering into sexuality has the potential for new forms of self, relation and society along the lines proposed by Bersani, if her broken pieces might form part of a fantastic new communal mosaic, and if the swoon offers the possibility of a coming-to in a different world, these moments of possibility are also the ones in which a phallogentric version of the world might be brutally impressed upon the prone woman.

Succumbing to the power of capital

In Grey’s version of the world, the power that money provides in consumer capitalism is the ultimate precedent and moral justification. Grey, citing Andrew Carnegie, believes he has the right, as the “ultimate consumer”, to possess all things, including people: “‘A man who acquires the ability to take full possession of his own mind may take full possession of anything else to which he is justly entitled.’ I like control of myself and those around me.”⁸²¹ In another version of reading as travesty, Grey gives scant consideration to what “just” might mean here, or to other of Carnegie’s bon mots, such as: “A man who dies rich, dies shamed”. There is nothing in Grey’s world that is

⁸¹⁹ *FSF*, p.528.

⁸²⁰ Bersani, *Intimacies*, p.55.

⁸²¹ *FS*, p.12.

not made available to him through money and he describes himself “exercising my democratic right as an American citizen, entrepreneur, and consumer to purchase whatever I damn well please”.⁸²² The initiation of Ana into Grey’s consumerist world-view is the final and most troubling proof of his exploitation of her swooning receptivity. This initiation begins at the very start of their romance with the proffering of extravagant gifts. Ana is at first troubled by these gifts, the sums of money they represent and the debt to Grey their acceptance might connote. But the novels increasingly glory in describing the gifts and their cost: Ana’s shiny new “iPad”,⁸²³ for example; or the whole new wardrobe of luxury clothes Grey buys her, with the price labels helpfully left on, so that we can marvel over a black bustier costing \$540 and a pair of Laboutins at \$3,295⁸²⁴; the diamond earrings from Cartier; the constant cork-pops of “Cristal” or “our favorite, Bollinger”⁸²⁵; the procession of top-end cars (always Audis). Ana’s initial consumerist reluctance seems to act as an equivalent to the traditional romance trope of ritualised female sexual reluctance, and the real seduction/rape Grey must achieve is in terms of Ana’s consent to his version of consumer capitalism. Ana must work at accepting the kind of money lavished on her, and her initial “guilt”, “a familiar unease that’s always present when I try to wrap my head around Christian’s wealth,”⁸²⁶ is presented as an individualised psychological problem to be resolved rather than an index of structural inequality. Grey’s impoverished and abusive early life become the moral justification for his finally “winning” the game of capitalism, rather than the grounds for any interrogation of its rules in relation to the idea of justice. And Ana becomes the perfect consumerist neophyte. She registers her reluctance, but is seduced into enjoyment. In the final epilogue to the novels, Ana describes herself having eradicated all guilt over her lavish lifestyle: “I relax, my body turning to Jell-O ... I should feel guilty for feeling this joy, this completeness, but I don’t. Life right here, right now, is good, and I’ve learned to appreciate it and live in the moment like my husband.”⁸²⁷ The ritualised female sexual reluctance of romance traditions is here converted into the reluctance and then successful seduction by luxury, and a final guilt-free acceptance of the trappings of extreme wealth as *part of marriage*.

⁸²² *FSD*, p.59.

⁸²³ *Ibid.*, p.39.

⁸²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.126.

⁸²⁵ *FSF*, p.88.

⁸²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.275.

Marriage is essential to Ana's relation to consumerism, because it allows her to simultaneously repudiate and accept Grey's power to spend, to both enjoy and disavow the pleasures of spending money (he spends on her behalf). Her distance from the processes of making the money that is spent on her also allows for a highly euphemised picture of capitalist accumulation, in which Christian is a "philanthropist". Ana does "wonder vaguely how Christian made all his money if he's so willing to give it away",⁸²⁸ but these minor qualms are brushed under the carpet in her final euphoric declaration that she is "married to the most delicious, sexy, philanthropic, absurdly wealthy mogul a woman could meet".⁸²⁹ Ana's is a strategy of studied naivety, in which the desire to consume is commuted through Grey and any moral ambiguities of desiring such wealth are thereby erased. Ana continually represents herself as helpless in the face of enforced spending, and powerless in relation to Grey's imposition of luxury. But in becoming his wife, and accepting his ownership of her as "asset", she describes the power of being his prized object: "'You're mine' [he tells her] ... It makes me feel powerful, strong, desired, and loved".⁸³⁰

What James gives us here, in Ana's final submission to Grey as master of her sexuality and of her consumer power, is a horrific rendering of Irigaray's concept of the "phallic proxy". Writing about the Freudian account of female sexual development, Irigaray describes the way in which "the castration complex" depicts the young girl in the process of accepting "the harsh reality of a sexual 'mutilation' or 'amputation' ... She must resign herself to the 'disadvantage' anatomy has in store for her".⁸³¹ The only way for the girl to "redeem her personal value, and value in general," would then be through the seduction of the father, and consequent father figures, to "persuade him to express, if not admit, some interest in her".⁸³² He might then act as her "phallic proxy". Irigaray painfully describes the coincidence of guilt and illness in the female experience of the insufficiency that necessitates such a proxy:

Mutilated, wounded, humiliated, overwhelmed by a feeling of inferiority that can never be 'cured'. In sum, women are definitively castrated. Their guilt would remain mute: active, of course, but unutterable, ineffable, *to be expressed only by the body*. They would give themselves up to be punished—by the

⁸²⁷ *FSF*, p.533.

⁸²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.140.

⁸²⁹ *FSF*, p.88.

⁸³⁰ *FSD*, p.271.

⁸³¹ Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), p.87.

⁸³² *Ibid.*

accomplished fact of castration—without knowing what they had done wrong, or even what they were suffering from, what they endured.⁸³³

It is this overwhelming inferiority that we might see as expressing itself somatically in Ana's swoons; and it is the enforced sense of her insufficiencies that lead her back to becoming the little girl/little wife who is desirous of a "Christian Grey Fifty Shades punishment fuck".⁸³⁴ Irigaray identifies the "powerful interests" vested in, and the "misprision" crucial to, such an account of female sexuality. If this account were to be adhered to, "women would remain entangled in a masochistic economy that certain psychoanalysts, male and female, do not hesitate to designate as the condition of women's pleasure. These analysts thus ratify, or enact the status quo into psychic laws, and perpetuate it under the sanction of 'normality'".⁸³⁵ The mainstream popularity of *Fifty Shades* perpetuates the idea of female sexual pleasure as adjunct to masculine punishment, whilst romanticising the aspiration to the power of extreme wealth wielded through a phallic proxy.

Angela Carter's transformative faint

Swooning Anastasia reveals to us the travestied anachronism embedded in this depressingly popular contemporary capitulation of the female subject as romance character. The possibility for a radical masochism suggested by Leo Bersani is, in this narrative, bathetically voided in the remaking of a female subject in accordance with the specifications of contemporary capitalism. *Fifty Shades* creates a version of femininity that romanticises female powerlessness, bathetically shrinks the female subject and eroticises the risk of rape. If the trope of female sexual reluctance was once used in romance as the justification for coercive sex, in *Fifty Shades* Ana's initial reluctance towards the *acceptance of wealth* is used as the justification for the imposition of the billionaire Grey's "gifts" and the coercive imposition of his money. "[I]mmense power," Grey tells Ana, "is acquired by assuring yourself, in your secret reveries, that you were born to control things."⁸³⁶ In making this link between fantasy life and the exercise of power, EL James, perhaps unwittingly, invites us to consider the impact of the fantasy she has authored for gender power-relations in late capitalism. The fantasy

⁸³³ *Ibid.*, p.88 (my emphasis).

⁸³⁴ *FSF*, p.40.

⁸³⁵ Irigaray, *op cit.*, p.98.

of a swooning heroine with anorectic tendencies coyly enjoying her husband's power and wealth can only, in the final analysis, seem regressive. Ana, with her marked physical frailty and insufficiency, is the fantasy romantic pretext for the exercise of the controlling power of rich, white men to protect their assets: their little wives and children. EL James invites women to shrink into the erotic.

And what, then, of liberation? Perhaps we might veer at the last moment, in search of a writing of female masochism that does not make a bathetic destitution of the hope of freedom, to the beautiful and true work of Angela Carter. In her non-fiction tract on pornography, *The Sadeian Woman*, Carter sees Sade's Justine as "the start of a kind of self-regarding female masochism": "a personification of the pornography"⁸³⁷ of the self-venerated condition of female *unfreedom*. The masochist's obscenity, according to Carter, resides in the "false expectation" that her submissiveness will do her any good. In terms of exploring this as an "aetiology of the female condition in the twentieth century",⁸³⁸ we might see EL James' "Red Room of Pain" anticipated and already long superseded by Carter's depiction of "The Bloody Chamber", the eponymous torture chamber in her reworking of the tale of Bluebeard. Carter's young, poor, virginal narrator marries a Marquis, the "richest man in France", and is given a wedding gift: "A choker of rubies, two inches wide, like an extraordinary precious slit throat."⁸³⁹ This choker has been worn by the Marquis' grandmother, in a decadent gesture of solidarity with "the aristos who'd escaped the guillotine" who developed "an ironic fad of tying a red ribbon round their necks at just the point where the blade would have sliced it through, a red ribbon like the memory of a wound".⁸⁴⁰ The "cruel necklace", then, is the glittering symbol of the young wife's entry into the grotesque world of obscene and violent wealth. And her admiration of herself wearing the necklace, her self-regard ("the cruel necklace became me"), reveals her potential for corruption within that world: "I hardly recognised myself."⁸⁴¹ Female desire in the context of this kind of marriage (which makes the marriage bed simultaneously the brothel bed and the butcher's

⁸³⁶ *FSF*, p.562.

⁸³⁷ Angela Carter, *The Sadeian Woman: An Exercise in Cultural History* (Virago: 1979), p.57.

⁸³⁸ *Ibid.*

⁸³⁹ Carter, *The Bloody Chamber and Other Stories* (London: Random House [1979] 1995), p.11.

⁸⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.11.

⁸⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p.20.

slab)⁸⁴² is experienced by the girl with nauseated horror: “I was aghast to feel myself stirring”,⁸⁴³ she tells us, “I felt a vague desolation within me ... there had awoken a certain queasy craving like the cravings of pregnant women for the taste of coal or chalk or tainted food, for the renewal of his caresses ... I longed for him. And he disgusted me.”⁸⁴⁴ There is no pastoralising of female masochism here; the desire for this kind of sexual contract does not pretend to be liberation, but identifies itself as part of a gothic tradition of female incarceration. And Carter produces a proliferating sense of gothic depth in the layered texture of the writing that she produces: the tale’s allusiveness, its baroque surface of imagistic callings back (to fairy tales and to Sade; to mythologised Transylvanian and Italian aristocracies; to the Bible and to colonial conquest narratives; to the occult and to the Symbolists; to *The Terror* and the Spanish Inquisition; to the Orient and to Paris), mean that we are never just in one place when we read Carter. The queasiness our narrator experiences is reproduced in the reader as a queasy sense of time out of joint, a sort of temporal seasickness. And this might remind us of one of the initiatory features of the gothic: “the making explicit (but therefore also the peculiar enfolding or complication) of a logic of anachrony ... meddling with time, a temporal meddler”.⁸⁴⁵ The gothic, Royle suggests, always produces a temporal unsettling, a return of the past or the repressed. Carter’s writing is composed of resonant repeats, so that the sound of so many histories strikes through her prose. “The Bloody Chamber” reveals James’ anachronism to be nothing more than a thin feint of the gothic by comparison. Anastasia Steele presents her literary heroines as footnotes to her own situation. She travesties her literary precedents, treating them as a disposable backdrop; she repapers literary history as though it is the interior of one of her newly-acquired *recherché* residences. Despite its vampiric roots, EL James’ writing is so bare of allusion that it stands as a kind of the antithesis to the heavy temporal-tampering texture of the gothic.

Carter’s work, in contrast, is piled with the resonant power of the many different pasts she evokes. And this gives the “The Bloody Chamber” a dreadful sense of building inevitability. The past bricks us into this densely allusive story, and the reading

⁸⁴² The narrator describes the “formal disrobing of the bride” as “a ritual from the brothel ... He in his London tailoring; she, bare as a lamb chop. Most pornographic of all confrontations. And so my purchaser unwrapped his bargain” (*ibid.*, p.15).

⁸⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.22.

⁸⁴⁵ As described by Nicholas Royle in relation to Horace Walpole’s first “Gothic Story”: *In Memory of Jacques Derrida* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), pp.48–9.

experience becomes one of rising claustrophobia, as the castle walls thicken, seemingly inescapable, around our narrator. But at the last moment, Carter always surprises us. And this is what makes her such a powerful inheritor and transformer of the gothic tradition: she utilises its temporal swoops, but redirects all the power of its taphephobic tendencies towards the possibility of new futures. In “The Bloody Chamber” we see the seeming inevitability of masochistic capitulation transformed at the very last minute. The narrator faces the spectre of past feminine acquiescence to cruelty: when she discovers the Marquis’ horde of murdered wives, the greatest horror is their seeming pleasure; the “worst thing was, the dead lips smiled”.⁸⁴⁶ “Were there jewels enough in all his safes to recompense me for this predicament,”⁸⁴⁷ she lies in “the lazy, midday bed of the rich”, wondering. If we do not stir from this imaginative bed, Carter’s fairytale suggests, then liberation’s bathos is glittered over with rubies that will bite into our necks. The possibility of freedom here stands in stark contrast to masochistic adaptation⁸⁴⁸ to the rich husband’s murderous exorbitance, and is glimpsed through the figure of an “indomitable” mother who has “beggared herself” and will finally save the narrator from her husband. Our narrator, realising she has “sold [herself] to this fate”, directs her imaginative energy towards the possibility of *escape*, rather than accepting the queasy consolation of tainted pleasures. And this gothic détournement is in part achieved through Carter’s inventive deployment of a faint. With her “nerves of steel”, our narrator faints only once: at the beautiful possibility of sexual relations with a man transformed from violence into tenderness.⁸⁴⁹ She is not fragile, and her passing out is not evidence of any feminine incapacity, nor of a capitulation to a sado-masochistic economy of desire. Carter gives us a witty reworking of the historically gendered swoon here: the faint becomes a hopeful turning point, occasioned by the surprising gentleness of a boy, a blind and ineffectual piano-tuner, who is loved in all his masculine frailty.

⁸⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.28.

⁸⁴⁷ Carter, *op cit.*, p.22.

⁸⁴⁸ Marianne Noble has written about female masochism in the 19th century in terms of the resourceful “accommodations” made by women in order to find “pleasure and power in the cultural circumstances in which they find themselves”. She finds the expressions of such accommodation “beautiful—or at least fascinating”, and reads them as “weird curves” (*The Masochistic Pleasures of Sentimental Literature* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2000), p.3). But appreciating the beauty of a weirdly curving stem attempting to flower is entirely different from swearing blind that the flower is in fact growing upright and blooming uninhibitedly.

⁸⁴⁹ The narrator describes her developing relationship with a blind boy, her gentle piano-tuner: “After the dreadful revelation of that bloody chamber, it was his tender look that made me faint.” Carter, *op cit.*, p.32.

Tenderness, this tale suggests, might finally transform gender relations, and render fearful feminine swooning obsolete.

