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Doctoral Thesis
English Studies
Durham University
2023

99,664 words

Contents

Acknowledgements

The completion of this thesis is the result of a whole system of supportive individuals, without whom this would have been impossible to achieve. Paramount among those who have contributed with their expertise, guidance, and encouragement is my supervisor, Professor Abbie Garrington. I would like to thank Abbie for her abundance of wise words, unceasing enthusiasm, steadying reassurance, and dedication beyond the demands of duty. That any kind of focused take on this subject has emerged is proof of her ability to help steer what could have been a far more ungainly project into a coherent form. In addition, I would also like to extend thanks to Dr Fraser Riddell, Dr Megan Girdwood, and Dr Francesca Bratton for their organisation of the *Charlotte Mew and Friends: Decadent and Modernist Networks* conference in summer 2021, as well as its further development into an edited collection with which I am thrilled to be involved, both by contributing a chapter and through my work undertaken as Research Assistant.

I would also like to thank the Northern Bridge Consortium doctoral training scheme of the Arts and Humanities Research Council, by which I was lucky enough to be funded. In addition to the necessary financial assistance, the workshops and conferences offered have been most beneficial for both training purposes as well as for meeting the larger cross-university cohort. My work also greatly benefited from the research opportunities that NBC helped to fulfil, including trips to the British Library. Finally, the writing retreat to Shepherd's Dene House hosted by True North via NBC was invaluable in its lessons in creative approaches to academic practice (as well as being a very fun and supportive environment).

Furthermore, I benefited greatly from my time as Lead Postgraduate Representative for the Centre of Nineteenth-Century Studies. In addition to coordinating events such as the postgraduate conference and various workshops, having the chance to participate in board meetings with the wider community involved in the Centre was a valuable opportunity to see the workings that go into fostering intellectual communities within academic contexts. I also would like to thank Anthony Cond and all at Liverpool University Press who so kindly hosted me for my placement, ensuring that I managed to both gain a broad insight into the workings of an academic press whilst also providing such a friendly environment in which to spend three months in a new city.

I would also like to thank my dear friend Dr Seren Nolan, whose footsteps I have been only too glad to have followed, and whose advice, sympathy, and general comradeship have made this experience much more manageable. Additionally, the support and camaraderie of my group of Durham friends — Bryony, Paul, and Caitlin — have been invaluable in buoying me up throughout this process. Perhaps most importantly of all however, I would like to thank my parents whose love and encouragement has provided me with the temerity and self-belief (and occasional financial assistance) that has allowed me to see this project through to its completion. And last but far from least, to my two dogs, Nell and Archie, who always remind me that there is little in life that is more important than a long walk and a good meal.

To my parents

Introduction

Rural Bodies, Modernity, and Sensory Relations

The Search for a Green Modernity: Leonard Bast's Walk

On an evening in spring, Leonard Bast caught the train to Wimbledon, and from there headed out on foot into the darkness of the Surrey countryside. He walked all night: down gaslit suburban roads, up steep hills, through undulating woodland. For *Howards End*'s downtrodden yet idealistic clerk, this walk out of London into Surrey's rural fringe promised a moment of revelation, of getting 'back to the earth' and subsequently being oriented within the world with a newly acquired clarity of purpose for his life which he had, up to this point, been bereft of.[1] Instead, Bast found himself only tired and hungry, and the morning had awakened with little sense of this salvific wonder: 'The dawn was only grey, it was nothing to mention.'[2] In spite of this, Bast tells his listeners, Margaret and Helen Schlegel, that although the scene itself was less than spectacular, the reasons for his excursion remained nonetheless vital. Working as a clerk in a bank, Bast felt ensnared by the indignities and petty economic realities of his humdrum urban life: 'Oh, hang it all! what's the good—I mean, the good of living in a room for ever? [...] You ought to see once in a way what's going on outside, [even] if it's only nothing particular after all.'[3] Although he has misgivings about the efficacy of his act of peripatetic rebellion, Helen Schlegel, an eternal idealist, enthusiastically asserts to him the nobility of his act: 'You pushed back the boundaries'.[4]

The tension between pragmatism and idealism, intellect and emotion, reality and fantasy within the story of Leonard Bast's walk encapsulates the ways in which rural spaces are never truly neutral zones. Existing as hybrid entities that are at once repositories for emotional divulgence, they also reveal an inherent materiality that can either support or dismantle the imaginary projection that is culturally affixed onto these terrains. This assumptive fixation upon an abstracted sense of place often returns to the seeker a disparate version of being that does not

[1] E. M. Forster, *Howards End* (London: Penguin, 2012 [1910]), p. 123.
[2] Ibid., p. 124.
[3] Ibid., p. 125.
[4] Ibid., p. 126.

reflect the promise of emotional release. We can see this play out in the scene of Bast's walk, in which, despite his physical exertion within the woodland, his misreading of the landscape causes him friction when faced with its actuality. This demonstrates that for Bast his walk was as much concerned with the act of textual re-enactment rather than with finding a unique version of revelation through his own embodied experience.

In line with this, E. M. Forster draws Bast as a character brimming with the commendable yet misdirected energy of the self-improver. This first meeting with Margaret and Helen reveals him as a figure essentially out of step with the present, too busy trying to regurgitate second-hand ideas that he has imbibed through his reading as opposed to actually engaging with their conversation; names such as Robert Louis Stevenson, George Borrow, Henry David Thoreau, and most particularly, Richard Jefferies, punctuate the exchange. In his conversation with the Schlegel sisters, Bast relies on this catalogue of literary figures to act as mediating intellectual touchpoints, but they instead serve to disrupt rather than to abet the flow of the discussion. Although we can and should read Bast's namedropping as entreaties for common contact, it also reveals how much of his walk was in fact textually conceived and imagined as a version of the post-Romantic radical strain of philosophical endeavour that saw solitary communion with rural landscapes as spiritually regenerative. That his route into nature is through this textual fraternity demonstrates the ways in which for many during this period — indeed, Bast tells us that 'There's been a lot of talk at the office lately about these things' — the rural offered a retreat from the everyday through its ability to bridge the material with the imaginative. The kind of spaces that Bast is searching for provides the opportunity for solitariness, for a temporary experience of the socially exiled wanderer, in which the material reality of the body can become invigorated through its exertion. The fantasy of communing with nature promises an absence of self-consciousness through an attention to the physical iterations of being. Suddenly, the self that has become burdensome is altered, made larger through its transgression into a zone of being not regularly experienced.

Boundaries and the limits they impose are central to the emotional and narrative life of Forster's novel. This acute attention to the confines of a social identity haunts all the novel's characters (especially Bast), who long for their lives to be enlarged and reconditioned into a way of being more perspicacious and lucid than what contemporary society can offer. The book's oft-repeated mantra of 'Only connect!' is typically read as a call to finding new kinds of authentic

relations between people.[5] But as Bast's walk suggests, it also offers a larger metaphysical proposal, in which the interactions between the self and the world in which they are situated might become redrawn into a space of ethical and experiential mutuality. These conditions for both Bast and, by the end of the text, the Schlegel sisters seem to be located within the return to nature, having discovered a new way of being within the world through the idealised version of rural England that Howards End, the house, represents. It is possible to read the denouement of the novel as a kind of retreat from the contemporary world with conservative ideological underpinnings. However, when considered as an ecological statement in which the protagonists have found a way to live in dialogue with the natural world, then it becomes a text poised at the cusp of what an alternate vision of what modernity could be. What the character of Leonard Bast helps to outline is the widespread concern that early twentieth-century Britain was instigating a fissure in the relationship between the individual and their sense of place within the world. The feelings of lack that structure Bast's desire to search for 'the love of earth' are part of a wider panoply of literature that explore an array of emotional and experiential confrontations with the idea of the rural as space of bodily and spiritual return.[6]

As reflected by *Howards End*, the search for a coherent model of selfhood in the modernist period regularly turned to the rural as a site in which some form of stability might be attained. This manifested in both progressive and conservative contexts, in which the attraction to a pre-industrial, communal, and seasonally regulated world promised forms of living that connected with the essential elements of an imagined inner consciousness of life. Some of the aesthetic and philosophical developments that are associated with the modernist avant-garde, such as the related but distinct examples of primitivism and organic nationalism (see Chapters 3 and 4), identify within the rural opportunities for addressing feelings of cultural and personal fragmentation that were identified as endemic to the experience of modernity. Similarly, in more popular contexts, legacies of Romanticism saw the continued appeal to a version of a harmonious past, in which the ethics and social organisation of a half-imagined rurality were transported in modified forms into modes in which to orient society. Examples of this range from the revival of traditional music and dances, as promoted by The English Folk Dance Society and The Folk-Song Society (which would merge in 1932), to the development of garden cities in town planning which promoted a suburbanised version of the modern rural community, or to the nationwide

[5] Ibid., p. 195.
[6] Ibid., p. 124.

appetite for the staging of historical pageants in both theatrical and civic contexts.[7] These complex mixtures of historicist and progressivist inscriptions of the rural into the cultural imagination of modernist Britain reveal the ways in which understandings of the natural world were becoming reconceptualised during this period. As this thesis will demonstrate, the body becomes a central actor in the way in which rurality was both aesthetically and ideologically conceptualised in these years, from the radical environmental corporeality of D. H. Lawrence's writings (see Chapter 3) to the establishment and popularisation of such outdoor pursuits as mountaineering or rambling. In the discursive landscape of the Great War and its rippling aftershocks into the interwar period, feelings of fragmentation, psychological alienation, and anxieties over the state of modern life, meant that suddenly the seemingly unchanging (yet also historically depopulated) rural spaces of Britain might offer respite and repair.

This thesis, *Selfhood, Rurality, and the Sensorial Body in the Age of British Modernism, 1910-1945*, addresses the interconnections between rurality, modernity, and the ways in which selfhood was produced and mediated through corporeal and sensory interactions with the natural world. This study surveys the work of novelists, poets, and filmmakers, examining the ways in which rural environments and the natural world provided unique opportunities for rethinking the relationship between place and its shaping of subjectivity. A range of aesthetic practices and formal interests are considered within the wider contexts of early twentieth-century Britain, during which time questions over imperialism, industrial labour, mass politics, economic depressions, and socio-economic transformations all informed the ways in which rural spaces were conceived as part of a wider national picture. The principal intention of this project is to expand an already vibrant field of study that recognises the role of nature and rural communities during this period as offering exciting possibilities for contemplating the variform shape of modernity, both as it was experienced contemporarily and as it has been subsequently conceptualised. Whilst redrawing the boundaries of what constitutes British modernism in formal and aesthetic terms is not the primary goal of this study — although it may be a subsidiary

[7] For information on the late-Victorian and Edwardian Folk Song Revival Movement's origins see Arthur Knevett, 'Cultural and Political Origins of the Folk-Song Society and the Irish Dimension', *Folk Music Journal*, 10.5 (2015), pp. 592-608; for the merging of Folk Song Society and English Folk Dance Society, see Arthur Knevett, 'The merging of the Folk-Song Society and the English Folk Dance Society: Amalgamation or takeover?', *Folk Music Journal*, 11.1 (2016), pp. 6-26; for the history and development of the garden city movement, see Standish Meacham, *Regaining Paradise: Englishness and the Early Garden City Movement* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1999); for the pageant movement of early twentieth-century Britain, see *Restaging the Past: Historical Pageants, Culture and Society in Modern Britain*, ed. Angela Bartie, Linda Fleming, Mark Freeman, Alexander Hutton and Paul Readman (London: UCL Press, 2020).

consequence — nonetheless a central concern remains to reintegrate the diverse spaces of rural Britain into a more inclusive picture of the wider cultural output during this period. This thesis hopes to demonstrate the extent to which rurality and modernity are continually in conversation in these works, and how it is through the interface of the sensory and broader corporeal system with rural contexts that provides us with new ways of seeing the countryside as affecting the way in which selfhood was (and is) conceptualised.

The Footprints of Green Modernism

Modernist and modernist-adjacent writing, which are concerned with the way consciousness is impacted and shaped by wider environmental contexts, show us that the conception of rural spaces during this period was highly varied. Jeffrey Mathes McCarthy's *Green Modernism: Nature and the English Novel, 1900 to 1930*, argues that the primacy of rural landscapes in the work of several — to varying degrees peripheral — modernist writers (Lawrence, Mary Butts, Ford Madox Ford, and Joseph Conrad) is evidence that the assumptive fusion of metropolitanism with high modernism is an exceedingly myopic understanding of the period. McCarthy writes that for these aforementioned writers, nature and the rural offered 'a modernism of resistance founded on a green aesthetic'.[8] Part of this aesthetic is recognisably modernist in its working 'as a discourse of diagnosis and protest, an artistic response to social problems' whilst also functioning as 'a productive textual practice actively modelling new subjectivities' in relation to established notions of nation, history, place, and labour.[9] McCarthy's positing that the essence of modernism is in fact located in the interplay between experience and nature is a stance pertinent to this thesis, given its central concern with the intersection of rural writing and the affective dimensions that inform our understandings of selfhood. Through their aesthetic mediations, this interrelation is described by McCarthy as a process of radical reorientation towards the world: 'physical nature takes modernists beyond the epistemological feedback loop of mind thinking about mind's thinking, and establishes, instead, a framework against which referentiality can be oriented.'[10] This dynamic between nature as a material entity and its iteration through conceptualisation is a frequent point of tension for many of the writers explored in this study. McCarthy's reading of this period as defined by the interplay between the

[8] Jeffrey Mathes McCarthy, *Green Modernism: Nature and the English Novel, 1900 to 1930* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), p. 3.
[9] Ibid., p. 4.
[10] Ibid., p. 9.

physical and the conceptual is useful in laying the groundwork for the authors' examined and their exploration of the role of the body and the senses in interactions with rural spaces in the modernist years.

McCarthy's *Green Modernism* is part of a critical field of enquiry that uses ecocritical approaches to the literature of the modernist period in order to expand the aesthetic conditions and historical contexts to include rural environments and cultures. This capacious reassessment of modernism is reflected in such work as Kelly Sultzbach's *Ecocriticism in the Modernist Imagination: Forster, Woolf, and Auden* (2016), *Exhausted Ecologies: Modernism and Environmental Recovery* by Andrew Kalaidjian (2020), Dominic Head's *Modernity and the English Novel* (2017), and the collection *Eco-Modernism: Ecology, Environment, and Nature in Literary Modernism* (2022), edited by Jeremy Diaper.[11] Sultzbach identifies the 'formal innovations' of the modernist period as offering 'a plurality of perspectives and viewpoints', including that of the non-human, that subsequently 'construct humanity's understanding of itself within a fluctuating world of environmental actors'.[12] Taking the Poundian premise of a fracturing aesthetics as central to modernism's aesthetics of rupture, Sultzbach positions the green modernism(s) that she identifies in Conrad, Woolf, Forster, and Auden as structured around the struggle to 'situate anthropocentric experience' in the context of this new awareness of conflicting subjective positions.[13] Kalaidjian takes a materialist approach that uses the concept of exhaustion, meaning both energy depletion and discursive breakage, as a route into thinking about modernism as a form of necessitous renewal: 'Modernism then can be thought of as a strategic form of regeneration where absolute exhaustion is constantly avoided through aesthetic innovation.'[14] Dynamics between movement and rest, productivity and fatigue, depletion and rejuvenation are identified as animating the development of a modernist understanding of ecological relations. Head's historically situated account of rural literature of this period finds much ambiguity to mine even in the instances of seemingly uncomplicated conservatism such as in rural nostalgia. He writes that the impulse to nostalgia in this period very often was 'conditioned by self-

[11] Kelly Sultzbach, *Ecocriticism in the Modernist Imagination: Forster, Woolf, and Auden* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Andrew Kalaidjian, *Exhausted Ecologies: Modernism and Environmental Recovery* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Dominic Head, *Modernity and the English Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017); *Eco-Modernism: Ecology, Environment, and Nature in Literary Modernism*, ed. Jeremy Diaper (Clemson, SC: Clemson University Press/Liverpool University Press, 2022). See also Alexandra Harris, *Romantic Moderns: English Writers, Artists and the Imagination from Virginia Woolf to John Piper* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2010).

[12] Sultzbach, *Ecocriticism in the Modernist Imagination*, p. 2.

[13] Ibid., p. 11.

[14] Kalaidjian, *Exhausted Ecologies*, p. 8.

reflexiveness' that problematised any reading that wanted to only 'assume that nostalgia is a retrograde phenomenon, redolent of a social conservatism that refuses to embrace change.'[15] This careful approach is helpful in identifying the extent to which certain aesthetic tactics during this period often employ a self-consciousness, at times even irony, to reflect upon their own emotional structuration of the rural as an consolatory mechanism. It is within this context of locating the rural and issues of environmental orientation within the larger picture of early twentieth century British modernity that these critical approaches offer diverse and lively accounts for this study to expand the terrain.

At the heart of a green or ecocritical approach to the literature of the modernist period are questions of ecological proximity, the ethics of aestheticisation, and the relationship between the material world and our variegated modes of experiencing it. As will be shown, the slipperiness of interpreting nature as a purified form of both materiality and of national culture for many of these writers poses broad metaphysical questions. This interest in the materiality of the natural world as representative of an 'authenticity' of being reflects the desire for some form of ethical separation from the epistemological structures that modernity promotes. This wish to find a new kind of consciousness sees rural spaces becoming sites in which to test the boundaries of the individual's capacity for self-abnegation, in which the subject often undergoes a process of diminishment in order to form a more coherent understanding of their ontological place within the world.

Throughout the texts studied here, the will for communion with nature is born of the desire to recognise the provisional role of the mind in the experience of consciousness. In this dynamic, the mind is presented as an interpretive tool whose primacy can and should be moderated through an awareness of subjectivity's essential provisionality to the wider ecological systems in which they are situated. As a result of this impulse for greater sensitivity to the world, the body becomes invested as the site in which to access that which is outside of the thinking mind's purview. This interest in the 'material turn', as McCarthy describes it, is an attempt to 'understand human existence as unfolding within a flow of interacting agencies'.[16] This is itself very recognisable in terms of modernism's development of formal techniques such as stream of consciousness, and it demonstrates the ways in which certain stylistic approaches that are developed during this period offer new ways of conceptualising the nature of being. In

[15] Head, *Modernity and the English Novel*, p. 13.
[16] Ibid., p. 33; p. 34.

recognising the inherently interdependent composition of being, the natural world's ecological system of coexistence offers a legible space in which to interrogate the ways in which an attention to the relationality between material entities might offer a new perspective toward the understanding of selfhood and consciousness during this period. In foregrounding this networked conception of the natural world we can identify it as conceptually mirroring much of the formal innovations in modernist stylistics, such as the notions of imitation and rupture, spatio-temporal unfixity, or the conception of interpenetrating or even communal selfhoods.[17] Many of these concepts are inscribed in ecological terms within the context of rural modernity, typically operating within an ethical framework that champions forms of interdependence as the essential version of being. McCarthy positions this ecological account of materiality as in essence already a kind of modernist epistemology, writing that 'Physical actuality is woven directly into the fabric of modernist theory and practice.'[18] Therefore, the function of the body in the context of rural modernism is to both mediate and produce this materiality of place by bringing actuality into contact with the plain of subjective experience. For all the texts studied here, the body holds a dual purpose as both a physical reality and as boundary into the perceptual rendering of the world within an aesthetic formation. Thus, green modernism, within which this project is in part situated, through its emphasis upon the interplay between material and aesthetic formations of selfhood and the natural world, offers unique opportunities for exploring modernity's interrogation of being through the lens of an environmental ideological position.

As we have indicated, modernism's development and expression as an artistic practice and historical context is multifaceted in its features and scope. One uniform definition is that it is a process of contestation over traditionally assumed forms of experience and their subsequent modes of expression. Michael Levenson extrapolates modernism into formal and compositional features such as 'the recurrent act of fragmenting unities', 'the use of mythic paradigms', and 'radical linguistic experiment' all of which were 'inspired by the resolve (in [T. S.] Eliot's phrase) to startle and disturb the public.'[19] Levenson implicates a rhetoric of confrontation and exclusivity at play within the works and contemporary discussions of high modernism (c. 1918-

[17] See Christopher Innes, 'Modernism and Drama', *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, ed. Michael Levenson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 130-156, p. 131; also, David Trotter, who describes Woolf's fiction as concerned with 'the permeability or friability of selfhood' or searching for 'cumulative models of selfhood', 'The Modernist Novel', *Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, pp. 70-99, p. 94; p. 95. See also, *The Cambridge History of Modernism*, ed. Vincent Sherry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).
[18] Ibid., p. 11.
[19] Michael Levenson, 'Introduction', *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, pp. 1-8, p. 3.

1930), whilst still acknowledging the familiarity of this reading.[20] For Levenson though, the key to modernism lies in the interrogational stance toward 'technique' in which 'every element of the work is [seen as] an instrument of its effect and therefore open to technical revision.'[21] This interrogation of not only the content of expression but also the manner in which such content was shaped and framed is vital in understanding the way that modernism was able to broach the problem of thinking about rurality in spite of its being mired in discourses of stasis, conservatism, and nationalism (in Chapter 2 I discuss this further, in relation to Charlotte Mew's interrogation of the lyric). Therefore, in thinking of modernism as a disruptive strategy, one which aims to redraw the world anew through formal and aesthetic innovations, the role of the body as the central structuring mechanism within our relationship to the world demonstrates its importance in any account of what modernism might be. Consequently, through this interest in formal experimentation, the rural becomes a site for interrogation in ways that resist and undercut any impulses for nostalgia and retrospection when approached within this context of self-conscious revisioning.

Rural modernist texts' resistance to embedded convention are most often achieved through the foregrounding of the affective dimension within subjective experience. Reflecting this material turn (to borrow McCarthy's coinage), Julie Taylor positions modernism itself as being concerned with the affective dimensions of experience. This interest in the lived experience of emotion before its conceptualisation into linguistic terms, she sees, is a product of increased attention to the way in which temporality was understood in this period. She writes that concepts of the modern emerge 'as an affective orientation towards history: affect is central to its constitution, its claims to newness and its ties to the past.'[22] Taylor helpfully summarises the place of the body and affectivity as central to modernism's temporally fixated concerns, showing how established questions within modernism such as the crisis of subjectivity's coherency are rooted in a tension between the body and mind's, perhaps conflictual, experience of temporal

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[20] In his attempt to define modernism in a summative manner, Levenson acknowledges that his introductory reading is not a new understanding, though nonetheless he argues it is demonstrative of a common position expressed during the period: 'Crisis is inevitably the central term of art in discussions of this turbulent cultural moment. Overused as it has been, it still glows with justification.' Ibid., p. 4. Additionally, the historical parameters of the modernist period are ever-expanding and so for ease of illustration I have used the designation of high modernism as post-First World War, 1918, to 1930 as directed by Joshua Kavalovski in *High Modernism: Aesthetics and Performativity in Literature of the 1920s* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2014), p. 199.

[21] Ibid.

[22] Julie Taylor, 'Introduction', *Modernism and Affect*, ed. Julie Taylor (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), pp. 1-19, p. 2.

states.[23] Whilst this concern has resonance throughout all of the chapters in this study, this is seen most acutely in the work of Edward Thomas (Chapter 1), who drew upon the rural as a space for both emotional release and for elegiac meditation upon the processes of time and history. Modernism therefore can be understood as a strategy of reincorporation that works to recoup the past through a process that defamiliarizes and transforms it into an aesthetic that is responsive to the specific demands of the age. This is echoed by Levenson's argument that modernism's discursive structure works through a 'recollection of precursors' in order to generate the propulsion needed to 'search for novelty'.[24] Part of the sense of dread that is pervasive across much of the work of the period is drawn from the attempt to articulate what Jonathan Flatley has called 'a sense of anteriority' linked 'fundamentally to loss', in which in the face of modernisation, the excitement of cultural fracture also carries with it a fundamental unease.[25] The rediscovery and popularisation of rural folk cultures and practices of superstition during the Great War and 1920s (see Chapter 4) demonstrates the ways in which modernity and retrospection often worked in parallel, with the threat of change prompting the cleaving to an often fictive and imagined version of the past. If modernism is construed along these lines, then, it is necessary to think of it as an aesthetics that is haunted by its own destructive desire to either sever or disfigure the past.[26] This in itself can be understood as an ideological trauma response to feelings that emerge from the experience of industrial capitalism (including the War) as producing an inherently dissociative model of being.

In many ways, ruralism within literature of the modernist period is perhaps the most indicative site in which to explore this discursive strain between the past and present. At once it draws upon the idea of the land as acutely historical, bearing the legacies of a past both physically and culturally, whilst also representing an immense possibility for a confrontation between the old and new, emerging as a material and psychic territory that is imbued with the opportunity to rupture rote consciousness. If the process of industrialisation across the nineteenth century had accrued a sense of alienation from both community memory and the natural environment, the

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[23] Taylor writes about this development extensively in her introduction to *Modernism and Affect*, part of which achieves a successful dismantling of long-held ideas of modernism as necessarily abstruse: 'scholars have tended to emphasise modernists' aesthetic preferences for irony and detachment over embodied sentiment [...] The traditional view of modernist aesthetics' is that it is 'cold, hard and cerebral'. Ibid., p. 2.

[24] Michael Levenson, *Modernism* (New Haven, CT and London: Yale University Press, 2011), p. 12.

[25] Jonathan Flatley, *Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), discussed in Taylor, 'Introduction', p. 1.

[26] I note here the use of the plural in 'aesthetics' as an acknowledgment that modernism cannot be delimited to a strictly and exclusive set of formal codes and rules; rather it is a series of intersecting types of expression that centre around a shared sense of instability and cultural fragmentation.

culmination of industrial-capitalism's politics of exploitation in the Great War facilitated a catalysation of cultural fracturing that had been, up to that point, a series of gradually widening rifts. Suddenly, a language of apocalypse and social isolation emerged as the necessary response to the feeling of total schism that the War had brought to both the sense of nation as a type of rational landscape and to the bodies that compose and personify that nation.[27] Lawrence's 1920 novel *Women in Love* foregrounds this sense of ontological rupture, with the character of Gerald Crich coming to represent the crisis in being that individuals and the wider cultural landscape were experiencing.

The fatalistic undertones to narratives of absence recall not only the realities of absent men, lost in the trenches, but also point to a wider uncertainty over the ethical relevance in constructing narratives of individual experience through a method of rational omniscience that had been naturalised by Victorian realism. As Stephen Kern describes, this type of specifically modernist character, who is both fragmented at the level of internal psychology and within the broader narrative scheme, works in response to features of modernity that created a ruptured sense of the world as clearly demarcated and lucidly formed. Such features as the telephone, with its ability to collapse time and space, resulted in the emergence of character types constructed through 'a mass of sensations whose ego boundaries are blurred with identities distributed between themselves and others or outside objects.'[28] Consciousness became a matter for interrogation, with notions of its permeability being registered at the level of formal construction, for example in the increasing application of free indirect discourse and in the transformation of narrative scope from progressive event-based plots to works more concerned with psychological rumination and capturing quotidian experience as it was lived within daily time, such as demonstrated in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* (1925).[29]

Conversely to traditional iterations of the fragmented urban modernist subject, within the context of rural fiction during this period, the same discursive exploration of the distributed self often produces a far more ameliorative effect when being fractured within an environmental system of organic life. As we see in discussion of Charlotte Mew's work (Chapter 2), in rural contexts the possibility to induce a dissipation of the self is seen as a positive revelation of

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[27] 'Ultimately, the war instilled in modernist esoteric and decadent imaginings a visceral sense of apocalypse.' Mark Morrison, 'The 1910s and The Great War', *The Cambridge History of Modernism*, ed. Vincent Sherry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), pp. 130-153, p. 145.

[28] Stephen Kern, *The Modernist Novel: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 26.

[29] For furthering reading on this theme, see Bryony Randall, *Modernism, Daily Time and Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

connectedness or extra-temporality, or other such forms of valuable unfixed-ness, while the fragmented city self is shown to be a necessary survival (or not) mechanism which is antithetical to any possibility of forming a coherent identity. Instead of crisis and severing, this is registered as relation and mutuality; it is an ecological rendering of the self that produces an expansion of consciousness, in which the vibrancy of the world of not-self facilitates a sense of spiritual stability. As with Forster's ruminations in *Howards End*, boundaries between entities become unshackled from the crisis of their own limitations. Therefore, in uncovering the desire for an ecological model of being that many of the figures within this study are keen to explore, questions over the fragmentation of selfhood, which is central to modernism as a psychological response to the world, become transformed into the desire for locating a wholeness through environmental sensitivity. The conceptual development of the network is a phenomenon central to modernist theories of consciousness (both individual and communal) which are structured around processes of contiguity, contrast, and interaction (as explored, for example, through Clarissa Dalloway's walk down Bond Street).[30] Networks are vital to modernism, in both urban and rural contexts, but thinking about the more explicitly ecological implications of networks allows us to help modernism 'go rural'.

Consequently, green modernism must look somewhat distinct from that of its traditional metropolitan counterpart given its divergent emotional structure that places connection as one of its primary objectives. That is not to say that green modernism is necessarily optimistic in its colouring, but rather it holds an object (rural spaces) in which to impress a model of subjectivity that is productive rather than reactive. As will be seen with discussion of Lawrence in Chapter 3, the state of the rural during this period is a complex mixture of living topographies brought into sharp contact with the destructive effects of industrialism. Therefore, if we take McCarthy's notion of 'a modernism of resistance founded on a green aesthetic', what he calls part of a wider movement in modernist studies to uncover artefacts of 'modernist "complicity"', the traditional cultural relegation of the rural as modernism's antithesis no longer holds much credence. Rather, we can see in many of these works that rural Britain is as much affected by the demands of capitalism as any other type of locale. Chapter 5 looks at the ways in which modernity comes in the form not of development but of economic decline for the parts of northern Scotland and its outer islands that are more geographically remote from the metropolitan centres. However, for

[30] See Maud Ellmann, *The Nets of Modernism: Henry James, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, and Sigmund Freud* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

the writers and filmmakers discussed in this study, the recognition of modernism as an experience of cultural fracturing was only the preamble to the wider project of social and political reform. This was centred around a recognition of humanity as a part of a broader continuum with the more-than-human world, and thus generated a version of green modernism that is in many ways productive and does not just stop with a nihilistic despair at the effects of post-Great War cultural cataclysm. Whilst not all the texts examined hold this level of instructive reform, a significant number do identify within the rural the opportunity for both personal and societal salvation.

Recent publications on the intersection between the rural and British modernity have helped to expand the field of critical enquiry away from reductive tropes of depictions of the rural as being synonymous with conservatism and pastoral simplicity. One such pertinent example, *Rural Modernity in Britain: A Critical Intervention*, edited by Kristin Bluemel and Michael McCluskey, furthers this effort to provide a corrective to the 'often-ignored' presence of rurality within both modernist and popular texts, as well as in other contemporary media, of the period.[31] In their introduction, Bluemel and McCluskey argue for a more compound picture of British cultural output during the interwar years which promotes the recognition of 'a vital relationship', rather than opposition, between the rural and the modern.[32] The adherence to this oppositional dynamic between the two, they argue, maintains the structure that positions modernity as a phenomenon of metropolitan spaces, characterised by 'Shifts, revolts and [...] movement', whilst the 'rural functions as the Other', its communities and socio-cultural practices viewed as 'stolid, static or stagnant'.[33] Where previous studies have been undertaken to redress the misguided division of the rural from the modern, Bluemel and McCluskey astutely take issue with the indiscriminate adoption of a framework which places the rural as in discursive opposition to the city, without critically interrogating this.[34] Conversely, their approach aims to acknowledge the realities of an inbuilt urban/rural division that is inherent in all discussion of rurality, and whilst this often cannot be diverted, it can be contextualised and recognised as being discursively

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[31] Kristin Bluemel and Michael McCluskey, 'Introduction: Rural Modernity in Britain', *Rural Modernity in Britain*, ed. Kristin Bluemel and Michael McCluskey (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), pp. 1-16, p. 1.
[32] Ibid., p. 2.
[33] Ibid., p. 3. Brian Short reiterates this point when he writes that from a historical perspective, 'Settlements were *inter-dependent* upon one another, not merely isolated and inward-looking', in 'The Evolution of Contrasting Communities within Rural England', *The English Rural Community: Image and Analysis*, ed. Brian Short (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pp. 19-43, p. 20.
[34] The two examples cited are Valentine Cunningham, 'Somewhere the Good Place?' (1988) and Alexandra Harris, *Romantic Moderns* (2010).

produced and not necessarily always a useful model for thinking about the rural. Indeed, it is this identification of the assumptive discourses that we bring to discussions about the rural — such as with questions of peripherality (further considered in Chapter 5) and socioeconomic practices (see Chapter 3) — that Bluemel and McCluskey's project is valuable in laying the groundwork for this study. Like theirs, this project is similarly interested in giving voice back to the rural realm, whilst still attending to the inescapability of this structural binary.

Head echoes this sentiment of refusing to simplify how rural modernity should be understood. For example, he identifies an in-built self-consciousness to rural writing that occupies a complex responsiveness to industrial progress. He states that 'rural writing itself stages an investigation of the decline of the industrial spirit, rather than being merely constitutive of it', and is therefore self-critical of the legacies that the rural literary tradition imbue to any critique that pits itself against industrialisation.[35] In a sense this is reflective of the ways in which modernist rural writing always attempts to undermine its own trajectory and call attention to its limitations as it recognises that any depiction of a landscape necessarily is a supplementary imitation of the absent "real" nature. Therefore, as Bluemel and McCluskey argue, the positioning of 'rural modernity' as 'a term that embraces the contradictory impulses that characterise so much writing about modernity' is one that affords opportunities for thinking about the ways in which we can approach the rural as both a lived and conceptual space that can at once speak back to the urban but also can equally speak for itself and its own contradictions.[36]

Where the direction of this thesis somewhat diverges from *Rural Modernity in Britain* is in the greater investment in the pastoral as a structural aesthetic in the figuration of the rural. Bluemel and McCluskey's project is concerned with moving away from the pastoral which structures the rural as a space which 'comes to represent something precious that is absent or lost yet is simultaneously received as the very thing that can compensate for such loss.'[37] Whilst this project aims to treat this impulse for the rural as a space of consolation critically, it is necessary to engage with the various ways in which pastoral manifests within the work of these writers. For some, such as Mew (Chapter 2) it is an essential component to their establishment of a queer vision of nature; for others, such as Lawrence, any impulse for retreat seems pointedly divorced from pastoral as an aesthetic position. With this in mind, this study does aim to

[35] Head, *Modernity and the English Rural Novel*, p. 5.
[36] Ibid., p. 4.
[37] Ibid., p. 6.

approach the pastoral as a critical pathway that can be instructive of the ways in which the rural was conceived by some within this period.

With this critical caveat in mind, it is necessary to call attention to fact that this study's interests are to examine the ways in which rurality was conceived through the aesthetic inheritances and transformations of a select group of (mostly) bourgeois thinkers. Furthermore, it is also worth acknowledging that some of these figures (Mew, Powell, Flaherty) had only tenuous links to the places or landscapes they were artistically framing. As a result of this, the writers and filmmakers that people this thesis very often fall into the kind of rhetoric that elegises both the decline of rural environments and their societies and cultures. Subsequently, the very dyadic of urban/rural that Bluemel and McCluskey see as mapping 'more or less directly on to the elite/popular divide' can be seen to be at play within even the more sophisticated renderings of rural cultures and people by these artists.[38] Therefore, questions arise of not only how these artists were encountering these types of communities and varied topographies but also why they chose to focus on them, and what legacies this focus produces, both within their contemporary contexts and when read from today's position of almost one hundred years later. Whilst this means that the intention of this thesis is not to mine the same territory as *Rural Modernity in Britain* — which focuses upon artistic outputs and artefacts that show 'rural people [...] as active agents in transforming the material and cultural conditions in which they lived' — it nonetheless does attempt to critique the limitations that are engendered by the touristic viewpoints that this study's assembled roster can often exhibit.[39]

The Enlarged Sensorium: Imperial Contexts and Eco-Phenomenological Remedies

At the centre of this thesis is an exploration of the way rurality is apprehended and assimilated by the self in the modernist years. The role of the subject as the locus for determining the way in which rural space is aesthetically inscribed means that attention to the manner of this interaction between the perceptual faculties and the natural world is paramount. Across all the texts examined in this study, we can see the dual function of ingress and egress that the sensory modalities perform, being at once the mediator of the world to the self, but also the system in which the self is brought into relation with the world. As shown with Bast's walk the approach to a place is often determined by an aesthetic assumption that is brought into friction in the

[38] Ibid. p. 7.
[39] Ibid., p. 10.

confrontation with its material reality. Across the writers discussed we can see the ways in which these aesthetic assumptions are interrogated and at times upended through sensorial orientation to the environments depicted within their texts. Part of Bast's failure in the scene of his walk is his inattention to the ways in which his imbrication within the Surrey woodland is achieved through a heightened sensory attentiveness — lost in the demands of mental expectation, the present-ness of his body within this environment is elided, and therefore his gambit necessarily has to fail.

In light of this, one of the central points of enquiry this thesis aims to address is the notion that the interface with landscape is always to some extent an imaginative act. The natural world exists as a material space, and yet our access to it is always mediated through cognitive perception. The period of the early decades of the twentieth century offer particular opportunities for investigating this discursive gap, in that with the emergence of modernism's strategies of reconceiving the way consciousness is both understood and expressed, new approaches to comprehending this fissure between the limits of self-knowledge and the knowledge of a large context in which we are placed become available in aesthetic representation.

In considering the emergence of modernism, it is also necessary to place this discursive shift in the context of the wider reverberations and tangential effects of imperialism upon British cultural life. It is no accident that the cultural and psychic reterritorialisation of the home nations' rural environments emerges during a period of political and economic insecurity. The entwinement of the development of national identities alongside specific regions of rural Britain (south-east England, the Scottish Highlands, and the Eyri/Snowdonia Mountain region of Wales) reveal the ways in which industrial expansion, itself a part of Britain's imperialist project, construed places of intense natural beauty as emotionally symbolic and productive of national identity. This, in part, emerges also as a transmogrified form of cultural memory as by 1901 77% of the English and Welsh population were settled in the ever-expanding cities, nearly doubling the urban population of one hundred years earlier.[40] This meant that conceptions of rural environments, places that were formerly the long-occupied communities of many of this migrated populace, became charged with the emotional resonance of the elegy, as spaces became defined by the loss of familial and cultural continuity. This process of codifying, for example, English

[40] Alun Howkins explains that the '1901 census revealed that England, and to a lesser extent Wales, was firmly established as the world's first truly urban and industrial nation. In that year 77 per cent of the population of the two countries lived in urban areas and 23 per cent lived in the rural districts.' Howkins, *The Death of Rural England: A Social History of the Countryside since 1900* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 8.

nationhood through the tropes of certain kinds of rural environments is part of what Roger Ebbatson sees as a trauma response to imperial expansion. This expansion produces a 'series of fantasmatic spaces' that offer a sense of continuity (both temporal and communal) through a legible and transferable, yet ultimately imaginary, projection of a common history (see Chapter 4).[41] This theory of the interest in rurality during the interwar period is also surveyed in Jed Esty's influential study *A Shrinking Island* (2003), in which he characterises the relationship between ritualised Englishness in this period with the political and cultural insecurity that accompanied the waning strength of the nation's imperial power as the 1930s progressed ever-closer towards the Second World War (see Chapter 5). Both Ebbatson and Esty identify an emotional tenor of nostalgia born out of the insecurity of the experiential contexts (both personal and socio-political) of life as it was organised under modernity. Whilst a Marxist definition of alienated labour does not graft successfully on to all the texts explored here, the principle of the self becoming diverted from the productive integrity of one's labour (as it exists in various contexts) is reflective of the period's concern with symptoms of fracture and disillusion. When considered in these terms, however, does not the break also require its opposite? In this sense, any disorientation within our understanding of the experience of modernity must also incorporate the inverse in order to procure a completed picture. Therefore, the return to the rural as a site of productive ontological ruminations should be seen as part of, not in opposition to, the broader experience of modernism's diagnostic project in that it is as much a response to its contemporary context as Mrs Dalloway's morning shopping in London is.