Passing Out

Is it too late to swoon? I finish this part of the thesis with another question, because the appearances swooning makes in the early twenty-first century seem, on the one hand, to be deliberately, and bathetically, anachronistic (as in the *Fifty Shades* narratives); and on the other, to be charged with catatonic irony. “Swoon”, *Urban Dictionary* tells us, is now often used “online as an action, to show that someone is attracted [sic] or interested in someone or something”,⁸⁵⁰ as in “Ryan Gosling... swoon.”⁸⁵¹ This new incarnation of “to swoon” is an example of an ironic virtual redefinition of what might constitute “action”. To act in this sense is simply to signal certain kinds of consumer preference: a self-regarding attestation to “attraction or interest”, quite possibly delivered in a supine state. The internet now encourages us “to swoon” at interior furnishings⁸⁵²; at new fashion labels⁸⁵³; at the latest film releases.⁸⁵⁴ Weekend supplements identify the cultural cause of “this season’s mass hipster swooning.”⁸⁵⁵ We might discover our “Swoon Appeal” at “Swoon.co.uk”, an online dating service where we can pay to select a mate.⁸⁵⁶

The swoon, I have argued, continued up until the early twentieth century as a powerful symbol deployed by certain writers to suggest the possibility of radical personal and communal transformation, which was bound up with the power of the symbolically feminine to disrupt systems of power. But does swooning now risk being evacuated of any meaning other than consumer approval? “Language”, Keston Sutherland has argued, “does not grow mean or lose its vibrancy through any activity of its own”; rather, “meanness and deadness” are “produced in words by people speaking

⁸⁵⁰ See <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=swoon> [Accessed August 9, 2013].

⁸⁵¹ See <http://pinterest.com/edonovan731/ryan-gosling-swoon/> [Accessed August 9, 2013].

⁸⁵² See <http://swoonhome.blogspot.co.uk> [Accessed August 9, 2013].

⁸⁵³ See <http://thecompanyswoon.com> [Accessed August 9, 2013].

⁸⁵⁴ See “FilmSwoon”, the blog of Buffalo-based movie critic Christopher Schobert: <http://filmswoon.com/?tag=frances-ha> [Accessed August 9, 2013].

⁸⁵⁵ For *The Guardian*, in the summer of 2013 this was Greta Gerwig, writer and actor in the newly-released *Frances Ha*: see <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2013/jul/13/greta-gerwig-frances-ha> [Accessed August 9, 2013].

⁸⁵⁶ See http://www.swoon.co.uk/ppc.php?dynamicpage=funn_lp&text=dating&ppc_cp=0000000001 [Accessed August 9, 2013].

and writing”.⁸⁵⁷ Our current usages of swoon, as bourgeois hipster term of approval and/or gendered romance anachronism, might then demonstrate the death of certain kinds of hopefulness in our speaking and writing. If our current deployment of the swoon seems to model consumerist capitulation, this might tell us something about the current state of our collective imagination and our failure to engage with questions of radical change.

The following novella extrapolates from some of the complex characteristics of the swoon that I have sought to describe over the course of this thesis. *Hartshorn* describes the faints of a contemporary protagonist who has inherited a tradition of feminine swooning. Her compulsion to repeat the swoon is at once a drive towards ghostly maternal precedents; the anticipation of a dissolution of the self and new modes of feeling and being; and an ineffectual escapism, a failure to engage, a passing out of the world. The novella is an attempt to continue to describe the ambivalence and potential fatuity that mark contemporary swooning, and to examine what might be at stake in the exhausted abandonment of the swoon as a morbidly feminine inheritance. *Hartshorn* is also an attempt to imagine new experiences that might carry the transformative charge once attached to the art of sinking.

⁸⁵⁷ Keston Sutherland, *Stupefaction: A Radical Anatomy of Phantoms* (London: Seagull Books, 2011), p.184.

Hartshorn

One

De-oxygenation

I suppose you could call it a talent. A gift, perhaps. Except that I had to work at it. It didn't come straight away. The first time I tried it, I was thirteen-years old. I'd cut my teeth on mother grief, so I wanted it more than any of the others. We all filed into the hall together, the girls of 2B, in our burgundy skirts and uncooperative cardigans, pumps scuffing against the parquet. And the secret crackled silently along the line of us. As we moved into place, we flickered our eyes towards one another, already aware of a slight shortness of breath: the effect of anticipation. Once the whole school was assembled, Mr Tweedle, perched on the stage above us, began his monologue: "Today's thought comes from Jalal ad-Din Muhammad Rumi." His voice rose and fell away, with a mystic's cadence. "The great Persian poet and theologian. This is what he says to us: 'Yesterday I was clever, so I wanted to change the world. Today I am wise, so I am changing myself.'"

As Mr Tweedle expounded the history of the Sultanate of Rum and the Seljuq dynasty, we girls of 2B covertly scrutinised one another, to check that no one was starting before time. We all made a show of breathing as normally as possible—shoulders back, chests forward—and some of us furrowed our brows in a way that suggested a zero-tolerance approach to cheating. And then the organ started up; the pages of hymn books rustled towards "Blessed Assurance". It was time: the game was afoot. Whilst seeming to sing, we began to make our breath as quick and shallow as possible. I imagine we might have looked like tiny dogs, our heads bobbing as we panted between each word. We kept this up until the last verse, at which point each of us held our breath for as long as possible. The boys around us knew that something strange was going on, but couldn't be sure quite what. We were creating a soft shushing sound, whipped up by the collective hyperventilation. Miss Briscoe stood at the side, anxiously surveying the line of us. Three of us had gone down in the previous week; she couldn't understand it. She'd given us all a long talk on the importance of a substantial breakfast.

But Leanne Hrymoc had got to us first. At a sleepover the weekend before, she had introduced the decision-makers of 2B to the Fainting Game. I wasn't included, but I got to hear about it soon enough.

"My cousin taught me it. She's 16 and she's shagging a *policeman*," Leanne had said to the others. "She says it makes you go all rushy. You feel like you're falling into a *dream*."

"Oh, I've heard of it. The *Dying Game*," Laura Murgatroyd had cut in. "I heard some girl in Barnsley *killed* herself doing it."

"Yeah, my sister calls it Indian Headrush," Anna McAvoy had added. "You can *totally* die from it."

They had all agreed. We would secretly play the Fainting Game every day in assembly the following week. The winner would be the girl who passed out the highest number of times. Or, in the case of a tie, whoever passed out in the most dramatic way. Or, if anyone died, they scored an automatic win. Or, if more than one person died, the winner was the girl who died in the coolest way. No starving, no faking: it had to be real.

So I stood in line, my eyes beginning to glaze with the effort of concentration. I didn't know what I was doing, back then. I dragged the air through my mouth in desperate covert rushes; I could feel it roughing up the back of my throat. And as the hymn reached the final verse I gulped in everything I could. I quickly scanned along the line, searching for the girls who might be teetering. Laura, at my righthand-side, looked perfectly serene: eyes closed, mouth flatly sealed. But she hadn't gone down yet either. Anna was looking likely: her cheeks were flushed and her right hand had begun to flutter. I closed my eyes for extra disorientation. I tried to force my weight forwards, into the balls of my feet, to encourage disequilibrium. I let my head fall back slightly. And then I think it *almost* happened: the darkness behind my eyes began to swim into a kind of green. I tried to sink into it, to let my brain soften. But I was still a novice. My thoughts refused to blur. I could feel my brain ticking with concentration, all nerves and electricity; I could still follow the words of the hymnal; I could call to mind my lessons for that morning. And then I heard a scuffle down the line to my left. I gave up; I opened my eyes, and let go of my breath. A clearing had formed around Anna, who was curled on her side now on the hall floor, with one arm around her head. Second time this week. She had fallen, audaciously, into the lead.

After school that day, I went back to Laura's house. The Murgatroyds lived in an enormous blackened vicarage in the bottom of the valley, next to the church. It was the sort of house we used to tell stories about when we were younger; everyone was a little bit scared of it. But I used to go whenever I could. Really old people lived on the upper two floors, looked after by Laura's mother. I suppose it was a small private care-home, but it seemed like a far more mysterious and macabre arrangement back then. As we sat in Laura's bedroom, the calls of an old woman sired in, again and again, even when we turned the music up. Sometimes the woman screamed for a full five seconds. From Laura's bedroom window, I could see the old headstones in the churchyard, haphazard and lichen-laced. I rested my head against the glass as Laura practised her dance moves.

"What's wrong with you?" Laura shouted at me, jerking her way through her finale bogle. Laura was always singing along to ragga tracks in her patchy West Yorkshire patois. She came to a breathless stop on the bed. "Is it your mum, Esther?" Laura asked, and lying down beside me, taking my hand and stroking it. "Are you thinking of your mum?" she asked again, with the salacious solicitude all the girls had adopted when my mother died. Suddenly, everyone had wanted to be my best friend, to lead me into the girls' loos to share claustrophobic confidences about my grief.

"I'm thinking about the game." I withdrew my hand. "I just want to know what it's like."

Anna McAvoy had spent a long time at break euphorically filling us non-swooners in on what we were missing. She saw things, she said, before she went down. Strange and beautiful shapes; and they were *that* beautiful, they were what *made* her go down. They were shapes she recognised, but didn't recognise. Like something returning; like ghosts; or something. Nothing stayed separate, and the shapes whispered to her. It was like falling into a new world, she said. Leanne Hrymoc had laughed and said she was touched. But I thought it sounded like the most wonderful thing; I hoarded the possibility inside myself.

"I just want to see it. I want to feel it. Like she did."

Laura thought for a while. "You *really* want to get out of your head? Off your face?"

"I suppose. If that's what it is..." I said.

"You know, there are other ways to do it."

"Yeah?"

“Like what my brother and his mates do on a weekend. Like gak.”

“Gak?”

“You know.” Laura bit her lip with excitement.

I think I half-knew I was being duped; but I didn't care that much. I was willing to try almost anything. Esther said she had some arrangements to make. She disappeared for a couple of minutes, and then she came back for me. I followed her down to the cellar, where enormous washing machines sat on top of one another and there were two industrial dryers, to manage the old people's laundry. Greyish flannel bedding was hung out at one end of the room and there was an old stone wash-sink in the middle, without any taps. We were below ground-level here, and one oblong window showed us the level of the church-yard grass above our heads. I remember the subterranean cold, and how it seemed to seep inwards and upwards through the walls and floor. I began to think laterally, to imagine directly outwards through the earth of the churchyard, towards my mother. And then an image flashed into my head: a coffin full of hair. It was that thing people always say about dead bodies and the hair keeping on growing; I thought of my mother cocooned in her own prodigious dead hair. I tried to close the thought down.

“Let's get on with it,” I said.

“So,” Laura said, “here it is. The *stuff*.” There were two thick, grainy lines of white powder poured out in parallel on the stone sink. It made me think of quicklime.

“So what do we do?”

“We get down like this.” Laura bent over towards the surface, so that her nose was hovering over the powder crystals. She nipped one nostril closed with her first finger, and mimed Hoovering down the line. “And then you suck it up like that. You first!” Laura stepped back, the magnanimous host.

“Ok.” I stepped up. I shut down one side of my nose and sniffed up as hard as I could. I could feel the powder filling up the bottom of my nostril cavity, like a liquid. And then I could feel a sharp sting, burning up my sinuses.

“Ow,” I squawked. “Ow, ow, ow.”

“Does it not feel ... good?” Laura asked.

“It feels ... like it's burning.” I was having to move from one foot to the other now, and fanning my hands at either side of my nose. “Is it supposed to feel like this?”

Laura watched me for a few moments with a strange expression on her face. “To be honest, Ettie, I thought I’d try you on soap powder first. To see if you could handle it. It’s all chemicals, right?” She swept her fat line of Daz down the plughole. “I think I’ll give it a miss.”

“Oh god,” I said. “I can feel it at the back of my throat. It’s disgusting.”

“So, maybe we need to, maybe, wash it out?”

We ran up to the bathroom. Laura held my hair, while I splashed water into my nose and mouth. I gargled again and again, spitting out soap clouds. My tongue kept on lathering.

Later, when it got dark, Mrs Murgatroyd said I should be going home; she said my Dad would be worrying. So I wound my way back along the canal path. I knew my Dad would still be at work. The house would be empty. So I slowed down, dawdling despite the cold. I lent against the canal wall; it was so enormous, the wall, stones as big as wheelbarrows, that it seemed to hold back the banked-up earth of the whole valley, which rose massively above it. I looked into the black water, rippling from the edge where a coot was bedding down. I stared up to the horizon, the top of the other side of the valley where the last line of light was cracking over the hills. If I stayed much longer, I knew the canal path would be pitch dark and I’d have to feel my way home along the wall. I suppose it was a sort of intuition. The coming dark made it seem possible. I started practising my breathing. I shuddered the air through my body as violently as possible. My throat was even more raw now, and I could follow the circles that the air was making through me by its sting. As the last light sank below the horizon, I locked my breath inside my body. Everything went dark. Tiny fluttering stars started to appear beyond my eyes. The ground began to swim. I could feel everything in my body swoop downwards. And I stumbled back, into the dark, against the wall. I was only out momentarily; but it was a start.

Two

Primal Scenes

I should explain about my mother. I grew up in a house at the edge of the Todmorden canal: a squat lock-keeper's cottage, blasted back to the colour of sand. It had ridiculous gates, which my father had painted gold. Despite his gaudy touches the house was always dark, shadowed by the steep valley behind it. The day I discovered her, it was late autumn. Blue skies and bitter-cold. I had walked home from school along the soggy canal path, which was dappled with leaves and goose-shit. By this time, Mum had withdrawn from the house entirely, taking to her room. She said it was because of the illness. She needed to rest a lot, she said. But it also meant she could carry on drinking without us seeing. I only saw her in weird snatches then, in her last few months, in our secret congresses after school. Mum suddenly wanted to tell me all these things about herself. She'd never been much of a story-teller before. But now, I was routinely summoned, and she'd pour it all out at break-neck speed, all these stories about the past. I'd come into the house, climb the dark stairs, and knock tentatively at her door, Moira's door. Mum had always insisted I refer to her by first name. But I called her "Mum" secretly, in my head and whenever she was out of range.

Mum's room was a long oblong space: two bedrooms had been repurposed when my parents bought the house to become a small dance-studio. It had large windows along one side that opened onto the canal, and the opposite wall was mirrored. The mirror wall reflected the canal, spilling its green, dank light through the space; I used to think that my mother was like a fish, trapped inside a tank that was never cleaned. There were shelves of books at the far end of the room, and against the mirror-wall a rotting chaise-lounge that Mum reclined on, winding herself in cashmere blankets. Next to the chaise was a small, black, lacquered cabinet, which held Mum's curiosities: an assortment of exquisite glasses—frosted lilac martini glasses, curlicue champagne glasses, etched sherry glasses, crystal tumblers, a tiny cube of glass with a battered silver lid—and sticky bottles of strange spirits. There were white rings on the top of the cabinet, where residual vodka had scoured the lacquer off the cabinet's surface, and this used to make me think of the illness, of Mum's liver, blanched and

retracting. There was always a small plate of garnishes that she used to offer to me enthusiastically, as though she had baked a cake. For her last few months, Mum ate only olives, glacé cherries and curled orange rind, as far as I could tell.

Sometimes she was on wonderful form. She would usher me in and immediately set off on a story, as though she was restarting a conversation from a moment before. She told me her history as though she was recounting it to a journalist, balancing facts with appealing, atmospheric detail: Moira had, for a fleeting period in the late 1970s, been a promising ballerina. This was when she had met Vincent, my father, after her first starring performance. He was, by the end, her oldest, most devoted, and only remaining fan. When they had first met, she had been surrounded by interested parties. During her one run as Odette, there had been a buzz around Moira; her performance had been received with excitement, and people suddenly wanted to know her, to interview her and to take her picture in the rehearsal room. But Moira's problems had also begun. That shady region of pain, the dull, grey fuzz at the front of her knees, had become much worse. She had danced through it, and during the later performances it had reached a pitch of exquisite intensity, shooting through her kneecaps. She had iced her joints each evening at midnight. And Moira had prided herself on being able to keep going, dancing through it; her dying finale had become more and more convincingly agonised. But after the show had finished, one night she found she could barely walk. The stairs to her flat had become almost impossible. The academy provided several different kinds of "conservative" treatment; they manipulated, palpitated and injected her kneecaps. But these interferences all failed in turn, and they decided on surgical correction. Through the long months of incapacity in her pale-green bedsit in Islington, Vincent Freestone made himself indispensable. After that first performance, he had asked if he might visit her; she was delighted to discover that alongside being a journalist he was an expert on classical music, and a real friendship developed. He was an odd young man, there was no denying that: slightly overweight, always dressed in an ill-fitting knitted tank-top and a flat cap, which he held against his heart when he sat at her bedside. And there was a gruffness in his manner towards other people which bordered on the rude; but this made his tender attentions to her come to seem more dependable than the easy, effusive sympathy of her dance friends. And he brought her the most surprising and wonderful gifts: black-cherry yoghurts, orchids, instant coffee, chocolates filled with liquor. He made her whiskey sours and always brought new

classical records for them to listen to. After the privations of dance school, spending time with him felt like being at a clandestine midnight feast.

When the third operation failed to restore Moira's right knee, my father had proposed. He had been offered a good job at a newspaper back up in Yorkshire; he would be able to take care of her. They could buy a house big enough for a studio, and Moira could teach. And she'd be closer to her people, who were mostly in the north-east. Moira had thanked him, and told him she would think it over. During her year of invalidism, she had received three other proposals. Moira knew herself to be extremely beautiful; she had been told this tartly by the teachers at dance school as a kind of admonishment. But she was just now realising that she had the kind of appeal to men that was heightened by indisposition. And these prior proposals had been delivered in terms that she felt failed to do her justice. "You're really frightfully pretty, you know," one retired dancer had told her, fingering his moustache and proffering a tiny ring. "You were a terrifically gifted dancer; the next big thing that isn't," her choreographer had said, patting her arm sadly, and producing a little burgundy box. Unlike other young dancers who took compliments badly, Moira was not embarrassed by these aggrandisements. She was offended by their diminishments. These compliments fell far short of the colossal and chthonic beauty Moira felt her person comprised. After she'd had a few sours, Moira sometimes stared at herself hard in the mirror, and she saw, in those glassy violet eyes, the dying swan stare back at her, in all its animal magnificence. "Pretty" didn't come close. She dismissed these suitors out of hand. But she considered Vincent's proposal seriously. She and Vincent had never so much as kissed, and he paid her no direct compliments at all; but to his quiet devotion she imputed an adoring acknowledgement of her catastrophic beauty. He might now, she began to think, be the most discerning audience she could hope to captivate. And so she accepted. She moved with Vincent to Todmorden, where she quickly tired of trying to teach leaden Yorkshire girls to dance; she had a baby and retreated into a gorgeous gloom.

Of course, as soon as I was old enough, she tried to teach me to dance. But, she told me, I had no natural talent. She could try as hard as she liked and I would only ever be mediocre. I had no grace. So there was little point. She stopped my lessons; the occasional trips we made to the Leeds Grand became increasingly infrequent. And things seemed to decline more rapidly after that. She barely spoke to my father, and when she saw me, she sometimes regarded me with the distant fondness of an old friend who has been deliberately kept at arm's length.

But then our afternoon salons had begun; and sometimes when I arrived home after school, Mum would play records and sweep about the room, blankets still clutched around her, talking through the dances and reminiscing. The afternoon before, the penultimate afternoon, she put on Prokofiev's *Romeo and Juliet*, turning it all the way up until I could feel the music in my body. Perhaps you know it? It begins with the rising panic of the flutes. And then the rest of the orchestra tensely builds-up towards the enormous crash; which is succeeded by soft cascades down into reedy undulation. The lingering harp, and the weird violin screech. It is like moving water then, pooling in a vast swell. At this point in the music, Mum dropped her blanket dramatically to the floor. She rose up on to her feet, and they began to flutter beneath her. "You see," she shouted, "she's falling in love. The bourrée is like the fluttering of Juliet's heart." She fluttered a while longer; and then she clutched at pieces of the furniture and slowly lowered herself backwards. "*This* is being moved," she cried, as she arched her spine aching up, her long white neck bared and the crown of her head descending towards the floor. Her hand swept across her brow. "I swoon," she cried out, her voice constricted. "And it must be spectacular; I stay like this until the dizziness blanks everything out. All I can feel is the arch of my back and the rush towards the floor. I am *almost* gone. And then he will swoop to catch me." Here she dragged herself up against the bookcase, slowly stacking her body back to vertical. "I will surrender my weight to him now, and he will take his cargo." She was breathless. She fell back onto her chaise and drew in her amber-green drink. "There is no falling in love without the swoon. The backbend, the sink and the lift in his arms. *This* is the key to classical ballet. This is what the surge of the music dictates. *La Sylphide*, our oldest romance, ends with a devastating swoon." Mum put down her glass and moved her hands about her in a fluid distraction. "My earthly lover binds me in a scarf; I let him wind it all around me, trembling at its touch; and my sylvan wings fall to the ground; he has killed me, you see, without knowing what he has done, and I have let him. I keel over into his arms." She dropped her arms suddenly and let her head fall back, lifeless. "And then I am carried away by my fairy sisters." She opened her eyes again, slowly circled her head back up and fixed them on the green water beyond the room. "He has *killed me*," she said again, turning to me. "Do you understand?"

I nodded, dumbly, not understanding.

Mum turned back towards the still green water. "When Margot Fonteyn played Juliet, the balcony scene, she managed eighteen swoons in six minutes. It got even more

desperate in the bedroom: *thirty-two* swoons. Romeo has to clutch her by the waist, to keep her from falling, doomed, to the floor. *Sleeping Beauty. The Dying Swan*. Imagine these without the backbend? She is extravagance itself; she takes up the whole stage with her swooning. With her dying. And then there is *Giselle!*” Her hands swept about in mesmerised movements. “I fall in love with a duke, so deeply that it takes all my strength. I am so fragile, I flutter on the breeze. I hear of his marriage to another and I am driven mad. I sink and swoon in my doomed adagios. And I die; but *still* I dance. I rise up from my grave, with the other jilted harpies, who wreak revenge upon their faithless men. But I will have no revenge. I will dance again with my Duke and forgive him; I swoon back into the forest, back to my grave.” She sighed and lay her arms extravagantly above her head, sinking into the chaise. Her eyes closed. This was the sign that I was dismissed.

The next day, I climbed the stairs and knocked at Mum’s door and there was no answer. I knocked again, and she uttered an abyssal sound. I sloped away and tried to do my biology homework, but the anxiety built into a flutter that forced me to move about. I was almost dancing. I alternated between the upstairs rooms, listening for any signs of disturbance. There was nothing; not even the sound of glasses and bottles clinking. I loitered outside her room, and could not dispel the thought of her bleeding silently out into the red velvet of the chaise. I pushed the door open. My mother’s arms hung limply either side of the chaise. Her back was pushed up along the curve of the recliner and her pretty head hung backwards, eyes open, hair sweeping the floor. She was utterly still. She was resolved into the perfect swoon.

Later, several months afterwards, I told my father how beautiful she had looked when I found her; I thought he’d appreciate that too. When I raised the alarm, crying like a baby gull, he’d come up after me. He’d ushered me out and then the whole process had been set in motion. They took her away, they boxed her up, and I never saw her again. But he must have seen her like that too, her body going out in a perfect arch. I thought he might have found some comfort in that final scene, in how serene she looked. But when I said it, when I said how I thought of her, he turned on me with a leer. “You still haven’t realised, have you, Ettie? And they say you’re a bright girl.” He went to the kitchen cupboard and brought out a tin that my mother used to keep jewellery in. He

opened it and handed me an envelope. “I found this,” he said. “In her room. Afterwards.”

I took the envelope. Its tongue had been folded tightly back into its mouth. The paper rasped as I opened it out again. It was a note, written in my mother’s over-elaborate hand. It began without preamble:

Vincent—You trapped me here, in my specially constructed glass case. Perhaps this is what you always wanted. I shall die so beautifully you will never forget it. Open casket please.

Then there was a small dividing line, scored across the middle of the page.

Esther—It feels like the ocean, and I cannot resist it. Give your audience something they will always remember.

And that was it. The words ended there. No affectionate sign-off, no little cross kisses. I stared across at my father. I read over the two paragraphs again. “What does it mean?”

My father looked at me as though I was a moron. “Your mother was very ill, at the end,” he said. “Delusions of grandeur. Paranoia. Most of all drunk. It was a sick thing to do.” He spat out the word sick. “But she *did it*. By her own hand, as they say. She took the drugs, and she posed her body like that. And then she waited to die.”

I looked at the letter again, but I couldn’t seem to read it. My eyes were swimming. “She staged it?” I asked. “She staged her death?”

“Do you think anyone looks so perfect, when they die, Ettie? They don’t. They look ghastly. Do you think anyone really goes out in a perfect backbend? It was her vanity. Yes, she staged it.”

Three

Falling in Love

I practised, often. Breathing quickly, then holding my breath. Over and over again. Long after Leanne and Laura and all the others had forgotten about our game, I was just finding my stride. I became adept at knowing just the point to stop if I wanted a headrush; and how to push myself over. I had a square of cashmere blanket, from Mum's old room, which I kept under my pillow. I suppose some might think it maudlin. But I found it wonderfully comforting and close. Some evenings, I would begin with that little fabric square, caressing it, feeling its scratchy softness against my cheek. Then I would lie back on my bed and close my eyes, allowing the greenness to begin to fill the dark. I would listen to the empty house, ticking around me. I would quicken my breath in successive cycles, and then I would take one enormous breath in, and expel it fully. I would seal my mouth shut. My thoughts would begin to thin down, and I'd arch my body upwards, like a fish. Sometimes I'd come back up immediately, gasping, my body rippling for oxygen, as though I were beached. But other times I'd go under. I don't know how long for; time gets distorted under the water. I thought of her, and I let my body swim.

I thought she might like it if I fell in love. That was supposed to be the way it happened, after all, the proper way: like Juliet, and Odette, and the Sylph, and Giselle. And that was how people talked about it, too: falling, falling hard, falling apart. So I hurled myself at romance, wanton with vertigo. The summer I turned fifteen, Aaron Murgatroyd, Laura's brother, started giving me lifts in his car. He hung around the school gates waiting for me, and Leanne and the others wore even more make-up and lurid bras that showed through their thin white shirts in hot pink, neon yellow, leopard print. Aaron was nineteen, a painter/decorator by day and a boxer by night; he spat a lot and had scars on his hands; he had dark skin and the lightest green eyes. He looked at the other girls in their tiny skirts as though they were the most boring sight imaginable, occasionally delivering them an ostentatious yawn. But whenever he spotted me through the railings he half-smiled, and I spotted it; then he would kick the ground to make the smile go away, and walk mock-nonchalant towards the car, slightly ahead of

me. He sometimes had a bag of chips waiting for me, making the front-seat warm and salty-damp when I sat on it in my school skirt.

Some evenings he would drive us up onto the moor tops. The further up the valley sides you go, the weirder the place names become: we drove through Little Egypt, past the row of exposed cottages called the Walls of Jericho; we drove along Pudding Lane, and wandered round the Red Water in the violet gloaming; we drove up Dog House and stopped at Scald End. And one night we drove up Sour Hall Lane, over the cattle grids, along the unmade tracks, all the way to Flower Scar, the old Roman road, tracking up to the very top of the Pennines. We were sat right at the peak of the valley, eating our chips wi' bits and drinking pop the colour of anti-freeze. We never said much to one another. The sun had just vanished from sight. In one direction, you could see all the way down the valley to Pendle, the hills beginning to turn blue in the dusk. In the other direction, the valley split in two, forking away towards Hebden Bridge and Rochdale. Studley Pike, blackened and phallic, rose out of the tops.

Aaron swigged on his can. Little lights begin to glimmer, like tiny stars caught in the valley sides. "Esther," he said. He was addressing me, presumably, but he continued to look straight ahead. "Ettie, I think about you all the time." He looked ashamed and stared at the steering wheel; then he hit it hard with both his hands. "Look, do you want to or not?"

I looked outwards, to the different distances of dark blue. Then I looked back at Aaron, at his dark profile. "Yeah, alright," I said.

Aaron was almost instantly on top of me. My skirt rucked up. I felt a slight rush and I concentrated on it: I closed my eyes; I thought about Juliet; I tried to hear the music, the weird violin screech and then the pooling swell. I tried to take it into my body. I let my head fall backwards, to constrict my throat. But I couldn't get the breathing quite right. I opened my eyes and looked out again, across the valley. Those hills, vanishing to darkness, were once on the same latitude as the Port of Sudan and Santiago de Cuba. You could have walked all the way from the Flower Scar to the South Pole on dry land. Mr Nield, with his long face and his desperate eyes, told us this in Geography class. Way back in *deep* time, hundreds of millions of years ago, the world existed as one enormous landmass, a Pangaea, surrounded by sea. The land had slowly, so slowly, riven apart, drifted enormously but imperceptibly into the continents we now know. Of all the cycles of the earth, the seasons, the tides, day and night, this was the most dramatic: the earth was breaking up, pulling apart. And in the future, in

hundreds more millions of years, it would collide again, recombining in a new supercontinent, and the shape of this new world would be totally unrecognisable. When I let myself go entirely, when I played dead in the dark, I could sometimes feel the earth move, a slow violent tremor through the ground below me. And this sometimes made me feel even more dizzy. There had been time, Mr Nield said, since the beginning of the universe, for it all to have come and gone, and come and gone again. The only traces of these vanished worlds would be the atoms inside us, atoms formed in stellar explosions. And this universe too would end: the sun would die, and geological time would run out. I closed my eyes again and let the dizzying deepen. I hyperventilated, quietly, so that Aaron wouldn't notice. I was just beginning to swoon away, when suddenly Aaron collapsed on top of me. He ugged, and then he reared up, before dropping himself heavily back into the driver's seat. He fixed his clothes, he cleared his throat, and then he opened the window onto the cool night sky and he spat out into it. And there we were again. Two damply separate human globs; bits of stars with blinking eyes.

Four

Communal Narcotics

I kept trying to find romance with Aaron. But he always seemed to interrupt me. Sometimes I'd swoon too soon, before he got properly started, and he'd get angry and tell me to stop playing silly beggars. On my sixteenth birthday, Aaron took me for a drive, and proposed. I laughed uncontrollably. He snatched the ring-box back into his pocket and looked at me for a moment in bleak confusion, before telling me to get out of the car. I spent that evening walking home along the side of the bypass. And after that, Aaron stopped driving me up onto the tops: he said I must have some kind of altitude sickness, with all the dizziness. We occasionally went for curry and beer in the valley bottom, but I could tell he half hated me now. Most nights I was alone in the house. Dad worked even later hours. And I would often lie on her bed, holding my breath in the dark, listening to the house creak, drifting in and out. Sometimes I felt her, as I arched my body upwards, as a slight shiver. Then I'd swoon fully.

I did well in my A-levels. I think the de-oxygenation made me especially receptive to the Romantics. I took up a place at the University of Leeds to study English Literature. I made the journey across to the city several times a week, taking the train that cut through the bottom of the valley and sped its landscape past me. There was a boy on my course, Rufus, who smelled of hemp and mouldering grass. He sat next to me in poetics seminars, and he always lolloped alongside me afterwards, trying to get me to delay the journey back to Todmorden and come to the pub. We often sat together in the Dry Dock, a beached barge-turned-bar in the middle of the ring road, drinking bitter and making jokes. Rufus betrayed his background almost immediately despite his ambient odour and crumpled appearance: he had been educated at Harrow and his parents were academics. They had made a large amount of money designing psychometric tests for the recruitment purposes of big companies. Rufus would tell me about his agonising holidays back home from school, when his every word was silently noted by his parents. He was convinced they were chalking it all up for later analysis. He told me that he became almost silent, for a while, fearing their scrutiny. And even at

university, he often blushed deeply when he spoke, his sonorous voice seeming to act against his will. His impressive face would impressively flush, his freckles lifting brightly out of their puce surround, as he rounded out perfect booming vowels, in the midst of a pub full of flat, indistinguishable voices.