As both Ebbatson and Esty intimate, modernist aesthetics' transformation of spatial order reveal an inherent dependency upon the ideological and material effects of capitalist imperialism. Fredric Jameson's analysis of modernism's imbrication within a wider cultural system of imperialism is valuable in capturing the sense in which such formalist developments in this period, such as the simultaneous intensification and destabilisation of the subjective point of view, are rooted in a latent anxiety over the alienation of the self from a coherent understanding of place. He argues that the period from the Berlin Conference of 1884, in which African territories were divided up by the major European powers, to the political splintering of the Great War, the consciousness that imperialism wrought 'tended to repress the more basic axis of otherness' as a necessary condition for the processes of colonial expansion.[42] Loss, both

[41] Roger Ebbatson, *An Imaginary England* (Padstow: Ashgate, 2005), p. 4.
[42] Fredric Jameson, *The Modernist Papers* (London: Verso, 2016 [2007]), p. 155.

in material and existential terms, Jameson posits, is at the heart of the colonial experience. This is experienced in a more direct form for those colonised societies, and more covertly for those in the home nation(s):

> colonialism means that a significant structural segment of the economic system as a whole is now located elsewhere, beyond the metropolis, outside of the daily life and existential experience of the home country, in colonies over the water whose own life experience and life world — very different from that of the imperial power — remains unknown and unimaginable for the subjects of the imperial power, whatever social class they may belong to. Such spatial disjunction has as its immediate consequence the inability to grasp the way the system functions as a whole.[43]

Therefore, imperialism, in producing a system which depends upon the obfuscation of material economic production in order to continue to expand, effects a sense of displacement at the heart of political, socioeconomic, and cultural life. The lack that is at the heart of the British relationship to its own existential self-image can be seen to be rooted in the same impulse that seemingly galvanises and codifies nationalism as an essential identification of character in this same period. Modernism, thus, is seen to offer a potential salvific reunification through its ability to narrate this ontological fissure by foregrounding the 'formal dilemma' at the heart of selfhood's dislodged relationship to space and place.[44] This very same dilemma is played out through the figure of Septimus Smith in *Mrs Dalloway*, the shell-shocked solider who 'went to France to save an England which consisted almost entirely of Shakespeare's plays and Miss Isobel Pole in a green dress' but who has returned disturbed and emotionally severed from the kind of sensuous dream of Merry England that had sustained his previously innocent self.[45]

New understandings of transforming spatial order during this period were both recorded by and conceived of through modernist aesthetics. This attention to spatial dynamics reveal a concern with upsetting an idea of the singular, empirical, objective encounter between the self and world, whilst also pointing to the limitations of a solely subjective conception of the world's arrangement. Innovative technological apparatus, such as the cinema (see Chapter 5), inaugurated new orientations towards the world through its manipulation of both temporal and spatial scales, a phenomenon that Jameson calls 'a cinematographic kind of space'.[46] He identifies

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[43] Ibid., p. 157.
[44] Ibid., p. 158.
[45] Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (London: Vintage, 2004), p. 75.
[46] Ibid.

within this new kind of spatial relation the production of 'some space, some third term, between the subject and object alike. Cinematographic perception is in that sense neither subjective nor psychological: there is nothing private or personal about it [...] But it is not objective either in any conventional sense of realism or empiricism'.[47] Cinematographic perception in these terms, understood as an essential element of modernist style that also appears outside of its actual technological application, is identifiable within many of the texts explored throughout this study in their built-in interrogation into the very processes of their own aesthetic production. Indeed, all of the writers that draw upon the rural as a space of conflictual continuities and innovations demonstrate an attention to the limits of their own subjective approach to the land and its cultural configurations. Some, such as Edward Thomas, find within this tension the very motor that will drive their work forward; others, such as Mary Butts, looks to the opportunities of modernist spatial style as a way which to counteract a nationwide cultural-political development that she sees as threatening the ontological order of a sacral understanding of place.

Jameson, using *Howards End* as an illustration, see modernity as a process of landscape becoming obliterated through the effects of imperial epistemologies.[48] Like Bast's walk out of the city, which represents an attempt to combat the 'fragile and ephemeral safety net of the interpersonal' that modernity induces, the landscape around the house of the eponymous Howards End itself, represents a rurality defined by personal relationships and contact between things.[49] Jameson describes the value-system that emerges during the course of the novel, in which feelings of 'infinity', synonymous with the reach of imperialism, are transfigured, tamed even, by their mediation through bodily and sensory processes. He sees the novel as engaging in a process of reconceiving perception in a way that allows 'an enlargement of our sensorium'.[50] This investment in the perceptual capacities of the body as instrumental in producing the modernist reworking of the self in relation to imperialism's existential lack, foregrounds one of the central questions of this study: namely, why is it to the body that these rural writers so frequently turn? Under Jameson's reasoning, it can be seen as an attempt to patch up a fractured totality, to redraw selfhood's relationship to the world as borne out of the body's grounding capacities. Therefore, for rural writers who engage with modernist aesthetics, isolated subjects are envisaged as part of, as Jameson describes Forster's project, 'a Utopian glimpse of achieved

[47] Ibid., p. 159.
[48] Ibid., p. 162.
[49] Ibid.
[50] Ibid., p. 163.

community.'[51] Of course, this search for totality manifests in diverse ways, with some writers and filmmakers (Thomas, Mew, Powell) finding ambivalent realities in their attempts at a consolatory reunification with rural environments; others, namely Lawrence, Butts, and Flaherty (chapters 3, 4, & 5) see the opportunity to repair the fractured ontology of modernity as dependent upon a return to either traditional or primitive states of being, thereby finding the impulse for consolation less a question of soothing and more one of compromise.

In positioning the body at the locus between consciousness and the wider demands of both material nature and the discourses of ethico-political culture, this study necessarily attends to questions of eco-phenomenology. The intersection of phenomenology and modernism has been identified by Ariane Mildenberg, who proposes that the two, if not directly historically interdependent, nonetheless demonstrate explicit concern with much of the same discursive intersections. She argues that modernism and phenomenology structure themselves around an attempt to uncover life in ways that are not 'objectively "framed"' but are instead 'an un-framed and raw experience that can never be completely possessed.'[52] McCarthy found that this lack of hermeneutic closure implicit within modernism was central to the conception of nature as both a site for 'cultural intervention' but nonetheless remaining uncontained by the fact of it 'existing as a physical ground beyond language.'[53] As McCarthy has identified, the conceptual possibilities that writers within the green modernists umbrella find within nature is its status as a form of materiality that is necessarily 'other' to subjectivity. This sentiment is echoed by Mildenberg's aligning of phenomenology and modernism as concurrent approaches to both philosophy and artistic practice that 'thrive in the blend of insecurity and possibility, in answers that are in motion and elusive, thus gesturing toward meaning and never ceasing to open'.[54] The impetus of indeterminacy and unfixity in much of modernist and phenomenological thought is by definition non-anthropocentric due to its inherently relational structure: everything is at once object of another's subject.

Eco-phenomenology, then, is the bridging of phenomenology's attention to the shape of perceptual experience and ecology's attention to the interwoven connection of living and non-living things. A key figure in this field is David Abram. In his book *The Spell of the Sensuous* (1996), Abram aims to put the body back into the picture when thinking about how consciousness and

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[51] Ibid.
[52] Ariane Mildenberg, *Modernism and Phenomenology* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), p. 18. Apple Books.
[53] McCarthy, *Green Modernism*, p. 7.
[54] Mildenberg, *Modernism and Phenomenology*, p. 78.

nature intersect. He argues that the body is not 'a closed and bounded object', but rather porously open to the effects of the environment in which it is enfolded within:

> the boundaries of a living body are open and indeterminate; more like membrane than barriers, they define a surface of metamorphosis and exchange. The breathing, sensing body draws its sustenance and its very substance from the soils, plants, and elements that surround it; it continually contributes itself, in turn, to the air [...] ceaselessly spreading out of itself as well as breathing the world into itself, so that it is difficult to discern, at any moment, precisely where this living body begins and where it ends.[55]

As is evident, Abram is determined to articulate a language of being that is integrative and embedded within a larger environment and which similarly produces in interdependency between that environment and the experiencing subject. As an epistemological position, it is in many ways a similar project to modernism's attempts at narrating experience and perception in a way that goes beyond the predetermined codes of expression handed down from Romanticism and realism (discussed in Chapter 1). Phenomenology as a practice aims to capture 'the living movement between mute perception and words'; it is a process of 'ongoing movement [...] unfinished and infinite' and critically is never reducible to a singularity of vision.[56] Abram sees this process as a kind of 'recuperation of the incarnate, sensorial dimension' that offers not only a form of environmental reintegration but also is able to redress modernity's ongoing crisis in ontological alienation.[57] Much like Lawrence's later writing, Abram describes a process of returning to sensorial awareness as one in which 'we gradually discover our sensory perceptions to be simply part of a vast, interpenetrating webwork of perceptions and sensations borne by countless other bodies' and that being is an 'intertwined web of experience.'[58] Much of this is highly evocative of the kind of green modernist writing explored in this study in that it recognises the natural world as a space of immense sensory intensity brought about through a constant interchange with other bodies (meaning entities, both conscious and unconscious) that, whilst they are perceived through an individuated subjective field, nonetheless operate with level of alterity that allows them to exist outside of subjectivity.

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[55] David Abram, *The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World* (New York: Vintage, 1997), pp. 46-7.
[56] Mildenberg, *Modernism and Phenomenology*, p. 83.
[57] Abram, *Spell of the Sensuous*, p. 65.
[58] Ibid.

Of course, an aesthetics that is structured around the interpenetrative relationship between subjectivity and the natural world is not a feature unique to developments in early twentieth-century literature. Obvious candidates of influential predecessors are found in the Romantic generations of the early nineteenth-century, with such figures as William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who were similarly interested in exploring the ways in which the self is mutually productive of the environment as a psychic entity. Another influence is found in Victorian nature writer Richard Jefferies (see Chapter 2), whose work was impactful on several of the writers explored in this study (including Thomas and Mew). But perhaps the most direct and recognisably tangible forebear of the figures explored within this study is the work of novelist and poet, Thomas Hardy. Not only did Hardy clearly influence some of Mew's poetry as well as having maintained a friendship with her, he also was the subject of a work of critical study by Lawrence, and helped to define the territory of south-west England as Wessex which Butts adapted in her animistic vision of the Dorset landscape.[59] Finally, in an example of circularity and a reminder of his intergenerational span, Hardy was himself seemingly influenced by the penultimate poem written by Thomas, 'Out in the dark' (see the close of Chapter 1), in his poem 'The Fallow Deer at the Lonely House'. Therefore, as a figure who incorporates an embryonic modernism alongside a high Victorian sensibility, Hardy's work provides the entryway to my investigation into the relationship between rurality, corporeality, and modernity.

Roots and Branches: Hardy's Transitional Ecology

Within his work Hardy both excavates and aestheticises a panoply of rural customs, cultures, and social types, animating them as part of a metaphysical struggle that sees the world as a terrain imbued with a hard Darwinian materiality. His work so often explores the ways in which human experience is governed by our inextricability from the earth in which we dwell, often exploring the ways in which social identities become unfettered by their place within a larger ecological reality that disturbs anthropocentric ontologies. A poem of his, 'Transformations', displays this concern with the permeability between the human body as an organic entity and its effect over time upon the material composition of the environment. First published in his 1917 collection *Moments of Vision and Miscellaneous Verses*, the poem concerns the elegiac ruminations of a speaker, who whilst looking at a yew growing in a graveyard, remembers the figures whose burial

[59] Hardy's influence upon Mew's poetry is most strongly felt in her use of approximated dialect language and narratives of rustic life in such poems as 'The Farmer's Bride', 'Old Shepherd's Prayer', and 'Sea-Love'.

in soil has fed into the life of the tree and the other plant life. Divided into three sestains composed of two couplets followed by a tail rhyme (AABCCB), the elegy is animated by a careful motion of immediate and delayed recall:

> Portion of this yew
> Is a man my grandsire knew,
> Bosomed here at its foot:
> This branch may be his wife,
> A ruddy human life
> Now turned to a green shoot.[60]

Hardy's formal mirroring through rhyme, in which the divided couplet acts as both a separation and deferred unity, reflects the poem's interest in capturing the movement of life from one state (adjacent couplet) into another (delayed couplet). The implication of time is apparent even from the off, with the reference to the yew tree signifying an ancient and mysterious custom of growing these trees in churchyards, for debated reasons that move between the practicality of its toxicity warding off grazing animals to supernatural explanations that link the yew to a pre-Christian past.[61] As an elegy, it is tinged with an optimism not commonly found in the treatment of mortality: rather than a poem explicitly about death in an absolute sense, it instead portrays death as a material transformation, in which the body becomes translated into the lifeforce of the earth through, as Abram describes, 'metamorphosis and exchange'.[62] This process sees death reformed into simply a component part of larger model of ecological being, in which the material capacities of the body become the substance of life.

As well as being a text about the sustaining and regenerative potencies of an ecological model of being, it also has the reverse effect of animating the natural world into a series of spectral entities: 'And the fair girl long ago | Whom I vainly tried to know | May be entering this rose.' Here the landscape of the churchyard becomes a place of personal relation with social and familial ties speculatively reborn through the flowers, grass, and yew. Although it could appear that Hardy is only using the plant life as a consolatory mechanism to engage with the emotional structure of the elegiac tradition, his poem actually functions as a statement about the

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[60] Thomas Hardy, 'Transformations', *Selected Poetry*, ed. Samuel Hynes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 117-18.
[61] See 'Chapter 3: Churchyard Yews' in Robert Bevan-Jones, *The Ancient Yew: A History of Taxus baccata*, 3rd edn. (Oxford: Windgather Press, 2017).
[62] Abram, *Spell of the Sensuous*, p. 46.

ultimate material reality of all things: names have faded and the memories of these personal relationships will dissipate once the speaker himself is of the earth, but the recompositing of their bodies as generative matter within the soil offers a hope that life will endure and that the total alterity of death is ultimately illusory:

> So they are not underground
> But as nerves and veins abound
> In the growths of upper air,
> And they feel the sun and rain,
> And the energy again
> That made them what they were![63]

This imaginative act of ecological vivification uncovers a flexible temporal scheme at the heart of Hardy's ontology which sees formal cessation of lifeforce as part of a bigger continuity of being that redirects this energy through material reformation. For Hardy, an avowed atheist, this turn towards a form of reconcilable afterlife has the effect of imbuing the natural world with the salvific potential that promises the perpetuation, admittedly a conscious-less version, of ourselves on earth. It is a proleptic imaginative experiment that confronts what a subject-less subjectivity might become.

Timothy Morton's concept of the mesh as 'the interconnectedness of all living and non-living things' is useful in considering Hardy's meditation as part of a wider interest in the act of decentring the subject.[64] As Morton argues, there is '"no center or edge" aspect of the mesh, [...] there is no definite "within" or "outside" of beings. Everything is adapted to everything else'.[65] This notion of the infinite adjacency, in which the world is composed of an endless connectivity, lies at the heart of Hardy's conception of nature as perpetual life, as even in death, there is a return to what 'made them what they were'. This ecological perspective is also visible within Hardy's relationship to the technological developments of modernity.

Hardy has always been a writer whose relationship to technology was animated by an interested but cautious ambivalence. From the 'red tyrant' of the threshing machine in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891), to the seed drill of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886), or to the faked

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[63] Ibid., p. 118.
[64] Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 20, Apple Books [Accessed 6 Nov 2023].
[65] Ibid., p. 25.

telegram and photograph of *A Laodicean* (1881), Hardy has offered a vision of technological advancement as a confluence of social crises that equally meets exciting opportunities to forge new connections.[66] Edward Allen calls Hardy's evasive relationship to modernity 'a complicated brew', in which there exists 'temptation to perpetuate the orthodoxies of media history [...] which might encourage one to characterise his sometimes vicious enthusiasm for infrastructure as a hangover from his London days.'[67] However, as Allen elucidates, Hardy was somewhat of an enthusiast for the telegraph as a kind of 'real-life magic of mass media', bringing with it the sort of supernatural resonances that he found so exciting.[68] Indeed, the promise of the disembodied and networked transmogrification of words was, as Allen argues, somewhat an extension of the culture of bell ringing that was central to the rural communities that Hardy knew in both his novels and real life.[69] Finding forms of connection is one of the central emotional structures that course throughout his writing, and so the intermingling of the seemingly spectral lifeforce of the telegraphic infrastructure meant a possibility of unifying the two poles of tradition and modernity to produce an understanding of the rural that was not ossified by its customs but which brought those customs and superstitions into the context of the modern age.

This haunting quality is palpable in 1924 poem 'Nobody Comes', in which a figure at twilight views the ending of the day through the prism of his own isolation. In a manner very reminiscent of Thomas, the poem occludes the speaker behind the thickets and hedges of the environment that is buzzing and rustling around him. Structured as a reworked sonnet with two mirroring septets, the interlacing rhyme scheme works to mimic the production of the setting, in which forms feed into forms and entities pull one another into altered contexts:

> Tree-leaves labour up and down,
> And through them the fainting light
> Succumbs to the crawl of night.

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[66] Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, ed. Juliet Grindle and Simon Gatrell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008 [1891]), p. 345.

[67] Edward Allen, 'Ringing the Changes: Hardy's Communication Networks', *Rural Modernity in Britain: A Critical Intervention*, ed. Kristin Bluemel and Michael McCluskey, pp. 19-32, p. 30.

[68] Ibid., p. 21. Allen describes the mixed reception that Hardy seemed to give developments in communication technology as demonstrated when a telephone was installed within his home: 'That promise of domestic polyphony has more often been characterised as a threat from Hardy's perspective, and the modernisation of his country house, Max Gate, a necessary evil'. However, with the telegraph this was less concerning for Hardy: for wireless technology, there is good reason to believe that Marconi's equipment came to occupy a charmed place in the social fabric of Max Gate.' Ibid.

[69] For further discussion on Hardy and infrastructure, see Karin Koehler, *Thomas Hardy and Victorian Communication: Letters, Telegrams and Postal Systems* (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2016).

Outside in the road the telegraph wire
To the town from the darkening land
Intones to travellers like a spectral lyre
Swept by a spectral hand.

A car comes up, with lamps full-glare,
That flash upon a tree:
It has nothing to do with me,
And whangs along in a world of its own,
Leaving a blacker air;
And mute by the gate I stand again alone,
And nobody pulls up there.[70]

Hardy begins the poem with a characteristic personification of the trees along the road as generative of activity rather than simply reactive to the effects of the implied breeze. This twisting of scenarios so as to render the reality of things into an obverse state is critical in Hardy's poetics which aims to disturb hierarchies of knowledge through creating a transformed perceptual field. The disparate dynamic between the lively phenomenal world — such as the light succumbing to night's crawl or the aeolian-like telegraph wires — set against the stillness and apparent inactivity of the watchful speaker animates the poem as concerned with a metaphysics of being that sees the world as vitally charged and the subject as disparate from this plain. The transformation of the technological infrastructure of the telegraph wires into a supernatural entity with the imagery of it as a 'spectral lyre' transgresses temporal fixity in its intimation of a spatio-temporal collapsing of distance and disembodied transferal of information. It also resurrects the notion of the classical aeolian harp, who, as Coleridge described it, was 'breeze caressed' with 'Such a soft floating witchery of sound', echoing the notion of the noise of the telegraph wire being caused 'by a spectral hand'.[71] This collision of the mundanity of communication infrastructure within an aesthetic framework of the transcendental realm recontextualises the poem's relationship to modernity as being far from one of rupture and instead as merely a continuation of that which has come before. That the speaker's position is one of isolation from the whirring activity of that which unfolds before him — so much so that he interrupts the illusion of the perceptual field to intimate that the passing car 'has nothing to do with me' — suggests an alienation of the self from

[70] Hardy, 'Nobody Comes', *Selected Poetry*, pp. 185-6.
[71] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 'The Eolian Harp', *The Major Works*, ed. H. J. Jackson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 27-29, p. 28.

the social world. Therefore, although modernity is not blamed as the cause of disaffection, its integration within a larger context of the rural setting demonstrates the ways in which features of modernity and the rural world were able to be successfully integrated and productive within an aesthetic scheme.

Within this understanding of Hardy's interest in the way issues of dependency and contiguity manifest in the context of ecological models of being, we can see that he is essential in providing the framework for how these ethical and aesthetic positions might determine our understanding of the natural world within this period. This sentiment is echoed by Richard Kerridge who identifies him as critical in the development of modernist ruralism, stating that 'Hardy offers the endless generation of meaning as the vivid life of a place, produced by its human, animal, and plant life: a creative life that newcomers enhance if they come with an awareness of relative positions.'[72] The crux of Kerridge's reading of Hardy is his ability to introduce conflicting points of a view within the same narrative, having the effect of demonstrating how both characters and reader(s) 'ceaselessly make and remake each other's identity.'[73] Both Thomas and Lawrence's debt to Hardy lies not only in the way that his work presents landscape as being integral to the human psyche, but also in the way he embeds mobility within the linguistic registers of his novels. As an example of this textual mobility, Hardy's writing regularly enacts a 'shifting set of relations' in order to 'create a stronger sense of the elusive, excessive presence of places.'[74] Head reiterates this in his discussion of Hardy as a writer of rurality that self-consciously propagates a false sense of nostalgia, only to subvert this expectation of 'the escapist impulse' through a refusal to adhere to expectations of nature as inherently generative of human development.[75] By creating a language built around the juxtaposition of meaning derived from various, at times conflictual, at times amenable, registers, Hardy pre-empts the modernist formal practice of producing discursive conflict through contrasting adjacencies in meaning.[76] If polyphony can be interpreted as a form of ethical environmental epistemology,

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[72] Richard Kerridge, 'Ecological Hardy', *Beyond Nature Writing: Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*, ed. Karla Armbruster and Kathleen R. Wallace (Charlottesville, VA and London: University Press of Virginia, 2001), pp. 126-142, p. 138.
[73] Ibid., p. 130.
[74] Ibid., p. 141.
[75] Head, *Modernity and the English Rural Novel*, p. 12.
[76] Ebbatson identifies this technique of apposition as concurrently tied to processes of constituting national identity: 'Writing concerned with Englishness aims to create new forms of memorability in a dynamic of re-visioning whose key technique is that of juxtaposition.' Ebbatson, *An Imaginary England* (Padstow: Ashgate, 2005), p. 6.

then Hardy's writing demonstrates through his interest in shifting positions an unfixity that captures the multiplicitous nature of rural modernity.

A key text in examining Hardy's conception of the provisional nature of subjectivity and its connection to an understanding of being as inherently ecological is his 1887 novel *The Woodlanders*. This text, set in the woodland village of Little Hintock, concerns the ramifications of a romantic entanglement in which the figure of the local woodsman, Giles Winterborne, comes into opposition with the incoming new doctor, Edred Fitzpiers, for the hand of Grace Melbury, a local timber merchant's daughter. Hardy's novel follows a schematic divide between the modernity of Fitzpier's rationalist would-be scientist and the earthly and intuitively rooted knowledge of Winterborne. Kerridge argues that the character of Winterborne represents the embodied and 'unalienated lover of nature' that 'inhabits' his environment which has otherwise been lost in the 'transition from preindustrial to industrial society'.[77] That the narrative will see him returned to soil of which he figuratively was born is representative of Hardy's wider political commentary on the transformation of rural England into a place in which the processes of labour and habitation have given way to the dominance of a disembodied touristic gaze who come to the natural world as spectators.

Connections between the body's expressive capacities and the vitality of the natural world are central to Hardy's interest in rural selfhood. One such notable example within the novel is the character of John South, a tenant labourer who earns his living by making thatch spars, and who, as he nears his death from a fatal illness, becomes fixated upon the tree outside his house. In his illness, South believes that his sickness comes from this tree that he can watch through the window: '"the tree 'tis killing me. There he stands, threatening my life every minute that the wind do blow."'[78] The elm that towers over the cottage becomes for South the marker of his own finitude, with every rocking motion from the wind, causing him to wave his hand 'with abject obedience' to the tree's motion.[79] South's mirroring of the tree fluctuating through his seemingly mindlessly responsive gestural motor system demonstrates the ways in which Hardy is concerned with exploring the reflexive connections between forms of consciousness and their environmental contexts. In response to his extreme distress at the threat of the tree, Fitzpiers

[77] Kerridge, 'Ecological Hardy', p. 134.
[78] Thomas Hardy, *The Woodlanders*, ed. Dale Kramer (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2005 [1887]), p. 83.
[79] Ibid., p. 84.

confers with Winterborne to have it felled in order to aid South in his anguish. Despite his fears of the tree collapsing onto him, South's reaction to its disappearance is one of fatal shock:

> As soon as the old man saw the vacant patch of sky in place of the branched column so familiar to his gaze, he sprang up, speechless, his eyes rose from their hollows till the whites showed all round; he fell back, and a bluish whiteness overspread him.
>
> Greatly alarmed, they put him on the bed. As soon as he came a little out of his fit, he gasped, "Oh, it is gone!—where?—where?"
>
> His whole system seemed paralyzed by amazement. [...] Nothing seemed to avail. [...] He lingered through the day, and died that evening as the sun went down.[80]

John South's strange mental torment and sudden expiration at the absence of the object of his fright is a curious incident that captures the complex relationship that Hardy constructs within his rural worlds. It seems evident that, given his motor responses and fatal terror at its absence, we should read John South as being symbolically reflected in the elm. Having stood near the house that he has dwelled for generations, the tree has become representative of the very lifeforce that animates his own being; as his health declines, the refraction of the tree's continued vitality portends a destructive undercurrent. South charges it as being an almost arboreal near-doppelgänger, saying 'that it is exactly his own age, that it has got human sense, and sprouted up when he was born on purpose to rule him, and keep him as its slave.'[81] That his fear of it toppling and killing him has overtaken his entire conscious mind is only representative of the very fact that he is coming to the cessation of his own life; when it is gone, so too is the figural iteration of his own being. In charging it with having the power to enslave him, John South's claim of forced supplication to the natural world reflects Hardy's own belief in a fatalistic determinism, which posits that the experience of life is one of being beholden to a greater force which individual will cannot affect.[82] When seen in these terms, the function of the tree is that of both symbol and material entity. Like a body, it holds dual purposes as both existing within actuality and representation, even occupying the same linguistic terrain with the remnants of previous

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[80] Ibid. p. 94.
[81] Ibid., p. 93.
[82] '*The Woodlanders* challenges the humanism that would see the world as determined by individual choices and motives.' Penny Boumelha, 'Introduction', *The Woodlanders*, pp. xi-xxviii, p. xxi.

pruning being dubbed 'old amputations' or with the knocking of a branch against the roof being akin to a 'gigantic hand'.[83]

The corporeal and psychological intimacy between selfhood and nature can be seen to offer a metaphysical framework that binds lone subjectivity to a version of expanded ontological contact. This is not to suggest that the lifeworld of Hardy's narratives are in any ways comforting or ameliorative to the emotional lives of his characters, but rather that this sense of ontological adjacency with the non-human world has the effect of producing human consciousness as merely one constituent part in a wider span of contiguous entities. In the context of this provisionality, the status of the body as merely another iteration of materiality affords a model of being that supports a coextensive relationship with the natural world. This is shown through the discussion of Winterborne and Marty South (John's daughter) as possessing an instinctual knowledge of the woods: 'They had been possessed of its finer mysteries as of commonplace knowledge [...] From the light lashing of the twigs upon their faces, when brushing through them in the dark, they could pronounce upon the species of the tree whence they stretched'.[84] Similarly, he is also conferred unique intimacy and skill when handling saplings for planting: 'his fingers were endowed with a gentle conjuror's touch'.[85] Kerridge describes this kind of labour as demonstrating Winterborne's enmeshment within the 'ecosystem', in which he has an 'undividedness in mind and body, self and environment, that is the object of so much Romantic longing.'[86] As will be seen in the discussion of *Lolly Willowes* in Chapter 4, tactile contact with the natural world often affords new kinds of self-knowledge that other sensory modalities do not have access to. Haptic contact with the trees in the case of Winterborne and Marty South is shown to be its own knowledge system, and their imbrication within the ecosystem of the woodland affords them the ability to be able to 'read its hieroglyphs as ordinary writing' (a notion similarly explored by Lawrence through his heroic colliers, discussed Chapter 3).[87] This emphasis upon the role of touch has the effect of foregrounding the body as the site of knowledge apprehension, rather than the more abstracted notion of the visual mechanism which, despite being its own form of corporeality, necessarily creates a greater divide between subject and object. Lawrence in a story such as 'The Blind Man' also identifies the tactile as an elevated form of self-

[83] Hardy, *Woodlanders*, p. 177; p. 277.
[84] Ibid., pp. 297-8.
[85] Ibid., p. 59.
[86] Kerridge, 'Ecological Hardy', pp. 136-7.
[87] Hardy, *Woodlanders*, p. 298.

knowledge through its requirement of physical contact with the other, which in turn has the effect of producing new and expanded hierarchies of being.[88] William Cohen echoes this in his reading of Hardy's novel as being primarily structured around the 'interlocking relationship of mutual constitution by trees and people' grounded in the processes of tactility.[89] Touch can also be considered a method of formation, in which, in this case, the hand and the branch are engaged in perceptual production of the materiality of themselves and their object; this reflects the phenomenological concept of reversibility in which the moment of contact renders a new spatial orientation that establishes the actuality of both subject and object within the phenomenal field.[90] And yet this is not an action of empiricism, of discovering the object through tactile mapping, but rather produces a consciousness of the position of the rural subject as an embodied and situated entity.

Therefore, in Hardy's novel the body and its connection to habituated knowledge becomes the theatre in which the rural is enacted. Unlike in the case of *Lolly Willowes*, touch in *The Woodlanders* does not need to have the same kind of epiphanic response, instead reflecting as it does a fantasy of total integration with the world in which one dwells. That Winterborne dies within the narrative scheme of the text has the effect of suggesting that for Hardy this kind of idealisation of what a rural subjectivity might be is necessarily couched in the elegiac tone of something that may no longer be possible now that the urbane, rationalist epistemology of Fitzpiers has invaded the locale. Hardy's conception of the relational dynamic that exists between the embodied rural subject and their environment is aestheticised through affording a moral sensitivity on behalf of the trees toward the woodsman, as if he were himself a fallen tree: 'Winterborne was gone, and the copses seemed to show the want of him; those young trees, so many of which he had planted, and of which he had spoken so truly when he said that he should fall before they fell, were at that very moment sending out their roots in the direction that he had given them with his subtle hand.'[91] It is a harmonious image of an ecological system that functions not only materially but also allegorically, enacting at the symbolic level the mutuality that Hardy's rurally embodied subject demonstrates. As with the yew tree of 'Transformations',

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[88] See Abbie Garrington, 'D. H. Lawrence: Blind Touch in a Visual Culture', *Haptic Modernism: Touch and the Tactile in Modernist Writing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), pp. 155-69.
[89] William Cohen, 'Arborealities: The Tactile Ecology of Hardy's *Woodlanders*', *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century*, 19 (2014), pp. 1-22, p. 19.
[90] See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, 'The Visible and The Invisible: The Intertwining – The Chiasmus', *Maurice Merleau-Ponty: Basic Writings*, ed. Thomas Baldwin (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 3-4.
[91] Hardy, *Woodlanders*, p. 293.

the body is shown to be the point of contact with the world beyond the boundaries of the conscious self; because of Winterborne's tactile ontology, the emotional register of the world is imbued back to him through the network of the trees' roots. The ghostly language of the telegraph wires in 'Nobody Comes' have shown us how Hardy can incorporate facets of modernity into his aesthetic that produces a vision of the rural environment as determined by its total materiality. This materiality, as with the yew, can evince a contiguity between entities, but it can also engender isolation for the self who is expelled from this relation. As has been discussed, the tentative relationship Hardy espoused toward the technological developments of modernity demonstrate him as a hybrid figure who incorporates progress but does not come to changes within the contemporary world uncritically. It is this duality of tradition meeting modernity that will similarly structure this thesis, hoping to uncover the ways in which the rural spaces of Britain in the early twentieth century offered manifold ways in which to find a coherent sense of selfhood. Like Hardy, the flux between corporeal materiality and the search for a path to ontological stability through a conception of the world that is framed by ecological contiguity — a desire to live within the world's relations rather than divisions — is the pursuit for every writer explored in this study.

'Back to the earth': Orientations

For some of the writers in this study, the rural *was* defined by its antithesis to all that was urban as much as it was by its topographical characteristics of fields, woods, moors, or mountains. A simple definition of 'the rural' would be a geographical area of land with a low density of population settlements (roughly those that are below 10,000 people) and whose primary economic output, such as agriculture, is enfolded within the natural resources of the area.[92] Although many of the writers attempt to let these environments speak on their own terms, often it is this relationality that characterises the ways in which an environment is approached. For example, the silence of a woodland by virtue of associative reflexes has the noise of a city street as its negative or obverse side (as seen in Butts's novel *Armed with Madness*). Rural then, in this thesis, should be understood as occupying multiple registers of definition ranging from the topographical designation of certain kinds of wild, organic, or farmed environment to the

[92] For current designations of the rural, see Department for Environment, Food, & Rural Affairs, *Defining Rural Areas* (9th March 2017) <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a81ae00e5274a2e8ab5547c/Defining_rural_areas__Mar_2017_.pdf> [accessed 27 Dec 2023] (pp. 1-5).

refracted and antithetical retort to notions of its urban opposite. In addition, the discursive fault line that runs between both urban and rural as associative entities representative of man-made versus untouched/cultivated classifications of space are a regularly contested opposition. As will be seen with the discussion of mining in Lawrence (Chapter 3), industrialism and rurality are far from neatly distinct zones, with the two often intersecting and reinforcing the other through an interactive politics that equally produces a new understanding of rural spaces as contingent within a wider global capitalist system; indeed, a pastoral space like Wragby wood in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* gains much of its powers of enchantment through its function as a cultivated screen to the clatter and belch of the nearby colliery pits. Thus, whilst often adopted in the terms of its distinction from modernity, the interactional, and therefore definitional, edges of these zones frequently unpick their own meanings as much as they do to establish anything secure. Hence, the usage of 'rural' is deployed with consideration of its definitional polyvalence. As a term implicating the various material properties of a geographical area, such as those of spatial, ecological, and socioeconomic designation, it affords the opportunity of encapsulating these diverse and interdependent components. Additionally, 'rural' also maintains the same inbuilt cultural discourses (e.g., pastoral, bucolic, rustic) that are at play within the word 'countryside', whilst also maintaining a degree of critical distanciation that allows us to see it outside of its echo of the city.

Other terms such as 'landscape', 'nature', and 'pastoral' are similarly used with an attempt at definitional particularity. 'Landscape' is a term that denotes an aesthetic position and implies an inaugurating point of view, typically informed by ocular orientation. Popular deployment of this word has seen it expanded to just mean a particular geographic area, topography, or environment. I have tried to use it with the intention of its less than neutral definition, being mindful of the necessary presence of a specific perspective that is implicated in its utilisation. Similarly, 'nature' offers a panoply of diverse definitions with at times conflicting implications. In light of this, I have tried to differentiate between 'nature' and 'the natural world', with the latter serving as my term for the material actuality of a rural environment, e.g., a forest that is part of an ecosystem that we can understand as 'the natural world'. 'Nature', on the other hand, offers a broader problem of specificity, bringing with it both material and cultural associations, and indeed, Raymond Williams calls it 'the most complex word in the language'.[93]

[93] Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Rev ed. (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1985 [1976[), p. 219.

Aside from its other definitions (such as an essential quality of something), the understanding of it as meaning 'unspoiled places' with 'plants and creatures other than man' is useful in highlighting the inherent slipperiness of such a term: if nature means what 'man has not made', then does a ploughed field becomes an example of culture? Williams' reading of the development of the word into meaning 'the source of original innocence' highlights the problems that are encountered by using 'nature' uncritically.[94] Subsequently, the deployment of 'nature' throughout this study will attempt to indicate its associational casting as a conceptual understanding of life as it exists outside of civilisation's influence. Similarly, a term such as 'rustic' implies a value-based position, urban to rural, which defines agricultural workers or people of rural trades within the framework of innocence, unsophistication, and simplicity. It is a term which denotes a similar version of rurality that the pastoral is invested in, and therefore both words will only be used as descriptive strategies that indicate a certain aesthetic position.

Although Woolf's circumspect declaration that 'on or about December 1910 human character changed' is a claim more valuable in its epochal colouring than its factual reality, nonetheless, it offers a useful historical guideline for drawing the temporal parameters of this study.[95] The dates 1910 to 1945 are chosen with a conscious awareness of their pliability: 1945 is an easy designation, due to it being the conclusion of the Second World War, and around the time Nan Shepherd completed her manuscript for *The Living Mountain*, the text which closes this survey. 1910 is a somewhat more amorphous date. It is chosen, in part, to encapsulate the world of our first three figures, the writers and poets Thomas, Mew, and Lawrence, all Victorian-born — Thomas in 1879, Mew in 1869 and Lawrence in 1885. Although both Mew and Thomas were active in the literary world from the 1890s, it was not until the coming of the First World War in 1914 that they began to write poetry. Mew, who had first published a short story in the second volume of *The Yellow Book* in 1894, had a sporadic writing career in the years that followed, and it was not until the publication of her first poetry collection *The Farmer's Bride* in 1916 that her position, admittedly peripheral, within the literary scene was more securely established. Lawrence's work first began being published in 1909 and continued until (and after) his death in 1930.

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[94] Ibid., p. 224.
[95] Virginia Woolf, 'Character in Fiction', *Selected Essays*, ed. David Bradshaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 37-54, p. 38.

Of course, biographical factors are only part of the rationales for this periodisation. It is the claim of this study that the understanding of selfhood and rurality underwent significant changes during this period. Bookended by the two world wars and moving roughly chronologically through the interim years, it is hoped that there will emerge a sense of changing contextual circumstances that are reflected, even if only tangentially, in the works of artistic production that are interrogated within this study. As will be demonstrated through the writers, poets, and filmmakers explored, conceptions of the rural offered various routes into investigating questions of subjectivity, nationhood, politics, ethics, and ecology. At the centre of this enquiry is the examination into how selfhood was constituted within these texts as a process of corporeal and sensory interdependency with an environment outside of the subject. Why the rural offered unique opportunities for interrogating these questions is bound up in its dependency upon well-established discursive inheritances which operate alongside material realities distinct from urban environments. All of these texts employ the pastoral mode in one form or another as a coherent aesthetic upon which to build a critical reorientation of environmental ontology in the context of the modern world. The degree to which this reorientation functioned as a critique of industrialism was varied; though even in those texts that do not comment upon its ecological and/or psychological effects, within the silence there remains a shadowy presence of an industrial world that is looming at the edge of the heath.

Firstly, Chapter 1 examines the ways in which the writing of Edward Thomas investigates the limits of subjectivity and its relationship to the rural. Thomas's work reflects an environmental consciousness that is grounded in an ethics that aims to decentre the subjective 'I' whilst still recognising the inherent impossibility of coming to the world outside of the perceiving subject. The rural for Thomas is very often a space that is haunted by its material and imaginative accruals, offering a vision of being that is caught in the process of its own temporal undoing. This acute fixation upon the derangements of time results in a poetics that is frequently attuned to the relationship between consciousness and its emergence through the body's sensorial modalities. It is in the immediacy of the sensory self that Thomas locates a vision of the rural that might offer an alternative ontology and open up new routes through which to experience the world through its acute materialities.

Chapter 2 looks at the work of Charlotte Mew, demonstrating how for her the natural world offered myriad possibilities for interrogating the permeable negotiations between the material and imaginative systems that structure subjectivity. Fascinated by testing the thresholds

of knowledge hierarchies, Mew's work critiques the pastoral and lyric traditions through the lens of queer ecology. Through her work, she explores the liberatory potentials that an ecologically conceived model of being might offer a subject beleaguered by modern living, producing a vision of the rural that operates as a fantasy space in which the self might return to its own corporeal form.

In the work of D. H. Lawrence, the figure of the miner looms large. Chapter 3 examines the ways in which Lawrence's eccentric theories of the body become expressed through the figure of the collier who functions within his fiction as representative of both an authentic masculinity and a symbolic casualty of industrialisation's processes of alienation. This alienation for Lawrence is understood as a combination of both excess mental fixation and a labour system that reconceives the body as synonymous with the machine. It is in the daily process of washing the body that Lawrence positions a discursive shift in the relation of the corporeal self to its environmental context. These scenes of washing function as narrative interventions that transform the ontology of the labouring body in relation to questions of space, scale, and sensory engagement. Furthermore, this chapter demonstrates how Lawrence's endorsement of the body at the centre of the production of authentic knowledge intersects with his conception of environmental relations, offering us a lively account of modernist embodied rurality.

Both Chapters 4 and 5 stray from single author accounts, and instead aim to look thematically at two distinct renderings of rurality in light of a modernity that threatens to erase its cultural legacies. Chapter 4 examines the ways in which folk traditions, rituals, and cultures of superstition emerged in the years after the Great War as a part of both mainstream and esoteric attempts to forge a sense of coherent communal identity within national, regional, or even local contexts. The chapter focuses on two texts by Mary Butts and Sylvia Townsend Warner, both of which draw upon the (at times imagined) traditions of rural folk and peasant cultures, such as witchcraft and narratives of Arthurian myth, in order to interrogate the connection between rurality, female power, and their relationship to authorities of knowledge. Both writers produce diverse accounts of the rural as a potentially radical space in which feminist self-fulfilment might be achieved.

Finally, Chapter 5 departs from literary texts to look at the ways in which cinematic depictions of so-called remote communities drew upon divergent discourses of both Romantic and modernist aesthetics in order to provide accounts of the changing relationship to the rural. As with the previous chapter, discourses of primitivism underlie these visual accounts that see

coastal communities and island societies as the last vestiges of a truly authentic and antiquated pre-modern culture. The films discussed range from Robert J. Flaherty's fantastically rendered ethnographic 'documentary', *Man of Aran* (1934), which depicts the struggle for survival on Ireland's storm battered Aran Islands; next is the 1929 documentary feature by John Grierson called *Drifters*, which follows a trawler as it fishes for herring in the North Sea off the Scottish coast; finally, Michael Powell's narrative feature *The Edge of the World* (1937), depicts the contraction of a Scottish island community modelled on the 1930 St Kilda evacuation. All three films offer parallel interpretations of the relationship of coastal and island communities to the rippling effects of modernity, whilst also displaying vivid accounts the phenomenological experiences of these topographies which work to disturb the self through their engagement with an aesthetics of dislocating spatial scales.

To conclude, Nan Shepherd's memoir of the Cairngorm mountains, *The Living Mountain* (1977 [written c. 1945]), offers a unique perspective on the interdependency of subjectivity and the experiences of corporeality. Shepherd engages in the mutable experiential tenors of nature through her positioning of the mountain's affective potential to at times heighten and at times empty out the consciousness of selfhood. As a concluding voice she possesses a summative eloquence that feeds back into all the previous writers explored and caps the story of embodied rural modernism with a markedly sensorial account of journeying and being.

Selfhood, Rurality, and the Sensorial Body in the Age of British Modernism, 1910-1945 explores the ways in which the rural was being both re-enchanted and contested by slant approaches to modernity. This approach saw opportunities for new models of being through an attention to the body as the site of relation with the natural world. It asks how rurality offered a different version of living to a particular group of writers and filmmakers, and how they came to suggest that we might still need to find a way to live in contact with the earth.

Chapter 1

'I tasted deep the hour': Rural Landscapes, Time, and the Senses in the Poetry of Edward Thomas

In a letter to Gordon Bottomley from the 14th of May 1907, the poet and writer Edward Thomas wrote of a fear of losing himself within his own neuroses: 'Oh, my self-consciousness, it grows and grows and is almost constant now, and I fear perhaps it will reach the point of excess without my knowing it.'[96] A few years earlier, he had written to his friend Ian MacAlister: 'I must have some time in which to be non literary [sic], free to think or better still not to think at all, but to let the wind and the sun do my thinking for me, filling my brain.'[97] A long-time sufferer of low moods and depressive episodes, Thomas had a mistrustful relationship to his own consciousness, never sure it would not round on him and cause him to return to a state of ensnared introspection and intolerable despondency.

As with our discussion of Hardy's ecological perspective, Thomas's poetry similarly demonstrates an acute sensitivity to the natural world as a system of relations, both spatial and temporal. In recognising the limits of his own provisional point of view, Thomas always saw himself as an ambivalent presence within the world, at once welcoming feelings of superfluousness and yet also being acutely tuned into the inescapability of his subjective 'I'. Edna Longley recognises Thomas's ambivalence to his place in the world as his 'ability to pull back from human parochialism' and of having the temerity to call 'anthropocentric theatricals into question'.[98] She contends that this willingness to see himself as a decentred actor is part of his contribution to 'the emergent literature of modern selfhood.'[99] As with Hardy's ecological image of the vivified yew tree, Thomas acknowledges the necessity for an epistemological redrawing that upends the asymmetrical relationship between man and the natural world. Indeed, much of his poetry is interested in the dynamic interaction between the material world and its rendering in aesthetic terms, often asking whether this apparently knotted inseparability of the

[96] Edward Thomas letter to Gordon Bottomley, 14th May 1907. John Moore, *The Life and Letters of Edward Thomas* (Kingswood: Heinemann, 1939), p. 302.
[97] Edward Thomas letter to Ian MacAlister, 25th December 1903. Ibid., p. 288.
[98] Longley, 'Going Back to Edward Thomas', p. 33.
[99] Ibid.

environment from its perceptual iteration can be animated by something other than one's own subjective rendering.

Thomas's poetry often spotlights the experiential qualities of the senses as a structural mechanism in which he explores how attending to the momentary might provide opportunities for respite from his noisy self-consciousness. As modes of perception, the sensory system typically functions within his work as an alternate form of consciousness, in which the body, as a pre– or non–linguistic entity, becomes the location that is suffused with the present–ness of its own situation within an environment. This feeling of spatio–temporal concentration that the sensory modalities provide for the self, has the effect of — like Hardy's yew — placing the subject within a contiguous field in which the central 'I' is provisional. As will be seen, Thomas's interest in the role of the senses combines with a fixation upon time's passing, producing a vision of rurality that is curiously about the enfolding of self within temporal schemes that are malleable and regenerative.

As a project of interrogating the indivisibility of the self with the world, Thomas's poetry is flooded with moments of intense self-consciousness that reckon with a landscape which both enfolds and is, at times painfully, distinct from him. Often, the territory that Thomas populates in his poems are abandoned sites of former human activity: chalk pits, old paths, derelict buildings, empty woods. David Farrier reads Thomas's haunted landscapes as being defined by the brimming 'interplay of absence and presence'.[100] These places correspond to Ruth Heholt's definition of a haunted landscape as places that 'shift and move, "collapse and cohere", as we traverse them', producing ambiguities of feeling that are 'fluid and experienced by and through the body.'[101] This affective turn in thinking about the way landscape is encountered works to collapse any impulse for distanciation that Romantic understandings of place embed; rather, Thomas's poetry is frequently a searching for some kind of contact with the ontological systems of rural places. This searching sees his sensory capacities invigorated with the possibility of insight and the hope for some distant connection to that which is bigger than his own cerebral point of view.

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[100] David Farrier, 'Reading Edward Thomas in the Anthropocene', *Green Letters: Studies in Ecocriticism*, 18.2 (2014), pp. 132-42, p. 134.

[101] Ruth Heholt, 'Introduction: Unstable Landscapes: Affect, Representation and a Multiplicity of Hauntings', *Haunted Landscapes: Super-Nature and the Environment*, ed. Ruth Heholt & Niamh Downing (London, New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016), pp. 1-20, p. 4.

Starting with situating Thomas in his contemporary critical reception, the chapter will establish the three recurrent discourses that compose his poetics: namely, the crisis of self and its situation within time, how this influences his relationship to the natural world, and the role that the senses play in producing an alternate epistemological orientation towards being.

'A lack of full-throated utterance': Thomas's Hesitant Poetics

In the immediate years following his poetry's publication, and after his death at the Battle of Arras of 1917, it was the combination of Thomas's ruminations on the nature of being mixed with his treatment of rural England as a space haunted by its own histories that prompted a divided reception of his work. One dismissal by the esteemed critic Louis Untermeyer in a 1919 article in *The North American Review* decreed with pointed finality that Thomas was a limited talent: 'Never a great poet, he will undoubtedly go down as one of England's lesser singers'.[102] Despite this dismissal, Untermeyer backhandedly conceded that Thomas's verse possessed an intense solemnity that captured 'the great charm of scenes so potent in their actual colors that they need no magic to give them glamor.'[103] Whatever merit they might have possessed, Untermeyer attributed much of the partial artistic achievement within Thomas's work as being due to the influence of his compatriot Robert Frost who, according to him, could 'be found in almost all of these English pages.'[104] The mixed reception was similarly reflected in Thomas's native Britain, with one 1919 review by John Gould Fletcher remarking, in a like manner to Untermeyer, that he was not a great poet due to his 'persistent mood of melancholy, his perpetually letting one down; his harping always on some quite ageless and dateless past; his stumbling, awkward technique, reminding me of rough cast walls and ragged hedges'.[105] Fletcher's conclusion of Thomas's poetry as being formed like 'ragged hedges', despite its intention as dismissal, inadvertently captures the spirit of his intensely localised, zoomed-in approach to the experience of being situated within a rural environment. Like the thicket of ragged hedge, Thomas's is a poetry that aims for an expressive simplicity that builds its effects through accumulation.

This 'rough cast' aesthetic aimed to capture the experiential complexities of rural England in a style that was vernacular rather than lofty. Thomas's poetic perspective found

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[102] Louis Untermeyer, 'Edward Thomas', *The North American Review*, 209.759 (1919), pp. 263-66, p. 66.
[103] Ibid., p. 264.
[104] Ibid., p. 263.
[105] John Gould Fletcher, 'Review: Old England', *Poetry*, 14.2 (1919), pp. 103-106, p. 104.

greater sympathy in another review from 1918 by Alice Corbin Henderson, who wrote that Thomas seemed 'to give to his landscape that poignancy that a familiar scene has for us when we see it in the light of some strong personal emotion.'[106] As with Hardy's interest in the continuities of being that an ecological perspective might reveal to us, Henderson recognises Thomas's ability to expose the implicit emotion through a quiet reimagining of the oft-trodden literary terrain of nature poetry. This eliciting of an unaffected emotional relation to familiar landscapes demonstrates that his aesthetic approach offered a new way of situating the poetic within the context of rural literature. Similarly, it is in the very stretching indefinition of the 'ageless and dateless past' that Fletcher had found so unworthwhile that much of the 'strong personal emotion', as Henderson dubbed it, finds its footing. Thomas sees in the spaces of rural England an accrual of time, in which histories of former lives, those wanderers like himself, become imbued within the landscape's temporal register. Like a fading memory, it is the faintness of the trace that holds for Thomas, and for us, the greatest sense of poignancy, speaking as it does to the ontological unmaking that time promises to all.

Thomas's tone of qualified ambivalence seems to lie in this awareness of the double-sided experience of time that rural spaces disclose to him. For Untermeyer this tone was evidence of a failure of poetic control, describing Thomas as having a 'voice [that] lacks a full-throated utterance; it has the sound of something far off and yet familiar, something that might be mistaken for an echo.'[107] Attention to Thomas's complex relationship between the sensing self and the temporally unstable rural pushes back against Untermeyer's charge that the diminutive tone of his work is unsuccessful. Rather, it is in the quality of the echo that we can locate the aesthetic potentials that reveal a politics of self that equally becomes a mappable politics of ecological relation.

Through this multidirectional point of view engendered by his hesitancy, Thomas treats the present moment as a refracted instant of many varied iterations. Farrier, drawing upon the work of Barbara Allen, sees this quality reflected in Thomas's treatment of setting as examples of '*timescapes*' which are understood as 'spaces experienced most vividly in their rhythms and tempos, and the marks they bear of past and future presences.'[108] Evidently, the echo-effect that Untermeyer takes issue with in Thomas's work, seems to be very much where it gets most of its

[106] Alice Corbin Henderson, 'The Late Edward Thomas', *Poetry*, 12.2 (1918), pp. 102-105, p. 103.
[107] Untermeyer, 'Edward Thomas's, p. 264.
[108] Farrier, 'Thomas in the Anthropocene', p. 134.

aesthetic dynamism, in which he interrogates the liminal movement between various kinds of oppositional orientations (e.g. presence/absence, psychic/corporeal, past/future, industry/obsolescence). This echoing quality emerges as a result of his interest in exploring the indices between two coherent modes of experience, such as in 'The Path' in which the material traces of children's feet are contrasted to the presentness of their apparently long-gone absence:

> They have flattened the bank
> On top, and silvered it between the moss
> With the current of their feet, year after year.
> [... But now] To see a child is rare there[.][109]

Such work reflects the confluence of Thomas' rurality as a fundamentally material entity, in which dispassionate observation to physical and topographical features are transformed into a poignancy that beget a kind of rural nostalgia. Thomas's nostalgia is rooted in this attention to the tense interface that any consciousness of an environment's history will induce: at once it is a rebirth through a form of remembrance (even if only imaginative), whilst it also operates as an acknowledgement of the inescapable vulnerability of even the most seemingly vital forms of life to the workings of time.

Despite their divergent claims of his artistic worth, all three contemporary readers of his poetry were quick to praise these qualities of restrained contemplation and observed continuity of the natural world. Henderson called his poems 'low-toned and quiet, almost subdued', occupying an unsettled 'twilight country, mellow and rich, but very cool and clear', the contrast of which gives the sense of 'a continuous searching for reality'.[110] This sense of aesthetic division at the heart of Thomas's work was interpreted by Untermeyer as a reflection upon the 'ultimate futility' of beauty: 'It is not disillusion exactly; it is rather an absence of illusion.'[111] This is evident, for example, in the poem 'Under the Woods' which possesses a kind of simplicity reminiscent of A. E. Housman's poetic style, with neatly rhymed quatrains of two couplets, one iambic tetrameter, the other dimeter, and all holding the linguistic clarity reflective of a country folk song:

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[109] Edward Thomas, 'The Path', *The Annotated Collected Poems*, ed. Edna Longley (Tarset, Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books, 2008), p. 72.
[110] Henderson, 'The Late Edward Thomas', p. 104.
[111] Untermeyer, 'Edward Thomas's, p. 264.

When these old woods were young
The thrushes' ancestors
As sweetly sung
In the old years.[112]

This short poem reflects upon the passage of years in the woods, including the quietly lived life of a now-deceased and almost forgotten gamekeeper. It is a purposefully nostalgic rendering of time as an essential element to the pastoral mode, in which the past is imagined in a register that begets folktale ('But the keeper was old | And he had not | Much lead or gold') and its adjacent nursery rhyme ('No children dear | Ran to and fro'). Thomas's ironic casting of the quiet woodland only reveals itself in the appearance of the final stanza which functions as a discursive interruption, throwing into relief the tone of sing-song sentimentality employed in the previous stanzas:

But now that he is gone
Out of most memories,
Still lingers on
A stoat of his,

But one, shrivelled and green,
And with no scent at all,
And barely seen
On this shed wall.

The sudden appearance of a dead, rotted carcase nailed to the wall of the keeper's hut, injects into the poem a biological materiality and an ethics of destruction which upends any comforting surety we had been led to enjoy, a theme would similarly explore more explicitly in the poem 'The Gallows'. Functioning as a metonymic symbol, the stoat's mouldering skin works to bring into this tone of benevolent imagining a physicality that recalls the keeper's role within the woodland as arbitrator over living things, as well as a potent remind of the ugly impersonality of decomposition. This emphasis upon the process of decay that is instrumental within the realities of time works to implicate both the keeper and the speaker as having had or soon to have the same fate — bodies will decompose, identity will be eradicated. Furthermore, with the observation 'And with no scent at all', Thomas intimates the total severing of the qualities of vitality that

[112] Thomas, 'Under the Woods', p. 94.

animate living things through this removal of any sensory interpenetration between the speaker and the object.

Scent holds for Thomas great ontological significance, appearing in several of his poems as the modality which unlocks a temporal gateway into another mode of consciousness. This is evident in the line 'With the wild rose scent that is like memory' from his poem 'The Word', which was written on the 5th July 1915, the same day as 'Under the Woods'.[113] With the curtailment of the stoat's olfactory capacities, the moment becomes as much about potential for the breakdowns of memory, both personal and cultural, and the realisation that memory, as the kind of emotionally charged fragments of time of the 'wild rose scent' will eventually fail to act as a form of psychic preservation. Longley is correct in affirming that 'If he looks like a "Nature poet", his generic range and symbolic reach expose the limits of that category too.'[114] This appearance of the stoat skin at the end of the poem, much as Untermeyer noted, functions as a severing of illusion, as what began as a gentle pastoral scene of contemplating a quiet wood, is closed with a hard-edged reminder of the embodied self's own entropic movement towards disintegration. The natural world operates for Thomas on several registers of being, one in which its materiality serves as a reminder that selfhood is only partial, and another which induces a recognition that consciousness is also ultimately only a product of the material world. Thomas's fixation on traces of people and things, in part, is born out of this awareness of the potential abyss awaiting the self on the other side of life.

Certainly, Edward Thomas was a man never truly at ease anywhere for long. Born in 1878 to Welsh parents, Philip Edward Thomas was raised in Wandsworth, then a suburban village at the outer margin of a rapidly expanding Victorian London.[115] Growing up merely streets away from Wandsworth Common, Thomas and his brothers spent their childhoods in a halfway world between the gorse bushes and rustling elms that curtain the fields, though it was always flanked by the whistling noise of the train tracks that skirted its perimeter.[116] This spatial friction between the idiosyncratic, personal time of Thomas's miniaturised childhood

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[113] Thomas, 'The Word', p. 93.
[114] Edna Longley, 'Introduction', *The Annotated Collected Poems*, ed. Edna Longley (Tarset, Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books, 2008), pp. 11-24, p. 1.
[115] For more on Thomas's ambivalent relationship to Welshness, see Andrew Webb, *Edward Thomas and World Literary Studies: Wales, Anglocentrism and English literature* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2013).
[116] Matthew Hollis, *Now All Roads Lead to France: The Last Years of Edward Thomas* (London: Faber and Faber, 2012), pp. 44-5.

pastureland and the regulated clock-time of the passing trains chugging in and out of the city seems to be a biographical feature whose tensions endure throughout his future poetry.

Whilst studying at Oxford University, Thomas fell in love with and married Helen Noble, soon having to manage his new responsibilities as a husband alongside a burgeoning but unsteady entry into the literary scene as a freelance writer. The Thomases, after an unsettled period in London, eventually uprooted with their expanding family to the village of Steep in Hampshire. It was here that he was able to fulfil his longings for being within the English countryside, surrounded by the undulating hills of the South Downs with its crystal chalk streams and pale beech copses. Over the next decade, Thomas would observe a routine of writing, walking, and heading up to London to meet with publishers, editors, and fellow writers within the London literary scene. Ever frustrated by the threadbare state of his finances and the culture of hustle and anxiety that came with freelance writing, Thomas's output of self-proclaimed 'hack work', which included literary biographies and criticism, country writing, reviews, and occasional fiction, demanded an intensity and focus that often left him worn-out and pessimistic.

As well as feeling disillusioned with his writing career, Thomas in general experienced episodes of acute despondency that ranged from general melancholia to heavy depressions — experiences that would shape and colour his work, as Untemeyer and Fletcher would criticise. This uncertainty over his own place in the world often manifested as chronic self-consciousness, in which his 'obsessive weighing of alternatives' (something which Robert Frost would later tease was the inspiration for his seminal poem 'The Road Not Taken') resulted in an anxiety over his own existence and propelled the impulse for constant mobility as a therapeutic crutch.[117] Helen Thomas, reflecting on her husband several years after his death, described his frequent depressions and angry frustration as causing 'A black gloom [...] over the house.'[118] Indeed, this chronic melancholy meant he 'often brooded on suicide', and sought the help of doctors' diagnoses for both physiological and psychoanalytic treatment.[119] With the legitimated excuse of needing subjects in which to write about, Thomas would routinely leave the family home for sustained walking tours all across the south of England. Walking, he found, would prove a salve,

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[117] Jem Poster, 'I Cannot Tell: Edward Thomas's Uncertainties', *Branch-Lines: Edward Thomas and Contemporary Poetry*, ed. Guy Cuthbertson & Lucy Newlyn (London: Enitharmon Press, 2007), 43-50, 44. For Frost's teasing of Thomas, see Hollis, *Now All Roads*, p. 235.

[118] Helen Thomas, 'World Without End', *Under Storm's Wing*, ed. Myfanwy Thomas, (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1988) pp. 75-174, p. 146.

[119] Longley, 'Introduction', *Annotated Collected Poems*, p. 13.

albeit a temporary one, for his unabating melancholy, and even when home from his long pilgrimages disguised as excursions, he would regularly walk more than twenty miles every day.[120]

Thomas's entry into the arena of poetry was soon to be invigorated by his time in Gloucestershire. It was whilst living in Dymock that he became acquainted and soon firm friends with Frost, who had moved across from New Hampshire in 1912. Under the encouragement of Frost, who had read his prose and felt that there was a poetic potential dormant within the sentences, Thomas began to write poetry in December 1914. The next few years bore witness to an intense and prolific speed of production for Thomas's poetry, during which he composed an astonishing 142 poems. In the summer of 1915, nearly a year into the War, he enlisted as a voluntary recruit (his age was 37, exceeding the limit for conscription) into the Artists Rifles. Thomas remained in England for over a year, in a period in which he wrote the majority of his poems, before being sent to the Western Front in November of 1916. It was at the beginning of the Battle of Arras on Easter Monday, 9th April 1917, that he was killed by an exploding shell. Although his career as a poet was only a compressed three years, within that concentrated time frame, Thomas produced a slew of highly complex and aesthetically beautiful verses, most of which foreground an interaction between humanity and the natural world as an experience of great psychological fulfilment. Much of his poetry is interested in the dynamic interaction between the material world and its rendering in aesthetic terms, often asking whether this apparently knotted inseparability of the environment from its perceptual iteration can be animated by something other than one's subjective rendering.

Not only is Thomas's engagement with nature poetry a recognition of its essentially elegiac (though not necessarily consolatory) undercurrent, but it also functions as an in-built critique of the same solipsistic impulse to insert humanity into spaces in which they are non-existent. Evidently, there is a tradition and trajectory that Thomas is feeding into within his poetry; for Longley, this attention towards the finitude of human experience makes Thomas a poet of metaphysics as much as of the landscape, though critically she does acknowledge it as a 'co-extensive' relationship. Longley contends that 'Thomas's landscapes are ultimately symbolic', placing him in relation to F. R. Leavis's claim that '"the outer scene is accessory to an inner theatre."'[121] Certainly, Thomas's poetry frequently positions nature as something experienced

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[120] Hollis, *Now All Roads*, p. 28

[121] F. R. Leavis, *New Bearings in English Poetry*, (1932), quoted in Longley, 'Going Back to Edward Thomas's, *Branch-Lines*, pp. 30-1.

through the prism of memory and emotions, though critically, for Thomas, this symbolism is generated by an inescapable subjecthood and is always presented with a cognizance of its own perceptual frame. Longley's positioning of Thomas's metaphysical poetics aptly draws attention to this sense of the self-awareness at work within his poetry and this chapter coheres with her reading of Thomas as highly self-reflexive poet. This self-reflexivity is expressed in relation to his conception of the rural as a space that serves to both facilitate the enactment of the subject's self-fulfilment whilst also being able to undermine this very impulse by questioning the ethics such reification may harbour. A wish for contact, in myriad forms, is the emblematic emotion which underwrites Thomas's lyrics.

Despite their deceptive simplicity and quality of subdued diffidence, Thomas's lyrics disguise his sophisticated interrogation of questions of both personal and textual ontology. One such question central to his enquiry is whether embodiment can function as an ethical system by which to determine the parameter of an externalised reality. Given his subject as poet of rural scenes, Thomas's work is inherently in dialogue with a tradition of pastoral Romanticism, drawing from diverse inventories composed of folk song, nature writing, and literary antecedents (such as John Clare and Wordsworth), and he is active in engaging with the intersections between pre-given forms and new kinds of epistemological orientations. This hybridity of form allows Thomas 'to achieve a more complex interleaving of perspectives' and is part of his interest in considering how pluralistic ethics (influenced by his reading of William James) might offer alternate intellectual pathways.[122] These divergences work to disrupt the epistemological position of perspectival singularity that so haunts his psychology.

As a poet intensely interested in the reverberations and echoes that a landscape accrues, the qualities of hesitation, uncertainty, and qualification that structure Thomas's poetry reveal a body of work vitally alive with the urgency of both his and our moment. Longley argues that his 'poems destablise perception, split or decentre the lyric "I", ponder the slippages between "word" and "thing"', that his poetry is 'radically dialectical'.[123] Jem Poster coheres with this notion, suggesting that this volatility can be seen to 'exemplify the near-paradox which lies at the heart of modernism itself: the vacillations and liminalities which might logically be associated with a failure of impetus are actually a source of extraordinary artistic energy.'[124] The uncertainty at the

[122] Farrier, 'Thomas in the Anthropocene', p. 136.
[123] Longley, 'Introduction', *The Annotated Collected Poems*, p. 21.
[124] Poster, 'Edward Thomas's Uncertainties', *Branch-Lines*, p. 44.

heart of Thomas's poetry is what charges its dynamic of disparate articulations, and it can be witnessed in the way he transforms simple observations into complex investigations into language and perception, often through a disjunctive syntax that works to dramatise these 'vacillations'. 'The Word' offers the most potent example of this, in which Thomas employs numerous clauses and subclauses, qualifications, and redirections to produce a text built around shifting positions. The text interrogates the wordless utterance, looking at the way in which the expressive capacities of the natural world become embedded within the self's sense of time and place:

> [...] One name that I have not —
> Though 'tis an empty thingless name — forgot
> Never can die because Spring after Spring
> Some thrushes learn to say it as they sing.[125]

Thomas's restlessness, here mirrored by the syntactical volatility, is seemingly reconciled before the poem's ending which refers to this 'pure thrush word'.[126] This is a language without words, in which the signifier and signified are enmeshed, with the sound of the speech emerging as a pure utterance by virtue of its separation from human cognizance: it exists to Thomas as a form of clean and reflexive instinct. Poster argues that 'Indefinition is, in fact, the subject of the poem [...] The word's purity depends both upon the absence of any correlative in the material world – its 'thinglessness' – and its distance from human language.'[127] This search for a form of pre-linguistic expression feeds back into Thomas's relationship to the sensory modalities as a form of experience that is defined by a reactive relation to external stimuli: like the purity of the thrush's song, the body occupies the same shared terrain of being the mechanism to which the self is made coherent within the phenomenal world, but which also functions as the version of being which exists in a state of pre-linguistic expressivity.

Under Thomas, language, like time, becomes a point of division. On the one hand, it is shown to fulfil the processes of recognition and signification that satisfy the needs of expression, but to also bring the distant closer. This is exemplified in the lines 'Choose me, | you English words [...] Let me sometimes dance | With you' from the similarly titled 'Words'.[128] Conversely, Thomas is always also aware of the limitation of these words, of their failure to fully express

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[125] Thomas, 'The Word', *Annotated Collected Poems*, p. 93
[126] Ibid.
[127] Poster, 'Edward Thomas's Uncertainties', *Branch-Lines*, pp. 48-9.
[128] Thomas, 'Words,' *Annotated Collected Poems*, p. 91.

experience, but also, as seen in the thrush's song, of their potential to reduce and wrest into fixity objects or experiences which exist in an unmediated state outside of linguistic contextualisation. Thus, for Thomas, much of his poetry can be read as an account of interior regret in which the poem is shaped by a feeling of necessary elegy for the world beyond human utterance, and in which the very locutionary act is interrogated as a form of ambivalence that renders the holistically external "thing" into a state of precarity under language.

Thomas is highly sensitive to this, and stages this wariness in a form of negation, in which the thrush's song is characterised by the speaker as 'an empty thingless name'. He plays with the notion of wordless nature as harbouring both an appealing potentiality and a kind of crisis of the nonextant, in which the 'empty thingless name' becomes concurrently a point of liberation and a fulcrum for an existential dread of the loss of expressible identity. M. R. Webb has described this paradox of the 'disintegrative gap between words and things' as indicative of Thomas's duality, in which he argues that 'So much of Thomas's verse partakes of dialogue, as if between two selves.'[129] As we have seen, 'The Word' stages this tension within Thomas between the consolation of language to name and to give meaning, in which it operates as a form of power to individuate and to order, whilst always feeling the need to outline the limitations of this practice. In this, the 'pure thrush word' is ironically burdened with the weight of Thomas's vacillations, in which the double motion of ingress and regress is always at play; the poem asks why it is that as soon as things are pulled in closer for comprehension, do their outlines start to obscure the very thing arrested in attention? 'The Word' helps to give shape to the scope of Thomas's poetic enquiry into the indivisible problems encountered in perception, in which the conscious mind both wields the power of recognition and yet simultaneously works to block the very dynamics of world unfolding outside of utterance.

In 'The Penny Whistle', Thomas inhabits the ballad form to describe an encounter with an encampment of travellers at twilight. The forest around the speaker has been made stranger than it already is by the pale light of the wintery moon, and seems poised between the material and symbolic realms:

> The new moon hangs like an ivory bugle
> In the naked frosty blue;
> And the ghylls of the forest, already blackened

[129] M. R. Webb, '"Yet not unhappy for its lack": the Poetry of Edward Thomas's, *English Studies in Africa*, 16.1 (2009), 37-44, <DOI: 10.1080/00138397308690688>, [accessed 15th February 2020], p. 42; p. 39.

By Winter, are blackened anew.[130]

Thomas' mirroring of the linguistic choices alongside the ballad metre has the effect of casting the forest into the kind of liminal spatial territories of the traditional form, in which setting is transfigured into 'a timeless world [...] with no factual accuracy, no past or future.'[131] There is a general inference of a historically-cast, though temporally nonspecific, sense of pastness generated from the off with the simile of the moon as being like 'an ivory bugle', suggesting the kind of hunting paraphernalia of a bygone, perhaps even "merry", age. Moving through the trees, the speaker spies, 'the caravan-hut by the hollies | Like a kingfisher gleams between'. Much like the referencing back to a previous age through his deployment of imagery, here too Thomas modulates the syntax to both implicate an antiquated linguistic terrain, but also to produce a sense of internal cohesion between the caravan and the bushes around it through internal rhyme. The final two stanzas introduce the figures of the caravan-hut as 'charcoal-burners' and Thomas uses imagery of contrasts to produce a pictorial encounter that frames the figures as archetypal, almost as shadowy extensions of the forest around them:

The charcoal-burners are black, but their linen
Blows white on the line;
And white the letter the girl is reading
Under that crescent fire;

And her brother that hides apart in a thicket,
Slowly and surely playing
On a whistle an olden nursery melody,
Says far more than I am saying.

The introduction of the woman reading a letter is contrasted with her brother who had been cloaked by the woods and sets up a dynamic of disparity between the social and the natural world. Here Thomas implicates the brother, who is playing 'an olden nursery melody' on a simple, rustic instrument, the penny whistle, as in some sense connected with an instinctive, ancient, even primitive version of being, in which because of the simplicity of both the tune and the instrument, there is a purity of expression akin to bugle-like moon. Once again, the issue of

[130] Thomas, 'The Penny Whistle', *Annotated Collected Poems*, p. 50.
[131] Donna Heddle, 'Stormy Crossings: Scots-Scandinavian Balladic Synergies', *Journal of the North Atlantic*, 4 (2013), 161-9, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26686978> [accessed 29th September 2020], p. 168.

expressivity without language is rounded upon, with Thomas casting explicit value judgment on the limits of his own textual production through the poem's final line in which the music 'Says far more than I am saying.' Of course, there is always the ironic bind that is written into the form of such statements which is the impossibility of preserving this encounter without modifying or reducing the experience into a linguistic framework. Like Mew in 'Moorland Night' (see Chapter 2), Thomas is deeply uncomfortable and even shameful about the relationship between the lyric self and its expressive reality. With this poem, we can see how the musicality of ballad form and metre has been used as a reflexive device that feeds back into the melody of the penny whistle. Only, however, this formal construction is diminished by Thomas's speaker as being inherently limited, offering at best a record of the music that was encountered.

Thomas creates almost a polarised scheme in the staging of this poem, in which the world in which he encounters is foreground through its sensory qualities, such as the (implied) acrid smell of smoke, the billowing winds through the linens, and, most importantly, the anti-verbal expressiveness of the boy playing the penny whistle. This is offset by the reduction of the scene as it is recalled, compressed, and made formal through this poem, becoming flattened out by a language insufficient to capture the singularity of that specific moment. The process of creating a representational trace occupies an uncomfortable ethical proposition for Thomas, forcing him to acknowledge the limit that his own mind can offer him when compared to the fullness of the experience itself, amongst the smell of smoke and the trill of the penny whistle.

Thomas' celebration of the travelling Romani communities that populated various regions of rural England become transformed in his imagination as symbolic of social and personal freedom by their un-extractability from the road, which is always for him symbolic of freedom from the acute self-consciousness he tried to outpace. The outsider social types that are encountered within rural contexts, such as the Romani travellers, tramps, and hawkers, or even just rustics in the Wordsworthian tradition (e.g., as seen in 'Lob'), always held for Thomas a fascination that materialises sporadically within his work. Indeed, this admiration can even be superficially detected in his costuming of himself and Helen as rustics for a Christmastide gathering: 'Helen and I went as a country couple to a fancy dress affair. [...] I had on an old Sussex pedlar's smock, black hat and red ribbon with a bunch of corn, knee-breeches, and grey stockings tied with black ribbons, and a red handkerchief as large as a sheet.'[132] Howarth reads

[132] Edward Thomas letter to Mr. and Mrs. MacArthur, December 31st 1911, in Moore, *The Life and Letters of Edward Thomas*, p. 314.

into Thomas' decision to enlist an version of this search for legitimised displacement: 'Becoming a soldier would make Thomas join the ageless continuity of homeless wanderers' he 'had always admired from the outside' and in which 'tramps, gypsies and vagrants are not just Romantic ideals, but always also what their author was waiting to become.'[133] Escape into the landscape of rural England meant a possibility of throwing off all the markers of identity that a regulated static existence might demand.

Evidently, Thomas's great complexity is easily disguised under his textual surfaces of clear and direct language. These poetic scenarios of quiet pathways, empty forest glades, and gardens which smell of damp soil and crushed artemisia are spaces characterised by feelings of absent presence, places caught in-between by a subject who feels himself only tentatively and temporarily welcome. It is this interplay between aesthetics and epistemological enquiry that prompts Longley to identify him as 'among the half-dozen poets who, in the early twentieth century, remade English poetry.'[134] Therefore, if we are to take Untermeyer's charge of Thomas's apparently 'lack of full-throated utterance' with any seriousness, then it is this very quality of the echo, that makes him, contrary to his initially muted acclaim, a poet of great formal and aesthetic sensitivities, someone whose work offers us fresh approaches both then and now to thinking about the self as plastically responsive and always in some form of relation to the vibrantly autonomous environment which encloses it.

'Time swims before me': Rurality and the Reach of Time

Throughout Thomas's poetry, rural environments are depicted as sites that enmesh consciousness in relation to time's span, the presence of which is enacted through a vision of nature that functions as a kind of archive. Farrier's reading of Thomas sees him as concerned with 'time ecology', in that he exhibits 'a sensibility open to the rhythms of the more-than-human world which have been overwhelmed by the rush of linear, industrial, clock-based time.'[135] Thomas's venture into poetry uncovered for him an understanding of nature as an immense repository for memory and history, producing both fascination and anxiety with regards to a tangible sense of time's passing. Within his work, the landscape is a site of numerous traces, in which the experience of contact reveals the limited capacity of this history to be expressed solely

[133] Peter Howarth, *British Poetry in the Age of Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 98.
[134] Longley, 'Introduction', *Annotated Collected Poems*, p. 11.
[135] Farrier, 'Thomas in the Anthropocene', p. 134.

linguistically. Often the landscape is seen by Thomas as something haunted by its own sense of pastness, though the shape of its details are no longer definite. This consciousness of a pastness that presses into the present has the effect of disorienting temporal schemes; suddenly, the future is enfolded into this same consciousness, with the knowledge that one day that too will be past.

The poem 'February Afternoon' captures this sense of Thomas's poetry as concerned with the ambivalent effects of these imaginative temporal excavations. One of his most Hardy-esque lyrics, here the rural past is brought into contiguity with an eternal-present (the 'ageless and dateless past' of Fletcher's criticism) through a sensory network that is simultaneously psychologically transformative yet potently nihilistic in its epistemological reckoning:[136]

> Men heard this roar of parleying starlings, saw,
> A thousand years ago even as now,
> Black rooks with white gulls following the plough
> So that the first are last until a caw
> Commands that last are first again, — a law
> Which was of old when one, like me, dreamed how
> A thousand years might dust lie on his brow
> Yet thus would birds do between hedge and shaw.
>
> Time swims before me, making as a day
> A thousand years, while the broad ploughland oak
> Roars mill-like and men strike and bear the stroke
> Of war as ever, audacious or resigned,
> And God still sits aloft in the array
> That we have wrought him, stone-deaf and stone-blind.[137]

His manipulation of the Italian sonnet form not only recalls Romantic antecedents, namely Wordsworth's adaptation of the form, but also engages with, at the level of formal arrangement, a schematic divide that structures the poem into distinct zones. These are divided between the world and its metaphysical stimuli (octet) and the observing mind's confrontation with its interpretation (sestet). As always with Thomas, his use of form is a mechanism for expressivity. From the first line, there is the sense of a disjunctive temporality produced through the elision of any propositional unit to locate us within a coherent time and space. As with other poems, such as 'The Glory', 'The Gypsy', or the previously discussed 'The Word', the syntax works to

[136] Fletcher, 'Review: Old England', p. 104.
[137] Thomas, 'February Afternoon', p. 109.

both propel and enfold the linear logic, thus distorting the sense of clear progression and instead providing a lively jolt of the immediate present, almost as if we have stumbled into the work mid-thought. Lucy Newlyn identifies the 'meandering pattern' of Thomas's sentences, both in prose and poetry, as imitative of Romantic-era essayists, such as William Hazlitt, which Thomas adapted to carry 'the freight of complex patterns of thought' through syntax rather than vocabulary.[138] There is a sense in which the deployment of these complex syntactical arrangements function as a mental equivalent to use of sensory strategies elsewhere in his work. If his idiosyncratic syntax can be considered a form of texture for the mind akin to the way the sensory operates as a texture for the corporeal self, then it could be thought of as a kind of rhythm of thought that uses elaborations and qualifications as its own temporal scheme to produce a obfuscated linearity: as with the inherent (though not exclusive) present-ness of the sensorial system, then the process of his syntactical arrangements offer a similar kind of stalling in which indecision (as with 'The Word') functions as a refusal to progress.[139] As the poem states 'A thousand years ago even as now', we can see a temporal contraction that produces the continuity of the 'roar of parleying starlings' as presences that have *always* been perceived by the men at the plough. Longley astutely observes the biblical undertones at play, notably recalling Revelations, as well as an explicit adaptation of Matthew XIX, 30: 'But many that are first shall be last; and the last shall be first'.[140] There is the sense then of not only a psychological reorientation within time, but also a comment upon religious, cultural, and social dynamics, as made evident through the lyric's textual accruals.