In our final year, Rufus invited me to move into a squatted house in Chapel Allerton. Dad didn't want me to go. But it would just be for a year, and I barely saw my father at home anyway. I persuaded him that I needed to be out in the world; the truth was, I was beginning to feel ready for an audience. The Cherry Street house was well-organised. There were grilles on the front windows, so that the light came in in dingy perforations, but otherwise it was perfectly homely. The couple who had cracked the house open lived in the ground-floor living-room. They were Bradford anarchists who survived on food recovered from supermarket skips. Each evening they used to go out into Leeds, kitted out like renegade poachers: khaki jackets, combats, netted bags, adrenaline-readied to leap walls and dangle over the edge of the massive food bins, fishing for deformed bagels and use-by expired mackerel. They would bring back their cache and improvise exquisite meals: trout with poached eggs and roasted beetroot; pork with bruised peaches and goat's cheese; serrano ham and celeriac hash; all washed down with a chablis lifted from the Tesco Metro. In what might once have been the dining room lived a Danish journalist, Begitte, who wrote about the evils of the capitalist property market and the ethical necessity of squatting. She spoke several languages fluently and lived almost entirely on raw food. Upstairs was Rufus' room, which was filled with books and photographs and records, and the occasional beautiful girl draped over his furniture in her underwear, hazed in smoke. Next to him was a box-room where Jay, a near-silent heroin-addict, slept in a methadone swoon. And across the hall from them was my room.

When I arrived, a brutal-looking dog stood guarding the door: a pit-bull cross, black with a white patch across one eye and shoulders that were wider than mine. Rufus ruffled the dog's ears, in a not altogether convincing way. "It's Jay's dog. The house dog now, I suppose. Jay doesn't really get out to walk him, so we take him out when we can. Good boy, Braxus."

The dog pushed its enormous head against my thigh and whined effetely. I nudged past it.

My room was at the back of the house, so there were no grilles on the windows. The roof sloped down to a mattress against the back wall. The walls were painted

orange and the room smelled of warm and of wood. I loved it. For almost a year, I slept and read and drank and passed out in that room, looking out on the cherry trees on the back street and listening to Peter Green's Fleetwood Mac on repeat. Aaron came to visit occasionally and always looked bewildered. He brought round buckets of fried chicken, and pleaded with me to come back to the Calder Valley.

On weekends, I used to go dancing with Rufus and I made a point of ingesting everything that I was offered. This seemed like good manners. We used to go to the West Indian Centre and listen to dub so loud that I could feel my internal organs palpitate at their different resonating frequencies. Sometimes this would be too much of a temptation. I'd begin to let go in the bobbing frenzy of dreadlocks and sweat and adrenaline. I'd close my eyes, and begin to look for the green light behind them. I'd feel my vibrating pancreas, making me nauseously conscious of the separate parts of my body, of my private densities. And then I'd begin to go; I'd feel the swoop in my stomach and everything would go wonderfully blurry. But Rufus got sick of the bouncers forcing him to take me outside; he said I needed to learn my limits. And he invited me out less and less often.

During the week, I would read and read, and Braxus would loll with his massive head on my lap, drooling on my knees as I worked my way through two centuries of haunted novels. The pace at which I read was ferocious. But I retained next to nothing. It began to feel like the words were so much dark water running through my brain; nothing of it remained, but it flowed on through, and losing it felt as though it might be keeping me alive. The more I read, the worse I did in my exams and essays.

I'd brought the square of cashmere blanket from my mother's old room with me, and I kept it under my pillow. My talent was really quite well-developed by now. In my room, I would often begin by caressing the cashmere, feeling its scratchy softness against my skin. I had a sort of ritual, I suppose. I would lean back and close my eyes, allowing the greenness to begin to fill the dark. The light from outside would gleam against my closed eyelids, like a pulsing phosphorescence. I always tried to hear the music; sometimes I even played the music: the screech of the violins, the pooling, overwhelming swell. And I would arch my spine, letting my head fall all the way back, to constrict my throat more quickly. Sometimes I would hang off the edge of the bed, dangling my head upside down. On a good day, everything would soften instantly at the edges, and I'd be able to see her clearly in my mind's eye, and feel my body doubling

hers. On a bad day, I'd pass out too quickly to feel her, and I'd come to with Braxus licking my cheeks.

In the spring, the squat started to prick up in agitation. There were rallies in town against the privatisation of higher education and Rufus and the anarchists joined an occupation of the University's buildings. I felt a strange sort of tingling excitement about all of this; that it might be another chance to act on a larger stage, as part of some sort of an ensemble. I tagged along with Rufus to various meetings and marched alongside him in a demonstration. I let my body get crushed into the body of people. There was a thrill to this—the way a woman's shoulder pushed right up against mine, again and again, and the woman didn't even notice, or if she did, she let it carry on, shoulder to shoulder—that made me feel a little dizzy. I spent a couple of broken nights sleeping on the floor of a conference centre, where I breathed in the carpet dust and listened to people chatting on the balcony and playing guitar through the almost dark. Rufus knew everyone in the movement; in fact he'd slept with most of the girls. He often spoke at length in the group discussions, while everyone sat round in a circle using occult hand-signals. Rufus' face bloomed whenever he orated; he looked truly happy. Other people seemed to instantly trust him by his blush, and he became a de facto leader. Messages of support started to pour in: writers, academics and broadcasters sent their solidarity and came to give talks in the evenings. People baked us cakes, and braved the University's intimidating security staff to deliver them. And it turned out that Rufus was incredibly well-connected: journalists, professors, past MPs, all came to address us at his invitation. The real coup was Rufus' godfather: the famous poet and “personality” H.E. Ruthen announced that he would launch his new collection, with all attendant publicity, from the sit-in. He arrived one evening with a terrified-looking publisher, and wandered round the space, talking to the great unwashed with evident pleasure. He was an enormous man: six-foot-six and broad across the shoulders, but narrowed to nothing in his waist and the pits of his cheeks. He wore a velvet jacket and a cravat, and had a booming, patrician voice. He bore a striking physical similarity to Rufus, but never flushed.

The room had filled up in expectation of his reading, until hundreds were crushed into the space; Rufus gave out specific directions in the case of a fire, because the University had blockaded our fire escapes. Someone from the crowd shouted, “Corporate murder,” and everyone cheered. Ruthen began with a long address on the

importance of dialectics to poetry. He talked about the contradictions that are endemic to society and to language. He talked about the need to access these conflicts, to give them full scope, in poetry and in political action, so that language and society might transform themselves. He told us that acts of resistance were works of art. He told us that the fight began here, that we must carry it on to save education and the hope of a more egalitarian society. We must resist the changes that had been made since the Browne Review, and the invasion of the neo-liberal body snatchers. And then he read his new poems to rapturous applause.

Afterwards, Ruthen's editor hovered at a desk with his books set out, and Ruthen held court, signing copies and clapping some occupiers on the back. Rufus produced a bottle of cava he'd smuggled in and we toasted the new collection with plastic cups. I skittered about at the edges of the group. There was something unsettling about the way Ruthen kept looking at me, as he boomed to the group. When people asked him questions, about his poetry, or his politics, he had a way of shutting them down with a joke, of dismissing them, or of humouring them but letting everyone else see how utterly facile he thought they were. This didn't seem very dialectical.

The evening wore on: he sat down and students circled about him. He kept swivelling around, staring at each one as they spoke, seeming to hold them in a kind of indulgent contempt. His nostrils flared. He snorted unabashedly at some comments, as he signed his books. And his eyes keep lighting on me; he looked down his nose, as though sighting me down the barrel of a gun: monomaniacal. Rufus laughed horrifically loudly at everything he said, and seemed to be in a permanent puce delirium of happiness. The publisher had sold all the books, and was beginning to ready Ruthen for departure. Everyone wanted to shake his hand before he left. As he made his way past me, he swooped suddenly, and grabbed me hard by the upper arm: "Hawk seeks mouse," he said, right into my inner ear. "Meet me outside in ten minutes." He dropped my arm just as suddenly and shook more hands on his way out.

I curled up in a corner. I watched the main occupation leaders at the front of the room, making plans for the next day, deciding who to invite for the Friday-night slot. Two of them knew famous comedians, and the group was now arguing about which of the two was the most radical, and who would draw the largest crowd. I wanted to leave. The excitement of the first march was gone. A few days ago, that woman's body had pressed against mine over and over and I had felt the power of our repetition of one another, as bodies together. I had felt her close, and had had to hold back the swoon.

But it was all individuals now: the power of personal charisma to persuade. I could sneak out to quiver in the dark, clutching at tree bark, letting Ruthen turn me to quarry. But it all seemed like a rather tired scenario. I would be acting out a hammy part. And what kind of audience wants to see that? Not a very discerning one. I spent a few more hours there in the occupation; and then, when it was safe, I ventured back out into the city.

The next few months I stayed away from the action: I heard reports from Rufus, when he occasionally came back home for the night. I spent a lot of time in my room. I read and I wrote in the day; and I drank and I passed out in the evenings. The nights were getting warmer; and the sky was brightening. One evening in May, I was walking back along Cherry Street with a stack of books, breathing in the smell of lit pollen and beer rising from students smoking and drinking in their front gardens. But when I arrived at the front door, a police-woman was barring the way.

“Do you live here?” the woman asked. Her voice was kind, despite her military stance.

“I do,” I said.

“Then we’re going to need to ask you a few questions.”

Another officer ushered me through to the kitchen and asked me to sit down. The other doors were shut, but I could hear unfamiliar steps in the room above—in my room. And the house smelled strange: of metal and salt.

The officer explained, firmly and in deliberately simple terms, the basic outline of what had happened, with timings and locations cross-referenced against his notebook. I elaborated the scene in my mind as the officer stirred sugar into a cup of tea for me that would apparently help with the shock. Begitte had raised the alarm at 15.07. She had been working at her desk that afternoon, researching an article. Seemingly out of nowhere, a small orb of bright liquid had dropped onto her page. It had spread slowly into a bright orange circle on the paper, working its way through the grain. And then another drop had followed. And another. Begitte had looked up. A livid patch of reddish brown was bleeding across the ceiling above her, a bright, asymmetric bulge of colour either side of a line in the plasterboard. It was darkest at the centre, spreading to bright orange at the edges, as though the plasterboard were litmus. She had no idea what it could be. A break in a pipe that was full of liquid rust? A psychedelic attack of liquid legionnaires? And there was a smell to it. A smell of iron and salt.

Exsanguinated. That was the word, the word I let flow through my mind over and over. I wanted to give the officer the word. Perhaps he didn't know it? It pooled in my mouth, unspoken. Exsanguinated. The fatal loss of all the blood from the body. Jay had slit his wrists. And he'd done it properly, scoring vertically along from the tender crux behind the elbow all the way to the wrist. He had slumped against the wall and bled his way out into the floorboards, along the joists, through the plasterboard, and down onto Begitte's white page. He had sat there, emptying, until Begitte discovered him.

"I'm afraid we recovered some drugs paraphernalia in your friend's room. So we need to conduct a search of the rest of the property."

"Where's Braxus?" I asked.

"Braxus?" the policeman echoed.

"The dog. Jay's dog."

The policeman looked at the table.

"We did discover a dog at the property. But I'm afraid it had to be confiscated under the Dangerous Dogs Act."

"Confiscated?"

"Miss, the dog is illegal. It will need to be destroyed."

When they'd finished their search, I retrieved the cashmere square from the back of my bedroom door, and left everything else behind. I walked back down the pollen-filled street towards town. I took the train to Todmorden, and walked back along the canal path. It was a soft, warm evening. I knocked at the front door. My father had Wagner on in the living room and had unbuttoned his shirt, so that his stomach domed out.

"Esther," he said, staring at me. "Whatever have you done to yourself?" He opened the door and then stood watching as I walked back up the stairs to her room. "I knew you'd come back," he called out after me.

Five

Big City

A year later, and I was stagnating at the bottom of the valley. I'd been doing some temp work at my Dad's paper, but I was feeling further and further away from her. I could turn myself out like a light, now; but there was no one to see it, no one to know how beautifully my act had developed. I knew where she had gone for her audience. I wanted to do the same.

Dad drove me down at the start of the summer. We navigated our way on the M1, and then turned into the intestinal streets of the city. In the last stages of the journey, the car moved slowly along a road in south London and a heat-haze streamed upwards from the stationary traffic ahead of us, making a zigzag of fumes on the air. I'd been to London once as a child; she brought me here one Christmas, to see the Nutcracker. This looked nothing like my memories of Covent Garden. I stared out of the open car-window, watching the procession of people and things as they trailed past. White boys with mean, thin bodies were strutting, shirtless, on the garage forecourt to the right. One of them yanked a squat dog on a lead that had been improvised from string. A gang of children jostled for position outside the newsagent, smoking and competitively swearing. Tables lined the pavement in front of shops, offering up boxes full of mangoes and arthritic-looking vegetables. In the windows, naked halal chickens hung by the score.

"What do you think of it, then?" Dad asked as we crept down the high street. I didn't say anything. But I think I must have been excited. From the paranoid look of the men gathered outside the mobile-phone shop, to the unfeasibly pink pool of freshly-ejected sick at the end of my new street, to the violent movement of people and vehicles in every direction; it all comprised a completely new scene.

"Dad," I cried, "turn here. This is it." And we turned down Marlborough Road, past the white facades of the Victorian terraces, and pulled up at number 29. I had very little with me. On the back seat of my father's car sat a carrier bag with some shoes in it, two carrier bags full of clothes, and another carrier bag of toiletries. I gathered these

things together and then stood with Dad on the doorstep. He rang the bell. There was a small front garden, with two overgrown rose bushes coming into bloom. An old climber, desiccated now, was still twisted over the door and up the front of the house. We heard heavy footfall on the stairs inside, and then my cousin appeared at the door.

“Hello. Esther. Uncle Vince.” Veronica raised her right hand in a pow-wow. She didn’t smile exactly, but stretched her mouth outwards horizontally. She stood for a moment on the threshold, eyeing me up, as though she might have thought better of the whole thing. But then she ushered us inside, towards the dark kitchen at the back of the house. Dad leant against a worktop, testing surfaces with a tap of his nails, like a covert surveyor. I stood close to him, still clutching my carrier bags. I wasn’t sure if I should make myself at home just yet. Veronica put the kettle on and asked us about our journey. Veronica was a junior doctor. She was a solid person, I remembered, certain of her usefulness to the world, socially at ease. I recalled a childhood family trip to a stately home: I had sloped off with Veronica, thinking we were drawn together into a cousinly conspiracy, and then she had forced me to climb a tree, standing below me with a long, sharp stick and pricking my thighs whenever I stopped moving. This, Veronica had said, was to toughen me up.

“Listen, Esther, make yourself at home. I’ve got to dash to a shift, but I’ve had these keys cut for you, and your room’s right at the top. Sorry I can’t stay, old man.” Veronica batted Dad on the arm. “Duty calls.” And then she was out through the front door.

I liked my new room. It reminded me of the squat, because of the slope of the roof, and the smell of wood. It only took me a moment to unpack. I came back downstairs to find my father poking about in the kitchen. There were stacks of filthy crockery around the sink, and half-eaten things had been abandoned on the worktops. There was a distinct smell of mouse. “If this is how doctors live,” Dad said, “I wouldn’t want them anywhere near my viscerals, eh?” He emitted a short laugh. “Let’s go out for dinner, love.”

We set off on foot back towards the main road, wading through the warm evening and the smell of petrol. At the end of the road, a man was sat on the ground, against the wall of a Cambodian takeaway and fish-and-chip shop, sweating, in a filthy jacket. He had ejected a new puddle of vomit. Dad upped the pace towards Tooting.

We opted for a Sri Lankan restaurant, with bamboo place mats. We ordered too much food; Dad was being beneficent. He told me to dig in, but I could see he was

slightly horrified when I kept on going. I downed four large bottles of beer and then I ordered us spirits. He was studying my face: my lurid orange lipstick, which had probably smudged and sometimes left a bright wax on my teeth; my hair, a dull mink colour, hung heavily around my face; my white cheeks and my almost invisible eyelashes. Sometimes, when I don't wear mascara, my eyes look derelict. I could see Dad was finding it painful to appraise my face. He'd like me to be well-groomed, like her. But I prefer a sort of pretty squalor; a deconstructed homage.

"Will you think about the job, love?" Dad had got me the chance of a journalism internship with a local paper back in Yorkshire. I had refused it. I'd taken a temp receptionist job at the *Ham and High* in north London, a newspaper with no connection to my father. "You don't have to do something so menial."

"I want to try this," I said. I downed my final drink, and then we headed back towards Veronica's house. We stopped at a crossing on the main road and Dad pressed the button. Cars and motorbikes sped past at a furious pace, relentless even on a Sunday evening.

"Just a minute," I said. I felt a little peculiar. I thought I might be about to spontaneously pass out; that had never happened before. Perhaps it would be a sign of some kind, from her? But instead, I held onto the crossing post, turned myself a half circle around it, and bent over the gutter. As the green man started beeped, I threw up my entire meal into the road.

"Oh, Esther, love." Dad bent down to help me. "Esther. I don't want to leave you here."

But I reared back up, laughing wildly. Everything was so new, and I couldn't wait to perform here. "There's nowhere else I'd rather be." I spat into the gutter, and then linked his arm, zig-zagging him all the way back to the house.

It took ages to get rid of him. We searched out coffee in the gloomy, mousy cupboards, and once this was finished, nothing could legitimately delay him. He stood on the doorstep of 29 Marlborough Road, and he caught me by the wrist.

"Let me see your eyes, love." He tilted my face up towards him. He was doing this to try to see her, I knew, because our eyes are the same strange colour; a milky grey that she called violet.

He let go of my chin. “Esther, London’s a big place. It’s different. If anyone ever hurts you Esther, you tell me. You tell me and...” He sniffed hard, and pushed his thumb and forefinger against his eyelids.

I stared up at the sky. His performance was making me think of the night of my mother’s funeral when, after everyone else had gone, I was left in the front room with Dad, fully alone with him for the first time. A new compact of two. He had been drinking enough to make him weepy. He had taken my hand. “Esther,” he had said staring into the fireplace. “Esther, I sometimes have the strangest thoughts. Sometimes I want someone to hurt you, Esther. Only a little. So that I can hurt them back. So that I can protect you. I tried to protect your mother ...” And then had he dropped my hand, leant back into the sofa and pressed his thumbs into his eyes, sniffing violently.

He stopped sniffing on the doorstep of 29 Marlborough Road after a few moments. “You’ve got a long journey, Dad,” I said.

“Yes, of course. I’ll go.” He kissed me, holding me tight to him, and then he moved away down the path. At the gate he turned back towards me. His body was black against the navy sky.

“I have been a good father, haven’t I, Esther?” he called out.

“Yes, Dad,” I said, and slammed the door shut.

I ran straight up to my new room, in the eaves, and opened the skylights, letting in the warm night air. I lay on the bed, listening for the sound of my father’s car pulling away. I thought of her, and slowed my breathing, only half swooning. When I was very young, on Sunday nights we sometimes drove in the darkness back from my Nana’s house, along the motorway. I would look out into the blackness and see the glimmering squares of light from houses in nearby towns. I would always want Dad to turn off the road, to pull up so that I could get out, knock on each door and introduce myself. It was such a strange thought, that there were all these people, inside their houses, eating their teas and making jokes and sitting on their sofas, who knew nothing about us, who didn’t know about my beautiful mother, and would never know that we had been there, secretly in the dark, speeding past them, seeing their windows and wondering about them.

And now, lying in my new bed, I thought of all the people in London, living in parallel, their rooftops multiplying away towards the city centre. I was thinking that, in the overwhelming majority, they would never know, or wonder about me. I could chalk them up as parallel lines on a wall, and they would repeat away, exceeding my ability to

mark them, because of all of the new people being born. And even though I couldn't count them, we were all in the city together, at the same time, duplicating one another; and now I was joining them, just like she had before me; we were all lying in parallel. I sank further into the bed, and began to make myself dizzier. When I slept, I dreamt of falling.

Six

Empathic Oceanic

The next morning, I sat on the black line for the very first time. The tube was like a rickety fairground ride that you don't quite trust: noisily pulling away from each station, judderingly and with effort at first, up the ascent, and then gaining speed, hurtling down to the next stop. People's proliferations infringed upon me at every turn: newspapers, umbrellas, suitcases, the muffled emanations of ipods. I felt fantastically violated. I marvelled at each station as a seemingly-fit-to-burst carriage squeezed in an extra couple of people. It reminded me of Dad's old party trick: he would slip five-pence pieces into an already brimming pint, squeezing the metal discs down the inside of the glass, the ale rising to a dome in the middle as more and more pieces were artfully eased in, seeming to defy the laws of space. I observed the new people around me: sitting opposite was an older woman in festival-bright lycras, staring ahead and out of the window at the furred black insides of the tube tunnel, a beatific look on her face; there was a smartly dressed young woman diagonally opposite, skinny and jerky, like a hunted bird, with a severe chignon; and next to her was a jaundiced looking man, sweat puckering on his upper lip and a slight agitation to his face, staring intently at the young woman's ballet pumps. I changed onto the grey line at London Bridge, with lots of the same passengers. We moved together like a school of fish through the station tunnels, and took our places in a new carriage. A couple of moments in, a strong smell prickled my nostrils. I thought at first that a dog must have squeezed its way onto the tube, between the legs of the densely-packed passengers. I glanced to my right: a large man in a high-vis jacket was pushing his way through to catch hold of the pole. His hair was lank and his chin was stubbled: dense iron filings worked into circles by magnets. He stood right in front of me, and I could practically see the smell coming off him, in mustardy waves. I turned to watch the other passengers: a woman stood nearby pushed her mouth into a converse arch and turned her head away; another squirmed and put a handkerchief across her face. No one could move away. I settled into my seat and began to breathe deeply. I let my head fall backwards, and began the ritual. I closed my eyes

and concentrated on the overwhelming smell. The odour was waxy at first, like lanolin and ears and dirty scalps; and then it stung into something more vinegar and sharply testicular. I breathed in again: finally the smell tanged into mouldering yeast. The man's body was impressing itself on everyone in the carriage. It was obscene. The more I breathed, the stronger the smell became, as though he was blooming in my nose. It was heavy, his scent, and it started to get to me. I breathed in again: dog and cider-groin and thickened scalp-fat, it hit me hard in the sinuses. I thought about my first London swoon being here, on the tube. But then I started to gag, and Swiss Cottage was announced. I got up, followed the jaundiced-looking man up to the escalator, fixing my attention on his back, and the way his white shirt clung to the damp column of his spine, all the way up.

I pushed through the revolving doors of the newspaper office and into the foyer. The building was glass fronted and the sunshine made the grain of the white-marble floor sparkle. It was much grander than anywhere I had previously temped. Other people surged in around me, breasting up out of the tube and on through the building. I approached the front desk.

"Hello," I said, "I'm Esther Freestone. I'm the temp receptionist."

"Oh. Right," said the woman sat on the other side of the desk, slightly behind and to the right of a flower arrangement with a pineapple as the centre-piece. The woman half-sighed; it was just audible. "Well, this is your seat." She motioned towards the chair at the side of her and I made my way round to it. On my side of the desk there was a computer, a piece of paper with log-in details, an empty desk-tidy, a company mug full of biro's and a small stand-alone sign with my name on it, cut into white plastic: Esther Freestone. I liked the echoing curves of all the e's. There was something plasticky bright and biting about my name laid out like that. I sat down on the spin chair and plummeted down a few inches.

"Your chair is the broken one," the woman said. "*Polly* never minded it." She looked straight ahead at her screen and jabbed at her keyboard, her fingernails clack-clacking against the keys. I got the impression that she might not have been typing into a real document; the clacking was quick and defensive. On her side of the desk there was: another company mug, this one with a red-brown lipstick pucker on the rim; a photograph of an older man, stood amongst racing dogs; two paperweights, identical except for the colour of the swirls inside; an open packet of Silk Cuts; a small mound of

multi-coloured paperclips; and a name plate: Maureen Walmsley. She must have been in her late forties: aggressively cropped bleach blonde hair, red nails, tight mouth drawn on in a fierce red-brown, tight trousers with a satin shirt tucked in, glittering gold and diamante earrings.

“You’ve got a safety video to watch for the next hour. If you don’t get a move on you’ll be late for it.” Maureen didn’t look up from her screen.

I sat alone in a room without windows. The room had shelving on each wall, full of packets of paper and envelopes and pens in every colour. It was in truth a large stationery cupboard in which someone had set up a TV. A woman from HR had introduced herself earlier and provided a plastic seat for me. She turned off the lights and made a tired joke about popcorn. Then I sat in the dark and watched a man on the screen lifting things off a pallet: in the right way (knees bent: big green tick); and in the wrong way (bending from the hips: enormous red cross). For a moment I wondered what I was doing here. But then I sank into the dark, and let my head fall backwards. I didn’t go completely. Just enough to remind me that here, in this enormous city, there would be new ways for us to mirror one another.

The brightness of the foyer was startling after my cupboard sojourn; Maureen Walmsley barely acknowledged my return. We sat mostly in silence for the rest of the day, Maureen passing across thick, printed guides to various telephony and online systems for me to read. But at six o’clock Maureen turned suddenly on me, with a look of some violence. “Right,” she said, “we’re taking you to the pub.” I shut down my computer and followed her out of the building. Maureen lit up almost immediately, and we stood on the edge of the busy main road as cars surged past us. Maureen rocked slightly on her heels: from the pleasure of the cigarette, I wondered, or towards the strange vertiginous pull of the traffic? We were going to “The Swiss”, Maureen informed me, between compulsive drags. Maureen’s mouth squeezed repeatedly into a tight, bright-brown anus around the end of her fag. I looked away.

The Swiss Cottage pub was directly opposite the office, marooned in an island in the middle of the two streams of traffic where Avenue Road splits. There were four lanes either side, and the noise was enormous. We crossed to the pub and Maureen took a seat at a picnic table; its legs were concreted into the solid grey area that was signposted, “Beer Garden”. “I’ll have a white-wine soda,” Maureen said, and pointed

me towards the door. Stepping inside the pub was like stepping into another season: it was dark, the tiny windows letting in very little light; it was like a Black-Forest cottage permanently fast in the deep of winter. Several old men sat at the bar, red-nosed, and one nodded at me, swilling his glass. There was an old woman, hunched like a boulder next to an empty fireplace, guarding a tartan wheel-along shopping trolley and a tiny dog. She issued a constant soft stream of profanities. A Korean man with a sports bag full of knock-off DVDs was winding his way from table to table. Two women stood like henges behind the bar, both of them skinny with blanched faces and gothic lipstick, reluctantly moving to pull pints when called.

I bought the drinks and went back out to the blue sky and car fumes. I sat down next to Maureen and we sank into an uncompanionable silence. Maureen gulped back her drink and chain smoked. "It's warm, no," she said after a while. Some men from the office sat down on a table behind us and Maureen leaned back, pushing into their conversation, asking how they all were, roaring with laughter at their jokes. "I'll have a white-wine soda," she said to one of the men, as he got up. I made my way, alone, back to the bar.

At some point later in the evening, when all the picnic tables were full and the separate parties had spilled over into one another, a man sat down next to me.

"You look a bit lost," he said. He had sandy hair, and a sandy face: tan, rough, a gold-blond greying beard. He was older than me, perhaps in his forties, and his voice lilted upwards, towards the North-East.

"Oh, I'm just new here," I said.

"Right," he said. "Do you work at the paper?"

"Sort of," I said. And then, to be whimsical, I offered: "It's a bit like being on a ship isn't it?"

"How do you mean?"

"See, we're on the deck of the ship. At the prow." I gesticulated with my glass, motioning the shape of the enclosed beer garden, concrete slabs curved into the front of a bow. "And the road rushing around us is the sea."

He looked at me like I might be deranged; I could see him assessing the situation, deciding instead that I was probably just drunk. This did not seem to deter him. "Well, yes," he said, "I can see what you mean. If, of course, you mean the *North* Sea: brimming with pollution and discarded prophylactics and the ghosts of lost souls."

My obligatory laugh seemed to vaporise in the warm night. The sky had sunk into navy blue above and around us, and the black tower blocks across the road now seemed like the charred remains of a faraway shore.

“Can I buy you a drink?” he asked.

When he got back, he started telling me about real boats, and his childhood on the quayside. He told me about the area he grew up in; and then about its demise. There was something about the emptiness he was describing that I thought I recognised. I wanted to talk more. I thought we might have a rapport; in truth, I thought he might be a good first-night audience.

“We’ve missed the last tube,” he said. “I know a place we can go.”

We lay in bed, in a serviced apartment; Thomas had begged the key from a friend who was working the desk of the town-house hotel. We made a post-coital V in the enormous raft of a bed, our feet touching and our bodies angled away from one another. I spent the early morning, as the light broke over London and spilled in through the blinds, making Thomas recount the desolate details of his childhood. I drew the stories out of him. And as he spoke, I closed my eyes, steadily quickening my breath, letting my mind soften.

Thomas told me that he grew up on the Wear, at the edge of a Sunderland shipyard, in a terrace of houses at the very limit of the land. When they were shipbuilding, these great steamers would grow up right in front of his front door: 30ft behind their television set and net curtains, the newest ship would rise straight up, a sheer and incalculable cliff of steel, gradually massing and blocking out the light. The house would be dark for months. And then, on the day of the launch, the freighter’s horn would blast, and it would be off: sunshine would flood their house again. And the ship-building would start all over. Every so often, at night, Thomas and his sister would waken to the siren’s scream: they would peer out of the curtains, two tiny ghouls, to watch the searchlight’s beam circle across the surface of the dark water.

Thomas’ father had been black trade, and mostly worked as a welder. He was an incomer, down from Scotland, and he hated it. And that was before they knew it all, too: how the muck they brought home wasn’t just so much oil worked indelibly into carpets and creases of skin, but trails of deadly aerialised poison. Thomas told me how he now imagined it: the asbestos in black sparkler stars arcing through their house, mucky

sparks cascading through the air from the tips of his father's fingers. And he told me that he wondered now if the black stars were settled at the bottom of his lungs, waiting and growing. Silicosis and asbestosis all around the quay.

I asked him to tell me about the worst times, to recount the most desolate bits of his childhood. I was in a strange breathless state, but one I knew well, holding myself suspended between dizziness and passing out. I could manipulate my breathing so adeptly, by now, that I didn't think he had even noticed.

When things at the yard started to get difficult, he said, his parents started to argue. His father's work was casualised, and dwindling to nothing. His mother had grown up in the yards: her father had worked them through the war years, when Sunderland made a quarter of the tonnage of all of the ships. Sunderland had won the Second World War, Thomas' grandfather always said. And he'd vowed he'd build ships until he died: which he did, at 55-years-old, when a piece of ironstone fell out of a bucket swinging above his head and shattered his skull.

Their yard was the last to shut finally in 1988. Nothing worse than those ships, Thomas told me, except for them being gone. Their house was light now, all the time; but the light was preternaturally bright, carrying seagull cries through the silence into the living room. The quay was deserted; and at night, instead of the scream of the siren, he and his sister would wake to the sound of lone, drunken men raging at the water.

After the closure, his mother, Mary, stayed in her room a lot; and then his father, Mick, left them and moved to the south, for new work and a new family. Mick would come back up, every so often, and sit in his car outside the house, waiting to take Thomas' sister out for her visit. But he never came back inside their poison-star-spangled house. Mick would take Amanda out for the day, and she would come back home with ridiculous presents. They had no money for school dinners or shoes, but Amanda had new earrings and silver bracelets and a ring with a pink, cut-glass stone. Sometimes his mother said Mick didn't take Thomas out with them because Mick was a bastard; but sometimes she said Mick didn't take Thomas out because *Thomas* was a bastard. After a while Thomas stopped hoping for his own visit. His mother didn't do much around the house now; she lived on meal replacement drinks, switching to gin in the evenings, and bought in biscuits and cereal for Thomas and his sister. Amanda was desperate to get away. So he tried to keep the house together as best as he could. He learned to cook: by the time he was twelve he could do a mean vindaloo, with lemon-meringue pie for afters. He would persuade his sister to invite her friends over for tea,

so that there were more of them and the house would feel full, the group of them warding off the empty, shipless space outside and the strange glinting light inside. He made lasagne and shepherd's pie and corn-beef hash, all out of his paper-round money. His mother sneered and said he had no real skills, not like his grandfather, or his father. But his sister and her mates crowded round most evenings, calling him a proper little chef, sometimes kissing him full on the lips and then laughing in his face.