In addition to its interest in temporal schemes (both thematically and structurally), 'February Afternoon' is also a poem that toys with the collapse of the lyric self (something which Mew similarly explores, see Chapter 2). This is evident where, in the octet, the 'Black rooks and white gulls' function as a symbolic saccade, in which the present and past of the scene are interpenetrative. Thomas's attention to the 'roar' of the birds corresponds to his sustained interest in sensory perception as a form of epistemology, in which the emotive response to the immediacy of external stimuli activates a form of self-consciousness. This self-consciousness, as seen here and in 'Digging' (to be examined later), is attuned to an anteriority of the moment;

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[138] Lucy Newlyn, '"The shape of the sentences": Edward Thomas's tracks in contemporary poetry', in *Branch-Lines: Edward Thomas and Contemporary Poetry*, ed. Guy Cuthbertson & Lucy Newlyn (London: Enitharmon Press, 2007), pp. 65-82, p. 68; p. 75.
[139] Thomas, 'Words', pp. 91-93.
[140] Longley, *Annotated Collected Poems*, p. 274.

here, a millennium is elided through the sudden awareness of the unchanging scene in front of the speaker. It is, in some ways, Thomas's punctuation and puncturing of the georgic pastoral mode, in which the tropes of the plough team and the turned-over earth are harnessed to envision a world that is fatalistically unchanging.

Thomas's interest in exploring a narrative of temporal crisis through an otherwise banal scene of agricultural endeavour implicates his interest in unearthing the inherently transformative potentialities that rurality effects. As is evident in 'February Afternoon', the scene of ploughing is transfigured through an imaginative temporal expansion into a tragic theatre which stages humanity's immolation for the psychological fulfilment of the speaker who is watching. As a war poem, he imbues the rural scene with a sense of despondency, in which men who 'strike and bear the stroke | Of war as ever, audacious or resigned' are bounded to repeat their actions so long as the God that they have made 'stone-deaf and stone-blind' continues to structure their worldview. Thomas's agnosticism is never again as palpable as it is here. The speaker comments that 'Time swims before me', resulting in a temporal disorientation in which 'a thousand years' a truncated into a day. Farrier calls these temporal elisions Thomas's 'radical disorientations' and 'disjunctive temporalities', arguing that they are part of 'a derangement of scale' that emerges in the age of the Anthropocene, in which 'the relationship between action and consequence' are upended.[141] While Thomas was writing ahead of the formulation of the concept of the Anthropocene, he nonetheless is foregrounding a temporal scheme which is responding to an external threat (war) by expanding the moment into its anteriorities.[142] What follows concurrently from this imaginative compression is the return to the present which has become a surrealistic collision of the natural world as framed within the figural registers of an industrial wasteland: now 'the broad ploughland oak | Roars mill-like' from the starlings that were 'parleying' at the start.[143] Furthermore, Thomas begins the poem with an image of sensory onslaught and ends it with one of sensory deprivation, 'stone-deaf and stone-blind'. What this suggests then is that a selfhood that is consciously relational and responsive, engaged actively with the world around it, is a form of ethical metaphysics. As will become evident, this project

[141] Farrier, 'Thomas in the Anthropocene', p. 133.
[142] The Anthropocene is a name given to the current geological epoch of the earth, which is defined by the results of humanity's influence (e.g., atmospheric and oceanic pollution and radiation) that have and continue to directly affect the global ecosystem. See Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'The Climate of History: Four Theses', Critical Enquiry, 35.2 (2009), pp. 197-222; Timothy Clark, *The Value of Ecocriticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019).
[143] Additionally, the notion of birds conversing recall Geoffrey Chaucer's 'Parlement of Foules', a dream vision poem in which the mating pairings of birds is debated in a court ruled by a personified Nature serving as adjudicator.

of being–within–the–world runs through the centre of Thomas's poetics. His almost obsessive fixation on the vestigial traces of former activity (both human and animal) demonstrates an essentially isolated selfhood which cultivates imaginative structures of contact in order to engage with the world outside of his psychic seclusion.

Despite the implicit scepticism of the morality of conflict as evidenced in 'February Afternoon', Thomas did find it a necessary action for him to enlist. Although this was far from an example of febrile patriotism (as is evident in the lines 'I hate not Germans, nor grow hot | With love of Englishmen'), an anecdote from his friend, the writer Eleanor Farjeon, demonstrates Thomas's complex relationship to place and nationhood.[144] She recalls his response to her question of whether he knew what he was fighting for, to which 'He stopped, and picked up a pinch of earth. "Literally, for this." He crumpled it between finger and thumb, and let it fall.'[145] Stan Smith calls this an example of symptomatic metonymy, in which the pinch of soil is representative of a larger metonymy of Thomas's vision of England. This vision is itself as reduction, taking a narrow band of the southern counties, as 'a part simultaneously larger and smaller than the whole it represents, standing in for the totality of Englishness, but at the same time no more than a parish pond'.[146] Thomas himself reflected such a notion when he wrote 'Someday there will be a history of England written from the point of view of one parish, or town, or great house', demonstrating at once a commitment to locality as a legitimate form of experience, but also by extension revelling the partial and the particular.[147] As a historiographical point of view, this demonstrates a metonymic perspective, in which an object seemingly too slight is invested with a potency that is ostensibly more fruitful than any attempt to otherwise wrangle totality into view. Thomas's England, Smith argues, is a 'peculiarly disjunct, decentred terrain', one which Thomas himself recognised as an imaginative territory 'incomparably larger than any country that was ever mapped, since upon nothing less than the infinite can the spirit disport itself.'[148] In his poem, 'Home ("Not the end")', the lines 'This is my grief. That land, | My home, I have never seen' reveal the extent to which landscape was bound up with feelings of psychic displacement in which the rural metonymy comes to function as an unreachable solution to this

[144] Thomas, 'This is no case of petty right or wrong', p. 104.
[145] Stan Smith, '"Literally, for this": Metonymies of National Identity in Edward Thomas, Yeats and Auden', *Locations of Literary Modernism: Region and Nation in British and American Modernist Poetry*, ed. Alex Davis and Lee M. Jenkins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 113-34, p. 113.
[146] Smith, 'Metonymies of National Identity', p. 114.
[147] Edward Thomas, *The South Country*, (Stanbridge, Dorset: Little Toller Books, 2009 [1909]), p. 134.
[148] Ibid., pp. 114-15.

irreparable absence.[149] The yearning for a sense of the rural that might be achieved through the sensory modalities — e.g., through a grip of the soil — is simultaneously tempered with a plaintive awareness of the irreconcilability of this wished for totality.

The issue of how an individual experiences history when confronted with both its abstract and material presences is central to Thomas's fixation upon the rural. His self-proclaimed 'Suspicion for all things quaint' reveals a concern for the commercialisation of tradition as simply a reproduction without any authentic origination. Poster argues that 'Thomas's readings of rural landscape were in part an archaeological exercise' in which 'Landscape is explicitly presented as an endlessly rich, if largely arcane, text.'[150] Certainly, Thomas draws upon a widespread literary and historic index (as seen in his adaptations of Spenser, Housman, Hazlitt, et al.) demonstrating that his sense of the traces of the past within landscape are textual encounters as well as material ones. Thomas wishes for an understanding of history that frames our own self-consciousness as a decisive mechanism in the act of temporal exploration. We can see this in his book *The South Country*, in which the past is shown to be communicable through processes of sensory and imaginative apprehension:

> But because we are imperfectly versed in history, we are not therefore blind to the past. The eye that sees the things of to-day, and the ear that hears, the mind that contemplates or dreams, is itself an instrument of an antiquity equal to whatever it is called upon to apprehend. […] And of these many folds in our nature the face of the earth reminds us […] of the passing of time in ways too difficult and strange for the explanation of historian and zoologist and philosopher. It is this manifold nature that responds with such indescribable depth and variety to the appeals of many landscapes.[151]

This reckoning with history sees the past as an experiential phenomenon, one in which the immediacy of the present is communicated to us through our sensory interrelation with these temporally dense rural spaces. Through this, fixed identities can be made immutable, and the environment around us becomes transformed, as he states, by its 'manifold nature […] with such indescribable depth and variety.' This attention to the contours of the past within the present iteration of a landscape demonstrates Thomas's fixation upon the interplay between the converse consciousnesses of the present in opposition to a past that keeps materialising.

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[149] Thomas, 'Home ("Not the end")', p. 64.
[150] Jem Poster, 'Excavating the Future: Richard Jefferies and Edward Thomas: A Spiritual Affinity in Prose', *Time Literary Supplement* (15 June 2018).
[151] Thomas, *The South Country*, pp. 137-8.

In thinking about his pinch of earth as an expression of the interplay between the material and symbolic strata of place, perhaps Thomas's careful nationalism, consciously anti-exclusionary, reflected this wish for a stable sense of psychological, if not literal, nostos. In 'Home', the speaker encounters birdsong just as twilight is falling: ''Twas home; one nationality | We had, I and the birds that sang, | one memory.'[152] This implication of an ecological version of national identity, in which the intersubjectivity between all living things produces an ethics of relation and community, demonstrates how the connection between landscape and nation in Thomas's work is always a project of expanding the limits of selfhood. This vision of a communal territory, structured by emotional connections to localised places, is further expressed in his description of 'England' as being 'spun out from such a centre into something large or infinite, solid or aëry', until it was ultimately a 'system of vast circumferences circling round the minute neighbouring points of home.'[153] This spatial reorientation of national/local identity is visible in the poem 'Adlestrop'. The poem, one of Thomas's most famous, engages with this sense of place and spatial relations through its roaming eyeline of flora that is viewed in the single moment of a train stopping at a station. This moment of sensory engagement seems to encapsulate this notion of the intensely felt minutiae as being a metonymic part of England. The scene of 'willows, willow-herb, and grass | And meadowsweet, and haycocks dry' that the speaker is enveloped within is crucially not a moment of fragmentation, but rather an instance of complete unity of the self with the contiguous environment.[154] For Thomas, the part *is* the whole, as seen with the poem's closing dilatory image of auditory infinity:

> And for that minute a blackbird sang
> Close by, and round him, mistier,
> Farther and farther, all the birds
> Of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire.[155]

As is evident, experiences of rurality for Thomas were as much a question of exploring an inbuilt emotional structure as it was of literal encounters. These closing lines of 'Adelstrop' demonstrate his interest in constructing a poetry that can map rurality in diverse ways, such as by using a

[152] Thomas, 'Home', p. 81
[153] Thomas, *Annotated Collected Poems*, p. 165.
[154] Thomas, Adlestrop', p. 51.
[155] Ibid.

panning out technique that both offers geographical specificity but also transforms these territories into spaces that are defined by their creative potentialities as represented by the birds. In many ways these closing lines function as an inversion of the regulated and charted train system in which his encounter occurs; instead of Oxfordshire and Gloucestershire being conceived as cultural and economic polities, they become psychically re-mapped as spaces offering a plurality of knowledge through a contrary implication of an infinity ('all the birds') that exceeds its own tangible limits.

Therefore, in his traversing, these terrains are animated into a psychic topography, which this also has the effect of transforming them into spaces that are half-realised. Smith echoes this notion when he writes, 'His landscapes repeatedly offer metonymies of a totality that cannot be grasped. At the heart of such metonymies is dispossession. They offer traces of something which no longer exists, or exists elsewhere – is precisely *not here* [my emphasis].'[156] Thomas's short poem, 'The Cherry Trees', reflects this sense of dispossession innately inbuilt into a landscape scene, with the blossom acting a bridging metaphor for the isolation of self from community:

> The cherry trees bend over and are shedding
> On the old road where all that passed are dead,
> Their petals, strewing the grass as for a wedding
> This early may morn when there is none to wed.[157]

Central to the poem is a sense of an environment that is psychically reciprocal to the emotional despondency of the speaker, echoing Hardy's portrait of woodland trees as mournful for the dead planter, Giles Winterborne, in *The Woodlanders.*[158] In addition to its referential quality, this is also one of Thomas's most aesthetically modern poems, seemingly straight out of the credo of the Imagist school as fronted by Ezra Pound.

Imagism was a small but influential aesthetic movement which thrived strongly but briefly in the poetry circles of the 1910s. As a credo, it had its terms defined by Pound, T. E. Hulme, and F. S. Flint. It called for a direct, unornamental language (1), concision (2), and organic musicality as opposed to fixed metre (3). Additionally, Pound championed the 'Image' at the centre of the aesthetic as being a treatment of a thing in an immediate and expressive

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[156] Ibid., pp. 115-16.
[157] Thomas, 'The Cherry Trees', p. 120.
[158] 'The whole wood seemed to be a house of death, pervaded by loss to its uttermost length and breadth. Winterborne was gone and the copses seemed to show the want of him'. Hardy, *The Woodlanders*, p. 293.

moment: 'that which presents an intellectual and emotional complex in an instant of time'.[159] Thomas resisted the work published in *Des Imagistes* anthologies, calling the movement little more than 'a tall marble monument' that was too stuck on the visual dimensions of poetry and not on its acoustic elements. Given Thomas's interests in the capacities of the sensory within his own work, the emphasis upon the aural qualities within poetics reflects this concern with the experiential situatedness that visual modalities, given their dominance in representation, fail to offer. Rather, an interest in sound not only harks to the oral tradition of poetry, which given Thomas's interest in the role of folksong as a genre within his work seems apposite, but also incorporates a temporal quality that the immediacy of visuality often eschews. With that being said, the aesthetic qualities of Imagism, such as spare and precise language, are evident in some of his poems, such as 'Tall Nettles' or 'Thaw', suggesting that he did, whether consciously or not, absorb some of its stylistic effects.[160] In fact, 'The Cherry Trees', specifically calls to mind Pound's 'In the station of the metro' (1913), which also uses the imagery of falling blossom petals to comment upon a sense of isolation and the experience of time (in Pound's case its immediacy, in Thomas's its ephemerality).

Although his status as a peripheral voice in the development of British modernist poetry has been long debated, such demonstrable stylistic parallels do suggest that his name should be more decisively called upon within such discussions.[161] For example, Webb argues that Thomas's 'best poems have a hardness which evinces their modernity'; on the other hand, Guy Cuthbertson draws parallels between Thomas and modernism but is wary of categorising him as modernist, in part because he identifies within Thomas a poetics of simplicity that he argues is antithetical to modernist poetry's valorisation of complexity — although this interpretation does not account for Imagism's status as a movement within the modernist aesthetic umbrella.[162] Both Longley and Peter Howarth argue instead that definitions of what constitutes modernism are themselves vague and flimsily applied, with Longley suggesting this is due to Thomas's focus upon nature in his work, which is typically seen as anti-modern by the fact of its very subject

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[159] Ezra Pound quoted in Peter Jones, 'Introduction', *Imagist Poetry*, ed. Peter Jones (London: Penguin, 1972), pp. 13-43, p. 39.
[160] Longley, 'Introduction', *Annotated Collected Poems*, p. 20.
[161] For an overview of the contemporary British poetry scene and competing factions during the 1910s see Helen Carr, 'Edwardian, Georgian, Imagist, Vorticist, and "Amygist" Poetry', *A History of Modernist Poetry*, ed. Alex Davis & Lee M. Jenkins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 157-85.
[162] Webb, '"Yet not unhappy for its lack"', 44.; Guy Cuthbertson, '"I should want nothing more": Edward Thomas and Simplicity', *Journal of the British Academy*, 7, pp. 89-121, <https://doi.org/10.5871/jba/007.089> [accessed: 19/05/20], p. 108.

being erroneously seen as a desire to return to simplicity.[163] Furthermore, both Howarth and Longley ultimately conclude that questions of Thomas's 'modernist credentials' are less important than in thinking about how his work situates itself alongside Pound, Eliot, et al., with Howarth settling that 'it is perhaps more illuminating to ask what those styles enabled each poet to say which could not be said in the Modernists' freer or more fragmented forms.'[164] Certainly, Thomas's position is a purposefully ambivalent one, and it is this duality between tradition and innovation that energises his work with a complex fusion of the familiar and the strange. In fact, it is the attention to the rural within his work that at times can obscure the otherwise contemporary engagement with the sensory aspects of self. Rather, it is because of the attention to the spaces that are unfashionably quaint in another writer's hands that we can see how Thomas's own branch of quiet radicalism, his cutting through sentiment with a clear-toned simplicity, such as in 'Tall Nettles': 'I like the dust on the nettles, never lost | Except to prove the sweetness of a shower.'[165] Lines such as those, which effect a bridge between the kind of neatly rhythmic Housman-esque phrase and the definite modernism of the Imagist's pure expression, work by embedding a personal dimension within a lyric that otherwise holds the subject's direct relation to the world in terms of its temporal instantaneity.

As a poet interested in the textual transformation that emerge from the collisions between past (the old road of the dead) and the future (the promise of matrimony as a statement of optimistic futurity), Thomas also embeds a referential quality that gestures toward previous generations of poetry. In addition to Hardy, A. E. Housman's second lyric in the sequence of poems collected within *A Shropshire Lad* (1896), is a clear textual spectre lurking underneath Thomas's lines: 'Loveliest of trees, the cherry now | Is hung with bloom along the bough'.[166] As

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[163] Longley sees Thomas's exclusion from traditional discussions of modernism as the result of an obtuseness in what actually constitutes modernism, stating that 'Thomas's echoing allusiveness bypasses theorists of modernism, who may either need more obvious signposts or believe that "nature poetry" invariably "returns to simplicity"', whilst also qualifying this by questioning the very practice of trying integrating Thomas within modernism: 'it's less a matter of giving him modernist credentials than of promoting a less restrictive account of poetry in English between 1900 and 1922'. Longley, 'Going Back to Edward Thomas's, in *Branch-Lines: Edward Thomas and Contemporary Poetry*, ed. Guy Cuthbertson & Lucy Newlyn (London: Enitharmon Press, 2007), 29-41, pp. 37-8. Furthermore, see her article 'An Atlantic Chasm? Edward Thomas and the English Lyric', *Literary Imagination*, 16.2 (2014), pp. 233-47, <doi:10.1093/litimag/imt092>.

[164] Peter Howarth argues for a non-progressive understanding of poetry, in which Thomas and others can be seen to sit alongside the modernist school(s), but crucially not be enveloped into it. In this acknowledgement of separation, 'Fateful Forms: A. E. Housman, Charlotte Mew, Thomas Hardy and Edward Thomas's, *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth-Century English Poetry*, ed. Neil Corcoran (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), pp. 59-73, p. 59.

[165] Thomas, 'Tall Nettles', *Annotated Collected Poems*, p. 119.

[166] A. E. Housman, 'Loveliest of tree, the cherry now', *A Shropshire Lad* (London: Penguin Classics, 2017 [1896]), p. 5. Notably, *A Shropshire Lad* was one of the most popular texts brought by combatants to the frontlines of the War,

a both an elegy and carpe diem poem, Housman's lyric, like Thomas's, is concerned with the passage of time ('of my threescore years and ten, | Twenty will not come again'), with the cherry blossom serving as a symbol of both time spent but also of the need to use that which is left afforded:

> And since to look at things in bloom
> Fifty springs are little room,
> About the woodlands I will go
> To see the cherry hung with snow.

In both Housman and Thomas, the transient nature of the spring blossom is used as figural distillation of a temporal crisis of ontology, in which the reflective self is brought into a timescape that imagines an absence of presence: 'On the old road where all that passed are dead'. Thomas does not mirror Housman's rhyme scheme directly, choosing interlaced couplets instead, but does correspond to the regularity of the iambic metre. Elsewhere, Thomas uses such formal qualities with decisively referential flair, as in 'The Mill–Pond' which uses the same unsettled ballad metre of Keats' 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci' (quatrains of alternating tetrameter followed by dimeter). Appropriately, 'The Mill–Pond' also imagines a scene of spectral visitation by a girl 'Dressed all in white' appearing at the edge of an gloomy mill's pond, revealing his interest in iterations of landscape that are as much textual as they are material.[167]

In 'The Cherry Trees' we can see an inherent tension between it as a scene of an environment that is still vital (the trees are blooming) but also anthropocentrically vacated, transforming it into an oblique view of a rural space during wartime. The poem reflects the lived reality of soldiers away at the Front, who have left behind both the ecological and social cycles of springtime, which includes May weddings. 'The Cherry Trees' is the second of Thomas's poems that appears to draw from Edmund Spenser's wedding song, 'Prothalamion' which is thematically similarly interest in the juxtaposition between momentary joy and the transience of time.

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reportedly to be found 'in every pocket' [Robert Nichols quoted in Peter Parker, *Housman Country: Into the Heart of England* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2016), p. 3.] Appropriately for Thomas's interest in the auditory capacities of linguistic and rhythmic dimensions within poetry, Housman's poems had also been set to music by various composers, most notably by Ralph Vaughan Williams and George Butterworth, placing his lyrics firmly within the cultural and aesthetic milieu of the Folk Song Revival movement.

[167] Thomas, 'The Mill-Pond', p. 56.

Another of Thomas's poem, 'The Bridge', which describes in elegiac terms the speaker's coming to 'a strange bridge alone' and thinking of his past.[168] Farrier calls the poem a paradox in which the water 'takes all other times into itself: motion and stasis combine uncannily.'[169] This is evident in the lines: 'The stream | Runs softly yet drowns the past, | The dark-lit stream has drowned the Future and the Past.'[170] Aside from the direct temporal referent, the poem also has an intertextual echo, with this line recalling Spenser's, 'Against the bridal day, which is not long: | Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song'.[171] With this both internal and referential reaching back and bringing time forward into the present, we can see Thomas's formulation of a poetics that is textured with a panoply of accrued linguistic and aesthetic inheritances.

Evidently, the passing of time for Thomas is the central driving force within the emotional structure of his poetics. As evidenced in the brief discussions of 'The Cherry Trees', 'Mill Pond', and now 'The Bridge', Thomas's intertextual adaptation or referentiality to works from earlier periods can be read as a kind of internal spectralisation of the poem's linguistic territory. His interest in the present moment as a rush of multiple temporal and imaginative scales helps us understand the underlying ontological structure that some of his more explicitly sensorial poems engage with. As will be demonstrated in the poems 'Digging' and 'Sowing', the awareness of the moment is induced through the sensory system's engagement with a world made more intensely present by the body's physical imbrication in the phenomenal space of the world, which, in these examples, are induced through the labouring processes of gardening.

'Today I think | Only with scents': Thomas's Sensory Consciousness

As we have seen, a dynamic of wilful self-negation animates much of Thomas's poetry. In poems such as 'Aspens', 'Fifty Faggots', and 'The Green Roads' the subjective 'I' does not materialise until the texts' endings. Its sudden appearance has the effect of arresting their initial sense of spatial expansion and temporal malleability with a point of view that abruptly roots the scene in the ocular perspective of the covertly hidden speaker. It is a hide-and-seek approach to perspectival shifting within the lyric, in which Thomas destabilises the centrality of the self by

[168] Thomas, 'The Bridge', p. 66.
[169] Farrier, 'Thomas in the Anthropocene', p. 138.
[170] Thomas, 'The Bridge', p. 66.
[171] Spenser, 'Prothalamion', *The Poetry Foundation* (1596) <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45217/prothalamion-56d224a0e2feb> [accessed 4th August 2020].

framing a provisional point of view, but then, somewhat reluctantly, reveals the material presence of a singular speaker. This hesitation at placing himself within the frame of the poetic action of the rural setting reflects his own uncomfortable relationship to the subjective formation of place. For example, in his preface to *British Country Life of Autumn and Winter* (1908) he called for 'a diminution of man's importance in the landscape'.[172] This appeal for the abnegation of the anthropocentric point of view so commonly found within representations of rural spaces was as much a self-rebuke as it was a genuine plea for more creative treatments of the British countryside. How might the subject get away from subjectivity, seems to be the central question that dogged Thomas both in life and in art.

Thomas's use of the stream in 'The Bridge', as well as roads or pathways as inherently temporal entities, brings to mind the work of the American philosopher and psychologist, William James. It was James who, in his 1890 work *The Principles of Psychology*, popularised the metaphor of consciousness as a kind of stream that would be adopted within modernist aesthetics.[173] Thomas was certainly familiar with James and used quotations from his work in several of his prose writings. Stan Smith describes James's influence on Thomas as rooted in his attempt to 'ground the subjective, insubstantial stuff of consciousness [...] within the objective, material body of reality, without reducing the one to the other.'[174] Evidently, Thomas's own metaphysical quandary over the struggle of materiality against abstraction can find the origin of its articulation in the model of being which was proposed by James.

James's work can be seen as attempting to narrate the 'explanatory gap that lies between the subjective, experiential character that is fundamental to consciousness and the objectivity' of material reality.[175] It is in restoring, what Smith describes as, 'the living texture of experience' to understandings of consciousness that we can see Jamesian iterations of consciousness as something which offers new approaches and values to the role of the emotive individual.[176] James's valorisation of the role of individual experience in producing reality as it comes to us has

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[172] Thomas quoted in Edna Longley, 'Going Back to Edward Thomas's, in *Branch-Lines: Edward Thomas and Contemporary Poetry*, ed. Guy Cuthbertson & Lucy Newlyn (London: Enitharmon Press, 2007), pp. 29-41, p. 33.
[173] 'Stream of consciousness' was applied by May Sinclair in a 1918 review of Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage* novels and became a shorthand term for an aesthetic effect synonymous with literary modernism's stylistics. See Justin Prystash, 'Times of the Timeless: May Sinclair, British Idealism, and the Stream of Consciousness', *Twentieth century Literature*, 68.2 (2022), pp. 179-98.
[174] Stan Smith, *Edward Thomas* (London: Faber and Faber, 1988), p. 93.
[175] Lana Kühle, 'William James and the Embodied Mind', *Contemporary Pragmatism* 14.1 (2017), pp. 51-75, p. 55, <https://doi-org.ezphost.dur.ac.uk/10.1163/18758185-01401004> [accessed 9th June 2020].
[176] Smith, *Edward Thomas*, p. 93.

led him to be accused of advocating 'an extreme, relativistic individualism'.[177] However, as Smith points out, his was always a social vision, in which, in James's own words, 'our various ways of thinking and feeling have grown to be what they are because of their utility in shaping our *reactions* on the outer world', meaning that we are reactive to a world already socially determined by various cultural categories (such as "Nature").[178]

It is in this difficult bind between solipsism and the wish to glance outside of subjectivity's interpretative filtration, that Thomas's work can be seen to be investigating the rural as reflexively material and symbolic. As Smith points out, 'Thomas's poetry abounds in attempts to seize hold of an inapprehensible core of meaning felt to lurk within the endlessly dissolving flux of things.'[179] Consciousness then becomes something which is the diminution of a vibrant and shimmering material present that can only be approached through the cognitive reduction of data into distinct units for comprehension. Consequently, there arises in Thomas's poetics a feeling of expulsion and unwilling denial of insight, in which the self is only ever witness to a partiality of being and can never cognitively experience it as a form of totality, except within the limitations of an imaginative capacity, which is itself divorced from the immediacy of the given moment.

Two of Thomas's poems, 'Digging' and 'Sowing', reflect a Jamesian ambiguity over being, whilst also introducing a poetics that proposes an ethics of the moment as a creed by which to structure one's epistemology. 'Digging' is the explication of a moment, in which the speaker's sensory perception is aroused by the odours of the plant life that surrounds him whilst working in the garden. In this moment of corporeal engagement, the potential for a self-directed interpenetration between the sensory and cognizant dimensions of consciousness are staged, producing a lyrical intensity through a cataloguing of objects. These plants range from the wild and native (bracken, wild carrot), to the neatly farmed (square mustard field) and to the imported but ubiquitously acclimatised (rose, rhubarb), but are unified by their olfactory potency, possessing through this their own shimmering vitality:

> Today I think
> Only with scents,—scents dead leaves yield,
> And bracken, and wild carrot's seed,

[177] Ibid. p. 104.
[178] Ibid.
[179] Smith, *Edward Thomas*, p. 106.

> And the square mustard field;
>
> Odours that rise
> When the spade wounds the root of tree,
> Rose, currant, raspberry, or goutweed,
> Rhubarb or celery;[180]

Thomas's opening proposition of 'Today I think | Only with scents' positions itself immediately within a logical contradiction, working from the moment of its utterance to unmake its very claim by staging a kind of paradox of the sensory: to think *with* the sensory is to wrest it into a form of language, which thereby distorts it — as with the 'pure thrush word'. Additionally, to privilege one sensory capacity is induce a process of negation and cognitive subtraction of the others, in which all focus is directed upon only the olfactory as a form of knowledge-basis. Smith notes that Thomas's poems often open with statements of negation, which, even when disguised, as in this poem, ultimately 'inserts absence right into the heart of an achieved and actual world.'[181] This inevitability of the gap that emerges between the sign and signified is one of Thomas's chief concerns, and in a Jamesian way, here he is also interested in how the subject produces himself through his empathetic capacities to become other than the logic of his interiority. Longley sees this process of 'cognitive fissure' in Thomas's work as producing 'an ecological space where humanity and the earth might associate and negotiate.'[182] To achieve this association, and in a similar way to 'Adlestrop', Thomas moves from mental intention into a space of sensory unfolding, in which the paratactical listing of 'dead leaves', 'bracken', 'wild carrot's seed', etc. all tumble in simultaneity after the caesura. The effect of this caesura is to separate the framing intention, the objective of *thinking with scents*, from the potentiality of experiencing the world in rush of the momentary. The process of naming both affords an instant of recognition between the speaker and the plant, but also produces the object into a system of relations in which it is perceptually conceived through a non-logical and unintellectual moment of contact. It is an attempt to enter into a temporary state of consciousness that is unalienated and exist within the units of sensory contact itself.

Indeed, 'Digging' can be read as a poem about the wish for incorporation of the environment into the mind and simultaneously an expulsion of this thinking self into the very

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[180] Thomas, 'Digging ("Today I think")', pp. 79-80.
[181] Smith, *Edward Thomas*, p. 100.
[182] Longley, 'Going Back to Edward Thomas', p. 39.

perceptual field of the world outside. Unlike ocular perception which depends upon a spatial distinction between foreground and background, olfactory perception is one that problematises this discrepancy. This relationship between spatial location and smell can be read in terms of Jim Drobnick's notion of toposmia, which considers the intersection between smell, spatial orientation, and notions of place.[183] Interestingly, the inaugurating 'I' of 'Digging' disperses after the first line, offering two potential readings: the first is that its disappearance mirrors the way in which the distinction between the speaker and the world is obfuscated through smell's ambiguous spatiality; an inverse reading could suggest that the 'I' in fact occupies the central discursive position within the text, in which the very act of sensory perception emanates from this singularity, producing a sense of bodily situatedness in which the speaker is sited within a privileged location at the centre of the perceptual field. In a Jamesian way, both interpretations of the poem are operating simultaneously, in that the speaker is engaging in an act of intersubjective contact with entities outside of his point of view, but also remains central to its origination.

In 'Sowing', the temporality of consciousness is given primacy of attention, with Thomas implicating a sensory concentration in which consciousness is registered in synaesthetic terms:

> It was a perfect day
> For sowing; just
> As sweet and dry was the ground
> As tobacco-dust.
>
> I tasted deep the hour
> Between the far
> Owl's chuckling first soft cry
> And the first star.

In this poem, Thomas offers a portrait of being in which the bodily activity of sowing seeds, with its meditative rhythms of repetitious broadcasting movements, effects an intensification of selfhood through its apparent absentmindedness. Much akin to D. H. Lawrence's concern with the relationship between mindlessness and labour (see Chapter 3), Thomas is interested in the ways in which labouring bodies might experience a creative awakening through their corporeal engagement. 'Sowing', Smith suggests, 'offers a fusion of the senses' in which one 'cannot be

[183] Jim Drobnick, *The Smell Culture Reader*, ed. Jim Drobnick (New York: Berg, 2006), p. 85.

separated out and thus fragment consciousness.'[184] Furthermore, this unity is achieved through an act of imaginative temporal contact: 'The planting of seeds, in its bodily effort, becomes an appropriation of time, too: this sowing has taken purchase on the future, on the seeds of time themselves, and in the process has made past and present alike sites not of loss but of fruition and fulfilment.'[185] In the final stanza of 'Digging', the speaker states that 'It is enough | To smell, to crumble to dark earth.' To smell and to touch are both sensory modalities which conversely depend upon the subject's relationship to distance (including the collapsing of it) in order to effect a transformation in the relation. These lines from 'Digging' show Thomas as a poet interested in the processes of imaginative contact through the senses, in which the haptic and olfactory, in this case, afford the possibility of emptying out the mind, of returning the body to a state of proprioceptive orientation within time and space, and to reaching the kind of purity of being that the birdsong seems to promise.

Both 'Digging' and 'Sowing' reveal Thomas as a poet concerned with the body as a site in which the world is given over to us or in which we are given over to the world. The sensory capacities provide for Thomas an aesthetic tool in which to articulate his larger questions of the self, such as where being might end or whether we expand into space or space into us. None of these concerns live on the surface of Thomas's lyrics but they nonetheless operate like echoes of some distant thought. In locating the body at the centre of his project exploring the contours of consciousness, Thomas further expands his persistent concern with the role of memory, time, and history, all of which occupy the shadowy side of concern with the present. The final stanza of 'Home' sees the speaker quietly observing a labourer at the end of the day. We are told that 'through the silence, from his shed | The sound of sawing rounded all | That silence said.'[186] Being located outside of the shed, operating as a witness but not participant, these final lines display a narrative position of speaker's ultimate exclusion from this vision of home. This image seems to offer a distillation of Thomas's emotional life that runs through every poem, in which the lyric self is always on the edge of the threshold, aware of life happening around them but also unmoored by their own lack of ontological enclosure within the world. This impulse for finding provisionality within experience is rooted in Thomas's feelings of malaise. By creating textual worlds in which the lyric 'I' is made provisional through its own telling, Thomas engages with

[184] Smith, *Edward Thomas*, p. 143
[185] Ibid., p. 144.
[186] Thomas, 'Home', p. 81.

the rural as a space in which to interrogate a metaphysics of time. Within this enquiry is an opportunity for uncovering a new epistemological position, one in which uses experiences of corporeal and sensory interrelation to produce an ecological ontology that offers more than the singularity of the self.

Conclusion: 'Out in the dark'

At the crest of the steep ascent from the hamlet of Oakshott in east Hampshire, in a wind-bruised clearing of frayed wild grass, is a sarsen stone dedicated to Thomas. The stone's memorial plaque faces outward, peering down the scarp slope of the hillside, the view spanning wide over beech groves and scattered villages, across to the distant chalk hills of the South Downs. On the plaque is written part of the final sentence of a short prose sketch by Thomas: 'and I rose up, and knew that I was tired, and continued my journey.' Its location at the summit of a winding path, amongst wild grass and past slanting trees, returns to the real environment the words that Thomas apprehended from his immersion within such places. These words capture the essential division within a self that was constantly pulled in conflicting directions. Much of this dynamic in which he is caught between distinct states of being (here, rest and movement) suffuses his poetry, and manifests in a poetics which is always haunted by its spectral potentialities.

The poetics that materialise within Thomas's poems reveal a consciousness that is both energised by its motor of empathetic reflexivity and also troubled by this unsettled relationship to a world that cannot be glimpsed outside of his eyeline. His penultimate poem before his early death in April 1917, 'Out in the dark', was written on Christmas Eve 1916 whilst he was staying with his family in a rented cottage in Essex. Knowing he was soon to be embarking for the Western Front, there is a, perhaps coincidental, finality in the poem's thematic and tonal qualities. It is a lyric swamped by silence, the darkness operating as a potent presence, amniotic-like in its swaddling of all in which it shields:

> Out in the dark over the snow
> The fallow fawns invisible go
> With the fallow doe
> And the winds blow;
> Fast as the stars are slow.[187]

[187] Thomas, 'Out in the dark', pp. 138-39.

As mentioned, the footprints of 'Out in the dark' can be detected in Hardy's 'The Fallow Deer at the Lonely House'. Unlike Hardy's poem, the speaker and the fallow deer are indistinguishable amongst the darkness which organises all within its paratactical patterning of object interrelation; unlike Hardy, there is no window to keep the divide, space is collapsed, and the self is immured within the scene:

> And star and I and wind and deer,
> Are in the dark together, — near,
> Yet far, — and fear
> Drums on my ear
> In that sage company drear.

In spite of this image of mutual concealment, the speaker's consciousness does maintain a sense of self-distinction. Thomas's use of line-breaks in this stanza, in which 'near, | Yet far' are textually translated into a moment of hiatus, reveals his treatment of form as itself a mode of psychological (and therefore emotional) comprehension. As with 'Digging', here the dashes become shifts in register, in which the interrelation between the material units of the world (including the speaker) are disturbed by spatial qualification. Smith suggests that the '"I" of Thomas's poems is rescued, on many occasions, from being a disembodied ghost, by the very fact of his encounter and dialogue in a common world.'[188] 'Out in the dark' is a poem about the commonness of things when they lose their visible distinction, in which the darkness creates a new understanding of mutuality. Within the gloom, the speaker's body is ocularly obscured, but the drumming of their ear, along with the regularity of the rhyme, implicates a stasis that is holding discretely in spite of the changing dynamics. By the end of the poem, it becomes no longer clear whether the 'I' will be rescued from the lyric, whether in fact the coming of the darkness does mean the culmination of a futurity that is deindividuated:

> No traveller has rest more blest
> Than this moment brief between
> Two lives, when the Night's first lights
> And shades hide what has never been,
> Things goodlier, lovelier, dearer, than will be or have been.

[188] Smith, *Edward Thomas*, p. 168.

With the final extended line, Thomas offers up a future that will be morally and ethically enriched, perhaps by the disappearance of any mediating subjectivity. As with Mew's ecological selfhood (see Chapter 2), he envisions negation as a form of aesthetic fulfilment; it is an image of ecstasy in which the landscape enfolds the self into its totality – far from Untemeyer's charge that his 'voice lacks a full-throated utterance'.[189] As a rural poet of both the sensory moment and the partially abnegated self, Thomas shows us that the abjection of the self and its disappearance into a world of darkness results in a vision of being in which imagination is produced as mode of temporal promise; anything is possible in the darkness, because life itself is transformed into the purely aesthetic, and it becomes a vision of reunion in which the self is no longer trapped in its own remoteness.