Still, though, his sister wanted to leave. And as soon as she was 16, Amanda left for London. She danced in clubs, she said in a postcard with Beefeaters on the front, and was drinking a lot of champagne. She lived in a flat in Hampstead owned by a very rich man, who was in love with her. Their mother tore the postcard into four uneven squares and put them in the bin. His mother drank pink and yellow meal-replacements all day long now, and had grown obese without ever eating solids. Thomas decided that as soon as he was able, he would follow Amanda. He saved his odd-job money and, at 15, took the coach down to London Victoria. But when he got to Mandy's flat it was not what he had expected: there were four girls sharing a bedroom, sleeping on two stained double mattresses on the floor, and when the man who owned the flat came round, she made him hide in a wardrobe. He hated it there, and his sister looked tired and sallow; but she swore blind she wouldn't go back north. Thomas spent a couple of weeks sleeping rough on benches on Hampstead Heath, showering back at his sister's, sneaking into the shared bathroom down her corridor. He got a job at a creperie, and spent the next 20 years working his way through various kitchens in north London. He managed a coffee shop now, he told me; bought-in cheesecake and frappuccinos. And as he aerated hot milk, he sometimes wondered where the time had gone, and how big the dark sparks in his lungs had grown.

Thomas turned over to face me when he'd finished talking. I could feel his eyes on me. I arched up my body, and cut off my breath. I started to slide into unconsciousness. "What are you doing, you mad bitch?" he said, and he shook me. "Misery porn and a bit of auto-asphyxiation. Is this what you get off on?"

Our rapport wasn't what I'd hoped for; but we'd made a start.

That morning was muggy; the warm air nestled round me as I trailed down the Finchley Road towards the office. I was giddy and slightly delirious from lack of sleep. When I sat down behind the reception desk, it was 9.03. Maureen looked over at me, and made a clicking sound with her tongue. As everyone streamed into work, I let the Wearside

stories continue to circle in my mind over and over, as I put through calls and booked rooms for meetings. They were beginning to fade already, the details swirling and changing, becoming secondary to the immediate glass and marble and plastic around me. But something remained strongly in my mind. It was the indulgent weariness in the eyes of the man at the hotel desk the night before, as he handed Thomas the keys to the apartment. A suppressed shake of the head, and a smothered smile that suggested Thomas' incorrigibility. This cluster of gestures made me aware that our evening was one of many. That it had been repeated at least enough times to produce weariness in Thomas' friend. That my body in that bed, alongside Thomas', was part of a series of repetitions. This began to feel wonderfully dizzying. From behind the reception desk, I could see the sky above north London turn dark as a bruise. The air was growing humid, fizzing as each besuited visitor drove it in through the revolving doors. It smelled warm and animal, like cat fur. I thought of the city circling close around me, and around Thomas, and around the other bodies that had preceded and would replace me, and him. And I thought of her, as the storm broke in forks of light through the violet sky.

Seven

Overpowering Algorithms

A month into the job, and nothing spectacular had happened. I had had high hopes of the tube, at first. The black line tunnelled me home each day, and the further south we got, the hotter it seemed to be, as though we were travelling deeper down, towards the centre of the earth. The heat helped to make me dizzy, and there was certainly a captive audience. Often, I let myself blur into a semi-conscious state. But so did plenty of other commuters. It wasn't much of a show. And there wasn't enough room for a back bend.

It rained a lot, this summer gone. One evening, when I re-emerged above ground in Colliers Wood, it was raining particularly heavily. My shoes filled up with water and when I turned off the high street, the pavement was littered with snails, which seemed to be multiplying in the warm wetness. I walked gingerly, fearing I might inadvertently crush one underfoot. I searched them out, though it was often difficult to spot their grubby tiger shells against the grubby wet stone. When I spotted one, I threw it up into the air; I made it fly in a pleasing arc, so that it dropped dramatically back into the giant hydrangea in the front garden it had emerged from.

Inside number 29, Veronica was sat at the kitchen table, eating toast and poring over some papers. "You're squelching," she said, without looking up, as I came into the kitchen.

"Yes," I said. "It's raining."

Veronica looked tired but determined, as though she has been readying herself to say something to me. "I don't know where you go some nights, Ettie," she said, "and I honestly don't care. But I've got your dad breathing down my neck, and my dad, and I'm not going to let you get away with just careering off the rails." Vron crunched her toast, and didn't look at me.

I sat down. I could feel the water form a skein around my buttocks on the wooden seat, and this was pleurably distracting. The previous night, I had met Thomas again and we had gone back to the same serviced apartment. But he didn't want

to talk about his family, and he was on me so quick I didn't have time to hyperventilate. I knew why Vron was worried: her father is my Dad's brother. Her father is a surgeon, and her mother is a tax lawyer. As far as they were concerned, Mum was a decadent, and she'd left a dangerous legacy of potential frivolity. Veronica had been tasked with trammeling me into usefulness.

"The thing is, Vron," I said. "I know what you all think. But I'm looking for something here. I am ... I'm trying something."

"As a receptionist?" Vron looked up at me now, with a flash of contempt; but her face softened. I imagine I looked fairly pitiful after the downpour, my hair plastered to my cheeks, my eyelashes beaded with raindrops.

I looked away from Veronica's gaze: it is hard to look at her for long without feeling entirely superfluous. Veronica is such a solid person. Her body is fed and exercised exactly to the degree that it is strong and capable, without being aesthetically distracting; her hair is cut into a bob that is practical without being self-indulgently severe; her clothes are uncoordinated, utilitarian hybrids of sports wear and work wear. Everything about Vron's appearance bespeaks practicality.

"If you want a purpose, Ettie, why don't you come and do something useful at the hospital? The phlebotomy ward is desperate for good people, and they train you on the job. If you had a skill like that, you could be *really* useful, here or anywhere else in the world. There are kids in Tooting, you know, coming from the most horrendous places, places you've probably never heard of in Todmorden, and no one in this country cares about them." She pushed the last corner of toast into her mouth. "At least think about it, Ettie," she said, and got up. "I could take you in to shadow them one day."

"Phlebotomy?" I asked. "Isn't that blood?"

"Yes, it would mean working with blood."

"Would there be a lot of blood?"

"Well, you'd be collecting blood samples for testing. I'm sure you'd get over any queasiness. Everyone does after a while."

"Yes," I said. "The sight of blood. I'll definitely think about it."

Veronica grabbed a bag from the door. "I've got a shift," she said. "There's a leftover lasagne in the fridge."

As Veronica left, I could hear the muffled shuffle of a rodent in one of the kitchen cupboards.

That evening I lay on my bed, beneath my skylight, and thought again about the remainder of my night with Thomas. It wasn't that late when we had finished our drinks. We hadn't missed the last tube. But Thomas had insisted that we go to the hotel, rather than to his flat. And his face had become over-animated when he said it. Aggressively jokey. Panicky. There was someone at home, I now concluded. And this made me feel again the sense of my repeatability, my extensibility into other female shapes. I thought about different ways to deepen that wonderful feeling; to repeat it so that it might become dizzying. I lay still for a while, watching bits of glittering far-away fire in the sky through the rain-grubbed glass of the skylight. And then I had an idea. I remembered something that Maureen said to me. "If you really want to get to know this city," Maureen had said, with a mean taunt in her voice. "You want to try online dating. You'll get the real picture there. See how much this city cares about you."

I stole downstairs and back to the kitchen. There on the table was Veronica's laptop. I huddled it to me, and ran back upstairs. I fired it up: no password needed. I opened the internet, typed in "London dating" and myriad links replicated down the screen. I clicked on the first one. There were faces, immediately, head shots of grinning girls. I began to feel a slight thrill. I steadied myself, to hold it off, and began, slowly, to breathe more deeply.

The little white-bordered rectangles repeated themselves down the lefthand side of the screen, decapitated iterations of tilting female faces with glittering eyes, cheeks pushed up into plasticity, repeated prehensile top-lips making strange, inviting shapes. There was also text, in a box next to each head. In the largest text were the pseudonyms: Just_one_dimple / Sinequanon / Geeky_Redhead / Quirky_English_Rose/ Funky_gibbon/ Lost in translation/ Opal74 / Piscean78/ Pepper81 / Rumi76 / Indigo_79 / Helen_of_Troy / Superwoman / ModernMarilyn / Frogkisser / Neptunia / DizzieLizzie / OneElleofagirl / ShrinkingViolet / BengalLikeTheTiger / Betterin3D / Babygurl / TinyDancer / Sunny_side / Happy_Pepper / Smiley_spice / GoneFishing / Red_Nail_Polish / CultureVulture / CarpeDiem / HoorayForHedonism / IamMe / LastRolo? / LabradorOwner.

Then, slightly smaller, came the subheaders: Do you like Bob Dylan too? / I love romping in my hunter wellies. / I love my Vespa, cupcakes and HBO. / I like the design principles, crime series and knitwear of Scandinavia, and vitamin D. / Sunshine, tea, F. Scott Fitzgerald, 70's glass kitchenware. / Lo fi songs are great. / Je danse, donc je suis. / What is it about France and all things French? / I love the changing seasons. / I

love food. / I love all things quirky. / I really detest the smell of oranges. / I'd date me. / Not your typical Mexican gal. / Curious about Mars. / Is this what it's come to? / Write something here. / Insert subheader of your choice. / In need of subheader inspiration. / Trying to think of something smart. / Do I have to do a subheader? / ??? / Well, this is embarrassing. / I work in finance *shudder*. / I'm a divorce lawyer in the city. / I'm looking for someone who is professional. / Woof. / I'm into beards. / Call off the dogs. / You're the one for me fatty. / Don't assume. / There's no lie in her fire. / I have magnificent breasts and an adequate personality. / Mostly after your money rofl. / I'm not very good at skiing. / Who cares if the glass is half full or half empty—fill it up! / A lot of people think I look like a vegetarian lesbian, but I love meat, as much as I can fit in my mouth at one time, and more. / I want to knit you a sweater, write you a love letter. / I milked a buffalo once. / Mucho gusto. / Proceed to checkout. / I am a contradiction. / Unconventional, kind, creative. / Unconventional, witty, kind. / Unconventional, creative, down-to-earth. / I wish I had a bigger garden.

I snapped the laptop shut. There was a sort of dizzying effect to the repeated, breezy, manufactured quirks I had been reading. I lay back and tried to enjoy it. I closed my eyes, tilted back my head. I felt for the piece of cashmere under my pillow. I let myself go a bit dreamy, and felt her approach, in the distance. I thought about making myself a profile, authoring my own iteration of detached desirability. I could try to work out a formula, an exact average of the profiles that preceded me. I could find the median angle of the head tilt, and the mid-point cultural reference. I could be conventionally unconventional too. I could certainly repeat the catatonic irony.

I opened my eyes and decided to take a look at the men. I zipped past writers and lawyers, environmentalists and bankers, young professionals and itinerants, filmmakers and clean-freaks, and then I spotted something of interest: a profile where the picture was not a man's head but a geometrically repeating pattern, a matrix of cubes, subdivided into triangles, each concentric layer of squares dividing into more and more, smaller and smaller triangles, spiralling into a disappearing centre. When I stared at the pattern, the lighter triangles lifted out of the picture towards me, whilst the darker ones sank back, creating a 3-D tunnel effect: it looked like you could fall into it, like a cut-glass mine-shaft. "I want to curate you," the header read. And then, "Artist seeks swooning beauty. Must be able to take direction. Travel to St Albans required."

Eight

Asphyxiation

I arrived at St Albans, and opened the map on my phone. I walked the streets watching my own progress ghosted by the little cipher on the screen. I moved away from the centre, along wide suburban roads, arbour'd in green. And then I reached the place where the house was meant to be. The evening was warm, but there was a soft drizzle beginning to fuzz in the air. Ahead of me, a long green path led off the road, perpendicular to it, bordered by tall trees. I turned along it, following it until it bent sharply to the left into the grounds of a large house. The house looked as though it had once been a handsome family home; it had a red tiled roof and 1920s angles. The garden was enormous. I turned around in it. There was a big square lawn, and borders full of buddleia. In the centre of the grass was a huge wooden structure, like a Maypole, with ropes extending out from the top and fastened into the earth. The garden had a freshly deserted feel to it, as though children had just been spooked into running away, and their voices might trail back on the wind at any moment.

I pushed the buzzer for flat 4 and the door vibrated with a release mechanism. Inside there was a lot of post, swept to one side. Flat 1 was straight ahead, and a staircase led up to the first floor. I heard a door open somewhere above me, so I took the stairs. I turned along a mezzanine landing, and in the doorway to flat 4 stood a short, lean man, with curly dark hair. He had a carefully coiffed moustache and a severe strip of beard scoring vertically down the centre of his chin. He held out his hand to me. "Esther," he said, looking me up and down, giving nothing away. "I'm Luke. Come in." I followed him into the flat. He was barefoot on the bare floorboards. I had guessed in advance that there would be none of the usual first-date small-talk. We turned into a large room with a fireplace. There was hardly any furniture, but positioned around the room were various exhibits. There was a chest next to the door, on top of which certain objects were meticulously laid out: a string of rosary beads, a pack of cards, a voodoo doll, a plastic leprechaun. On the mantelpiece was an animal skull, a cow's perhaps, with large flowers fixed in its empty eye-sockets: it seemed to bloom black and white

chrysanthemums out of bone. In a corner there was a large glass display case, filled with dead beetles. "These are some of my pieces," Luke said. "You might have seen another in the garden. That was for an open exhibition, last weekend."

"Oh, yes," I said. "The Maypole?"

"I'm thinking of burning it down," he said. "Perhaps tonight?"

"Oh," I said.

"Can I get you a drink? Perhaps some weed tea?"

"Weed tea?"

"Yes," he said, slowing his voice as if he might be dealing with an idiot. "Weed, brewed into a tea."

"Oh, right. Yes, of course. Thank you." He turned out of the room gracefully, and returned shortly after with two teacups. Fuzzy bits of green were floating on the top of the water.

"We can sit on the floor," he said. "And get to know one another."

I sipped at the tea, letting the little fronds of green enter between my teeth. I chewed on them and swallowed.

"It's a much quicker way to get high," he said, and laughed, his face lifting up in a mischievous squeeze of delight. Then he seemed to remember himself, and dropped his face back into impassivity.

"So, have you ever worked with an artist before?" he asked.

"No, not exactly," I said. I could feel a softness in my tongue, and pieces of information began to loosen out of my mouth. "I'm hoping it might run in the family. My mother was a dancer, and very beautiful. She posed for a lot of portraits. We have really wonderful photos of her dancing, bending all the way back and closing her eyes for the camera. And her grandmother was a famous actress. We have some early photos of her that look like paintings. They've touched up the colours, I think, when they only had black-and-white. It's so unnatural, so vivid." I was talking a lot; I was definitely getting high.

Luke was stroking his moustache. "I think we can make something together," he said. "There's something in those eyes." He stared at my face, and then down at my body. "How are you enjoying your tea?"