In the next chapter, we will see how Charlotte Mew's poetry and prose writing takes on a similar ontological enquiry to the one that we have seen Thomas investigate. Her work reveals an attention to the natural world as a space in which to find both consolation and expression. Animated by an essential queerness, Mew's aesthetic interrogates the divisibility between the material and imaginative iterations of the rural and, like Thomas, she finds in the sensory system opportunities in which to expand the capacities of the lyric self.

[189] Untermeyer, 'Edward Thomas', p. 264.

Chapter 2

'I am quiet with the earth': Queer Nature and the Lyric Self in the work of Charlotte Mew

In 1953, 25 years after the death of the *then* almost forgotten poet, Charlotte Mew, Alida Klemantaski Monro began to sketch out a biography of her old friend. In one note, she recalled a poem which Mew had 'read many times' to her, 'which described how a Breton shepherd one night left his sheep to lay himself at the feet of a Wayside Calvary and the next morning passers by [sic] found a heap of leaves – all that was left of him.'[190] Mew, Monro divulges, would finish 'with her characteristic toss of the head, and the admission that for her part, such a death, perhaps in a wood, was all she asked.' That, however, was not to be her privilege. Instead, she died in a sanatorium in grey central London, 'surrounded by no trees, no birds', having swallowed the Lysol she had bought covertly from a chemist's earlier that morning. Much like the fate of the Breton shepherd, the poem too has disappeared, likely destroyed by Mew with casual stealth into the smoking grate of the fire or as 'paper spills to light her endless cigarettes'.[191] Now, decades on, the poem has fully faded out of living memory, its title lost, the words dissipated and leaving only a faint outline in anecdote.

The story of the poem of the Breton shepherd captures the way in which a text transforms itself into more than the purpose of its conception: it becomes a fragment in which to look at the process of time as decay, to hold a trace of something that has moved outside of memory, and to pause over all that could be lost. Furthermore, Mew's story of the Breton shepherd's transformation into the forest's organic matter, itself refracted through Monro's recollection, displays Mew's intense concern with nature's fragile salvific potential. In her work, the natural

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[190] "Charlotte Mew'. A memoir, probably by Alida Monro', in 'Supplementary Poetry Bookshop Papers. Vol. xxvi. Works by and correspondence relating to Charlotte Mew', 1880-1977, Add MS 83382, Item 9, Western Manuscripts, British Library, London, pp. 169-70.

[191] 'In his obituary, Sydney Cockerell suggested many more poems had been written that had fallen prey to house moves, spells of depression and an over-zealous editorial eye: "There can be no doubt that her fastidious self-criticism proved fatal to much work that was really good, and that the printed poems are far less than a tithe of what she composed." Whether or not that is true, Alida Monro added weight to the supposition by recounting some years later by recounting an occasion when she'd visited Mew for tea and watched her making paper spills to light her endless cigarettes or to give to her parrot, Wek, to chew on. Noticing some writing on the spills, Alida asked if Mew was using up old letters that way, and was told, "I'm burning up my work. I don't know what else to do with it." [...] it is an indication of Mew's playful, and often inscrutable, nature that neither Anne [Mew's sister] nor Alida could decide whether the comment was made in jest, or if Mew really was destroying original work.' Julia Copus, *This Rare Spirit: A Life of Charlotte Mew* (London: Faber, 2021), p. 3.

world is often imbued with tentative redemptive capacities that are otherwise absent from the solely social world. As in the story of the Breton shepherd, nature is formed as an archive of the imagination through which the body can be inscribed. The natural world emerges as a space in which psychological pain is deposited in the precarious, disavowed self — lost in the woods, and ultimately disremembered.

Mew's conception of nature is caught in polarity between one in which the subject is the central organising force and one in which it is necessarily disregarded. As in her poem 'Ken', this interface between the self and the natural world produces relationships of contact which are mutually transformative: 'A perished leaf or any such thing | Was just "a rose"'.[192] Nature is both material— the 'leaf' is just a leaf — and symbolic — Ken's mind transfigures it into a 'rose', which both displaces its taxonomic definition but also inscribes a new cultural and organic value system. This display of the imaginative capacity for redefinition effects a vision of ecological contiguity that helps us to see nature in new ways: entities can be reformulated away from their divisible separateness and slippages of definition can usher in larger discursive ramifications that draw new relationships between things. In grappling with these two versions of nature, her work creates an unsettled version of the pastoral mode which resists the conventional valorisation of retreat and simplicity. In similar terms, she asks us to carefully rethink the lyric as a form that both demands disclosure and yet seems conflictingly concerned with the privacy of such expression. Rather, Mew's treatment of the pastoral and lyric genres is more immediately concerned with interrogating the emotional (in)sufficiency of these inherited forms.

The critical practice of queer ecology offers some ways of thinking about how Mew's work recalibrates these genres, particularly in their quietly insistent disruption of anthropocentric assumptions. Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson describe the aim of queer ecology as providing a version of 'ecology that embraces deviation and strangeness as a necessary part of biophilia'.[193] This orientation toward ecological thinking resists anthropocentric conceptions of nature, such as that of a 'wilderness', which are aesthetically and politically produced in order to facilitate the 'enactment of a specific heteromasculinity'.[194] Timothy Morton echoes this in his description of ideological Nature as that in which 'masculine Nature

[192] Charlotte Mew, 'Ken', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Val Warner (Manchester: Carncanet Press, 1981), p. 15.
[193] Catriona Mortimer-Sandiland and Bruce Erickson, 'Introduction: A Genealogy of Queer Ecologies', *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*, ed. Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), pp. 1-48, p. 37.
[194] Ibid, p. 3.

is "unperversion"', codified as 'outdoorsy and extraverted, heterosexual, able-bodied' and privileging 'physical wholeness and coordination' over the feminine, queer, and non-normative.[195] Queer ecology's attempt to de-nature Nature — to bring out a sense of strangeness inherent within the non-human world — rejects fixed taxonomical understandings of the natural world as its total formation. Rather than aim for a politics of completeness, which are inherent in epistemologies that aim to wrestle nature into easy comprehension, queer ecology aims to un-work these totalising impulses. For Morton, this is in essence a rejection of the 'inside-outside structures' of ideological Nature. He writes:

> All life-forms, along with the environments they compose and inhabit, defy boundaries between inside and outside at every level. When we examine the environment, it shimmers, and figures emerge in a "strange distortion."[196]

This approach to environmental intimacy is foreshadowed in Mew's writing, which is so often preoccupied with the hazy edges of the self and its relationship with the affective dynamics of physical and imaginative environments. As in Morton's notion of the blurred boundaries of human and non-human entities, Mew's vision of the self is that of an expansive category that subverts easy signification through aesthetic strategies of resistance, inhabiting given forms, such as the lyric and dramatic monologue, in order to un-work them from within their own frameworks. Boundaries for Mew always function as an expedient structure in which to upset.

Along with queer ecology, queer phenomenology similarly offers an equally productive perspective in thinking about the role of the subject in relation to the world. In Sara Ahmed's conception, queer phenomenology offers the opportunity to question what is foregrounded in narrating the processes of perception, asking to instead critically examine the underside of the universalising tendency a given subject might bring to their experience.[197] Both ecological and queer approaches to thinking about experience share a similar purpose 'to disturb the order of things'.[198] Furthermore, queer phenomenology's ability to un-systematise the given world offers a potent opportunity for ecological thought. For example, instead of thinking of a tree as

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[195] Timothy Morton, 'Guest Column: Queer Ecology', *PMLA*, 125.2 (March 2010), pp. 273-82, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25704424> [accessed 07 November 2020], p. 279.
[196] Ibid., p. 274.
[197] Sara Ahmed, 'Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology', *GLQ*, 12.4 (2006), 543-74, <DOI: 10.1215/10642684-2006-002> [accessed 30/10/22], p. 549.
[198] Ahmed, 'Orientations', p. 565.

composed of bark and leaves, a queer slant would be to reconceptualise the tree as a system of roots and sap, as by refocusing upon an unseen dimension of an object, the orientation of the perceiver (subject) to the object (tree) is redrawn.

The poem, 'The Trees Are Down' captures this sense of queerness as an epistemology which aims to disturb through injecting a register of emotion. In the poem, a scene of city trees being felled opens up a moment of emotional correlation for the speaker with both personal and ecological time, stating '…my heart has been struck with the hearts of the planes; | Half my life has beat with these'.[199] This transforms a scene of banal urban development into a narrative of ecological tragedy and self-elegy. The speaker's confrontation with different scales of experience, in which the trees brought with them pastness as well as futurity, causes feelings of intense emotional dislocation: 'When the men with the "Whoops" and the "Whoas" have carted the whole of the whispering loveliness away | Half the Spring, for me, will have gone with them.' Mew uses the trope of 'Spring' as symbolic of the possibility of renewal, in which life as a form of becoming and a vitality is given the opportunity for expression through emotional correspondence with something outside of the self. Much as the trees represent an expansiveness in the scales of memory-time and non-human time, they also work as symbols for the loss of self – to 'unmake the Spring' is to disrupt the promise of the self's futurity. This is undoubtedly a form of ecological melancholia, which, as Mortimer-Sandilands states, produces 'a present that is not only haunted but constituted by the past: literally built of ruins and rejections'.[200] The recurrence of the past as a form of haunting is something regularly glimpsed at in Mew's work, and a poem like 'Saturday Market', with the symbol of the 'red dead thing', demonstrates that this resurfacing of personal history can manifest as unspeakable crisis. That the trees both are symbolic and material at once in the speaker's relationship with them demonstrates what Abram calls 'the living pulse of subjective experience', which bring things into a sense of being and existence for ourselves.[201] With the severing of the trees, the connective tissue between the speaker and the trees as a form of materialised hope and continuity is broken. With the line 'These were great trees, it was in them from root to stem', Mew animates these planes as the living materiality themselves, in which the energetic force of life is implicated through the imagery which recognises the trees as vital entities. Later, she describes the trees as akin to dying

[199] Mew, 'The Trees Are Down', *CPP*, pp. 48-9, p. 48.
[200] Mortimer-Sandilands, 'Melancholy Natures', *Queer Ecologies*, pp. 331-58, p. 340.
[201] Abram, *Spell of the Sensuous*, p. 34.

bodies who heard 'the sparrows flying' and 'the small creeping creatures in the earth where they were lying'. Ahmed's queer phenomenological notion of slant orientation towards an object is helpful here in thinking about Mew's use of personification as a form of imaginative contact: with the line 'the small creeping creatures in the earth where they were lying', Mew describes a lifeworld outside of the human speaker's immediate cognition. Indeed, there is a sense of the speaker's acknowledgment of their own partiality of comprehension, which does not affect the existence of these other beings. However, through the trees, the speaker and the 'creeping creatures' are brought into a form of proximity and mutuality, which acknowledges a plurality of material existence. That the poem ends with the speaker's assertion of spiritual distress, 'all day I heard an angel crying: | "Hurt not the trees"', reflects the idea of melancholia as a form of emotional resistance in the face of unacknowledged loss, what Mortimer-Sandilands describes as the 'holding-on to loss in defiance of bourgeois (and capitalist) imperatives to forget, move on, transfer attention to a new relationship/commodity.'[202] Despite the effects of capitalist expansion being in no means contained to only urban locales, Mew's use of an urbanised experience of nature in this poem works to distil the ways in which the natural world operates as a sympathetic reflection of a selfhood that is regularly disenfranchised by capitalist modernity.

As with many *fin de siècle* writers, Mew retains an attachment to landscapes that are ultimately psychologically and textually constructed.[203] Yet she is nevertheless deeply ambivalent about the inflation or aggrandisement of the self in relation to the natural world. Indeed, many natural environments in her work possess what she calls 'a living darkness,' imbued with a destabilising potential born out of their very impenetrability.[204] Although Mew's sexual identity is a debated question,[205] her experience of familial insanity and the anxieties this produced for her regarding her own genetic makeup, suggests that her sense of her own body was in some ways strange and wayward: Monro describes how both Charlotte and her sister Anne 'had both made up their minds early in life [...] that they would never marry for fear of passing on the mental

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[202] Mortimer-Sandilands, 'Melancholy Natures', p. 354.

[203] I refer to Mew as a *fin de siècle* writer as opposed to Victorian, modernist, or Georgian due to her biographical context (being born in 1869, she is the earliest born writer in this study), her publishing history (she was first published in the famous Decadent periodical, *The Yellow Book*), and also because of her interest in exploring the stylistic inheritances of Victorian-era poets and writers within her work in ways even more directly than Thomas. With that being said, it is of course important to note that much of her poetry was not published until the 1910s and 1920s, under the handling of The Poetry Bookshop's Harold Monro, and therefore this does position her as on the fringes of the modernist poetry milieu.

[204] Charlotte Mew, 'Men and Trees I,' *Collected Poetry and Prose*, p. 391.

[205] See Penelope Fitzgerald, *Charlotte Mew and Her Friends* (London: Fourth Estate, 2014 [1984]), p. 30; pp. 137-8. Copus provides a counterargument to Fitzgerald's interpretation in *This Rare Spirit*, p. 243.

taint that was in their heredity.'[206] Irrespective of motive, Mew's decision to remain an unmarried 'odd' woman, reveals an essentially queer alignment, intensified by her ambiguous social and precarious class position.[207] That this queerness was based around a sense of corporeal instability can be read in her work's attention to the body as conduit for social location, with poems such as the aforementioned 'Ken' and 'On the Asylum Road' exploring in explicit terms various types of non-normative subjectivities in tension with a community that rejects them. Jessica Walsh has identified within Mew's work a poetics that 'agonize[s] over a body that [… does] not fit into the categories and organizations offered to her by an often strictly stratified society', going on to claim that it is through Mew's exposure to the philosophy and pseudoscience of eugenics that we can begin to think of her poetry as ontologically divided between normative and deviant bodies.[208]

The poem 'Arracombe Wood' offers a further opportunity to bridge the two strands of the natural world and social trepidation that run through Mew's work. The poem is a short two stanza account of farm labourer called Dave, who having died is being remembered by an unnamed speaker. From the outset, Mew intimates the poem's concern with the dynamic between social groups, beginning with the words 'Some said' affirming its concern in dramatising the emotional and psychological gaps that emerge from divergent points of view which do not cohere. We are told that some in the community thought Dave 'mun be bird-witted' (notice Mew's use, as in 'The Farmer's Bride' and 'Sea Love' of dialect phrasing, although this time Northern/Midland's rather than West Country) because of his lack of social cohesion and his inability to speak to the parson or any women. The speaker, however, identifies within Dave a great capacity of knowledge, whether instinctual or the product of routine experience, through the way he sowed the barley and how he handled rakes and scythes when mowing. The first stanza's engagement with questioning hierarchies of knowledge falls within the same territory of 'Ken'' with the rose/leaf elision or the bird's wing: 'Nothing was dead: | He said "a bird" if he picked up a broken wing'. Dave in 'Arracombe Wood', like Ken, and their Romantic antecedent Johnny in Wordsworth's 'The Idiot Boy' (1798), is shown to possess great sensitivity, to be

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[206] Alida Monro, 'Biographical Memoir', 'Supplementary Poetry Bookshop Papers, p. 162.

[207] The social precarity of spinsterhood is helpfully crystallised in George Gissing's 1893 novel *The Odd Women*, as is illustrated in this dialogue: '"…there are half a million more women than men in this happy country of ours […] So many *odd* women […] The pessimists call them useless, lost, futile lives."' Gissing, *The Odd Women*, ed. Patricia Ingham (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 44.

[208] Jessica Walsh, '"The Strangest Pain to Bear": Corporeality and Fear of Insanity in Charlotte Mew's Poetry', *Victorian Poetry*, 40.3 (2002), pp. 217-40, <http://www.jstor.com/stable/40004327> [accessed 10th May 2021], pp. 218-19.

aligned to the world in ways which disrupt fixed rules and demarcations over how things should be encountered.[209] The second stanza begins by informing of Dave's death, and that he is buried in the churchyard. Despite hostility from some ('they'), the speaker assures us that Dave was not a 'bitter old soul' but instead was emotionally complex and found expression and protection for this vulnerability in communing with the natural world: 'His heart were in Arracombe Wood where he'd used to go | To sit and talk wi' his shadder till sun went low'. Like Thomas, Mew uses framed narratives or characters which are defined by their oppositional status to the speaker (e.g., Thomas' Gypsy boy in 'The Penny Whistle') in order to examine various scales of isolation: here Dave is both socially ostracized but also seems to have bifurcated his selfhood and has produced a society through imaginative remodelling of his shadow into a responsive entity. As a portrait of loneliness, 'Arracombe Wood' has an emotional poignancy which demands audience sympathy even though it narrative castigates the world of the snooping onlooker.

That the woods provide a theatre for self-interrogation as well as social consolation is significant in that the natural world is seen to be both a site of privacy and generative of the imaginative capacity; it is both a screen and a door for Dave to find a sense of himself that is not trampled by social obligation and interaction. Additionally, the woods operate in the poem as a way for Dave to be occluded, as, much like the mystery of the Breton shepherd, the speaker tells us that what Dave said is not known. Arracombe Wood is made into landscape that provides social shelter for Dave and as well as protecting his internal world from the language of the poem itself. As Jeredith Merrin observes, 'In her best writing she plays the power of withholding against the power of revelation', and Mew's concern with privacy in utterance and the imperative of secrecy is a point rounded upon with full force in 'Moorland Night', to be discussed.[210] Any legacies of this relationship Dave had to the woods is soon to be lost, if it has not been already, as the speaker intimates that there 'baint not mem'ry in the place' and that, like the Breton shepherd, the presence of Dave is no longer tangible. As with the Breton shepherd, Arracombe Wood functions as a site of entwinement, in which the environment's power to incorporate the

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[209] Much like Ken's re-visioning of a bird's wing as a bird in and of itself, Wordsworth's final two stanzas of 'The Idiot Boy' end with a similar exploration into the ways in which phenomena can be transformed through disparate points of view: 'Now Johnny all night long had heard | The owls in tuneful concert strive; | No doubt too he the moon had seen; For in the moonlight he had been | From eight o'clock till five.' Asked about what he had seen, Johnny replies '(His very words I give to you) "The cocks did crow to-whoo, to-whoo, | And the sun did shine so cold.' William Wordsworth, 'The Idiot Boy', *The Major Works*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp 68-80, p. 80.

[210] Jeredith Merrin, 'The Ballad of Charlotte Mew', *Modern Philology* 95.2 (Nov. 1997), 200-17, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/438989> [accessed: 11 August 2022], p. 213.

self is afforded an ambivalence between imaginative fulfilment and the ultimate destruction of emotional attachment. In this respect, nature in Mew's writings offer spaces of queer un-knowing, ultimately reflecting her sense of queerness as a kind of anti-social ontology.

These amorphous spaces are often registered in terms of their effect on the body and its sensory capacities, revealing a concern with the possibilities and risks of corporeal transformation through encounter. Indeed, for Mew the body is invested as the site at which self-knowledge is made tangible. Anxieties over corporeal errancy in relation to the social world is a theme visited in several of her works.[211] The two texts explored in this chapter reflect Mew's interest in surveying the tension between the individual and the social world through rural settings that work as externalised landscapes of emotionalised states of being. Her short story 'The Wheat' engages with the idea of nature as an imaginative force in which the promise of tactility is transformed into a fixation, even fetishization, of the rural. Conversely, 'Moorland Night' is concerned with the self as it confronts nature's incomprehensibility. Here, Mew interrogates the role of the lyric subject as a viable model for charting experience, examining the dichotomy of the earth as representative of creative potential, against the shame of a social isolation that cannot reconcile creativity with community. Mew's interest in exploring the inherent self-consciousness of the lyric tradition is evidently transferred to her prose writing as well, with 'The Wheat' similarly interrogating the strategies in which the natural world offers psychic relief to feelings of ignominy that emerge when faced with the demands of modernity. Across both texts, Mew interrogates individuals undergoing crises of estrangement from the social world, both of whom come into contact with a version of nature that is at once generative of and transformative to their state of being.

The Pastoral and the (Im)materiality of Touch in 'The Wheat'

Mew's engagement with the pastoral mode represents the rural as a means of escape from the psychic pressures of urban modernity, in which the promise of simplified living creates an interior landscape to provide relief for the protagonist's agonised soul.[212] 'The Wheat' represents the fantasy idyll of a rural non-place, mirroring, at a narrative level, what Terry Gifford calls the

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[211] See 'Ken', 'On the Asylum Road', 'Arracombe Wood', 'Madeleine in Church', *CPP*, pp. 15-17; p. 19; p. 31; pp. 22-27.

[212] Charlotte Mew, *Collected Poems and Prose*, ed. Val Warner (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 1981), pp. 213–15. Hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text. 'The Wheat' was first published posthumously in *Time and Tide*, February 20, 1954.

'temptation to disconnection' which lies at the centre of pastoral's aesthetic and emotional retreat structure.[213] It is part of a group of texts written around this period which depict the figure of the office clerk and other lower-middle class professionals within narratives exploring the deadening effects of urban modernity, and the promise of a revivifying rurality. This is evident in such characters as the previously discussed Leonard Bast in *Howards End* (1910), Edward Darnell in Arthur Machen's novella *A Fragment of Life* (1904), and within H. G. Wells' eponymous shop-proprietor in his comic novel *The History of Mr Polly* (1910), all of which are clear examples of part of a wider interest in the kind of precariously placed lower-middle class male that Mew's narrative similarly considers.[214] The story concerns the psychological unravelling of an unnamed London bank clerk whose quiet tolerance of his routinised, workaday existence gradually leads him towards a physical and psychological breakdown. In a manner reminiscent of John South's talismanic elm tree in *The Woodlanders*, the image of the wheat becomes a fixated point of crisis for the clerk, whose dreams of tactile contact with the abundant golden ears and terror at the prospect of its destruction causes him to cry out in frantic supplication 'Don't let them cut the wheat!'[215]

There are obvious biographical parallels with Mew's elder brother, Henry, and his decline into mental illness.[216] Julia Copus describes how Henry Mew's gradual inability to concentrate on his architectural studies due to increasing insomnia led to religious mania, excessive masturbation, and paranoid visions of sexual assault. Eventually, Henry would be institutionalised aged nineteen, living for the following sixteen years in various mental institutions before dying in 1901, aged thirty-five, at the Peckham House Lunatic Asylum. Comparably to Henry Mew, we are told that the clerk's work has had an effect on his psychological dislocation. In the story, the central character comes to believe that his life is malevolently fictitious, that 'the cheques and the scales and the sovereigns were not real things'.[217] As the clerk's illness worsens and he is confined to his sickbed, he becomes fixated with imaginary scenarios of rural life which seem to offer him a vision of spiritual and moral purity:

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[213] Terry Gifford, *Pastoral*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2019), p. 71.
[214] For further discussion of this trend see Jonathan Wild, *The Rise of the Office Clerk in Literary Culture, 1880-1939* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).
[215] Mew, 'The Wheat', p. 213.
[216] Copus, *This Rare Spirit*, p. 58; p. 136.
[217] Mew, 'The Wheat,' p. 213.

> He would have liked to follow the plough. There was something about a furrow, the smell of the earth, the give of it under your feet, the brownness, the evenness, the everlastingness of it, up and down — which got hold of you like the sea; the smell and feel of the water, the blueness, the distance, the everlastingness [...] Those men and animals he fancied had it — the thing he hadn't got at, which was somehow in the sunshine and the night[218]

The emphasis upon the physicality of the earth 'under your feet' demonstrates the protagonist's fantasy of contact, in which the tropes of unconflicted, virtuous rural labour effect a moral reintegration missing from his real life. Mew plays upon the pastoral's flattening of psychology in this foregrounding of the plough team which function in the text (as in the pastoral mode itself) as stock figures of an unconflicted, fraternal masculinity that is deindividuated, existing outside of any real social relation or personal identity. This fixation upon an idealised countryside also reflects wider contemporary enthusiasm of 'back-to-the-land' movements typified by such organisations as the Ramblers Association, Clarion Cycling Clubs, or Baden-Powell's Boy Scout movement and other similar organisations (see Chapter 4). All emphasised physical exercise within nature as healthfully and morally cleansing to the afflictions of modernity's physiological and psychological excesses.[219] The inaugural image of the text highlights the contrast between the spaciousness of the imagined rural idyll and the reality of urban proximity: 'the window opening on to the row of windows opposite, in the brickwork of the London street.'[220] Not only is this an environment of impermeable physical boundaries set in contrast to the expansive fields of wheat, it is also presented as a framework for the removal of privacy. Here, eyelines are halted by brick walls and windows peer into windows, creating a visual distillation of the private self at odds with a public morality that polices the individual.

Feelings of oppression and disorientation are similarly registered in the text's formal construction. Mew employs a perspective which hovers close to but not inside the bank clerk's

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[218] Ibid.

[219] Nicola Bishop discussing *Mr Finchley*, a 1934 novel by Victor Canning identifies an established tradition that saw urban office clerks as feminized by their labour, of which the countryside offered curative opportunities to return to masculinity: 'The clerk was originally aligned with stereotypically feminine markers such as indoor work, domesticity, and ill health, but the ramble creates a clerk who is healthier, more vigorous, and enthused by an open-air existence; in short, more masculine.' Bishop, 'Ruralism, Masculinity, and National Identity: The Rambling Clerk in Fiction, 1900–1940', *Journal of British Studies* 54, no. 3 (July 2015), pp. 654-678, p. 669. See also Melanie Tebbutt, 'Rambling and Manly Identity in Derbyshire's Dark Peak, 1880s-1920s', *The Historical Journal* 49, no. 4 (Dec 2006), pp. 1125-53; David Prynn, 'The Clarion Clubs, Rambling and the Holiday Associations in Britain since the 1890s', *Journal of Contemporary History* 11, no. 2/3 (July 1976), pp. 65-77; Harvey Taylor, *A Claim on the Countryside: A History of the British Outdoor Movement* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997).

[220] Mew, 'The Wheat', p. 213.

mind, producing a narrative that is more experiential and fragmentary than it is coherent. This is felt at the level of temporal flexibility, in which any sense of linearity is disoriented, but also in the ways in which she chooses to focus the narrative through the clerk's memories and sensations rather than from a position outside of his consciousness. A key example of this is the abstruse discussion of a woman he once desired. Here, we are told that for him she was at once 'loveliness [...] painted and blotted out', 'dreamlike and a fragrance,' 'pure loveliness [...] not a thing to touch, simply to wonder at'. In this intensity of point of view, we are otherwise left without any clear understanding of the contours of their relationship, and instead are shown it in fragments and phantoms, in vivid but enigmatic collages of memory and imagination. Indeed, Mew uses this technique of narrative bewilderment to dramatise the way in which the clerk's dream of escaping from standing in 'someone else's bath' of 'hated' money [...] all day from 10 to 4', seems to precipitate his physical decline. This leads to an intensification of the porosity between reality and his increasingly invasive visions:

> And then one afternoon he discovered that there were only three things on this earth: from the Bank steps, even from the house steps he found them in nearly everything [...] and they were in remembered things, the bronze of the seaweed [...] the sweep of a man's hand broadcasting along the furrow [...] And then he was struck down.

These visions are structured around a promise of communion with an environment that is intensely registered at the level of physical and sensory interaction. As the clerk's illness progresses, the wheat fields become more and more vibrant within his imagination. Mew draws upon familiar pastoral tropes in which landscape becomes an extension of personal freedom: through their topographical scope of wide capaciousness, the wheatfields offer a terrain for spiritual expansion, in which spatial vastness becomes equated with an infiniteness of possibility for the self.

By the end of the story, the clerk's illness has progressed to such an extent that he seems to willingly give over to his fantasy and enter entirely into his own mind. Mew presents this movement towards immersion and withdrawal as akin to stepping into a picture: 'He simply turned round and lay still and got over a stile into the fields and went on and on.'[221] The syntax blends the two distinct spaces of the material world and the imaginative one, bridged here only by casual repetitions of the word 'and'. In doing so, Mew collapses any straightforward

[221] Ibid., p. 215.

distinction between physical, material presence and imaginative, ideal projection. Through Mew's formal stylistics, the clerk's intensely felt imaginary inner world becomes invested with the same sensory vibrancy that the material world once afforded. As he enters the field, the text repeatedly emphasises the disorienting experiential force of his visual impressions: 'Fields — fields, quite endless, mile after mile of gold; they were the real gold — the wheat, stirring gently, with just above it the green, the line of the hedge and higher up, over it all the blue.'[222] Mew experiments with a visual perspective that hovers at the clerk's eyeline, creating a distinctive sense of permeability between self and environment. It is a perspective that simultaneously projects out and up, yet at the same time refuses to fix onto anything specific.

The clerk's mobility of vision within the landscape emphasises his strange spatial dislocation. Through this experience of expansiveness, his ontological uncertainty is momentarily resolved by a fleeting sense of transcending any limits of fixed identity. This recalls the claim of the American Transcendentalist, Ralph Waldo Emerson, who wrote that when 'Standing on the bare ground, — my head bathed by the blithe air and uplifted into infinite space, — all mean egotism vanishes. I become a transparent eyeball; I am nothing; I see all; the currents of the Universal Being circulate through me.'[223] Like Emerson's experience, the clerk, in passing through these fields of wheat, is brought into contact with 'All that there was or ever would be'. Through this moment of spatial expansiveness, a suspension of time occurs and the self dissolves beyond its usual fixed boundaries.

As is evident in her echoing of Emerson, Mew engages dynamically with a wide range of nineteenth-century nature writers. One such figure was the Victorian ruralist, Richard Jefferies, who was similarly concerned with how physical contact with the natural world might affect consciousness. Mew wrote a review of Jefferies's *Field and Hedgerow* (1889), a posthumously published book of late essays, and his influence is evident in many of her stories and poems.[224] As in Mew's short story, Jefferies's essay 'Walks in the Wheat-fields', holds in tension two visions of wheat. These occupy an ambiguous middle-place between nature and culture: on the one hand, wheat is an aesthetic and symbolic entity, and loaded with expansive experiential potencies; on the other, by the fields' very existence, an inherent political and economic instrumentalism is revealed. Jefferies's essay begins with a description of a single grain of wheat.

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[222] Ibid.
[223] Ralph Waldo Emerson, 'Nature' [1836], *The Portable Emerson*, ed. Jeffrey S. Cramer (New York, NY: Penguin, 2014), p. 20.
[224] Mew, 'A Country Book,' *CPP*, pp. 411-14.

Drawing comparisons with other folk traditions of former 'enchanted days,' it argues that if one examines it carefully 'you can almost trace a miniature human being in the oval of the grain.'[225] 'These little grains of English corn,' he suggests, 'hold within them the actual flesh and blood of man. Transubstantiation is a fact there.'[226] Jefferies presents a lost oral folk culture in which the genesis of humanity's own image is reflected back to them in a component of the landscape. It is an unsettling description that emphasises a sense of corporeal proximity to non-human objects not too dissimilar to the strange transfiguration of the Breton shepherd and casts his metamorphosis as a kind of transubstantiation too. Both images are rich in religious, folkloric, and ecological connotations. Jefferies' startling glimpse of a human figure in the wheat-grain is also an intensely eco-phenomenological notion, in which the kernel functions as both corporeality *and* representation. The image evokes a cyclical sense in which the land is of the human and the human is of (and from) the land.

In a similarly striking aspect of phenomenological intensity to the clerk's dreams of tactility, Jefferies's essay also focuses on the haptic experience of wheat-fields. He implores his reader to '[l]et the hand touch the ears lightly as you walk — drawn through them as if over the side of the boat in water — feeling the golden heads.'[227] This tactile interaction figures the wheat through an aesthetics of sensitivity and recalls Emerson's description of the lover of nature as someone within an intensity of sensitivity and flexible responsiveness, 'whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other.'[228] In the passages that follow, Jefferies proceeds to draw into the scene sparrows, hares, partridge chicks, finches, linnets, rooks, rabbits, mice, and insects. This envisions an environment that de-centres the human, placing them as one part of a wider system of animal life that depends on the wheatfield for sustenance.

Jefferies's essay combines this attention to the phenomenological and aesthetic aspects of wheat fields with an acute awareness of the economic dynamics of such an environment. His essay emphasises the fact that these spaces are emblematic of broader industrialized modes of agricultural cultivation. In doing so, it powerfully problematises the assumption that the rural is divorced from larger networks of ecological exploitation. In the same passage as the imperative to touch the wheat, Jefferies also describes the fields as 'a triumph of culture over such a [natural]

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[225] Richard Jefferies, 'Walks in the Wheat-fields,' *Landscape with Figures: Selected Prose Writings*, ed. Richard Mabey (London: Penguin, 2013), p. 196.
[226] Ibid.
[227] Ibid., p. 203.
[228] Emerson, 'Nature', *The Portable Emerson*, p. 19.

space.' Here, he characterises man's intervention upon the landscape as defined by 'such regularity, such perfection of myriads of plants springing in the true lines at the same time, each particular ear perfect'.[229] Elsewhere in the essay, he describes the changing economies that multiply across the globe into complex webs of import and export. This results, he suggests, in British wheat production becoming outsourced to other countries in favour of cultivating alternative crops ('they are telling our farmers to cast aside their corn').[230] Jefferies laments that as wheat becomes increasingly an import crop for Britain, 'the gold is slipping away' in favour of actual gold coinage, 'every penny-weight of it, hundreds of tons, all shipped over the sea to India, Australia, South Africa, and, above all, America, to buy wheat.'[231] It is a narrative of wheat as both aesthetic artefact and imperial nexus and capital, in which 'these little grains are a ponderous weight that rules man's world. Wherever they are there is empire.'[232]

In the essay, Jefferies oscillates between moments of nostalgic longing and incisive political commentary. In one striking passage, for instance, he forcefully condemns the harsh physical toil that the harvest inflicts on agricultural labourers. He describes their bodies as 'nothing but sinew and muscle,' tearing 'at the wheat with a frenzy' to produce as great a yield as possible.[233] In foregrounding the harsh physicality and intense desire of production that underpin this so-called 'gold fever,' Jefferies develops a consciously anti-pastoral mode that rejects any abstract moral purity or aesthetic beauty in the harvest. 'This is human life, real human life,' he insists, 'the hard fist of necessity forever battering man to a shapeless and hopeless fall.'[234] Jefferies's imagery transforms the gentle brushing touch of the gold ears of corn into the brutal grip of the marketplace, 'batter[ed]' by the 'hard fist' of potent economic necessity. His rural scene is far from a simple idyll; rather, he attempts to traverse the gap that sees rurality as an idealised aesthetic experience. His work implicitly castigates nature writing which patronizingly reduces the inhabitants of the countryside to simple jolly rustics, thus failing to account for the realities of the economic hardship they face. What Jefferies conjures up instead is a vision of nature that moves seamlessly between different registers and scales of comprehension. After recounting the rabbits, mice, insects and birds that feast upon the crop, he states, '[a] whole world, as it were, let loose upon the wheat, to eat, consume, and wither it, and yet it conquers

[229] Jefferies, 'Walks in the Wheat-fields,' p. 203.
[230] Ibid., p. 197.
[231] Ibid.
[232] Ibid.
[233] Ibid., p. 205.
[234] Ibid.

the whole world.'[235] His writing positions the wheat grain as at once a minute, animistic capsule of locality, memory, and spiritual potential, whilst concurrently functioning as part of a global agricultural network, essential to the lifeblood of imperialist regimes.

Mew's text is cast in a different light when we remember that wheatfields are not, in fact, apolitical spaces, but sites of economic production within a larger, global system. When read alongside these aspects of Jefferies' essay, 'The Wheat' might risk appearing like a naïve dream of pastoral simplicity, as much concerned with the impossibility of the real world to fulfil the imagination's desires, as it is with the transformative potential of the natural world itself. However, as the story opens and closes with a cry of the clerk insisting 'Don't let them cut the wheat!', an economic dimension is tacitly foregrounded from the start. In light of Jefferies's essay, this cry now emerges as a plea to reject those economic and political cycles that animate the heart of modernity. On a psychological level it is an exclamation that appeals for time to be suspended, freezing the rural into a scene of unchanging eternity. The 'endless fields of golden wheat' are not only an image of ontological spaciousness for the clerk, but also one of temporal deferral, in which the topography is reconstructed outside of linear time and stripped of its economic utility. As time is paused, the external forces of agricultural capitalism are rendered null, and the self can become inflated with its own interior experience. 'The Wheat' explores the ways in which non-normative forms of ecologically situated experience call into question our certainties of knowledge, envisioning a temporal and spatial scale that is unbounded by the demands of 'reality'. In doing so, Mew exposes how contact with nature is always, at some level, an imaginative act. Yet at the same time the harvest seems pressingly imminent, suggesting that imagination alone cannot entirely sustain a coherence of selfhood.

Like Jefferies, Mew fuses the ecological and the experiential potentialities of a landscape in her rendering of a fantasy topography. In 'The Wheat' the touch of the crop holds the potential to access a totality of knowledge that traverses the gap between nature and life itself, simultaneously *both* material and symbolic:

> They were there, all three, the only things: the gold, the stir and the folded ear; they were in the wheat and his hand was passing over it and it was passing something into his hand.[236]

[235] Ibid., p. 203.
[236] Mew, 'The Wheat,' p. 215.

As with Jefferies, Mew explores the question of embodiment through contact with alterity. Prior to his reanimation through this fantasy of contact, the clerk's bodily experience had become dislocated. He had turned automaton-like in the enactment of routine tasks: 'it wasn't he who was doing it [working]; that he was really somewhere else'.[237] Ontological revelation is brought to the clerk through sensation rather than through mental or linguistic structures of being, it is instead acquired through tactile corporeality (or at least, a fantasy of it). It is through the touch of the wheat, now notably devoid of the morally dubious implications that prevented the clerk from touching the woman, that the promise of psychic and emotional revelation is now within reach. Like Jefferies's image of ecological coexistence, the touch produces the sensation of situatedness, and of the self being more than its own remote entity. Where Mew's story offers a new perspective on the phenomenon, though, is in the revelation that in this act of touch both nature and the imaginary become the site of return and expansion of the self. Outside of actual material contact, this intensity of being is viscerally felt through a perceived, though imagined, tactility. For Mew's clerk this sensory process enfolds the mental and the material, ultimately vivifying the imaginary into the realm of the real.

Mew's depiction of the clerk's shattered idyll insists that the encroaching world of modernity, of commerce and progress, cannot be withstood. This imaginary landscape of the clerk's mind reveals a complex underlying pessimism that transforms the scene into one of elegy. 'The Wheat' explores the ways in which non-normative forms of ecologically situated experience call into question our certainties of knowledge. Mew achieves this by envisioning a temporal and spatial scale that is unbounded by the demands of 'reality'. In doing so, she exposes how contact with nature is always, at some level, an imaginative act. Yet at the same time the harvest seems always to be imminent: the imagination alone cannot entirely sustain the coherence of the self.

This tension that emerges between states of being is one of Mew's chief concerns within her writing. As with 'The Wheat', her late lyric 'Moorland Night' displays a similar ambivalence toward psychological dislocation from one world into another. In the poem, Mew interrogates the politics of the isolated, inward-looking subject implicit within the lyric form, centring questions over expressivity and the role that nature's anti-social structures can play in ameliorating fraught irresolution between the self and the social world. Like 'The Wheat', Mew's poem 'Moorland Night' engages in a familiar unpicking of the aesthetic assumptions that the self impresses upon the natural world.

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[237] Ibid., p. 213.

'Moorland Night' and the Limits of Lyrical Self

At the heart of 'Moorland Night' is an enquiry into the lyric as a space which both facilitates and stymies the subject's potential for unguarded self-expression. In the poem, the speaker is seemingly on the brink of death, hoping to become materially incorporated with the earth itself:

> My face is against the grass—the moorland grass is wet—
> My eyes are shut against the grass, against my lips there are the little blades,
> Over my head the curlews call,
> And now there is the night wind in my hair;
> My heart is against the grass and the sweet earth; —it has gone still, at last.
> It does not want to beat any more,
> And why should it beat?
> This is the end of the journey;
> The Thing is found.[238]

By emphasising the purely experiential within the opening lines, Mew indicates the poem's concern with nature as a force that contests the boundaries between self and world. Selfhood is shown to be dependent upon its material location through this repeated iteration of contact between the body's epidermal surface ('face', 'eyes', 'lips') 'against the grass', an image at once concerned with spatial proximity and ontological opposition. This contact not only demonstrates a different type of spatial knowledge but also acts as a moment of temporal situatedness, and like the clerk in 'The Wheat,' situates the body at the centre of subjectivity. Tim Kendall reads throughout Mew's work a kind of 'haptic longing felt so intensely'.[239] This intensity is dramatized here through the instability of the irregular rhythm of these opening lines. Although the opening line's two phrases appear to be rhythmically mirrored, with the second functioning almost as an echo, attention to its metrical arrangement reveals a disjunction between the two. Whilst the second phrase uses regular iambic metre ('the moorland grass is wet—'), within the first phrase ('My face is against the grass'), is an embedded anapaest in the centre ('against'). This asymmetry effects a subtle destabilisation, which is further exacerbated by the next line's mirroring of the first phrase, only to be offset by the unspooling of the long clause which follows it. This adroit sense of rhythmic undulation combines with the lines' oscillating lengths to create a formal

[238] Mew, 'Moorland Night', *CPP*, p. 50.
[239] Tim Kendall, 'The Passion of Charlotte Mew,' *The Oxford Handbook of Victorian Poetry*, ed. Matthew Bevis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 645.

unevenness that corresponds to the feeling of subjectivity on the brink of transformation. Working alongside the fluctuating metre, the caesuras in the opening two lines produce verbal stoppages and discursive re-framings which stymie the poem's momentum. The effect of these overlaid images is a lyrical hesitancy that seems to reorient each phrase back into a feeling of present-ness, producing a sense of returning the body back each time to the centre of both the moorland and the speaker's emotional calamity. With this temporal resetting, the echoing of line five with the opening line works in the place of rhyme to generate this configuration of return and non-progression. This utterance is extended into one of Mew's characteristically long lines: 'My heart is against the grass and the sweet earth; —it has gone still, at last'. The line maps at the level of form the fatalism of the speaker's heart stopping through the line's rhythmical unwinding. As with the clerk's touch of the wheat, the sensory capacity in 'Moorland Night' is invested here with the potential to disorder linear temporality. The experience of tactility is shown to be at once a total unmooring from the world of normative materialism in the landscape's inherent psychic construction, and yet also, is demonstrative of an eco-phenomenological intensity of being, in which the self is transformed by its interface with the not-self of the moorland.

Such moments in which the limits of subjecthood are re-defined is central to Mew's queer ecological aesthetic. Indeed, the poem's opening lines can usefully be read in the light of what Stacey Alaimo calls 'trans-corporality.' This describes the body as kind of ethical and political 'contact zone', in which its confrontation with the more-than-human world both reveals to a subject its own limits and subsequently transcends these edges through enmeshing the self within an environment that is no longer only external.[240] Alaimo's work helps us to see in Mew's writing her own interest in contesting subjectivity's hegemonic structures of self in opposition to the not-self. Through the febrile atmosphere of 'Moorland Night' and its imagery of acute intimacy between the speaker and the earth, such adverse category distinctions as interior/exterior, vital/inert, and self/world are called into doubt. As with Alaimo's notion of 'trans-corporeality', the poem contests such apparent divisions, and instead proposes a liberatory worldview that is structured around experiential and imaginative permeability.

When considered as a textual landscape, or mindscape, moorland operates discursively as a liminal topography vacillating between revelation and obscurity. On the one hand the shape

[240] Stacey Alaimo, *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment and the Material Self* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), p. 2.

of a moor, with its wide and expansive horizons, suggests the potential for a totality of perception. Yet, perhaps because of this potential for visual monotony, it equally holds the risk of being misread; its flatness acting as a false revelation and queerly working instead to hide definite meaning. The poetic metaphorization of this kind of terrain helps to animate this sense of the self in crisis between its social and lyric components. As reflected in Mew's variability of line length, this produces a textual landscape as a space of intensity and precarity. This is evident in description of 'the wind that drives up from the sea along the moorland road', in which the implication of the elevated flatness of the terrain is combined with a personification of the poet's internal conflict to create a landscape defined by a potent discursive restlessness. It is through this sense of topography and syntactical uncertainty that we can also see a tension in the poem between verbalisation and withheld expression. It is this conflict between the voiced and unvoiced that is the essential component of Mew's critique of the lyrical subject.

Alongside Emily Brontë's poetry, Hardy's Egdon Heath, the setting of *The Return of the Native*, seems to be a clear influence on Mew's construction of the febrile moorland as space for interrogating such ambivalences of selfhood.[241] In Hardy's novel, the opening description of Egdon Heath at twilight emphasises the landscape as a charged, illegible space, defined by its liminal and transfigural potencies as much as by its topographical expansiveness:

> The sombre stretch of rounds and hollows seemed to rise and meet the evening gloom in pure sympathy, the heath exhaling darkness as rapidly as the heavens precipitated it. The obscurity in the air and the obscurity in the land closed together in a black fraternization towards which each advanced half way.[242]

Like Mew's moorland, Egdon Heath is a site for intense material and epistemological contact. Hardy's personification of the Heath's and the twilight's mutual contiguity and creative exchange is shown in both ethical ('pure sympathy') and tactile terms ('closed together' as if two hands reaching towards one another). This constructs a spatial ontology that defines rurality in its purest formation as metaphysically amorphous. Hardy's construction of Egdon Heath discloses it as a space of several coalesced aesthetic registers. One striking example is the rendering of the Heath's geological deep time through a metaphor of haptic impressions: 'even the trifling

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[241] Aside from the evident aesthetic and thematic inheritances within her work, Mew was also personally acquainted with Hardy and, more particularly, his second wife, Florence. For details of Mew's relationship with Hardy, such as her visit to Max Gates in Dorset in November 1918, see Copus, *This Rare Spirit*, pp. 291-2.

[242] Thomas Hardy, *The Return of the Native*, ed. Simon Gatrell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008 [1878]), p. 9.

irregularities were not caused by a pickaxe, plough, or spade, but remained as the very finger-touches of the last geological age.'[243] In a manner reminiscent of his anthropomorphic depiction of the vivid arboreal life in *The Woodlanders*, the scalar implications in Hardy's 'finger-touches' can be seen as a process of making the environment legible, in which there is made a discursive elision between nature and the body that makes time translatable through a metaphor of touch. Much like with Mew's touching of the grass, here the body is used as the site in which the world is formulated, although conversely, here the body is present only through its traces — almost as if it were the tangible marks of Mew's speaker many thousands of years later. Hardy's centring of these traces of corporeal contact as formative of the very substratum of the landscape, demonstrates his investment in the rural as a space mutually implicated in the corporeal: as with the trees enclosing Little Hintock, the natural world is a living entity that is discursively contingent with the somatic system of the human body, only functioning at a different temporal and spatial scale.

That Egdon Heath is presented as a space of simultaneous circadian and epochal deep time, and yet is also outside of regulated linear time ('Civilization was its enemy'), demonstrates Hardy's conception of the rural as a space of multiform accruals, both material and imagined.[244] Like Mew's moorland, here too the Heath is defined by its radical imaginative potencies, emerging as a heightened landscape that is responsive to the sensitivities of the creative self. Egdon Heath's spatial indistinction translates environmental materiality into a metaphysical plain that upends the fixed definitions by refusing to be mappable under the cloak of darkness. Both Hardy and Mew's nocturnal landscapes of psychic intensity are figured as spaces of un-knowing, queer in their opportunities for definitional transformation. This discursive unfixity implicated within the poem's topographical configuration, as shown through its textual predecessor of Hardy's Egdon Heath, is reflective of Mew's interrogation of the tension inherent within the lyric form.

Mew's creation of a poetic landscape that precludes a composite discursive ambiguity, reflects the poem's ambivalent relationship to the lyric form's expressive demands. Indeed, when considered in these terms of revelation and concealment as the moor's topography implies, it becomes apparent that 'Moorland Night' is a poem defined by its own embarrassed attempts to avoid apostrophic enunciations to nature. This half-buried articulation of shame is at the heart

[243] Ibid., p. 12.
[244] Ibid. p. 11.

of the lyric's agitated relationship to expressivity which is perceived as a kind of risk. Gillian White has written about the struggle with feelings of shame that emerges in the development of the lyric form during the twentieth century. She takes as her starting point John Stuart Mill's influential definition of Romantic lyric poetry as '"feeling confessing itself to itself" that is yet "overheard" by an uncountenanced listener'.[245] Modernist poetics, she suggests, emerge through the rejection and reframing of Mill's characterisation of lyric. Critics of the modernist avant-garde, White argues, assume 'the caricatured figure of the Romantic lyric…to be defined by unmitigated individualistic subjectivism, self- absorption, leisured privilege, and ahistoricism.'[246] The primacy of the self as a solipsistic focus for the lyric became increasingly denigrated as closing down 'possible new ontologies.'[247] Therefore, incorporating feelings of shame and impulses towards shaming become an adopted strategy that offers new approaches to the lyrical self. As an aesthetic position, it functions to disrupt the insularity of the lyrical self, disturbing its complacency by implicating the presence of external voices that can undermine the subject's purity of expression. As White points out, the result of introducing shame into discourses of the lyric has the effect of rescuing it by disrupting the sense of sacred privacy that it once took unquestioningly for granted. In introducing shame, the lyric becomes invested with an unignorable public dimension, as the self is no longer determined only by the pretence of its introspection; suddenly, an audience is envisaged at the very level of the text itself. In Mew's unsettled rendering of the pastoral impulse, nature maintains a degree of its redemptive capacity through its linguistic silence. Unlike the inbuilt shame of the lyric, the moorland of the speaker's mind is responsive only through its lack of retort. It may appear like Mew's nature functions as a kind of tabula rasa, however, it is through this unresponsiveness that we can see the 'strange distortion', to borrow Morton's term, of nature as a system outside of any anthropocentric order.[248]

When considered in these terms, Mew's approach to the lyric can be seen to harness similar feelings of shame and despair in order explore this inherent tension between poetry as private thoughts caught in a struggle with the need for their public dissemination. Much like the moor's liminal topography varying between clarity and obscurity, the sense of the interplay

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[245] Gillian White, *Lyric Shame: The 'Lyric' Subject of Contemporary American Poetry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014), p. 32.
[246] Ibid., p. 5.
[247] Ibid., p. 28.
[248] Morton, 'Queer Ecology', p. 274.

between declaration and refusal of disclosure runs throughout all of Mew's work. Kendall identifies this 'war between such tropes of restraint, constraint, and confinement, and tropes of release and freedom' as one of the primary legacies of the Victorian lyric visible within her work.[249] This is evident in such lines as 'This cannot stay, | Not now, not yet, not in a dying world, with me, for very long,' in which each successive clause reads as a further hesitant and reluctant elaboration; the speaker is caught between the need to verbalise their situation and a circumspection about the efficacy and ethics of this utterance.

Mew's 'Moorland Night' offers a distinctive response to these inherent ambivalences and contradictions of the lyric form. As Jonathan Culler has observed, the role of the apostrophic address in the lyric tradition is to 'posit a potentially responsive or at least attentive universe, to which one has a relation.' 'The ritual invocation of elements of the universe,' he continues, is made 'to evoke the possibility of a magical transformation.'[250] In this context, a phrase such as 'against my lips there are the little blades' seems to both invite consideration of the speaker as rooted within the tradition of apostrophic utterance, whilst also holding the potential of such utterance hostage. The speaker's moving 'lips' are paradoxically silenced by their contact with these faintly threatening 'blades,' suggesting a pre-emptive negation of any anticipated apostrophic lyric expression. It is because of this uncertainty over oracular expression that Mew eschews a direct apostrophic address to the earth in this poem, whilst nonetheless still effectively evoking the drama of nature's responsiveness through the implication of its mysterious creative energy: 'Perhaps the earth will hold it, or the wind, or that bird's cry'. As with the touch of the grain against the hand in 'The Wheat', we can see in the opening line, 'My eyes are shut against the grass', that the text is concerned with vitalising other sensory capacities, namely touch and hearing, in a wish to foster a more concentrated bodily intimacy than visual contact alone would permit. The poem's suspicion of vision similarly extends to doubts about the efficacy of speaking too. Indeed, its focus on the materiality of nature and the body, over the primacy of the voice, tentatively allows for alternative versions of embodied lyric expression to emerge.

This sense of the lyric space being redefined through a process of making strange an understanding of the lyric self is also apparent in the poem's temporal qualities. Through her adoption of what Culler calls the 'lyric present,' Mew creates a landscape in which the moor is outside of linear time and of the psyche. The 'lyric present,' as Culler explains, has the effect of

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[249] Kendall, 'Passion of Charlotte Mew', p. 643.
[250] Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), p. 216.

making events happen 'now, in time, but in an iterable now of lyric enunciation, rather than in a now of linear time.'[251] The lyric present, he concludes, produces 'the vivid yet indeterminate now of an undetermined time of articulation'.[252] In Mew's case, its use disrupts any neat epistemological categorisations, rendering 'Moorland Night' a poem about the ways in which the earth is imagined as a space that both generates and sustains a creative impulse that cannot be cultivated in the social world. We can see this clearly in Mew's use of the nonprogressive tense within the poem, such as in the phrase 'Over my head the curlews call'. Had she used the progressive tense and phrased this as 'the curlews are calling,' there would have been an effect of specificity within time and space. The nonprogressive tense generates here a sense of the curlews as *always* calling and imbues the environment around the speaker with a psychologically amplified, unreal quality.

This is worth considering further in relation to the poem's concern with the interplay between energetic expulsion and containment. At the heart of 'Moorland Night' is a sense of crisis between giving the self over to the earth in totality or returning to back to the social world of the liberal humanist subject. For Mew, creativity is synonymous with nature as a wild, unknowable entity. Indeed, "Wild" is a word with great significance for her, and it is worth noting that it and its variants appear at least twelve times throughout her poetry.[253] The concept of 'the wild' facilitates the possibility of confronting what is outside of our cognitive and emotional capacities. By thinking about 'wildness' in similar terms to queer ecology as a non-normative, anti-categorizing entity we can begin to see the way in which 'Moorland Night' constructs the natural world as a repository for the self's innermost emotional life. When considered as an anti-categorizing force, nature within the poem becomes, in Jack Halberstam's words, 'wild space[s] of unmeaning and un/being' that destabilize the very order of identity, and offers the potential for attaining a selfhood that is unmoored from its social formulations.[254] As with the island films of Robert J. Flaherty and Michael Powell in the 1930s (see chapter 5), Mew draws from the legacy of the Romantic sublime, although in this case of her appropriation, she reinscribes it with the potential not to strengthen the subject but rather to dethrone it.

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[251] Ibid., p. 289.
[252] Ibid., p. 294.
[253] 'Wild' is used by Mew in the following poems: 'Absence,' 'The Changeling,' 'The Cenotaph,' 'Fame,' 'The Farmer's Bride,' 'The Fête,' 'The Forest Road,' 'Moorland Night,' 'Requiescat'.
[254] Jack Halberstam, *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), p. 37.

There is a sense that Mew's interrogation of the lyric subject within this poem as something ultimately unsustainable, though not totally disavowable, has in its echoes, the words of her literary forebearer, and personal heroine, Emily Brontë. Mew's admiration for Brontë's work is manifest not only in her poetic inheritances, but also in her prose writing. In a piece originally written in 1904 to be the introduction to Brontë's collected poems, though never actually printed in this context, her ardent championing of Brontë's genius produced a reading in which Penelope Fitzgerald describes Mew as 'scarcely even trying to disentangle her own feelings from her subject.'[255] That Mew's admiration bordered on 'religious devotion' can be glimpsed in her descriptions of an asocial Brontë who possessed an 'almost unearthly light', envisioned as 'one of nature's outcasts' whose imaginative capacities worked in tandem with the elemental sublimity of the natural world.[256] Brontë for Mew was a transcendent figure, one whose genius moved beyond categories of gender: 'It is said that her genius was masculine, but surely it was purely spiritual, strangely and exquisitely severed from embodiment and freed from any accident of sex.'[257] Fitzgerald reads this claim as Mew's desire to 'see Emily as a reconciliation of opposites', and certainly, Mew's claim that in death Brontë was 'resolved into the elements she worshipped, [...] transmuted, given back to earth again' is clearly reflected in the aesthetic concerns of 'Moorland Night' in which the promise of death (both physical and spiritual) acts as a great moment of emotional unburdening.[258]

Of Brontë's poetry, 'Night is darkening round me' is the clearest direct influence on 'Moorland Night'. In Brontë's poem, the speaker is in the centre of a sullen, wintery scene and, in spite of the approaching storm, refuses to take shelter: 'The wild winds coldly blow; | But a tyrant spell has bound me, | And I cannot, cannot go.'[259] Whereas in 'Moorland Night' there is a sense of doubt that undercuts the ritualistic disavowal of the 'Thing', the creative life force, in Brontë's poem, life itself is inseparable from the potential for its own destruction. Mew's conception of Brontë is a totalising one, transcending earthly conditions such as gender and health to move beyond epistemological taxonomies. Like the speaker in 'Night is darkening', Mew reads in Brontë's work a communion between the self and nature that is absolute, all-encompassing, and which goes beyond realms of the mental and into a space of experiential

[255] Fitzgerald, *Charlotte Mew and Her Friends*, p. 94.
[256] Ibid., p. 93.
[257] Charlotte Mew, 'The Poems of Emily Brontë', *Collected Poetry and Prose*, pp. 356-69, p. 364.
[258] Ibid., p. 368.
[259] Emily Brontë, 'The night is darkening round me', *The Complete Poems*, ed. Janet Gezari (London: Penguin, 1992), p. 30.

intensity. Whilst the tropes of Brontë's ambivalently Romantic vision are apparent in the poem, Mew, however, does not wholly speak the same language as her heroine, and, much as in 'Fame', she does not quite perform as direct an aesthetic graft as it may initially appear.[260] Instead, the recognition of the potential return of the 'Thing' to the speaker ('One day the quiet earth may give it back [...] to me'), suggests a tension at play between the artistic and social self in which there is a faint hesitancy towards complete abandonment of the creative lifeforce ('the Thing'). Though the speaker states 'This is the end of all the roads', meaning the end for the lyric subject, the switch in the penultimate lines into the conditional tense in which the speaker hesitates 'if I come back and ask for it again', demonstrates the impossibility of completely abandoning the creative self. Where 'Night is darkening' seems to call for complete artistic fulfilment, 'Moorland Night' is an account of giving it all up, of returning to the banal and leaving the terrain of the dangerously isolated genius. That the speaker cannot commit completely to the safety of community reveals the seductive lure of the need for creative expression. 'Moorland Night' could be read as elegiac, but this hint at possible return refuses to commit it to the sense of real, permanent loss.

This sense of the moor as a space of discursive disorder is distilled in Mew's deployment of symbolism. In the poem, the curlews are described as 'calling through the dusk' with their 'wild, long, rippling call'. This evocation of the curlew's call has the effect of producing within the world of the poem an enunciation that is both audible and wordless, a parody of the lyric self as concerned with the reverberations of expressivity. In contrast to the speaker—who seems to be trying to bury her language into the 'wet grass' — the circling curlews have a decidedly non-human unselfconsciousness towards their right to utterance. In fact, they could not do anything else than sound their call; in the dynamics of sound and silence, they are figural manifestations of a pure and total expressivity. This recalls the birds of Thomas's poetry, namely the 'pure thrush word' and its transcendental expression of language outside of referential demand. Where Mew's lyric differs, somewhat, is in its investing the call of the curlews with an almost supernatural capacity to transcend their simple status as birds. Indeed, Mew likely evokes here the superstitious folk belief in the portentous 'Seven Whistlers,' with which curlews have frequently been

[260] Kendall reads 'Fame' as echoing Brontë's metaphysical vision of the tension between earth and paradise, whilst also succeeding to establish an alternate trajectory that move her away from simple aesthetic mimicry: ''Fame' folds together the glory of these competing visions to establish its heavenly places: old and known they may be, but they originate in Brontë's work. Mew cannot write out of them without subordinating her genius to a predecessor. So she must establish a separate vision, haunted by an ecstasy which it has shared but been obliged to abandon.' Kendall, 'Passion of Charlotte Mew', p. 642.

linked.[261] An article on the topic from a 1904 edition of *Country Life* describes the 'general belief …that the "Whistlers" are the foretellers of bad luck, disaster, or death to someone in the locality.' 'Utterers of the cries,' it adds, 'are the spirits of the dead unsaved, whom the Angel Gabriel is hunting through space, and urging along with his whip.'[262] When taken as portentous symbols, or even spectral souls, the very landscape of Mew's moor becomes a space of fraught discursive exchange, in which the lyric subject is located within a world that is seemingly at the edge of some fatalistic inevitability. At the same time, this environment is animated into a version of itself that transcends its mere materiality through the force of the speaker's imaginative and emotional intensity.

'Moorland Night' is ultimately a poem that attempts to un-speak itself out of existence by rejecting the lyric as form of expression. The poem pulls back its speaker from any immersive engagement with the apparently spontaneous creative capacity of the lyric form. In playing out the divisions and criticisms of the lyric, Mew explores its capacities as an inherently anti-social phenomenon. This anti-social concern places the lyric self as oppositional to the liberal humanist self of the public world. When read in these terms, 'Moorland Night' can be seen as confronting the same territorial divisions between public/private that White identifies as central to the mid-century American 'confessional school' of poetry and its interest in interrogating the breach between decorum and impropriety.[263] Indeed, it is this sense of internal discord that animates the poem into exploring the tension at the heart of an unsettled creative selfhood:

> I leave it here:
> And one day the wet grass may give it back—
> One day the quiet earth may give it back—
> The calling birds may give it back as they go by—
> To someone walking on the moor who starves for love and will not know
> Who gave it all to these to give away;
> Or, if I come and ask for it again,

[261] Cheryl Tipp, 'The tale of the seven whistlers,' *Sound and Vision Blog*, British Library Online, February 7, 2019, https://blogs.bl.uk/sound-and-vision/2019/02/the-tale-of-the-seven-whistlers.html.
[262] 'The "Seven Whistlers",' *Country Life*, April 9, 1904, pp. 537–38.
[263] The 'confessional school' poets, such as Anne Sexton, Robert Lowell, and Sylvia Plath, pushed the personal to forefront of their lyrics as a strategy of impropriety to reject the kind of abstracted universalism at play within modernist and Romantic poetry. At the centre of this impulse was the desire to interrogate and dramatise, what White calls, the 'Millean theater of lyric'. White: 'The Confessional seemed to turn away from the abstract universalism of this figure (and in this, it is like a wide range of midcentury poetic modes). It did so by (infamously) identifying the historical author and his or her personal experiences with the poem's supposed speaker— with the airing of personal shames understood as a breach of decorum.' White, *Lyric Shame*, p. 39; p. 34.

Oh! then, to me.

In giving over her creative self to the earth, Mew recalls Prospero's declaration of 'I'll break my staff, | Bury it certain fathoms in the earth.'[264] Yet while Prospero declares the relinquishing of his powers with a sense of apparent permanency, Mew holds back from such definitiveness. This hesitancy can be read as a form of emotional conservation, in which the depth of feelings inherent within the creative self are not psychically castrated, but instead remain phantom-like in the possibility of return. Instead, the speaker emerges as sustaining her life through a temporary unburdening of the lyrical impulse. The temporariness is a vital distinction: just as the curlews cannot cease calling, the lyric self cannot be completely abandoned.

In this respect, Mew's poem reveals the challenges faced by women poets in the opening decades of the twentieth century, torn between two worlds of obligation (public) and creative fulfilment (private). This unclosing of the creative self places the text in dialogue with what Melanie Micir calls the 'unfinished aesthetic of queer feminist modernism,' and offers us a way of thinking about Mew as committed to subverting expectations of masculinist self-assuredness.[265] As in queer ecology's recognition of the limits of discursive closure, Mew similarly imbues the psychic landscape of the moor with an ontological multiplicity; in functioning as a repository for the creative self, the environment resists the will to complete the lyric's impulse to public-minded coherency. In sheltering the creative self within a textual landscape that is emotionally responsive, Mew's speaker engages in queer ecological thinking by acknowledging the value in protecting deviation: as Morton says, 'Instead of reducing everything to sameness, ecological interdependence multiplies differences everywhere.'[266] By the end of the poem, the speaker's creative potentiality remains in a state of suspended possibility, and like the 'wild, rippling call of the curlews,' we are left unclear as to future of the lyric subject, although we know it cannot be completely denied.

'A final peace in the heart of things'

The examples explored in this chapter trace Mew's poetic sensibility as ecologically queer. They alert us to how a vibrant relationship between the self and the natural world is sustained in her

[264] William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, in *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Complete Works*, ed. Stanley Wells and Gary Taylor, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 5.1.54–55.
[265] Melanie Micir, *The Passion Projects: Modernist Women, Intimate Archives, Unfinished Lives* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), p. 110.
[266] Morton, 'Queer Ecology', p. 277.

work through imaginative transformation of material bodies that facilitate new routes into self-knowledge. In both 'The Wheat' and 'Moorland Night', tactility and sensory contact is frontloaded as the route, to borrow Jefferies's terminology, to ontological transubstantiation — the self is remade when given over to the world through the gateway of sensory experience. Mew's work engages with the idea of contact with the natural world as a breaching of the self, a transformative act that allows the subject to experience a world made strange, even if only through a momentary reinvigoration of their imaginative capacities. It takes queer ecological and eco-phenomenological approaches to Mew's work to show us how the apparent boundaries between things have always been just shimmering distortions and when looked for in the right place, indeed, 'the Thing is found'. In reaching for the edges of what is known, of seeing how the outcast in fact holds the greatest power of creative sensitivity, Mew reveals herself as a poet trying to find a form that holds but does not ultimately restrict the boundaries of the self.

Nonetheless, it is evident that Mew's approach to the environment stemmed from a source of great emotional isolation. It is from this feeling of isolation that iterations of the natural world are reached for as a legible aesthetic, refashioned to make coherent volatile reactions to a hostile social world. In some ways, Mew's is a misanthropic point of view, though one only formed from the wrenching pain of a real woundedness. Familial insanity, financial precarity, and the spectre of sexual errancy, all conspired to produce a figure that felt she was at the edge of every room she entered. It is in this search for the place of restitution that the rural becomes a healing terrain for the lonely. Monro describes that Mew had a self-confessed spiritual affinity with the non-human world, stating that she 'was always conscious[,] she once admitted[,] of what seemed to her an Earthly Presence, a bond, an actual contact with the earth, of a knowledge of final peace in the heart of things.'[267] For her, nature was a dream place in which to shake off identity, to enter into a version of being that transgresses the limits of individuality in its capacity for anonymity, its promise to forget, to take our bodies and mould them away until they no longer hold the traces of an identity that burdens us.

It is no wonder, then, that the topographies that are traversed within Mew's work all afford the same opportunities for disappearing: moors disguise things in a falsely flat, quietly furtive terrain; a field of wheat harbours pheasants and field mice under its canopy; woodland transforms the world into a partially glimpsed vision, occluded from certainty. Hilary Mantel describes the experience of being in the woods at twilight as a place in which we 'lose all sense

[267] Alida Klemantaski Monro, 'Biographical Memoir,' p. 169.

of our body's boundaries. We melt into the trees, into the bark and the sap. From this green blood we draw new life, and are healed.'[268] Much like Mantel's description, Mew's Breton shepherd can be seen to haunt the discursive treelines and moorland horizons of her writing; he is the spectral archetype, enacting the desire to 'melt into the trees', to metamorphose into the stuff of nature itself, and to, hopefully, arrive at 'a quiet piece of earth.' Chapter 3 continues this interest in exploring tactility as a means of ontological transformation, looking at how Lawrence draws upon codes of primitive corporeality and a sensuality of the body to provide both a political and social diagnostic account regarding the state of consciousness as it falls upon the modern labouring body.

[268] Hilary Mantel, 'Wicked Parents in Fairy Tales', *The Guardian*, 10 Oct 2009, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/oct/10/fairytales-hilary-mantel> [accessed 21st December 2022].

Chapter 3

D. H. Lawrence's Working-Class Bodies: Tactility, Purification, and the Industrial Rural

Tactile Optics and the Vulnerable Body in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*

In *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (1928), D. H. Lawrence's final completed novel, an encounter between Constance, Lady Chatterley, and the estate's gamekeeper, Oliver Mellors, pivots around the act of washing. Constance, whilst out walking in the woods of the Wragby estate, knocks on the door of Mellors's humble stone cottage. After receiving no response, she moves around to the back of the property and her eyes fall upon him as he stands washing himself in the dwelling's enclosed sunken yard:

> In the little yard two paces beyond her, the man was washing himself, utterly unaware. He was naked to the hips, his velveteen breeches slipped down over his slender loins. And his white slim back was curved over a big bowl of soapy water, in which he ducked his head, shaking his head with a queer, quick little motion, lifting his slender white loins, and pressing the soapy water from his ears, quick, subtle as a weasel playing with water, and utterly alone.[269]

As a portrait of Mellors it offers a distinctly different picture of the man who had, in a previous encounter in Wragby woods, suddenly appeared in front of Connie 'with such a swift menace [...] like the sudden rush of a threat out of nowhere.'[270] Here, there is a striking degree of vulnerability in Mellors being 'utterly unaware' of his being watched, his 'slim white back' a marked contrast to the looming presence he had previously engendered.[271] For a writer so often guilty of espousing an aggressive phallocentrism, this passage is striking in its casting of the male body as an object caught within the desiring eye of the female subject. There emerges a reworking of the implicit power differential between Connie and himself in this moment, in which physical presence becomes sublimated once again to social position: he, as the working man, (unconsciously) submits his body to the subjective framing of the aristocratic woman. Not only does this attention to his physical form reveal an inbuilt hierarchy in the structure of the erotic

[269] D. H. Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (London: Vintage, 2011 [1928]), p. 108.
[270] Ibid., p. 86.
[271] See Kate Millett, *Sexual Politics* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2016 [1970]).

encounter, it also curiously has the effect of placing Mellors within a traditional framing of the interrupted female nude. This aesthetic resonance has its legacies in the classical narratives of goddesses or nymphs discovered bathing or swimming, such as within the story of Diana and Actaeon.[272]

The mythic resonance of Mellors's washing is given greater credence when it is placed within the context of the arboreal environment in which he dwells. Indeed, the woods of the Wragby estate have already been recorded by Connie as possessing an inner enchantment that harks back to a fabled iteration of the green wood past: 'from the old wood came an ancient melancholy [....] better than the harsh insentience of the outer world. She liked the inwardness of the remnant of forest, the unspeaking reticence of the old trees. They seemed a very power of silence, and yet a vital presence.'[273] The ancient silence of the parkland is only exacerbated by the schematic opposition to the world outside its walls — the pit town of Tevershall and the adjacent colliery, Stacks Gate, which pervade a sense of 'unease' and 'ever-shifting dread' across the landscape. Through this opposition, Lawrence imbues within the setting a charged potency that has the power to remould linear temporal structures, reviving the stability of an ancient place through its contrast with the industrial modernity of coal extraction.[274] Like much of Lawrence's work, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is a discursively hybrid text in which psychological and symbolic registers are intermingled throughout.

This chapter aims to explicate how Lawrence's model of being was fundamentally rooted in the celebration of the body as the site of inner vitality. Drawing from texts across his work, it will become evident how he uses moments of corporeal focus within his narratives to explore larger questions about the nature of modernity, how it impacts the lived experience of an affective body, and how this attention might help redress the damage inflicted onto an environment that is suffering through industrial capitalism's depletion. The figure of the collier offers Lawrence a dynamic route into exploring these issues. As will be made apparent, the miner is a figure that is invested with great ambivalence, being both resonant of a heightened

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[272] This has been a regular subject depicted across the history of art, with some notable works being Titian, *Diana and Actaeon*, 1556-59, oil on canvas, 184.5 × 202.2 cm, <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/titian-diana-and-actaeon> [accessed 4 Nov 2023]; Rembrandt van Rijn, *Diana Bathing with her Nymphs with Actaeon and Callisto*, 1634, oil on canvas, 93.5 x 73.5 cm, <https://www.wikiart.org/en/rembrandt/diana-bathing-with-the-stories-of-actaeon-and-callisto-1634> [accessed 4 November 2023]; Thomas Stothard, *Diana and her Nymphs Bathing*, 1816, oil on canvas, 508 × 610 mm, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/stothard-diana-and-her-nymphs-bathing-n00320> [accessed 4 Nov 2023].

[273] Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, p. 107.

[274] Ibid., p. 167.

corporeality and of industrialism's alienation. It is in the opportunities to explore diverse knowledge systems that we can see how the miner becomes a figure of deep concern within Lawrence's aesthetic, foregrounding a type of haptic contact as demonstrative of an inner vitality that is so frequently diminished in the wider modern world.

Although central to nearly all of Lawrence's work, *Lady Chatterley's Lover* dramatises in the most explicit and coherent terms his valorisation of the potency of contact, both physical and spiritual, as a mode of psychic survival. The novel is structured around moments of tactility which disrupt consciousness and offer new ways of being within a self that is somatically grounded and open to the potential for reciprocation from another; touch becomes the ethical framework in which mutual coexistence is expressed. Lawrence foregrounds this notion of relational ethics through a narrative concerning the emergence of an emotional and sexual relationship between Connie and Mellors, exploring the ways in which authentic emotional dependency through sexual interaction unlocks a new consciousness of being for both characters. This mutual contact (both spiritual and physical) produces transformative revisioning of how to exist within a world that promotes fragmentation. His stated intentions for the novel was for it to propose why 'We *must* get back into relation, vivid and nourishing relation, to the cosmos and the universe', through a process of 'daily ritual' which emphasises organic corporeality.[275] Lawrence's text aims to portray genuine bodily and emotional contact as politically revolutionary, in which corporeal sensitivity begets a new form of consciousness that acts as a solution to the ontological and environmental wreckage of society in the wake of the Great War.

When Mellors is viewed in the context of this aesthetic hybridity, his relationship to the environment in which he lives produces him as a figure embedded within this dynamic of ontological unfixity. Therefore, returning to the washing encounter, within the very moment that his body is being visually apprehended, Lawrence simultaneously invites the possibilities for him to become at once resonant of a complete maleness — his bare torso and 'slender loins' indicative of a type of primal masculinity — and yet also have this maleness destabilised by its implication within a larger visual and narrative tradition of oblivious female nudes being caught bathing. With the emphasis upon the whiteness of his skin, Mellors appears to Connie as if a living sculpture — resonant of Pygmalion's 'snowy ivory statue', a pure 'image of a human form' in its total physicality.[276] As with her first encounter with him, his physical presence is similarly

[275] D. H. Lawrence, 'Apropos of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*', *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, pp.3-37, p. 31.
[276] Ovid, *The Metamorphoses*, trans. Mary M. Innes (London: Penguin, 1955), p. 231.

foregrounded through its somatic effect upon Connie, in which her confrontation with his form produces a jolt that 'hit[s] her in the middle of the body.'[277] Bodies for Lawrence are not discrete entities, their true ontological shape is not determinable until they are situated in relation to an external environment. The jolt that Connie registers is indicative of Mellors' function within the text as both a material entity, with his innate physical authority, and as a symbolic device that functions as a figural manifestation of a spiritually regenerative version of modernity. The body of Mellors and the landscape of the Wragby environment are coextensive in their mutual function as diagnostic tools of a shrinking Britain that is being encircled by a destructive modernity.

As this scene of washing exhibits, Lawrence is interested in the ways in which the sensory system might offer opportunities for emotional contact through its promise of interrelation. This elision between selves is evident even at the level of form, in which a loose free indirect style is deployed throughout the novel, unsettling narrative authority through implementing a linguistic hybridity that undercuts the absolutist point of view that a singular subject position might ideologically endorse. Instead, he employs a narrative perspective that is acutely flexible and demonstrates 'unfixed fluidity and internal contradiction'.[278] There is a sense that Lawrence positions the narrative focalisation within this as an increasingly within Connie's subjective viewpoint. Here, Mellors's seemingly innocuous domestic ritual is expanded beyond the physicality reality of its action which becomes resonant of both Connie's reactive desires and his essential character:

> She saw the clumsy breeches slipping down over the pure, delicate, white loins, the bones showing a little, and the sense of aloneness, of a creature purely alone, overwhelmed her. Perfect, white, solitary nudity of a creature that lives alone, and inwardly alone. And beyond that, a certain beauty of a pure creature. Not the stuff of beauty, not even of the body of beauty, but a lambency, the warm, white flame of a single life, revealing itself in contours that one might touch: a body![279]

As Lawrence rounds upon and intensifies through each successive clause, Connie's own subjectivity in this viewing process becomes uncovered and brought into responsiveness through her recognition of Mellors's aloneness. The deployment here and in the previous passage of a

[277] Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, p. 108.
[278] Violeta Sotirova, *D. H. Lawrence and Narrative Viewpoint* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), p. 183.
[279] Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, p. 108.

fragmentary and breathlessly elaborating syntax works to mirror Connie's own bodily response, with the irregular rhythm of the clauses emulating her quickening pulse or staggered breathing as she is momentarily fixated. This mutuality of corporeal states — Mellors with his washing action and Connie's physiological response — further recalls the narrative of Pygmalion's sculpture in which his touch animates the stone into flesh: 'At his touch the ivory lost its hardness, and grew soft: his fingers made an imprint on the yielding surface'.[280] The associative echo of the Pygmalion myth is useful in thinking about the way sculpture might offer Lawrence a metaphorical distillation of his theories of being. For one, a sculpture is defined by its pure physical materiality: carved out of the organic material of the earth, its solidity is its essential property. And yet it is through this manipulation of materiality that the object becomes transmuted into a representational entity: like Pygmalion, suddenly, the stone is flesh when the sympathetic imaginative apparatus conjures it out of its material stolidity.

It is this act of creative reach on behalf of the observer that we can see how Lawrence is interested in the way bodies become the sites in which the spirit and the world intersect. This allusive nature to the sculptural attractions of Mellors's body is evident in Lawrence's description of his 'Perfect, white, solitary nudity' possessing a 'lambency' that draws Connie to fantasise about touching him. This tactile description intimates Lawrence's epistemology that sees touch as a transfigural act. For him, tactility above all else is the sensory apparatus that alters the state of things through its process of adjusting spatial relations by bringing objects together and simultaneously extending the self into the world through an assertion of sensible proximity. Lawrence explicates this through his poem 'Touch Comes' in which he describes the haptic process as producing 'a soft warmth, and a generous | kindled togetherness, so we go into each other as tides flow'.[281] Touch is explicitly designated as the apparatus that facilitates a contrary kind of consciousness that is rooted in 'the unmental flood', a purer state of being. That touch offers a separate epistemological orientation, away from the 'delirious | day of mental welter and blether', demonstrates the ways in which bodies in Lawrence's work hold a metaphysical primacy that supersede their mere material function. Therefore, in framing Mellors in terms of his bodily ontology within the context of his pure aloneness, the text demonstrates how washing is used by

[280] Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, p. 232.
[281] D. H. Lawrence, 'Touch Comes', *The Complete Poems of D. H. Lawrence* (Ware: Wordsworth Editions, 1994; repr. 2002), p. 386.