The tea was making me feel strange. I was moving quickly between the desire to talk, and the desire to be inert. He began to tell me about himself. He told me that the house was empty: the landlord was selling to developers and all the other tenants had

left. But Luke was refusing to go. He'd been holding exhibitions and parties in the garden all summer long. I began to feel my body wanting to soften into the floor. I lay down and let myself sink into it. But small, inanimate things seemed to tick into life at the edges my vision, disturbing me: the flower petals of the chrysanthemums seemed to crinkle spontaneously; the legs of the beetles seemed to flinch. Luke carried on talking. He told me about art college and that his first exhibition had been a series of oil self-portraits of himself wanking. A comment on the contemporary art scene, he said. Saatchi had wanted to buy them, but he had refused to sell, he said, and he burnt them all at the end of the show. "I like burning things," he said. I was beginning to feel a little unnerved. I kept my eyes on him. He was playing with a lighter in his hands, and he kept thumbing it to produce a flame. "Ow," he said, catching himself on the hot metal. And then he lent over towards me. "Can I kiss you, Esther?" he asked, suddenly sounding desperate. I was unsure; I began to say, "Perhaps a little later," but my lips barely moved. I probably hadn't spoken for about an hour. I had never been this stoned. I was so high I was completely dumb. Luke was attractive: his body was tight-knit with energy, and there was a proud set to his small features. As he lent over, I let him kiss me with his forceful, energetic little tongue. But I was still unnerved: I was aware of the things flickering at the edges of my vision. And suddenly I felt a sharp sting against my arm. I pulled away, just able to move, and drew my arm towards me. There was a tiny red mark on it, in the shape of a horse shoe. It didn't hurt so much at first, but then, as I looked at it, it started to bite into my flesh. Luke was holding the lighter in his right hand. "It hurts, doesn't it?" he said, earnestly. "I wanted you to feel it too."

Then he got up, and retrieved a camera from the windowsill. "Now, this is what I'd like you to do, Esther," he said. "As I said, I'm working on a project of pictures of semi-conscious people. The idea is, I'll restrict your oxygen intake, until you're just at the edge of unconsciousness. It's a wonderful feeling. It's euphoric. I know exactly where that edge is. I've done this lots of times. Here, have a look at these pictures while I get my kit." He handed over the camera, which was flashing through various images. The first few were of Luke himself: he was laid out, naked, in front of the fireplace, in the same place that I was lying now. There was a fire in the grate behind him, and a belt around his neck. In the first couple of pictures his face was puce and his body looked taut, straining against asphyxiation. In the final picture his body was relaxed, eyes closed, his head angled backwards, the top of it meeting the floorboards. Then there were pictures of girls lying naked in exactly the same position: their thin white bodies

look bleached against the bare floorboards. Some of them had the belt around their necks; some of them didn't. He'd taken close-ups of some of their faces, just before they passed out, their eyes glittering desperately. I thought I could hear a scrabbling sound, like lots of beetles skittering across the wooden floor. I thought of the empty house and the empty garden, dark now, around us. I became aware of a cloying, sweet smell in the flat, like decomposing organic matter. When Luke came back into the room, he was carrying a belt.

"We can do this any way you'd like," he said. "I can use the belt, or I can restrict your air-flow with my hands." He squatted down beside me. And when he lent in to kiss me, suddenly my right hand swung up into his face in a fist, smacking him hard on the side of the jaw. It knocked him backwards. I was as surprised as he was. He was temporarily dazed, and then he clutched his face. "What the fuck?" he shouted. "What's wrong with you?"

I sat up, with some effort, and shook my head. I tried to rouse myself. "I'm not sure," I said, sadly. "I think it was some sort of instinct. But, please, can we still try? I think, with a few tweaks to the procedure, you'll make an excellent audience."

He got up onto his feet, rubbing at his jaw line. "If you weren't comfortable, you could just have said. We went through everything beforehand, in the messages."

"I know," I said. "I think it's the tea. Paranoia or something. I thought the beetles were moving." I looked over at the glass case, still full of the brittle black bodies.

"Sleep it off," he said. "And go home in the morning."

"But we could still try?" I said.

Luke shook his head. "I'm not coming near you."

Nine

Exercises in Heat

A few days later, when my head had cleared, I sat behind the reception desk and thought things over. Thomas was my best lead, I thought. Maureen eyed me suspiciously, as though she knew I was up to something. It was still raining; people drove the revolving doors open, clutching soggy newspapers over their heads, their suits drenched a darker shade of grey in silhouettes of their make-shift rain-shelters.

At the end of the day, I decided to walk up to Hampstead Heath. It was a short uphill burst in the drizzle, past large art-deco blocks of flats and then enormous, gated white houses. When I reached the matrix of tightly turning streets that make up the centre, I wandered around them, looking for the coffee shop that might be Thomas'. There were lots of beautiful old houses converted into shops, displaying expensive copper kitchenware in their brightly lit windows. There were mannequins draped in this season's brights. There were windows full of glowing blue bottles, filled with organic beauty potions. The smell of mandarin blossom trailed me down the street. At one point I crossed the main road and took a set of stone steps, which wound steeply upwards between terraced houses in a ginnel. It was almost like a Pennine village. But at the very top there was a break in the buildings and I could suddenly see all the way across London: the knobbled BT tower was in the foreground; and then, softly fuzzed in the peach sky behind it stood the wheel; other buildings towered up in the distance, where the orangey-pink fogged into grey, like the flesh of cooked salmon darkening at the edges. I carried on walking: small pubs were hidden away up here, already full of gregarious after-work drinkers. I found myself at the top of Hampstead, and snaked back down. Finally, in a narrow passage off the main hub of streets, I peered into a coffee-shop window. The sign on the door said "Closed". There was a man at the counter, with his back turned to the window, a tea-towel wrapped around one of his hands. He was disengaging nozzles from a coffee machine and then rinsing them in the sink. After a few moments he turned around: it was Thomas. At that moment a woman, who had been sat unnoticed by me at one of the tables, stood up and moved to meet him. They embraced. Thomas' hands were in the woman's hair, and he was pulling her

in towards him. Watching this felt oddly thrilling; I was ghosting the woman, several feet behind her. I was mesmerised by their kissing. Then they disentangled. I ducked around the side of the window, into a recessed doorway. I waited a few moments, my heart beating hard. And then the woman banged the coffee-shop door open, and walked quickly away. My legs moved me rapidly after her, across the street and back down the hill. The momentum in my body was exciting. The two of us were now moving in series back down the high street towards Swiss Cottage. The woman walked so quickly that I felt like I was tumbling after her. When we got down to Avenue Road, the woman made a sharp right, and my feet automatically followed. She diverted into the big, grey, cubed complex of the leisure centre, and I found myself behind her at the barriers; then I was watching her back disappearing through another set of doors.

“I’m sorry,” said the woman on the kiosk. “Helen’s class is fully booked this evening.”

“Helen’s class?” I turned to face the woman.

“Yes, Helen’s hot yoga,” the woman inclined her head towards the cooling trail. “I can book you in for her class tomorrow evening though,” she offered.

“Oh, yes, please,” I said.

When I entered the room, the heat hit me like a solid force: it was like walking into a cross-hatched area, where the air is denser and pushes back against you. And then there was the smell: people were already sweating and the salty musk was rising, adding to the force of the hot air. One man, stood just in speedos, had already dripped a raggedy silhouette of himself onto his mat, light purple shading into dark around his body. I picked a spot towards the back of the room, and lay out the mat I’d borrowed from the centre. It had faded to a dusty pink through use, and I could smell the fusty accumulations of feet and sweating backs that had gone before me. I lay down on it and breathed deeply. The lights were dimmed, and Helen entered the room, picking her way through the group to the front. She held herself beautifully, chin tilted slightly upwards, limbs fully articulated, as though her whole body was perfectly choreographed from her navel. She moved like a dancer, like mother; and her thick bob swung against her cheeks with each step. She placed tiny plastic candles in front of her mat, which flickered with a battery-powered flame, and struck a tiny cymbal.

“The mat is bread, your body is butter,” she intoned flatly. “Melt your body into the mat.”

After a cycle of nostril breathing, where I tried hard not to succumb to the temptation to pass out, Helen talked the class through sun salutations. “*Listen* to my instructions,” she insisted, “Don’t look at the people around you. They’re probably doing it wrong.” I followed the directions and moved my body through a sequence of bends and lunges and genuflections. The heat was really something; everyone was sweating freely now and the odour seemed to expand in the space. “If you’re new, lie down if you need to,” Helen said. “The body needs to adjust to the heat. But you. Must. Not. Leave. The room. Sudden temperature drop is *extremely* detrimental.” Helen patrolled the rows as she barked out the next position: downward dog. I pushed my weight backwards, lifting my body into the triangular inversion. Helen approached down the row, and when she reached me she put her hands on the base of my back, pushing me further backwards. The pressure Helen exerted against my body was tender but disinterested. “Spread your hands flat,” Helen said, “they should be flat against the floor.” She pushed me a little harder, so that my face moved closer to the mat, and then she moved off to adjust someone else. All this was making me feel light-headed: if I looked to the right I could see all of us in the mirrored wall, our various repeated inverted-v postures. Our bodies echoed one another’s, like the e’s in my name. My body felt like an imperfect replication of all the others in the series around me, and of the ones who had come before me. When I rose up to standing, there was a slight swimming at the corners of my eyes, and the heat pushed itself more fiercely around and into my body. It was almost too much to bear. I began to move towards a backbend. “Do *not* close your eyes.” Helen was right in front of me. Her voice was followed by an aggressive waft of patchouli. “You’ll lose balance. *Awareness* in the room please.” I had to open my eyes. This banished the beautiful blurring. In fact, I suddenly felt fantastically clear headed, as though my consciousness was beating against the heat more strongly. My body moved easily through the postures, the warmth seeming to open my joints into fluidity. Helen continued with her firm instructions as she paced down the rows. As the postures got more advanced, she commanded the class with more authority. “If you do not follow my instructions exactly, you will INJURE YOUR NECK,” she shouted. She talked us through a headstand. “Everyone can do this, if you just follow my instructions,” she said. “I don’t understand why *some people* can’t just follow instructions.” And then she reeled around and pointed at an overweight woman on the front row. “Except you. You can’t do this. Lie on your back.”

At the end of the session we all lay back down on our mats. I thought again about the layering of bodies, all of us laid out now in series, and all the other bodies who had left their traces on my mat. I began to let myself go. But as Helen ordered us all to melt into our mats, the angry little catch in her voice kept drawing me back out. When I momentarily flickered my eyes open, I saw Helen standing by the mirrors at the front, stretching and admiring her own angles.

The sky was still light when I emerged from the sports centre. I had showered, scrubbing gloriously at my face. I felt especially clean, and my skin was now fully exposed to the dirt of the city around me. I took the tube to Waterloo, and then I decided to head above ground, to make the most of my vulnerable epidermis. I walked towards the river, intending to walk home as far as I could along it. On the South Bank there were flamenco dancers and children screaming on a giant trampoline. The sun was just about to sink below the buildings on the opposite bank, and it seemed to glow blindingly bright in its final moments. My skin still felt raw. I imagined it accumulating the dirt around me, taking everything in. I kept on walking. I passed grand cast-iron lampposts decorated with huge scaley fish; they seemed to regurgitate the lampposts like a synchronised magic trick. I passed the Houses of Parliament, their dark patterned surface like a gothic wedding cake. As the towers of Battersea Power Station appeared intermittently on the horizon, the streetlights became fluorescent strips, and the other pedestrians thinned out. I approached a man sat on a bench, who was talking animatedly. There didn't seem to be anybody material that he was talking to; but then again, I have on a number of occasions confused full-on mania with the use of hands-free technology. The man was wearing a cheap green anorak, and, as I drew alongside him, I could see a polyester skirt and a blouse and pair of shoes laid out next to him on the bench; he had dressed the empty silhouette of a woman, draping the bench in synthetics. He continued to speak animatedly to the clothes as I passed.

I carried on walking until the path at the side of the Thames disappeared into riverside apartments and the sky had become a grey-violet haze. Then I was forced into Vauxhall and drifted until I found the tube.

Later, deep into the night, I woke. I lay in the thick black and thought of Veronica asleep in the room below me; and then of the hundreds of people nestled in sleep along our street, and of all the other streets of Colliers Wood, full of sleeping people, sleeping

people I would never know, and who would never know me. I lay there in my cocoon of dark, a secret to them, to all the unmourning strangers of London. We were mirroring one another in our poses of unconsciousness. And we were all composed of the same thing. Dark matter. What would it be like to see blood, I wondered, to see the thing we all shared. I clicked back my skylight blind, to let in the starlight. I watched the winking planes circle, low and wide over the city, like a night-time vigil over all our black bodies. My breathing slowed and I was folded back into sleep.

Ten

The Sight of Blood

St George's Hospital was sheened linoleum and trammelled speed-walkers as far as the eye could see. Which was not very far: vision was limited to low-ceilinged corridors, cut off by sharp corners. I followed the signs for Phlebotomy, which took me out of the main building, across two car parks, and then back into a squat '60s prefab. I introduced myself at the desk.

"Oh, yeah, the work experience girl," said a tired-looking woman in a thin blue pajama suit.

"Well, not exactly," I said. "I—"

The woman picked up the phone, and called through to someone. "A Freestone here for you." And after a few moments a young, extremely fat woman bustled into the waiting room, in green overalls.

"You must be Esther," she said kindly, without breaking her walk, encouraging me to trot alongside her down a corridor and into an examination room. "I'm Carmilla. I've heard such a lot about you from Veronica. She's so pleased you're coming in." The woman motioned for me to take a seat on one of the plastic chairs. "So," Carmilla wound a strand of blonde hair behind her ear, and looked over a clipboard. "We'll be seeing lots of different people today for lots of different tests. You'll get a good sense of the range of patients we deal with." Carmilla's voice was soft and refined; the walking had made her slightly breathless, so she sounded like an aristocratic coquette. "Some of them are regulars. Others might never have had a blood test before." She looked at her watch. "We've got a few minutes, so I can go over the equipment." Carmilla got out several small drawers full of plastic-wrapped apparatus. "Ok, this is what we use most commonly," she said, still slightly breathless, "for a straight-forward venopuncture, where we want to draw blood from here." Carmilla turned her own arm tender-side up, and rolled back the long-sleeved top she was wearing under her overalls. She flexed her elbow and massaged the braced nook. "So, you can't see much at the moment, but the cubital fossa, anterior to the elbow, is the best place to draw blood: the median cubital vein is close to the surface and has minimal nerve supply." I watched Carmilla continue

to work the patch of flesh: at first I could only see the tiny dark-blue threads close to the surface of Carmilla's skin, so delicate they looked like biro lines; but then, in the centre of the articulated fold, a vein began to rise into a small greenish bulge.

"So, on this kind of vein we'd usually go for a vacuum tube." Carmilla rolled her sleeve back down and shook one of the plastic packets. "You'll see a lot of these today. We use one hypodermic needle, and multiple vacuum tubes can be attached if we need to take multiple samples." Carmilla tossed the packet back in a drawer. "You can use a fingerstick for small tests. Or, if you were dealing with a very small baby, a neonatal heelstick. Do you want tea and a biscuit? You look a little bit pale, my darling." Carmilla placed her hand on my arm and gave it a firm squeeze. "You're not squeamish are you, you lovely thing? We haven't even seen any blood yet!" She bustled out of the room, her overalls rustling like paper.

I stared at the lucent floor tiling; it had been polished until the plastic looked like solid liquid. It was unsettling to see Carmilla's vein beneath the surface of her skin: the little rising glut of blue-green, a tiny glimpse of the obscene territory underneath; inside. I felt a dizzying swirl in my stomach at the thought of the blood to come, as though my own internal material was clustering in readiness to meet it.

Carmilla pushed the door open with her behind, and re-entered the room with two plastic cups of tea, biscuits stacked up high on top of each one. She cooed over me for a while, making me drink the sugary tea, and then talked me through the different tubes that are used in different blood tests: some came ready-prepared with additives to prevent the blood from clotting; others, for tests where clotting time was at stake, contained citrates; some were laced with clotting accelerators. It would be my job today to hand over the correct tubes, under Carmilla's instruction. The first patient was a regular, Carmilla explained: a heavily pregnant woman who was rhesus negative. She was being tested regularly, because her baby was at risk of erythroblastosis fetalis: to put it simply, Carmilla said, the mother's antibodies might travel through the placenta and attack the red blood cells in fetal circulation, the blood cells the baby needed. "The mother and baby's blood is a shared system," Carmilla said, with a deliciously naughty inflection, "but sometimes it turns nasty."

Carmilla buzzed through to reception, and, a few moments later, there was a knock at the door. The pregnant woman pushed her way in, and sat down heavily on a chair.

"How are you today, Ruth?" Carmilla asked.

“Tired,” said the woman. “Work keep breathing down my neck; coming in late after all these tests.”

“Right, well let’s get on with it then. Left today.” Carmilla pulled on latex gloves and directed me towards the correct tube; then she fixed it to the gleaming hypodermic. She stepped over towards the woman, who had already pulled up her sleeve and was looking away, disinterested, towards the door. Carmilla palpated the stretched crux of the woman’s arm, gently, tenderly, as she had done her own: and sure enough, a bluer vein began to rise up. She took the needle to the most acute angle, and eased it gently into the skin, so that the moment of incision was impossible to detect. And then the tube began to fill. The colour of the blood in the light blue room was incredible; it bloomed upwards, a lurid and gorgeous coagulation. I was drawn towards it. I couldn’t help it. I started to hyperventilate, so subtly that they couldn’t have heard. The woman’s face flickered as the needle retracted. But otherwise, once Carmilla had whipped the tube away, it was almost inconceivable that the woman was made of blood: that, underneath her floral maxi-dress and mesh of skin, an intricate bloodwork was progressing inside her; that between the matted blood placenta and the gathering blood of the new baby, there was a complex and potentially treacherous blood ecology. I remembered the word *exsanguinated*, and felt my pulse tick in my lips and my cheeks. I let my head fall backwards a little, and closed my eyes. “Esther, are you ok?” Carmilla clamped a hand on her shoulder.

“Oh, I’m fine,” I said, and brought my head upright. Carmilla was too vigilant; I’d never get away with any kind of performance.

Not all the patients were as straightforward to bleed as the first. There was an elderly woman later in the morning, whose veins looked as though they were tougher than any other patient’s: they rose up through the skin of her arms, fat and solidly blue, as soon as she clenched her fist. But apparently her veins were collapsing. She was a regular too. Carmilla asked me to find her a butterfly needle, and tried a new approach, glinting towards a tiny new vein that she thought might be branching off the collapsing course. The woman’s arm was so thin that there was nothing plump to rest the point of the needle against; the insertion looked more like a blind stab. And it didn’t work the first time. The blood clotted too quickly and stopped being drawn up the tube. The old woman leaned her head back and groaned. Her arm dangled limply and was yellowed all over in bruise-blotches. I looked for the branching veins, the new tributaries splitting

off where the old had failed. I remembered something from school: that blood vessels are fractal, repeating their self-similar shapes over and over, darkly branching under the skin again and again and again. Finally, Carmilla extracted a sample she could use, and the woman hugged her rain-mac hurriedly back around her, as if to protect herself from further violence.

Our final patient of the morning blundered into the room and came to a halt right in front of us, drawing himself up. His body was strange: he held himself tall, barrelling out his chest, as though squaring up for a fight; but his arms hung limp from his torso, as though they were sewn on. I realised he must be drunk, because of the smell. And then I saw that he was already bleeding: there was blood spattered down his bare right leg, blackening on the fabric of his shorts. This was no longer as odd as it would have been a few hours ago, in the outside world: no longer obscene, the blood was merely in the wrong place. I followed the red line upwards and saw that the end of the man's middle finger was raggedy; no curve, just a dripping, raggedy glut of blood.

"Mr Stevens, Jack, isn't it?" Carmilla was up on her feet, deftly steering the man into a chair. "You're bleeding already, my darling. I'm just going to call someone to see to that." She picked up her phone and requested an auxiliary to dress a wound. "Now then, Jack, you need to tell us what happened to your finger."

The man extended his legs out, rigid, so his body formed a hard hypotenuse. "Can't remember, can I?" he said, and swept his arm across his sweating face. "Woke up in the shed. And then I was rushing to get here. Late. Must've caught it on something." He had left a smudge of blood across his forehead, and now his finger was dripping onto the linoleum. A knock at the door, and a woman with a plastic case came in. She smiled kindly at the man, and he held his hand out like a child towards her: he seemed almost proud of the strange finger. The woman cleaned it and dressed it into an enormous white bulb. "Ha!" said the man. Another woman came into the room to clean and disinfect the floor.

"Can nurse get you something for the pain?" Carmilla asked.

"Can't feel a thing," the man responded, turning over his bandaged hand again and again.

Carmilla took blood from his other arm. He barely seemed to notice. "You need to take care of yourself, Jack," she said.

"No one to care if I take care of myself or not," he said, cheerfully.

“Results will come to your doctor,” Carmilla said, and showed him out. And then she turned back to me. “Now then, you’ve got the blood in your cheeks back, young lady,” she said.

“Oh, yes, I’m absolutely fine,” I said. “But it was still very interesting.”

Veronica met me outside the entrance to A&E. She was wearing green pajamas and her thick hair was pulled back into a tiny hard stub of ponytail.

“So, how was it?” she asked as we walked together through the car park. “You didn’t freak out, did you?”

“No, not exactly,” I said. “I thought it was pretty amazing.” It was drizzling warmly again, gauzing over the road in front of us.

“Right,” said Veronica. “So shall we look into phlebotomy training for you?”

“Oh no,” I said. “I mean, I wouldn’t be very good for the patients. I’d get totally lost in it.”

Veronica turned her face skywards and raised her palms in a gesture of frustration. “I don’t understand you, Ettie. Don’t you want to do anything useful with your life?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “I’m just trying to... There’s something, first, I still need to try to—”

Veronica’s phone rang from behind her, inside the small burgundy rucksack she wore across one shoulder. She shrugged the bag off and dug out the phone.

“Hello?” She listened for a moment and then passed the phone across to me. “It’s your father. He’s being dramatic.”

Eleven

The Flood

As the train pulled out of Kings Cross, a woman with bright yellow hair pushed a trolley amiably down the aisle, calling out sandwiches and coffee in a falling market cadence. It rained all the way up to Leeds; and then it rained all the way across to Todmorden. Blue and brown fields streamed past us.

“We have a rainy season now,” one old man on the train was saying to another. I couldn’t see their faces, but their words came out in long, low rumbles, with great pauses in between. “Just. Like. India.”

The water on the window was collecting in multiplying beads, which must, I thought, be convulsing as they travelled at speed, clinging to the train. But the convulsion was imperceptible. The beads seemed still, until they suddenly streamed away down the outside pane.

“It’s global. Warming.”

Field upon field of cabbages blurred past through the water, glimmering blue lakes of greens.

“Then why. Aren’t. We any. Warmer?”

As we pulled into the valley, I could see that the fields either side of the canal, which should be green, were covered in still brown water. The whole valley bottom looked brown.

“You know. It’s the Gulf. Stream. Being *affected*.”

What was strange was the stillness of the water. It was as though it had always covered these areas; like the playing fields had never existed. The green had disappeared so absolutely.

“*I don’t*. Know.”

My father picked me up from the train station in his truck. When we got to the bottom road, where the street crosses the river, brown surface water covered the tarmac, and all of the gutters were gushing. Cars drove slowly, kicking up water around them.

“This is much better!” my father said. “Yesterday it was practically impassable. And further down it was completely flooded. Waist deep. We were cut off for a couple of days. We’ve had reports of cars stranded, people wading to safety up at Morrisons. All sorts of things. We’re running a story on an elderly woman living between the canal and the river. The water flooded her house a couple of nights ago, and she was trapped for 12 hours upstairs with her miniature poodle. Nobody could get near her. Five feet of it, pouring from the river into the canal through her house. She spent most of the night talking on the phone to my reporter.”

We turned off the main road and up over the bridge to the house. We pulled up. There was very little surface water left here, but there was a residual brown soddenness to everything. The garden looked like it had leaked slurry: filthy wetness swelling up out of the ground, spreading in all directions.

Inside the house, the smell was terrible: salty, sludgy damp. There was still an oily film of water covering the carpets.

“Look what the council helpfully dropped off.” Dad motioned towards a box on the kitchen table. “Tins of spam and sandbags.”

I took my things upstairs. The bedrooms hadn’t got wet, but the electricity was off, so everything felt even more dismal than usual. I changed my clothes, and quickly checked on her room. It was the same: unalterably gloomy. I spent the next few hours helping Dad to sort through his effects, separating the recoverable from the terminally sodden. Then we started to move things upstairs or outside, so that he could take up the wet carpets. There was a constant anxious whirr in the background: the sound of the pump pulsing water out of the cellar. I surprised a frog in the sideboard, and there were weird black molluscs clinging to the skirting boards.

I was down on my hands and knees when I found it, forcing more water up out of carpet into little puddles around me with the pressure of my joints. I was sorting through some things in the bottom of the dresser, to see whether the water had got to them. There were boxes full of records, which felt a little damp, but might have recovered. And then there was a beautiful old tin, embossed in gold, with an art-nouveau woman iconised on the lid. The tin seemed to spring open in my hands; it was full of small, beautiful things. A ring, a glittering brooch, a small cut-glass cube. I picked the last object up. It was familiar. It looked like a squat salt shaker, full of white powder. But instead of perforations on the top, there was a battered silver screw cap. It had lived on her drinks cabinet, that’s where I recognised it from, one of her curiosities.

I started to unscrew it as Dad was walking back in. He froze on the threshold when he saw what was in my hands.

“Put that box down, please, Esther,” he said, his voice low and quiet.

“What is this?” I said, turning the cube up to the light.

“It’s ... it’s something your mother inherited. From her grandmother.” He stepped towards me. “Smelling salts. Salt of hartshorn. It’d burn out your mucus membranes if you weren’t careful.” He was being suspiciously jovial with his voice now, but his eyes were small, narrowed with concentration. “But it supposedly stopped you from fainting. And your great-grandmother was a fine one for pretending she was always about to faint. An actress, as you know.” He placed his hand on my shoulder. “Let’s put these old things away,” he said.

I snatched the tin away from him.

“I can’t,” he said, “I can’t look at these things any more. I can’t think about her anymore.” He staggered, and came to rest against the dresser. “I can’t,” he said again, sliding to the floor.

“Are you ... swooning, dad? Do you want a pinch of hartshorn?” I looked at him, crumpled and pink-cheeked on the floor. I didn’t doubt that his legs had gone from underneath him; but his collapse also seemed hysterically exaggerated. I was his audience. I’d always been their disappointingly small audience. And I realised, in that moment, that I didn’t envy their performances. Not even hers. Not anymore. It was a tired show.

I walked out of the house, over the bridge and into town. The water was flowing in the usually still canal, and looked close to spilling over. I walked onto the main road, past the giant portakabin that houses the Aldi. A woman in green overalls was sweeping water out of the front door. I kept along the main road: all of the shops were closed, and people in each one were sweeping their floors, the tell-tale brown tide-marks making dirty ripples along white walls. There were mounds of sodden carpet periodically blocking the pavement. The bad green sludge smell followed me everywhere.

The graveyard wasn’t flooded, though the ground was boggy. The parkland next to the church is part of the flood-defence system, so the river had been diverted into it. It was now one enormous brown pool, with a red climbing frame rising up from its centre. I walked between the graves. The Murgatroyd house stood blackly ahead, interposing itself between the A646 and the buried. There were some boys over in the

corner of the graveyard nearest the woods, three of them, wearing anoraks pulled up and smoking crumbling reefers. I could smell the greenness of the skunk through the damp air. I kept up my slow procession until I found the grave. There were tiny goldfinches darting around in the trees above it, like fluttering leaves. I lay down to watch them, and I could feel the back of my head beginning to get cold, the damp soaking into my hair and seeping around the skin on my skull. I could hear the boys laughing, and I thought of the dried plants burning orange in their fingers, and then moving with their breath into their lungs. I thought about the fractal branching of their bronchioles, the tiny vessels splitting again and again, filling up with the hot smoke. And then I thought of the woods behind them, each tree forking out its branches, spitting out self-replicating adjuncts of wood, over and over. Each tree tells you how many trees there are in the surrounding wood, through the pattern of its twigs: this was Mr Nield again. The forest is one big algorithm, full of wooden self-replicators: zombie trees. I closed my eyes and thought of all the water around us, coursing down the sides of streets, rippling across the over-full grates, seeping downwards into the soil, watering all the tiny organisms feasting deep inside the earth. Was this the ocean Mother meant? If I concentrated I could hear the water gurgling, above the bubbling sounds of the boys' voices. If I lay here long enough, perhaps I would begin to break down, to be reconstituted as sodden ground? I imagined my skin, the thick pad of it, full of parasites, softening into earth. I thought about all of our bodies: mother's and mine; the boys and their lungs and the trees and their branches. My body was beginning to do it. Force of habit. My breathing was speeding up, ready to shut down.

And then I thought of it: the hartshorn. The burning sensation that might force you upright. I imagined myself as a sting, a graze against the surface of the world around me. I was being uttered out of the teeming water; a separate variation in the series of repetitions. And I wouldn't do it any more: I wouldn't pass out.

"Are you able to stand?" a woman's voice asked sharply above me.

I opened my eyes. An old, wiry woman with white hair and a large rain hat was leaning over me.

"Yes, I can stand. I was just—"

"Well then get onto your feet, young lady," the woman said. "There's an awful lot to be done after a flood, you know."

The woman walked briskly away down the path and then turned back towards me. I got up onto my feet and followed her. The obverse of my body was cold with the

damp. I wondered if I was marked, a line dividing me between dry and wet like a jester suit, cut halfway between the living and the dead.

The woman was now kneeling on a muddy cushion in front of a flower bed, and she drew a trowel from a beaten-up basket. "Now, then," she said. "These are water-logged. We need to make courses around the roots of each plant, so that the water can drain, and then we're going to add some sand to the soil." I didn't move. The woman turned to glare at me again. "Well, are you helping or are you hindering?" I moved closer. "You can do the sand," the woman said, and handed me a bag of orangey sand mixture.

I crouched beside the woman, and followed the lines of her trowel, sprinkling the sand in circles around each plant's roots.

"I planted all of these, you know," the woman said. "A group of us do it. They call us the guerilla gardeners. Wherever there's unused land, we've planted it. We've done legumes in front of the police station, and fruit trees in the supermarket borders, and herbs around the health centre. Now I'm cultivating the dead." She hummed a little tune, and then she turned on me with her glossy, goitrous blue eyes. "And why are you falling down in graveyards, young lady?"

I stared at the ground. "I ... I suppose I've been trying to find something down there," I said. "Or to refind it. Something beautiful."

The woman continued to scoop away at the earth and said nothing for a while. Then, "Do you know, we share 35 per cent of our genetic coding with daffodils? Did you know that? Daffodils are extremely beautiful. And they stand up," the woman said.

"They do," I said, and I thought of the daffodils that sprung up each year in that graveyard, nosing their way upright through the earth, repeating themselves upwards over and over from their onion skins, flinching brightly in the breeze. Replicating themselves, and standing up separately.

"Do you know, they say I have a cancer?" the woman said. "Of course you don't know. But it makes no difference. It's growing, slowly, every day. They say I'll die *with it*, not of it. And I still make the effort to get up. You don't just lie down about these things." The woman knelt up with her back straight and turned to the raspberry bushes.

I continued to pour the sand in careful repeated circles. I thought of the cancer growing inside this fierce little upright woman, reproducing itself through her organs in beautifully exact patterns, like visceral snowflakes. I pushed my shoulders back, and felt upwards into my height. Might this be what other things felt like? Like trees felt,

and daffodils, and raspberry shoots, and other existences that copy themselves upwards towards the sun? I lent over to shake sand on the ground. I stood up straight again. I felt a bloom of fresh blood through my abdomen, where a vessel was opening up; it felt as though it was pulsing in time with the flow of water, and the glugging inhalation of skunk, and the scraping of the woman's trowel, and the splintering-off of close-by branches. I was upright, but I was not alone. I doubled the old woman now: slowly, carefully, I shadowed the woman's movements in sand as the rain began, again, to fall.

Illustrations

Figure 1: G. Baldry, *The Kiss* (nineteenth century)



Figure 2: Johann Heinrich Fuseli, *The Nightmare* (1827)



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