Lawrence as a narrative device to explore the transformative reverberations of the body in an unaffected physical state.

Though this encounter is one of visuality, Lawrence's intimation of Connie's bodily response begets an interest in the interplay between modes of comprehension that extend beyond initial visual apprehension. Instead of just a moment of ocular encounter, this scene should be read as one of expansive contact, in which Connie's self is extended beyond its own boundaries in response to the sudden confrontation of Mellors's total corporeality. Such scenes of washing beget complex relations which either demonstrate distinct moments of physical contact (such as the routinisation of touch or the modification of the skin's surface through cleansing) or they provide opportunities for instances of imaginative tactility, in which the visual reach of the observer works to interface with the surface of the other. In 'Art and Morality' (1925), Lawrence describes this process of subjective extension, writing that 'Each thing, living or unliving, streams in its own odd, intertwining flux, and nothing [...] is fixed or abiding. All moves. And nothing is true, good, or right, except [...] the things that are in the stream with it.'[282] Subjectivity then for Lawrence is defined by its unfixity and kinesis, it is a process of mutual relation to the world that is ever-changing in its form and character. Therefore, sensory modalities, as part of the formation of the subjective perspective, are similarly unfixed in the effects of their interaction with the phenomenal world.

In this scene of Connie's corporeal intensity and heightened subjectivity, the body of Mellors becomes ocularly caressed by the visual apparatus melding into the emotional expansiveness of the tactile juncture. In this we can see Lawrence's engaging in an early form of phenomenological thinking. As Merleau-Ponty suggests, visual encounter and tactile encounter are not necessarily distinct at the level of perception, as both engage with a crossing between the perceiver and perceived in an intermedial zone:

> Through this crisscrossing within it of the touching and the tangible, its own movements incorporate themselves into the universe they interrogate, are recorded on the same map [...] We must habituate ourselves to think that every visible is cut out in the tangible, every tactile being in some manner promised to visibility [...] Since the same body sees and touches, visible and tangible belong to the same world.[283]

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[282] D. H. Lawrence, 'Art and Morality', *The Bad Side of Books: Selected Essays*, ed. Geoff Dyer (New York: New York Review of Books, 2019), pp. 222-29, p. 228.
[283] Merleau-Ponty, 'Visible and Invisible: The Intertwining – The Chiasmus', *Basic Writings*, pp. 3-4.

If vision and tactility become interchangeable in the moment of perception, as Merleau-Ponty proposes, then the function of touch is afforded the same kind of authority in knowledge comprehension as ocular perception. Thus, whilst the text superficially appears to be performing a version of the ethnographic viewer–position (see Chapter 5) by disclosing a singular point of view, Connie's gazing at Mellors in fact implicates the kind of modernist interrogation over the authority of subjectivity and exposes the internal ambiguities at play within the power structures of such a viewer–position. In a text filled with moments of actual tactility between Connie and Mellors, this scene nonetheless offers a glimpse at the kind of disorientation of the sensory system that modernist aesthetics is so often concerned with.

Within this narrative framing of the optical tactility of Mellors's body, Lawrence's relationship to modernism's interest in the formulation and experience of consciousness can be seen. In thinking about the way in which vision and touch interact within the scene, we can identify Lawrence's interest in exploring the ways in which the sensory modalities offer new ways of reframing ontology. This concern of Lawrence's with locating being in relation to properties of the body has its roots in the conceptual development of perception through the nineteenth century. Jonathan Crary has proposed that the changing understandings of vision throughout the nineteenth century hinged around an increasing emphasis upon subjective visualisation, which developed through studying the physiological capacities of the eye. The effect of this was to reassert the role of the body as the shaper of meaning in the process of ocular perception. Crary writes that the 'body which had been a neutral or invisible term in vision now was the thickness from which knowledge of vision was derived.'[284] Certainly, as Connie watches Mellors, visuality, as we have understood, is transformed into tactility, with Mellors's body through Connie's sight being brought into contact with her sympathetic nervous system as the site of her 'unmental' being. This, moreover, demonstrates Lawrence's unique place within the modernist canon, in that his focus upon the body as the site of consciousness offers a unique proposition in elevating corporeality above the realm of the mind as a critical knowledge system. Tim Armstrong's study *Modernism, Technology, and the Body* argues for an understanding of modernism that bifurcates the body into two dependent categories, the first of which recognises the body as a primary central actor in the formation of self (of which Lawrence falls), the second acknowledging the necessity for its 'augmentation [...] in relation to technology' as a method of

[284] Jonathan Crary, 'Modernizing Vision', *Vision and Visuality*, ed. H. Footer (Seattle, WA: Bay Press, 1988), pp. 29-49, p.43.

control.[285] It is in this second category, that of the body's relationship to technology, that Lawrence attempts to intervene and provide an alternative pathway in which the corporeal is the realm of true, unaffected consciousness. As we will see with his depiction of colliers, this relationship to augmentation via technological development is a central critique of the effects of modernity upon the life of humanity as caused by the depletion of the organic corporeal will.

Despite Lawrence's prophetically reformist tone in his foreword to *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, in which 'the re-awakening' of society can be breached through the salvation of the body, within the context of the novel itself, the proposition remains curiously precarious. Given that the text's emphasis upon the body as a conduit to an expansive consciousness, the primacy of this same body's insecurity and vulnerability is as central as its vitality. As we have seen with Mellors's washing, the slightness of his body presents him as a figure as susceptible to harm as it does to the kind of litheness and vigour that his relationship with Connie displays. Later in the novel we learn that prior to his return to England to become the estate's gamekeeper he had been a soldier, stationed during the war in India and that he contracted a near-fatal bout of pneumonia, the same of which had actually killed the Colonel of his regiment. As a result of this, his lungs became permanently damaged. Despite the presence of his physicality, Mellors's body is shown to be not the apex of perfection, but rather is highly sensitive to its environment. The weakness of his lungs is made plain by the strain he endures when he has to move Clifford, Connie's paraplegic husband, whose motorised wheelchair has become stuck in a ditch: 'his [Mellors's] heart was beating and his face white with the effort, semi-conscious [...] his hands [were] trembling on his thighs'.[286] Therefore, whilst a quick and careless glossing over the novel might present a reading of the vigorous Mellors and disabled Sir Clifford Chatterley (also injured by the War) as merely oppositional shadow figures who are demonstrative of the two polarised binaries of maleness, this would be a simplification of Lawrence's intent. Certainly, it is true that Mellors's maleness is generated as almost archetypal through the novel, and the emphasis on the phallus and its potency to renew consciousness for both himself and Connie, Lawrence gestures toward a mythic fertility figure who enacts ritualistic death and rebirth.[287] But what is important to note in this scene of him washing, is his aloneness.

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[285] Tim Armstrong, *Modernism, Technology, and the Body* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 3.
[286] Ibid, p. 245.
[287] John B. Humma, 'The Interpenetrating Metaphor: Nature and Myth in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*', *PMLA*, 98.1 (1983), pp. 77-86.

Part of Mellors's own emotional trajectory within a narrative, so often seen as Connie's coming into consciousness alone, is his movement towards reintegrating himself as a subject responsive to and desiring of human contact. We are told he has been living alone for the past four years, and the routine of his life seems to imply a closing-off from society, initiated originally by the breakdown of his relationship with his estranged wife being one of the primary reasons for his physical and psychological retreat into the woods. What separates Mellors in his washing from the examples of the colliers to be discussed, is the supressed vulnerability of his aloneness: 'He was temporizing with life. He had thought he would be safe, at least for a time, in this wood. [...] He would be alone, and apart from life, which was all he wanted.'[288] Indeed, Rachel Murray comments 'Consistent throughout *Lady Chatterley* is an emphasis on the ability of the human body to persist and even thrive in a "frail" and often vulnerable state'.[289] Mellors's body is shown as a frail and susceptible entity; like the woods themselves, he is in a cycle of regeneration and destruction. His engagement with 'green' labour, such as the raising of pheasant chicks, in spite of their eventual fate of being 'shot ultimately by fat men after breakfast', demonstrates this tension between Wragby woods as being restorative only to a point.[290] But it is important, that like his environment, his body is in process, it is responsive and sensitive to its enmeshment within the woods.

One particularly recurrent narrative motif which captures this variation between vital embodiment and the precarity of vulnerability is Lawrence's depiction of, usually, male bodies washing. Throughout his work, he returns to this motif of the cleansing and bathing male as a point of rupture in the worlds of his narratives. That washing, at once so banal it can easily evade attention, is so frequently ritualised in his plots, demonstrates a concern with the body as a site of myriad resonances that extend beyond immediate narrative progression. Furthermore, often these instances of washing are concerned with the labouring body, in which bathing and cleansing become an extension of the practices of working-class identity and ritual. As we have seen with regards to Mellors, the working-class male body becomes both a literal and symbolic focal point in which Lawrence's complex ontologies are given corporeal form. Furthermore, as we have also with Mellors, the relationship of this working-class body to rural spaces, both in conjunction and opposition, afford ample opportunity to think about how Lawrence's ecology

[288] Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, p. 191.
[289] Rachel Murray, *The Modernist Exoskeleton: Insects, War, Literary Form* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), p. 90.
[290] Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, p. 192.

is most often expressed through these narrative mechanisms of embodied relation to the world outside of the self. Most often Lawrence focuses on the coaldust-covered body of the miner, a figure who serves great cultural as well as personal resonance for Lawrence, being representative of an embodied heroic masculinity whilst also equally becoming part of an industrial system that stymies the kind of expressive and intuitive modes of being that he prizes most highly.

Bodily Authority and 'True' Consciousness

Lawrence's own investment in the discourses surrounding labour and the body have its origins in his birthplace in England's industrial midlands. Raised in a working-class household in Eastwood on the Nottinghamshire-Derbyshire border, Lawrence's father was a miner who laboured in the nearby colliery, whilst his mother had once been an aspiring teacher before financial hardship closed that path to her. Despite the proximity of the mining industry, Lawrence described the area of Eastwood as 'still the old England of the forest and agricultural past [...] the mines were in a sense an accident in the landscape, and Robin Hood and his merry men were not very far away.'[291] This is the same dynamic interplay between the mythicised, seasonally-directed rural and the disruptive modernity of industrial Tevershall that Lawrence establishes in the landscape of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, although here the sense of the romantic past's presence is asserted as dominant over the strange incongruity of the collieries.

The general presence of industrialisation, however, did leave its mark on both the surrounding landscape and on Lawrence's own perception of the trajectory of British society. He describes a shift in attitude from his father's generation to his own, in which 'the boys I went to school with, colliers now, have all been beaten down, what with the din-din-dinning of Board Schools, books, cinemas, clergymen, the whole national and human consciousness hammering on the fact of material prosperity above all things.'[292] Whilst cut through with a bent of nostalgia for days before his youth, Lawrence's gripe with the shift towards consumer materialism is reflective of the increased social consciousness toward markers of class as promoted, in part, by factors such as increasing commercialism, a developing mass culture, and residential demands reflected in the area land developments that were expanding towns and cities.[293] Additionally,

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[291] Lawrence, 'Nottingham and the Mining Countryside', *Bad Side of Books*, pp. 451-60, p. 451.
[292] Ibid., p. 457.
[293] See Nick Hayes, '"Calculating class": housing, lifestyle and status in the provincial English city, 1900-1950', *Urban History*, 36.1 (2009), pp. 113-40; and Neville Kirk, *Change, Continuity and Class: Labour in British Society 1850-1920* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998).

the framing of this oppression as a form of ontological hammering, further recalls a sense of the colliers as 'beaten down' in a more literal way, with the 'din-din-dinning' evoking the excavation of coal through its aural effects, as well as linking this battering as a corrupted form of tactility. For Lawrence, this all coalesced in the reduction of the individual into an alienated cog within a dying culture. As Kalaidjian argues, these feelings of cultural severing were rooted in Lawrence's hatred for the oppressive industrialism that was, as he saw it, consuming both the raw materials of the earth and the souls of the men who work under its configuration: 'Lawrence's return to the body as an aesthetic source of knowledge can be understood in terms of an inward exile from the industrial England of his youth, where the human body was increasingly regarded as a unit of labor to be weighed and balanced in terms of its contributions to a larger system of material production.'[294] This fragmentation of the self through capitalism's division of being into the productive and non-productive capacities of the body, meant that, rather than deteriorating through an absence of intellectual stimulation, for Lawrence this deterioration was more a question of an excess of cerebral consciousness. This excess of mental consciousness, what he refers to in 'Touch Comes' as 'the white mind' of 'the conscious personality', emerges through the misapplication of the body into a context that dulls the authentic and instinctual mode of being, of which the motivations, experiences, reactions, etc. of the individual have become stultified within the domain of mind.[295]

In order to elide this congestion of the body by an over compensatory mind, Lawrence proposes a kinetic and dynamic model of being. In this ontology life is conceived as a propulsive movement toward becoming, directing the individual into 'the full achievement of itself.'[296] This actualisation of being is a question of motion as a form of generation: the will to life is a process of coming into individuality in its most internally responsive form, of achieving 'this richness of new being' that is self-fulfilling on its own merit.[297] Lawrence uses the analogy of a fiery red poppy, arguing that it is in the emergence of the flower and its ability to 'disclose its red' that we see the purpose of life; production of fruit or seed is secondary to this essential redness of the poppy's nature: 'This accomplished, it will produce what it will produce, it will bear the fruit of its nature. Not the fruit, however, but the flower is the culmination and climax, the degree to be

[294] Kalaidjian, *Exhausted Ecologies*, p. 55.
[295] Lawrence, 'Touch Comes', p. 386.
[296] D. H. Lawrence, 'Study of Thomas Hardy', *Study of Thomas Hardy and Other Essays*, ed. Bruce Steele (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 3-132, p. 12.
[297] Ibid. p. 11.

striven for.'[298] He elsewhere states this as 'The seed is purpose, the blossom accident', in which though phrased to seem that it is the blooming which is the by-product, the use of an ironic register here is later clarified when he states: 'be a rose | of roses unchidden and purposeless; a rose for rosiness only'[299]. Therefore, it is the coming into being for itself or oneself alone that is the true purpose of existence and productivity is merely subsidiary, a reverberation. It is this notion of vitality that runs throughout Lawrence's writing which conceives a kind of formal integrity in a process of being that is purely intuitive and not purposive to any external demands, such as (re)productive generation.

We can think Lawrence's ontology as a kind of being-through-movement, which is reflected in what he calls the One Will. This term is itself composed of the Will-to-Motion and the Will-to-Inertia, in an adaptation of Nietzschean terminology.[300] Through this interplay akin to 'the ebb and flow of a wave' we can see that the kinetic and mechanical expressions of bodies moving and resting within space, organically responsive, is for Lawrence the essence of human consciousness.[301] As he states, the very fact of being itself is a question of the interplay of energetic potential and expulsion expressed through the promise of temporal unfolding:

> For is he not in himself a growing tip, is not his own body a quivering plasm of what will be, and has never yet been. [...] Is not this his purest joy of movement, the indistinguishable, complex movement of being. And is not this his deepest desire, to be himself, to be this quivering bud of growing tissue which he is.[302]

The centrality of organic generation to Lawrence's metaphysic brings with it a vision of existence that connects vitality to a kind of morality of living, in which the dynamic of becoming occupies a responsibility toward actualisation of the individual. Indeed, this notion induces a reflexive friction between the individual's personality (outer/social) and the self (inner/essential), and furthermore sets up community and the environment as similarly habitually colliding.

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[298] Ibid., p. 12.
[299] Lawrence, 'Rose of All the World', *Collected Poems*, p. 167.
[300] Colin Milton explains: 'It is in "Study of Thomas Hardy", written in 1915, that Lawrence makes his first clearly critical reference to Nietzsche in discussing the relation of will to power to human love and sexuality', going on to identify the way in which Lawrence interprets this aspect of Nietzschean philosophy as a question of supremacy: 'The emphasis in *Study* and in *Women in Love* is on will to power as a conscious urge which aims at establishing dominance of an obvious, physical kind [...] Will to power is nothing less than the ultimate metaphysical principle of Nietzschean philosophy, the ground of all being and in human life, as in all its other embodiments, nearly all its activity is unconscious.' *Lawrence and Nietzsche: A Study in Influence* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1987), p. 12; p. 14.
[301] Lawrence, *Study of Thomas Hardy*, p. 59.
[302] Ibid., p. 35.

Lawrence's description of being is structured within a linguistic and discursive scheme of flux and interchange, and as he develops his ideas of what it means to have consciousness, biological and corporeal accounts of existence always supersede epistemological variants. As Kalaidjian notes, Lawrence was familiar with '"New Physics" of relativity, flux, and uncertainty that challenged the positivistic determinism of nineteenth-century science', and therefore he developed his theories of being in light of these notions of dynamic indeterminacy.[303] In bringing this language of energetic exchange back into the body, Lawrence turned to trying to articulate a version of being that depended as much, if not more, upon corporeal experience as it did the mind.

Written as a corrective to what he saw as the 'slimy serpent of sex, and heaps of excrement' at the centre of the Freudian conception of the unconscious, *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious* is Lawrence's systematisation of the unconscious and its relationship to being.[304] As Catherine Brown has discussed, Lawrence's notion of being follows a dualist model, in which everything in the universe is either composed of live or dead material, determined not at the level of literal consciousness but rather as a question of spiritual vitality and potentiality.[305] Consciousness, as Lawrence understands it, is composed of three distinct categories: that of the soul, the mind, and the body. In both *Psychoanalysis* and *Fantasia of the Unconscious*, Lawrence attempts to provide an anatomical account of the soul, which unlike in Freud's schema which emphasises a topology of the mind, is here synonymous with the unconscious. This means that it is the location of 'that essential unique nature of every individual creature', which is necessarily 'unanalyzable, undefinable, inconceivable'.[306] Distinct from the Freudian notion of the unconscious as 'that which *recoils from* consciousness', and of whose repressions need to be brought forward into the conscious mind for therapeutic purposes, for Lawrence the unconscious 'can only be experienced', it cannot be intellectually considered, given that 'the vast bulk of consciousness is non-cerebral.'[307] A famous example of this idea deployed in his fiction is found in the wrestling incident in *Women in Love* (1920), in which Gerald Crich and Rupert Birkin engage in a jiu-jitsu match. In the process of struggle and combat, they enter into a state of being that is purely physical and which Lawrence describes as 'rapturously, intent and mindless

[303] Kalaidjian, *Exhausted Ecologies*, p. 48.
[304] Lawrence, 'Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious', p. 9.
[305] Catherine Brown, 'D. H. Lawrence 1: Consciousness' Lecture, *University of Oxford Podcasts*, podcast, 15 Feb 2012 <https://podcasts.ox.ac.uk/dh-lawrence-1-consciousness> [accessed 24 May 2021].
[306] Lawrence, 'Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious', p. 13; p. 17.
[307] Ibid., p. 17; p. 19.

[…] two essential white figures working into a closer oneness of struggle.'[308] Notably, Birkin, who wins the fight, is described as 'tall and narrow' with 'bones [that] were very thin and fine', much like Mellors, and in contrast to Gerald who is 'much heavier and plastic', demonstrating Lawrence's investment in particular body types as being synonymous with the possibility of experiencing true non-cerebral consciousness.[309] Furthermore, the emphasis upon the whiteness of the skin indicates on a symbolic level the process of bringing to light something not usually perceptible. Like Mellors' 'lambency' of flickering life force, Lawrence focuses upon the whiteness of their skin as both evidence of the surfacing physicality that their intellectual existence has suppressed, and also associates them with the kind of marble or ivory sculptures that are pure materiality. Given the notion that Lawrence's ideal corporeal consciousness is by nature fleeting, the implication of stasis through white marble sculpture suggests that there is a symbolic temporality at work to aesthetically freeze these scenes of pure physicality in a way that the actual unfolding of them in the diegetic narrative world cannot accommodate.

Lawrence's motif of championing an anti-cerebral consciousness is once more deployed within this wrestling scene between Birkin and Crich. The scene describes how 'in the white interlaced knot of violent living being that swayed silently, there was no head to be scene, only the swift, tight limbs, the solid white backs, the physical junction of two bodies'.[310] The notion of decapitation or headlessness functions as an image of total bodily engagement that is unconscious and emphatically non-mental and is one which Lawrence resurrects several times within his writing (not least within *Women in Love* again).[311] It is in this mentally unbreachable unconscious that the origins of all individual life is determined, as it is here that the 'real motivity' of being, understood as a kind of will to action, is founded.[312] Lawrence plays with this decapitation simile in one of his later essays, 'Insouciance' (1928), in which he is being talked to by two elderly women about Mussolini and fascism, a topic in which he has little interest to discuss:

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[308] D. H. Lawrence, *Women in Love*, ed. David Bradshaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008 [1920]), p. 280.
[309] Ibid., p. 279.
[310] Ibid.
[311] This occurs in 'The Water Party' chapter, in which Gerald, having dived under the water of the lake in which his sister and her husband have disappeared, resurfaces and describes the experience in terms of a kind of consciousness that is markedly divergent from normative perception: 'it's curious how much room there seems, a whole universe under there; and as cold as hell, you're as helpless as if your head was cut off.' Ibid., p. 188.
[312] Lawrence, 'Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious', p. 12.

> I don't care about right and wrong, politics, fascism ... There was a direct sensuous contact between me, the lake, the mountains, cherry trees, mowers ... All this was cut off by the fatal shears of the abstract word fascism ... the little old lady ... beheaded me, and flung my head into abstract space.[313]

Here we can see that the mental is equated with the abstract and therefore the reality of being that Lawrence so wishes to be left to sit with must be charged with a kind of vital materialism (although he would likely reject that word). Lawrence equates mental processes with abstraction and therefore a disruption from the communion of true being which exists as an ambiguous materialism breached through sensuous contact. It is the body's location at the centre of this process of dynamic and energetic relation with the given material world that allows the awareness of the underside of being to be touched. Whilst it may appear that Lawrence equates *all* life in the terms of the unconscious, he is specific in designating it as 'essentially single and unique in every individual organism; it is the active, self-evolving soul bringing forth its own incarnation and self-manifestation.'[314] Therefore, we can once again see the inherent discourse of the organic as critical to Lawrence's notions of the self, foregrounding the development of corporeal consciousness as a non-linear, self-determining, and thereby contextually dependent process. This explains how the world of industrialism is so often the centre of a dislocated soul, given that the conditions are purposefully self-dissociative and cannot be adapted for such organic incarnation.

It is in this struggle that the drama of coal, as representative of the false materiality of being, becomes the substance in which the body of the worker is pitted against.[315] When placed in contrast to opening chapters depicting agricultural work in *The Rainbow* (1915), *Women in Love*'s parent novel, the relationship between labour and the self is shown to be a process of indivisible union with the body and the land:

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[313] D. H. Lawrence, 'Insouciance', *The Later D. H. Lawrence* (New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf, 1952), 369-72, 371-2.
[314] Lawrence, 'Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious', p. 38
[315] In *Beyond Good and Evil* Nietzsche proposes that all life is a process of struggle between individuated forces of energy with self-interested intent. He writes that 'Even a body within which [...] particular individuals treat each other as equal [...] if this body is living and not dying, it will have to treat other bodies in just those ways that the individuals it contains *refrain* from treating each other. It will have to be the embodiment of will to power, it will want to grow, spread, grab, win dominance, – not out of any morality or immorality, but because it is *alive*, and because life *is* precisely will to power.' *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to the Philosophy of the Future*, trans. Judith Norman, ed. Rolf-Peter Horstmann and Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002 [1886]), p. 153. It is certain that Lawrence was influence by Nietzsche's work, having been exposed to it since 1910 onwards and 'had also subscribed to the *New Age*, a journal edited by A. R. Orage who was an enthusiastic proponent' of his philosophy. Shiach, *Modernism, Labour and Selfhood*, p. 157.

> it was enough for the men, that the earth heaved and opened its furrow to them, that the wind blew to dry the wet wheat, and set the young ears of corn wheeling freshly round about it [...] so much exchange and interchange [...] they lived full and surcharged [...] their senses full fed.[316]

Mew's tactile relation to the wheat is once more recalled, with this kind of labour demonstrating Lawrence's interest in types of labour which require communion in their enactment, and in which the land is revealed to the self in process of ecological interrelation. Here the boundaries between environment and the material body are porously receptive. Furthermore, that the novel is as much an elegy for this semi-mythic kind of labouring practice should be further proof that its loss is registered as an inevitable catastrophe of historical process. In this sense, Lawrence exhibits the aesthetic fixations of the earlier Romantic school, and it is not surprising that his work has often been called latent Romanticism, given its discursive dependencies upon the organic versus the mechanical.[317] The pessimistic trajectory of *The Rainbow*, and the conversely optimistic tenor of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, demonstrates the ways in which Lawrence sees salvation as located within the promise of the natural world's regenerative capacities. It is worth remembering that Mellors is a gamekeeper in a community otherwise full of colliers, and his corporeal potency seems dependent upon his freedom from the act of mining. Therefore, within this context of the body as the site in which unmediated creative expression is produced (which for Lawrence, the essential drive of an unobstructed consciousness), we can identify an approach to the rural that positions it as the environmental extension of this inner creative expressivity. Before we explore this fusion of body and place, first it is necessary to outline the ways in which Lawrence's eccentric conceptions of anatomy feed into to his larger metaphysic.

In the opening paragraph of his 1925 essay 'Why the Novel Matters', Lawrence compares the common conception of the self as being a 'body with a spirit in it', a vessel akin to bottle of wine which the 'years drink up', until eventually the bottle is thrown away.[318] For him, this Cartesian dualism is a curious but lacking proposition which places the mind/spirit/soul at centre of the self, and the body as subsidiary receptacle. Describing the motion of his hand 'as it so cleverly writes these words', Lawrence refuses to locate his mind as the central actor in this

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[316] D. H. Lawrence, *The Rainbow*, ed. Kate Flint (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008 [1915]), pp. 6-7.
[317] See W. J. Keith, *Regions of the Imagination: The Development of British Rural Fiction* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), pp. 145-6.
[318] D. H. Lawrence, 'Why the Novel Matters', *The Bad Side of Books*, pp. 252-259, p. 252.

hierarchy of self; rather, the hand itself demonstrates through its movement an authority of being that places his body in conjunction with the thinking mind. Emphasising its nervous properties and kinetic potential, he writes that 'My hand is alive, it flickers with a life of its own.' Not only does Lawrence intimate a corporeality of being that is essentially alive on its own terms and independent of mental cognition, but he also inscribes within this vitality a consciousness of the body that occupies as much of his self as his mind does: '[it] is just as much *me* as my brain, my mind, or my soul.' In the movement of his hand through space, this consciousness unfolds through contact: 'It meets all the strange universe in touch, and learns a vast number of things, and knows a vast number of things.' In undoing the Cartesian notion of the mind-body hierarchy, Lawrence's writing hand can be seen to dethrone knowledge from the mental, and place it, at least partially, back into the corporeal. Elizabeth Grosz explains that Cartesian dualism inscribes the body as a kind of 'self-moving machine, a mechanical device, functioning according to causal laws and the laws of nature', which the mind ultimately governs in 'hierarchical superiority over and above nature.'[319] It would be tempting to view Lawrence's championing of his hand as a reversal of this dualism, in which the organic materiality of the body becomes master over the abstraction of the mind. However, Lawrence rejects this compartmentalisation of the self and instead opts for a gestalt version of ontology, in which 'The whole is greater than the part. And therefore, I, who am man alive, am greater than my soul, or spirit, or body, or mind, or consciousness, or anything else that is merely a part of me.'[320] Lawrence's anti-reductionist assertion of the self sees it as an expansive entity that resists fragmentation and reveals a vision of being that rejects any fixed understanding of singularity. Within his model of being, to be alive is a process of fluctuation, responsiveness, and relation that are always only contingent and never predetermined or absolute.[321] We have seen this play out in the ways in which Connie's furtive watching of Mellors washing produced instabilities both psychologically and textually through the shifting power relations embedded within the encounter.

With this model of selfhood as definitionally fluid and instinctually guided, Lawrence's vision of the body implicates it as an ethical site of sympathetic openness. Authentic consciousness is produced in the physicality of a self that is continually reinscribed through

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[319] Elizabeth Grosz, 'Refiguring Bodies', *The Body: A Reader*, ed. Mariam Fraser & Monica Greco (London; New York: Routledge, 2005), pp. 47-51, p. 48.
[320] Lawrence, 'Why the Novel Matters', p. 255.
[321] 'We should ask for no absolutes, or absolute. Once and for all and forever, let us have done with ugly imperialism of any absolute. [...] All things flow and change, and even change is not absolute. The whole is a strange assembly of apparently incongruous parts, slipping past one another.' Ibid., p. 257.

moments of relational contact with that which is outside of one's own selfhood. Therefore, thinking of the body in Lawrence's writing is always thinking about the importance of the co-dependency between the material and the spiritual, in which the limits of the self are brought into breach through contact with contiguous entities which reveal their own vitality. Lawrence himself describes the purpose of artistic works in these terms, stating that the 'business of art is to reveal the relation between man and his circumambient universe, at the living moment.'[322] This notion of the 'living moment' manifests itself within his fiction through various diverse instances. One such pertinent example is in his short story 'The Blind Man', which concerns the life of an ex-solider turned farmer, Maurice Pervin, who has been made sightless by an injury sustained in combat during the Great War. In the aftermath of his recovery and adjustment to his disabling injury, Maurice has found a new sense of personal equilibrium within the darkness of his blindness. The key scene in the story concerns Maurice and a friend of his wife, Bertie Reid, a lawyer, who are in the cattle barn on a rainy night. Their relationship has been somewhat distant until that point and so when Maurice, much to Bertie's dismay, suddenly asks if he can touch his face in order to know him better, he reluctantly complies:

> [...] he laid his hand on Bertie Reid's head, closing the dome of the skull in a soft, firm grasp, gathering it, as it were; then, shifting his grasp and softly closing again, with a fine, close pressure, till he had covered the skull and the face of the smaller man, tracing the brows, and touching the full, closed eyes, touching the small nose and the nostrils, the rough, short moustache, the mouth, the rather strong chin. [...] He seemed to take him, in the soft, travelling grasp.
>
> "You seem young," he said quietly, at last.
>
> The lawyer stood almost annihilated, unable to answer.[323]

In the scene of Connie watching Mellors, optical perception was shown to be tactile in its imaginative elision of spatial distance; in this scene, by contrast, tactility is productive of visuality. Or rather, tactility is invested with the authority of visual perception. For Maurice, the action of epidermal contact with Bertie induces an emotional closeness that his previous unknowability had until then not allowed. Lawrence's attention to the gestural movement of the fingers over Bertie's face captures the temporal linearity needed in the process of haptic contact: unlike with visual perception, which mostly functions as a totality of the perceptual field until spatial

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[322] D. H. Lawrence, 'Morality and the Novel', *The Bad Side of Books*, pp. 230-36, p. 230.
[323] D. H. Lawrence, 'The Blind Man', *Collected Stories* (London: Everyman's Library, 1994), pp. 423-440, 438.

orientation of either the object or the viewer is manipulated, here, the moment of contact works as an accrual of information with each change of directional caress transforming the phenomenal field for Maurice. By contrast, Bertie's responsiveness to the act of being touched engenders a crisis of emotional disjunction. Lawrence's description of Bertie as being 'almost annihilated' by this breach is reflective of the kind of congested cerebral consciousness that has diverted humanity from accessing a cohesive form of being. This is supported by Garrington who reads the dynamic between the two men as an inversion of the story of doubting Thomas, who needed to touch the wound of the resurrected Christ in order to believe his validity: 'Bertie fails to believe because he continues to see. The disability of the story is not Maurice's blindness, but Bertie's inability to connect through touch.'[324] For Maurice, similarly echoing Tiresias, the blind prophet of Greek myth, sightlessness is a not a subtraction or impediment to achieving a coherent ontology, rather it, figuratively, allows him to see. Indeed, the enfolding of sightlessness and touch together functions to concentrate the self through the necessity of physical contact which is itself tantamount to emotional openness. What this tells us about Lawrence's epistemology of being is that true knowledge is borne of the body and that it is apprehended when in conjunction with a world that is mutually responsive.

The Collier's Body

Mining as a process of coming into being through collective, masculine knowledge of the body is central to many of Lawrence's depictions of colliers. In several of his earlier narratives, both prose and drama, the realm of the domestic is positioned as a threat to the labouring male through the supremacy of its inherently feminine and materialist qualities (in capitalist terms). The domestic in its most torpid formulation is seen by Lawrence as a space of ontological deadening, strikingly opposite to the subterranean world of the mineshaft, in which the possibility for the necessary struggle of the soul is obfuscated by the inertia of superficial social relations.

This clash, in which the miner's masculine grimy body comes into conflict with the orderliness of the domestic space can be seen in his early play *A Collier's Friday Night* (1909). Working as a rehearsal of the family romance narrative he will expand upon in *Sons and Lovers* (1913), the play depicts the internal class tensions at work within a collier's family, the Lamberts, in the mining communities of industrial Nottinghamshire. The beginning of the play depicts Mr

[324] Garrington, *Haptic Modernism*, p. 163.

Lambert, the collier father, returning home from a day hacking at the coal seam. Lambert, through both his disruptive physicality and the tenor and content of his speech, which is sharply aggressive and full of bluster and dialect, is positioned as an outsider figure in the context of his own home — with the starched white tablecloth functioning as the symbolic representation of aspirational bourgeoise respectability of his wife and children. In both this play and the short story 'A Sick Collier', the stench of the pit is registered as a disturbance of the order of the home. Mr Lambert's daughter Nellie decries that 'the smell of them's [his pit clothes] hateful', whilst Lucy, the collier's wife in 'The Sick Collier' registers 'the faint indescribable odour of the pit in the room, an odour of damp, exhausted air.'[325] That the body of the miner brings with him the olfactory malodour of his labour as a form of disturbance in both works implicates Lawrence's frustration at the structural discrepancies between labour and leisure that the world of capitalist industrialism promotes. George Orwell, in his tour around the industrial north, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (1937) describes the class prejudice he had been educated to think: 'in my childhood we were brought up to believe that they were dirty [...] that there was something subtly repulsive about a working-class body. [...] The smell of their sweat, the very texture of their skins, were mysteriously different from yours.'[326] This visceral but culturized reaction to the physical qualities of the labouring body demonstrates the ways in which smell is productive of a certain form of social designation, it has a political currency that orients types into respective categories of distinction. In addition, Orwell also provides a useful account of the everyday routine of a collier who is returning home from the pits:

> As soon as the miner comes above ground he gargles a little water to get the worst of the coal dust out of his throat and nostrils, and then goes home and either washes or does not wash according to his temperament. [...] After his meal he takes a largish basin of water and washes very methodically, first his hands, then his chest, neck, and armpits, then his forearms, then his face and scalp (it is on the scalp that the grime clings thickest), and then his wife takes the flannel and washes his back. He has only washed the top half of his body and probably his navel is still a nest of coal dust, but even so it takes some skill to get pass-ably clean in a single basin of water.[327]

[325] D. H. Lawrence, 'A Collier's Friday Night', *The Plays*, ed. Hans-Wilhelm Schwarze & John Worthen (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 3-62, p. 12; Lawrence, 'A Sick Collier', p. 346.
[326] George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier* (London: Penguin, 2020), p. 124.
[327] Ibid., pp. 32-3.

Orwell's ethnographic perspective on the minutiae of the collier's cleansing practice is useful in its attention to the organised pattern in which the cleaning is performed. This demonstrates the ingrained banality of the washing action, indicating that its function in Lawrence's fiction occupies dual registers of the social realist naturalism (especially his earlier work like *A Collier's Friday Night*) and the symbolic aesthetic register that transforms the exhausted body into a metaphysical struggle. Orwell's intimation of the laboriousness and difficulty of removing coal dust furthers this understanding of the collier's body as a site in which two types of being are symbolically at play within the singularity of this figure who represents the tension between the scales of inside and outside, meaning both the spatial configuration of work and home, but also the kinds of physicality that are invested with a quality of the 'unknowable'.

Both the play and short story depict the act of the miner washing the dirt of the pit from his body, but although narratively similar, individually they offer contrasting readings of how washing the body is far from simplistic routine. In *Collier's*, after Mr Lambert has disappeared off-stage to wash himself in the scullery, he returns 'dripping' and 'sitting on his heels very close to the fire'.[328] Despite several outbursts of irritation between the two, he proceeds to ask his daughter Nellie to 'gie my back a wesh!'.[329] The subsequent enacting of a ritual of domestic cooperation is significant in its mundanity; it is the site of the father's body that both initially disturbs harmony, but also subsequently provides a literal point of contact through cleansing, and depending on choice of staging, this could be the first instance of physical contact shown to Mr Lambert. Indeed, the act of washing her father's back provides a moment of emotional softening between Nellie and Mr Lambert, who until then had been pointedly butting heads: she jokingly teases him 'You great baby, afraid of a cold flannel!'. With the washing of the miner's back, also being the washing of the father's back, the role of cleansing as a transitory action that brings the male figure into the domestic realm, symbolically refamiliarises the collier as 'father'. This presents the act of washing the labouring body as a process of reintegration.

Contrastingly to the Lambert family narrative, in 'A Sick Collier', the eponymous collier, Willy Horsepool, remains a figure of disorder through his washing, in that it has the effect of emphasising his physicality rather than taming it. For his wife who is becoming emotionally distant from him, this reminder of her husband's brawniness effects feelings of alienation and anxiety:

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[328] Lawrence, 'Collier's Friday Night', p. 17.
[329] Ibid., p. 18.

> When he washed himself, keeling on the hearth-rug stripped to the waist, she felt afraid of him again. He was so muscular, he seemed so intent on what he was doing, so intensely himself, like a vigorous animal. And as he stood wiping himself, with his naked breast towards her, she felt rather sick, seeing his thick arms bulge with their muscles.[330]

Unlike in the case of Connie watching Mellors, there is no bridging of the gap between Lucy's watching of her husband wash; rather, the 'wiping' of his body, and the highlighting of his muscularity brings his excessive masculinity into stronger focus. There is a sense that this point in the story, before he becomes injured, Willy's status as a collier is inseparable from his very body, and it is only when that labour is disrupted, that his consciousness beings to become deranged. In this instance of washing, it is revealed as a process that confirms the working body as in some ways dangerous to a femininity that Lawrence reads as overly mental through its superficial fussiness which maintains a clean and tidy interior. Mary Douglas comments that the conceptual understanding of dirt as being 'essentially disorder [… in which] eliminating it is not a negative movement but a positive effort to organise the environment.'[331] If the role of dirt is a 'reflection on the relation of order to disorder, being to non-being, form to formlessness', as Douglas proposes, then Lawrence offers a somewhat complicated assessment of the dirty body as a valuable symbol that resists the false consciousness of domestic materialism. Stephanie Ward's work into written and oral histories of miners in South Wales during first half of the twentieth century reveals a relationship to both hegemonic notions of masculinity as well as a return to a sense of individuality against the '"common identity" of unwashed miners returning home "in one black mass"': 'real men were clean men.'[332] It is not that Willy Horsepool's mental decline is caused through his cleanness, but rather that in the narrative of the disruptive, dirty body, the trace of the labour on skin in the form of coaldust, works to assert the domain of masculine, fraternal intimacy in a space that otherwise would appear to *de-nature* the working man from his own selfhood.

Having grown up in the coal mining region of Nottinghamshire and with a father who was himself a collier, Lawrence had a deep familiarity with the lived reality of the collieries and their workers. Frances Wilson notes however, that in spite of his proximity, Lawrence most likely

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[330] Lawrence, 'A Sick Collier', Collected Stories, p. 346.
[331] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London; New York: Routledge, 2003 [1966]), p. 2.
[332] Stephanie Ward, 'Miners' Bodies and Masculine Identity in Britain, c. 1900-1950', *Cultural and Social History*, 18.3 (2021), pp. 443-62, p. 453.

never actually went down into a mine, and so subsequently his work 'romanticised and mythologised the miner.'[333] It is certainly the case that the corporeality of the miner for many growing up in those communities became intimately connected to gendered archetypes of familial and domestic reality: 'The muscular bodies of fathers, brothers, and uncles in the home normalised the hard and fit labouring body as a symbol of manhood'.[334] Although Lawrence's father was initially a figure of derision for most of his childhood and adolescence, in which the young Lawrence sided with his intellectually disappointed mother (a relationship dynamic that Lawrence explores in *Sons and Lovers*), as his theories of bodily consciousness developed, his sympathy and celebration of his father became more evident. This is visible in one of his final essays, 'Nottingham and the Mining Countryside' (1929), in which he describes his father foraging for mushrooms and hunting rabbits, constructing him as synonymous of the type of working-class male whose labour, far from alienating him, engendered a more acute sensitivity towards the understanding of nature.[335]

That miners acquired divergent forms of knowledge through the practices of their labour is an aspect regularly returned to by Lawrence in his work. In the essay, he presents the labour of mining under the deregulated butty system in terms of fraternity produced through 'physical awareness and intimate *togetherness* [when] down pit [original emphasis].'[336] This is in part due to necessity for survival in activity that required shrewd attention: 'the continual presence of danger, made the physical, instinctive, and intuitional contact between men highly developed.'[337] It is the development of this new form of knowledge which produces the miner as an outsider figure. Certainly, Lawrence's notion of the miner as in some ways a separate entity from the rest of the working-class population was a commonly held idea dating back to the nineteenth century, in which 'their physical strength saw the emergence [...] of an image of miners as otherworldly, coarse, and wild.'[338] In addition, and much akin to Gerald Crich's vision of his workforce, Ward writes that 'The Mining Association of Great Britain still believed in the mid-1930s that "the average man" held an image of miners as "a grimy race of troglodytes".'[339] That the miner was

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[333] Frances Wilson, 'Mining, Coal and D. H. Lawrence', *BBC Radio 3: Arts and Ideas*, podcast (8 Jul 2021) <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p09nsr9r> [accessed 28th August 2021]. See also, Wilson, *Burning Man: The Ascent of D. H. Lawrence* (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), p. 29.
[334] Ward, 'Miners' Bodies and Masculine Identity', *Cultural and Social History*, p. 447.
[335] Lawrence, 'Nottingham and the Mining Countryside', p. 454.
[336] Ibid., p. 65.
[337] Ibid.
[338] Ward, 'Miners' Bodies and Masculine Identity', p. 451.
[339] Ibid.

perhaps synonymous with degeneration is a motif Lawrence similarly draws upon, whilst also spinning it around to explicate a version of being in which the sheer physicality of the miner in return produces them a figure resonant of the same kind of deep time of the coal which they extract.

The function of coal as a marker of geological scale signifies how the underworld of the mine functions as a site of spatio-temporal derangement. Timothy Clark's notion of the Anthropocene as a derangement of scales of knowledge (discussed in Chapter 1 via Farrier) is evident in the way Lawrence's troglodytic miners are at once bodies that are out of time, reduced to a parody of their corporeal potential, whilst also being completely determined by their relation to the political superstructure. As Clark argues, 'the scale of the Anthropocene entails a disconcerting de-politicization' through its disruption of modernity's promise of progressive development.[340] Therefore, Lawrence's work captures the hybrid state of the ecological discourses at work during this period, at once being entrenched in the notion of coal as partisan, a question of capital and political ideology, whilst also proleptically looking ahead and, in an Edward Thomas way, suggesting the existential and environmental rupture that will be unleashed by this systemic over-extraction. Coal, as the product of a great span of time and shifting environmental contexts, becomes the representation of the undoing of time and space as it has been naturalised: Lawrence's implicit apocalyptic vision of the finality of industrial capitalism, without foreknowledge of our current environmental crisis, prophetically imagines the unsustainability and radical change that needs to occur.

This tension between the sub-human and its potential to rediscover alternate forms of being, returns us to Lawrence's sense of haptic knowledge as a form of embodied consciousness that we had seen at play in the wrestling between Birkin and Gerald. We can see this enacted quite explicitly in his 1920 novel, *The Lost Girl*, in which the protagonist, Alvina Houghton, enters into a mine: 'The collier kept on talking to her, stretching his bare, grey-black, hairy arm across her vision, and pointing with his knotted hand.'[341] Lawrence's emphasis upon the damaged hand of the miner, recalls what Garrington has described as the 'potency of the knowing hand' within his work, in which tactility comes to work in tandem with a visuality that has been curtailed.[342] That the hand is knotted and mangled through his labour implicates the

[340] Timothy Clark, *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 13.
[341] D. H. Lawrence, *The Lost Girl* (London: Penguin Books, 1950 [1920]), p. 64.
[342] Garrington, *Haptic Modernism*, p. 156.

body as reflective of the material they mine; Ava Baron describes physical deformity in working men's bodies as allowing the opportunity to perform masculinity and have it publicly validated.[343] Orwell echoes this sentiment in his description of the 'blue scars' that miners carry from the coal dust entering cuts and wounds causing 'a blue stain like tattooing'.[344] This 'knotted hand' also is echoed by Lawrence's description of an ancient wall painting in an Etruscan tomb (see below) that he describes as having a 'big, exaggerated hand'.[345] Thus, physical transformations through labour *can* be registered as demonstrative of wider ontological (including spiritual) transformation. In this scene, the miner is positioned as the apex of masculinity, in which he is bestowed with a position of authority both through his maleness and through his alternate epistemological insight: 'he seemed to linger near her as if he knew – as if he knew – what? Something forever unknowable and inadmissible, something that belonged purely to the underground … knowledge humiliated, subjected, but ponderous and inevitable.' This intimation of a knowledge system that is beyond language and registered at the level of instinct, so much so that the experience of this knowledge cannot be contemplated but rather felt in terms of its effect on the spirit. Recalling the wrestling scene (described as occurring in 'the subdued light of the room') and a scene of drowning in *Women in Love*, as well as the inferred darkness experienced by the sightless Maurice Pervin, the subterranean space, in which the body is submerged in darkness, functions as an opportunity for a new kind of perceptual knowledge.[346] Indeed, this furthers the notion of the mine as a space of spiritual transformation — Alvina describes feeling as if she 'were in her tomb forever, like the dead and everlasting Egyptians' — in which because of its excess of matter, with coal as the raw material of time, any revelatory dynamics are registered through the consciousness of the body, which extends the materiality of the coal into the knowing flesh of the self.[347] In this space, because of vision's occlusion, the body becomes responsive to the minutiae of its own proprioceptive relationship to space, attuned to small environmental signals, as well as having to be responsive to any internal flashes of instinctive reaction.

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[343] Ava Baron, 'Masculinity, the Embodied Male Worker, and the Historian's Gaze', *International Labour and Working-Class History*, 69 (2006), p. 152.
[344] Orwell, Road to Wigan Pier, p. 32.
[345] D. H. Lawrence, 'Sketches of Etruscan Places', *D. H. Lawrence and Italy*, ed. Simonetta de Filippis, Paul Eggert, Mara Kalnins (London: Penguin, 1997; repr. 2007), pp. 327-441, p. 366.
[346] Lawrence, *Women in Love*, p. 280; p. 189.
[347] Lawrence, *The Lost Girl*, p. 64.

These scenes of transformative darkness within Lawrence's writing serve as symbolic iterations of his interest in primitivism as a form of creative darkness that promotes systems of unobstructed corporeal knowledge. This is made clear in his travelogue *Sketches of Etruscan Places* (1932), in which he describes the 'actual vital touch' of the wall paintings he encounters in the Etruscan tombs.[348] The visual culture of the Etruscan tombs are demonstrative to Lawrence of an essential corporeal consciousness, visible through their concentration of a haptic aesthetics: 'they really have the sense of touch; the people and the creatures are all really in touch.'[349] As with the scene of Mellors bathing, this is demonstrative of Lawrence's tactile optics, in which the dimensionality of the paintings are felt to be primarily haptically formed through an aesthetics of bodily relation rather than static visuality. He expresses this distinction when looking at later examples of work that have been made or adapted in the later classical period: 'These paintings, though they are interesting in their way [...] have suddenly lost all etruscan [sic] charm. They still have a bit of etruscan freedom, but on the whole they are Graeco-Roman, [...] all the motion is gone; the figures are stuck there without any vital flow between them. There is no touch.'[350] Touch, evidently, is the sensory modality that Lawrence finds the most representative and productive of his conceptions of vitality and lifeforce, and any absence of this becomes synonymous with a flattening of the aesthetic plain, making things statically in opposition to the implicit flux that a haptic-centric ontology would create. Garrington identifies Lawrence's fascination with the touchiness of the Etruscans as indicative of his wider interest in the notion of 'Dark seeing', meaning a way of approaching the world that take into account the essential nature (or spirit or essence) of a thing through 'the crossing of a self/other gap through skin contact'.[351] This mode of true vision necessarily has to mean a disavowal of the temptation to approach living through superficial characteristics of easy perception, of which the form of visual perception that Bertie Reid exhibits is actually, for Lawrence, its own kind of blindness. Therefore, in connecting these approaches to darkness and non-visual seeing, we can infer how Lawrence's conception of the miner of his father's generation and earlier as a 'wild' kind of entity that is corporeally linked to primitivist tactile culture of the ancient Etruscan (and Egyptian) civilizations.[352] As models of instinctual knowledge, these ancient-modern colliers possess for

[348] Lawrence, 'Sketches of Etruscan Places', p. 435.
[349] Ibid., 372.
[350] Ibid., 397.
[351] Garrington, *Haptic Modernism*, p. 158.
[352] Dolores LaChapelle, *D. H. Lawrence: Future Primitive* (Denton, TX: University of North Texas Press, 1996), p. 7.

Lawrence the same kind of 'spontaneity of the flesh' that his anatomised metaphysic aims to recover.[353] This temporal enfolding within the ontology of the collier's body implicates them as representations of a form of continuity that counteracts the very modernity that, inadvertently, are at the centre of fuelling.

With this emphasis upon the collier's body and his spatial knowledge in the dark as accessing a primitive kind of knowledge system, Lawrence makes clear the distinct ontological states that are produced when in the darkness of the mine versus the brightness of the surface world — what he calls their lack of 'daytime ambition [...and] daytime intellect'.[354] The kind of fraternity that emerges is built around the mutual corporeal consciousness that exists between the subterranean colliers. For Lawrence, this perceived comradeship born out of physical toil has its roots in his own wish for a sense of community which would facilitate the transgression of the self's indivisible boundaries by becoming part of an interrelated psychological unity. Wilson echoes this reading of Lawrence's heroic mining fraternities when she writes, 'Lawrence, who searched all his life for a form of fraternity, also compared the camaraderie of the colliers with that of soldiers in the trenches.'[355] The sense of the miner as a stand in for the solider, or rather the miner as a different kind of combatant, is that he is one who was battling for the survival of the flesh consciousness that Lawrence saw as being nullified by the 'daylight intellect' of modernity. Whilst Santanu Das has read the relationship between touch and modernity through the exclusive lens of the experience of trench warfare, his argument could equally be applicable to the role of touch within a mining context. He writes that 'Vision, sound and smell all carry the body beyond its margins; tactile experience, by contrast, stubbornly adheres to the flesh. At once intense and diffuse, working at the threshold between the self and the world, touch can be said to open up the body at a more intimate, affective level.'[356] In *The Lost Girl*, Lawrence is acutely aware of the role of touch within the mine as a process of not only abnormal knowledge acquisition but also of coming into a kind of affect which foregrounds the vulnerability of uncertainty when it describes the 'unknowable and inadmissible' nature of the experience.[357] This notion of the subterranean as an almost literal invocation of the unconscious — the Lawrentian unconscious which foregrounds bodily experience as opposed to mental — is recalled,

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[353] Lawrence, 'Sketches of Etruscan Places', p. 440.
[354] Lawrence, 'Nottingham and the Mining Countryside', p. 455.
[355] Wilson, *Burning Man*, p. 29.
[356] Santanu Das, *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 6.
[357] Lawrence, *The Lost Girl*, p. 64.

again in 'Nottingham and the Mining Countryside', in which he describes the way in which the miners retained a sense of their otherworldliness on their return to daylight:

> When the men came up into the light, they blinked. They had, in a measure, to change their flow. Nevertheless, they brought with them above ground the curious dark intimacy of the mine, the naked sort of contact, and if I think of my childhood, it is always as if there was a lustrous sword with inner darkness, like the gloss of coal, in which we moved and had our real being.[358]

That the miner is constructed as necessarily adaptive, altering their sense of being within the world, but also nonetheless retaining a glamour of mysterious, fraternal intimacy can be read as the apotheosis of Lawrence's consciousness-through-movement argument. It is important to note that the kind of mining that Lawrence is valorising here is the butty system, which retains its sense of autonomy and individualism at the level of the labourer. Once the system is reformed to privilege productivity over all else, the kind of which Gerald Crich represents in the most extreme form, the corporeality of the miner becomes a perversion. Their bodies as economic units become an excess of their function, and their collective intimacy stymied through the introduction of machinery that fragments the labour process. Orwell gives more factual detail to this ocular bewilderment that the colliers experience, describing how 'the most characteristic industrial disease is nystagmus' which 'makes the eyeballs oscillate in a strange manner when they come near a light. It is due presumably to working in half-darkness, and sometimes results in total blindness.'[359] This real risk of blindness from the conditions of the mine in some ways feeds back into Lawrence's valorisation of the removal of visual perception as the route to true embodied knowledge. When the reality of the collier's potential disablement becomes brought about through their daily burial within the deepest tunnels of the earth, there emerges a degree of distaste in Lawrence's somewhat naïve celebration of this state of perception (even if it is only ultimately symbolic). Thus, as with Thomas's fascination with tramps and gypsies, or Hardy's abstracted sense of the physicality of the labour in some of his fiction, it is worth pausing to remember the way that rural labour— agricultural or industrial — and the precarity of the rural poor is often aestheticised by a point of view who has the opportunity to sample this form of living, and does not have to endure the physical pains that a lifetime of hard toil induces.

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[358] Lawrence, 'Nottingham and the Mining Countryside', p. 455.
[359] Orwell, *Road to Wigan Pier*, pp. 43-44.

Therefore, in thinking about scenes of washing within this context of the collier's body, what must also be considered is the notion that something is lost or cast off in this process of returning to the surface world of the domestic sphere. *A Collier's Friday Night* poses the conflict between Mr Lambert and his family as being a question of class, but when considered in line with the miners as described in both *The Lost Girl* and 'Nottingham and the Mining Countryside', the sense that washing enacts a process of disembodiment and emasculation begins to emerge. In returning, through the alteration of his epidermal self, to the compromised state of the family structure, the collier finds his hard-won pure corporeality ebbing away; his 'full achievement of' his selfhood becomes transmuted into the diminished identity of father and husband.[360]

Consequently, if the function of washing is to enact a form of re-socialisation for the male who is required to return to the purview of the surface, feminine world, then this process of tactility must be read as a form of habituated self-abnegation. This reading marks a significant contrast to the kind of quiet embodiment displayed by Mellors, who has regained a sense of embodied wholeness through his purposeful extraction from the kind of domestic fray that Lawrence sees as causing this reduction of the essential self. This schematic conceptualisation of the implicit gender divisions within gaining access to true embodied knowledge, does reveal at its heart an implicit misogyny. In this discursive model, the world of the collier's wife is constructed as the site of loss and of spiritual fracture, of the cause of dulling of the sharp edges of embodied masculine subjectivity. This is never more palpable than when Lawrence writes: 'The woman almost invariably nagged about material things. [...] it's only the woman who idolizes "her own little home" — and it's always the woman at her worst, her most greedy, most possessive, most mean.'[361] Lawrence's association of all the negative qualities of the surface world with the domain of womanhood and his connection of femaleness with the smallness of avarice and defensive vindictiveness demonstrates the way in which his vision of modernity in all its sickness is rooted in feelings of emasculation.[362] With the semi-mythic figure of the collier being transformed by the onslaught of aggressive productivity, as represented by Gerald Crich's

[360] Lawrence, 'Study of Thomas Hardy', p. 12.
[361] Lawrence, 'Nottinghamshire and the Mining Countryside', pp. 457-8.
[362] We can see the shift in his thinking in which he had once related regret at the presentation of Arthur Morell in *Sons and Lovers* (a stand-in for his own father) and had often thought about rewriting it to reflect his feelings of increasing benevolence to him: 'When children, they had accepted the dictum of their mother that their father was a drunkard, therefore was contemptible, but that as Lawrence had grown older he had come to see him in a different light; to see his unquenchable fire and relish for living.' From Earl and Achsah Brewster, *D. H. Lawrence: Reminiscences and Correspondence*, pp. 254-55 in LaChapelle, *D. H. Lawrence: Future Primitive*, p. 8

reforms, we can see how the loss of this essentialised vision of manly selfhood is channelled by Lawrence as symptomatic of the larger destruction of the embodied subject under modernity.

One short story which complicates this polarised iteration of the gender dynamic at play with the collier figure is in the 'Odour of Chrysanthemums'. In this narrative the washing of the miner's body becomes a ritual of emotional reintegration into a version of cathartic wholeness, and the epistemological ruptures are mended through the tactility of the cleansing hand. The story concerns the fractious marriage of Elizabeth Bates and her collier husband, Walter. The narrative opens on Elizabeth waiting with dread for his return from a day in the pits. She waits and waits for Walter's return, all the while caring for their two children and anxiously assuming that he has stopped off at the local pub and is likely drinking himself into a stupor. Word soon reaches her, however, of an accident in the pit; a coalface has buckled and collapsed, trapping someone in the mineshaft. It is not long before the realisation that Walter was the trapped man: caught in a sealed chamber formed by the subsided coal, he had already suffocated before he could be rescued. His body, 'half naked, all grimed with coal-dust' is brought to the house and laid out on the parlour floor.[363] Lawrence would return to this narrative of the dead miner's body being washed by his wife in several other iterations, one such notable being the backstory of Clifford's nurse, Ivy Bolton in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, whose husband was killed years before in an explosion at the pits owned by Clifford's family. Despite her physical engagement with his body, Ivy states: 'I've never believed it, though I washed him with my own hands'.[364] Here, Ivy intimates the process of washing her dead husband's body as an experience of fantastical reality, in which his corporeal singularity does not supersede her emotional relation to him.

Conversely, Elizabeth in 'Odours', experiences an acute sense of Walter's complete materiality. Looking at his lifeless body, she is struck by how completely separate he is from her: 'She saw him, how utterly inviolable he lay in himself. She had nothing to do with him.'[365] Walter, now only a body, is asserted as a pure materiality. Whether this should be interpreted as a termination of Lawrence's conception of spiritual vitality or, conversely, its apotheosis is an ambiguous question. Certainly, he has, to some extent, entered into the state of complete corporeal being, and whether materiality alive or not, there is a sense that he is still spiritually vital: 'He was still warm, for the mine was hot where he had died. [...] Elizabeth embraced the

[363] D. H. Lawrence, 'Odour of Chrysanthemums', *Collected Stories*, pp. 361-79, p. 374.
[364] Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, p. 125.
[365] Lawrence, 'Odour of Chrysanthemums', p. 375.

body of her husband, with cheek and lips. She seemed to be listening, inquiring, trying to get some connection. But she could not. She was driven away. He was impregnable.'[366] This sense of him as cut off now from the possibility of mutuality, driven by death into an absolute state of self-fulfilment, does suggest, on the other hand, that we might read Walter's body in this moment as a perversion of the vital consciousness that bodily contact should, according to Lawrence's credo, achieve. This ambivalence of how to accurately read the body when it has become supremely material is reflected at the level of the narrative world in which Elizabeth cannot orient her emotions. This ambiguity, at this moment in the text, seems purposely engendered by Lawrence, who demonstrates the way that rituals of the body actually offer entry points into connecting with the relational consciousness that corporeal knowledge can offer.

Elizabeth and Walter's mother, prepare to wash the grimy corpse clean of all the coal dust, sweat, and other such dirt. Elizabeth begins by 'carefully' washing his face, enacting the kind of loving, tender contact that had not existed between her and her husband for many years. Walter's mother, out of jealousy, demands to assist and we are told that they 'worked in silence for a long time'.[367] There is a solemnity to the scene that echoes a biblical anointing, with Elizabeth and her mother-in-law almost standing in for the women who went with 'spices so that they might go to anoint Jesus' body' (though crucially did not actually need to since he had already risen).[368] In the process of washing the corpse, the action of cleaning and returning the flesh to its nakedness, both women experience divergent emotions about the 'isolation of the human soul'.[369] It is in the act of tactile contact – 'the touch of the dead man's body gave them strange emotions' – that the boundary between the materiality of the flesh and body as a conduit for the soul is brought into tension. Through the undeniable materiality of her husband that Elizabeth is now forced to reckon with their emotional subterfuge and cruelty toward one another: the act of touching his skin provokes recognition of her failings, of the trajectory of her life away from finding a true vital consciousness: 'He was dead, and her living flesh had no place against his. A great dread and weariness held her: she was so unavailing. Her life was gone like this. [...] This separate stranger with whom she had been living as one flesh [...] utter, intact separateness, obscured by the heat of living'.[370] Lawrence stages the emotional and ethical

[366] Ibid., 376.
[367] Ibid.
[368] *Holy Bible*, Authorised King James version, Mark 16:1.
[369] Lawrence, 'Odour of Chrysanthemums', p. 376.
[370] Ibid. p. 377.

dissolution of domestic disharmony through this confrontation with the recognition that the body is at the centre of all existence. The surface of Walter's material consciousness for Elizabeth has the effect of forcing her to admit that she had been living falsely, that the '*as* one flesh' [my emphasis] was not the same as its actuality: 'they had come together, exchanging their nakedness repeatedly.' This notion of the false corporeal relation is something that Lawrence will continually explore throughout his work, although an obvious illustration of it is in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in which Connie, before starting her relationship with Mellors, engages in an affair with one of her husband's friend which whilst giving her 'a subtle sort of self-assurance, something blind and [...] mechanical', the two nonetheless remain 'external' to one another.[371] Lawrence's interest in the body as site in which the inside/outside of spiritual vitality, or rather authentic consciousness can become enacted is shown in this revelation of Elizabeth's that, despite their years of physical proximity and sexual interaction, the inner intention of her corporeal selfhood has been disengaged.

In the touching of the dead man's skin, the body becomes the focus of emotional and spiritual restoration, in which the purity of Walter's silence necessitates a coming into knowledge for Elizabeth. Interestingly, this recognition is framed in terms of blindness: 'she knew she had never seen him, he had never seen her, they had met in the dark and had fought in the dark'.[372] Although the absence of vision in this description could indicate the kind of corporeal relationality that Lawrence so values, it is evident that here the framing of blindness and darkness is more aligned to the kind of sightlessness of Bertie Reid. This is not the 'vital touch' or the 'Dark seeing' of the Etruscan kind of embodied knowledge, rather their meeting in the dark denotes a relationship that did not reach emotional mutuality, their discrete subjectivities were too locked in an oppositional struggle to afford a sympathetic union. So, whilst the washing of Mr Lambert's body might imply a re-inscription of his bodily presence into a domestic context, or Willy Horsepool an assertion of his excessive masculinity, in 'Odour of Chrysanthemums' Lawrence depicts the touching of the miner's body as a process of self-recognition, in which the nakedness of his flesh induces a spiritual transformation in the other: 'She was grateful to death, which restored the truth. And she knew she was not dead'.[373] In many ways this scene functions as the reversal of Connie watching Mellors wash in that the process of optical tactility was

[371] Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, p. 69; p. 68.
[372] Lawrence, 'Odour of Chrysanthemums', p. 377.
[373] Ibid., 378.

foregrounded, in that vision became an extension of the haptic modalities as Mellors' self-touch became imaginatively embodied as him touching Connie. Whereas here, touch instead becomes a form of seeing, offering a new way of accessing the inner selfhood that the epistemologies of an oppressive hegemonic modernity forces one to disengage with; like the knowledge systems of the dark subterranean chambers, it is a form of depth-seeing that elides the surface-nature of visuality. Walter's ecstatic embodiment that his death in the mine has enacted — 'his look was other than hers, his way was not her way' — has now been translated to his wife through their tactile contact.[374]

As an allegory for Christ's sacrifice, Walter's death and its translation of embodied knowledge to Elizabeth should be read as a form of expiation. David Janzen describes expiation as 'a ritual response to sin meant to cope with or eliminate its expected negative effects', often using the conceptual framework of purification, or cleansing.[375] Therefore, when read as a process of expiation, the act of cleaning comes not only from the context of Elizabeth cleansing Walter's body, but also reciprocally, Walter's body imbues Elizabeth with her own purification of self: 'her touch was humble on his body'.[376] As with Maurice in 'The Blind Man', touch is as much a metaphysical coming together, and here in its ritual function, it serves as the route to forgiveness, of entering a state of grace through a reawakened sense of being; if it is not Walter's resurrection, it is Elizabeth's.

Conclusion: Lawrence's Environmental Ecology

We can see how washing is used in Lawrence's fiction to engage broader questions of how selfhood might be fulfilled through an embodied form of consciousness. The figure of the collier serves as a unique distillation of a Lawrence's theories and codes of the body as the site in which pure forms of knowledge systems might be achieved. However, this figure is also the centre of the discursive division between this kind of essential embodied ontology and, as Gerald Crich in *Women in Love* views it, 'thousands of blackened, slightly distorted human beings with red mouths, all moving subjugate to his will' that hard-lined industrial capitalism produces.[377]

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[374] Ibid.
[375] David Janzen, 'Sin and Expiation', *The Oxford Handbook of Ritual and Worship*, ed. Samuel E. Balentine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), pp. 289-300, p. 289.
[376] Lawrence, 'Odour of Chrysanthemums', p. 378.
[377] Lawrence, *Women in Love*, p. 230.

This distortion of the body is in turn reflected in the distortion of the landscape, in which an exhausted rural England becomes a theatre for the depletion of the self. This is evident in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, in which the environment of Wragby wood is made co-extensive with the state of both Mellors and Clifford's physical damage from the Great War:

> [...] suddenly, on the left, came a clearing where there was nothing but a ravel of dead bracken, a thin and spindly sapling leaning here and there, big sawn stumps, showing their tops and their grasping roots, lifeless. [...] This was one of the places that Sir Geoffrey [Clifford's deceased father] had cut during the war for trench timber. The whole knoll, which rose softly on the right of the riding, was denuded and strangely forlorn.[378]

From the earlier reference to the woods of Wragby Hall as a place that harks back to an ancient, semi-mythic past, this denuded landscape serves as a sudden assertion of the hard realities of an industrial modernity that even the managed parkland cannot keep at bay. Kalaidjian points out, the 'landscape presents an entire trajectory of industrial England from the woods of Robin Hood to the trenches of WWI.'[379] Lawrence draws upon a language of curtailed life here, recalling Hardy's vital trees, in the framing of the cut down trunks almost as corpses 'grasping' for salvation. This aesthetic presentation of the scene of deforestation is a purposeful distillation of modernity as a form of wreckage, in which the landscape of the Wragby estate is transformed into a metonymic image of the Western Front. Certainly, given that this scene is brought to us during an outing of Clifford and Connie, there is a sense that its presentation is through Clifford's subjective point of view; it is a landscape that is post-traumatically framed.

Amongst this environmental depletion, however, it is easy to miss an important indication that Lawrence embeds within this scene. This is the presence of 'a thin and spindly sapling', which, although evidently not an indication of robust regrowth, does indicate a muted continuation of life within the terrain. Kalaidjian reads in Lawrence an interest in the relationship between exhaustion and creation, arguing that 'positive inertia', meaning 'the cultivation of energy', is in fact part of the process of regeneration.[380] This understanding of the building of energy resources within the body or environment, draws upon the same attention to bodily vulnerability as a form of creation: '"positive inertia" [...is] an attention to the limits, needs, and fragility of human life serves as an important counterpoint to modernism's obsession

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[378] Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, p. 82.
[379] Kalaidjian, *Exhausted Ecologies*, p. 66.
[380] Ibid., p. 47.

with autonomy, excess, and limitless production.'[381] Therefore, we might read in this scene of otherwise extreme environmental depletion, an indication that Lawrence envisions the possibility for ecological renewal; the thin sapling is evidentiary of the process of becoming, gathering its energetic resources in order to, like the fiery red poppy that will 'disclose its red', find the true expression of itself. It is then through that development that the possibility of relationality will emerge.

In some ways, this sapling is the epitome of Lawrence's notion of the One Will, in that it emerges organically in spite of the context which would otherwise encourage its cessation. Therefore, when it becomes apparent that Clifford is having it replanted, it is for the purpose of re-creation rather than regeneration: 'I want this wood perfect … untouched. I want nobody to trespass in it.'[382] Clifford's patrician exclusivity demonstrates a version of environmental consciousness not too far away from the collier's wives that Lawrence so derides: his restoration of the wood is not for the vivification of the land but rather for its mortification. It is a vision of the past that he wishes to stage, not a promise of the future. In recreating the woods as they were, but falsely, Clifford desires to restore his own body back to its earlier capacities; however, given the rupture that cannot be denied, either in Clifford or the woodland, this would merely be a form of negative inertia, or keeping the land as a space of 'self-preservation' rather than really willing it to flourish with the vitality of its future regeneration.[383] In fencing it off for private use, it simply upholds the industrial model of classifying the environment as somewhere for either extraction or for reification through leisure.

As we have seen, the progression of collier from heroic embodiment of a vital corporeal consciousness to a sublimated figure who is the victim of, and inadvertent upholder of, a destructive modernity that has eroded the possibility for the self to come into sustained ecological consciousness. Where this leaves both the miner and the environment by the time of 1928's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is in need of a radical political and ecological reconfiguration: 'Something that men *should* have was bred and killed out of them'.[384] We can see hints of this in a scene in which Connie is watching the local colliers head home from the pit:

> Incarnate ugliness, and yet alive! What would become of them all? Perhaps, with the passing of the coal they would disappear again, off the face of the earth. They had

[381] Ibid, p. 45.
[382] Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, p. 83.
[383] Kalaidjian, *Exhausted Ecologies*, p. 59.
[384] Lawrence, *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, p. 211.

> appeared out of nowhere in their thousands, when the coal had called for them. Perhaps they were only weird fauna of the coal-seams.[385]

Connie's ruminations seem to function akin to the washing of the collier's body: it is a macro-image of cleansing. The socio-historical implications of the mass eradication of a people are undeniable, especially when this novel is placed within the wider context of fascism. However, if we see this cleansing of the earth as synonymous with the cessation of industrialism, rather than the proletariat itself, then we can see an ecological politics coursing through Lawrence's text. Del Ivan Janik sees Lawrence as standing 'at the beginning of the modern posthumanist tradition' in his reorientation of ontology as phenomenon that transcends the limits of an anthropocentric model of being.[386] Miners, like Walter in 'Odour of Chrysanthemums' have to be sacrificed, in order for us, as with his wife Elizabeth, to be able to come back into contact with an essential being that industrial capitalism has, almost, destroyed. If the process of washing the miner's body can be analogised as a larger process of washing away destructive industrialism, producing a new sensibility for the subject that is integrated into an ecological system of relations, then we can see how Lawrence views rurality as intimately connected to his model of vital being. Indeed, he himself asserted this notion, writing in a letter, 'Believe me, my feet are more sure upon the earth than you will allow – given that the earth is a living body, not a dead fact.'[387] Therefore, in Lawrence, we can see how the body reverberates beyond the limits of its own material actuality; the earth, like the body, is defined by a consciousness that centres being as an expressive potentiality. In rural England, Lawrence saw a complex of vital and deadened spaces, but like the touch of the collier's skin, he believed it was through an awareness of ourselves as bodies that are in systems of relation that this ecological vitality might be resurrected.

In the next chapter we will see how similar concerns with revival animated an attention to folk cultures and customs that seemed at risk, whether in actuality or not, from modernity in the 1920s. Similarly to Lawrence, both Butts and Warner envision the rural as a space for radical socio-political change that might be achieved through an attention to sensory interrelation. Unlike him, however, they see this potential as being invested with a specifically feminine orientation toward the supernatural capacities of the rural to offer regeneration through either mythic nativism (Butts) or an ecologically focused radical social reformation (Warner).

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[385] Ibid.
[386] Del Van Janik in Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2007), p. 88.
[387] Lawrence in a letter to Cynthia Asquith, quoted in Dolores LaChapelle, *Future Primitive*, p. 86.

Chapter 4

Rural Folk Culture, Mythic Bodies, and the Sensory in Mary Butts and Sylvia Townsend Warner

On 6th of May 1924, the then recently defeated Conservative Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin (who would be reinstated by the year's close) delivered a speech to the patriotic Royal Society of St. George at their annual dinner. In the speech, the subject of which was the nature of Englishness, Baldwin identified a mythic pastoralism that he believed lay at the heart of the historic national character: 'there comes into my mind a wonder as to what England may stand for in the minds of generations to come if our country goes on [...] in seeing her fields converted into towns. (To me, England is the country, and the country is England.)'[388] He ended his speech with a lyrical rumination upon rural England as a transhistorical phenomenon which has power enough to endure great external pressures and changes, such as the uncertain future of the British Empire:

> The sounds of England, the tinkle of hammer on anvil in the country smith, the corncrake on a dewy morning, the sound of the scythe against the whetstone, and the sight of a plough team coming over the brow of a hill, the sight that has been in England since England was a land, and may be seen in England long after the Empire has perished and every works in England has ceased to function, for centuries the one eternal sight of England.[389]

Baldwin's sentimental Romanticism leans on a strand of mythmaking that sees the present as contiguous with a past ancestry who were tied to the land. His is a paternalistic vision that constructs agricultural England as an emotional centre for national identity. His emphasis upon rural craft and manual skill implicates a version of rural life that is community focused, and which places male labour at the apex of this benevolent arcadia. Philip Williamson argues that whilst it is persuasive to view Baldwin's celebration of rural virtue as reflective of wider contemporary politics, that we should understand 'his references to England and its countryside'

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[388] Stanley Baldwin, 'England', *On England and Other Addresses* (London: Philip Allan & Co., 1926), pp. 1-9, p. 6, <https://archive.org/details/in.ernet.dli.2015.470280/mode/2up> [accessed 10 Sept 2023].
[389] Ibid., p. 7

as being 'intended as moral statements, about character, place and home, about social harmony, and about the presumed native virtues of steadiness, kindness, humanity, individuality and love of justice and truth.'[390] In using an approximation of rural England as indicative of good morality, Baldwin's speech does demonstrate the ways in which in the 1920s a search for coherency in the face of increasingly disparate and fragmented experiences within society found in the models of rural England's pastness an opportunity for psychological unity.

As part of this backward-glancing impulse for finding cultural and social cohesion, this period also bore witness to a rise in attentiveness to the past through the interest in folklore and traditional rural culture. This emerges in diverse contexts from the performing of folk dance and music, to the revival of the witch as a cultural and intellectual talking point, to the popularisation of the vernacular style of architecture in the expanding suburbs, and in the promise of the pastoral idyll in the newly developed metro-land communities of London's rural fringe.[391] In the realm of literature, there emerges in this decade two distinct voices offering diverse interpretations of the relationship between female power and rural culture, Mary Butts and Sylvia Townsend Warner. Attention to the work of both allows us to bring a greater nuance to our understanding of the rural in the modernist years by offering two diverse interpretations of rurality as a space uniquely suited for the reshaping of female selfhood.

The relationship between modern and folk iterations of selfhood and its determination through rural environments are explored within the novels *Armed with Madness* (Butts, 1929), and *Lolly Willowes* (Warner, 1926). Both texts demonstrate a vision of the rural as a space charged with a latent strangeness. This strangeness reflects feelings of the spectralisation of rural culture(s), in which such factors as depopulation, cultural homogenization, and the encroachment of urban expansion produces a sense that rural society, as it declines, becomes psychically ever more potent. Warner and Butts engage with rural landscapes as places haunted and stalked by entities larger than the material realities that compose them. In drawing upon traditional folk cultures and oral tales of supernatural doings, the countryside is fashioned into the place of national haunting, its eeriness serving as a counterbalance to urban metropolitanism's hegemonic rationalism. Mark Fisher's definition of the eerie as a phenomenon 'constituted by a *failure of absence* or by a *failure of presence*' is useful in thinking

[390] Philip Williamson, 'Baldwin and a United Nation', *French Journal of British Studies*, 28.1 (2023), pp. 1-23, p. 11.
[391] See Dennis Edward and Ron Pigram, *The Romance of Metro-Land* (Tunbridge Wells: Midas Books, 1979), <https://archive.org/details/romanceofmetrola0000edwa/page/n7/mode/2up> [accessed 10 November 2023].

about the way these texts counteract the erosion of traditional rural cultures through their narratives of folkloric intervention into knowledge systems that attempt to un-work their destabilising effects.[392] When placed within the larger context of 1920s revivalist interest in national and local histories, as well as the emergence of eccentric subcultures such as the Kibbo Kift, the opportunities of rural lore and folk practices afforded new ways of approaching the present through an attuning to the very cultural traditions that have been reformed into rituals of renewal. Additionally, the widespread staging of the historical pageant across the country from the early decades of the century and into the 1920s and 1930s suggests there was an emotional necessity at both national and local levels to establish and reinforce origin narratives for community identity.[393] Typically, these displays aimed to activate feelings of collective history, in which the narrative aesthetic framework of an imagined past works to forge a sense of unified identity based upon emotions of mutual kinship. This kinship often foregrounded a relatively conservative vision of history in which the peasant is a symbolic figure, representative of an essential spirit of nationhood due to their imbrication within a rural landscape that is viewed as an uncorrupted version of place.[394] Amy Palmer writes that the 'peasants of each nation were seen as the truest carriers of the volksgeist. The peasantry was in ruder health elsewhere on the continent than in England in the late nineteenth century but nonetheless concerns about its imminent demise were widespread.'[395] The tradition of the ethnic and racial origination of a rural or peasant folk culture has its roots in Romantic Nationalism, in which the ancestral peasant is presented as an "authentic" vision of true citizenship — a concept that will become central to the mythological and visual credo of extreme political movements across Europe in the 1930s.[396]

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[392] Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, 3rd Edn. (London: Repeater, 2016), p. 61.

[393] See *Restaging the Past: Historical Pageants, Culture and Society in Modern Britain*, ed. Angela Bartie, Linda Fleming, Mark Freeman, Alexander Hutton and Paul Readman (London: UCL Press, 2020); Ayako Yoshino, *Pageant Fever: Local History and Consumerism in Edwardian England* (Tokyo: Waseda University Press, 2011).

[394] This continues the tradition established during the Romantic era, in which the peasant class, at threat from industrialisation, became a focus for lively re-inscriptions of rural customs as living fossils of a rural localism that is by its very nature pre-modern. The Arts and Crafts Movement, which emerged in the mid-nineteenth-century, but whose influence was felt strongest in the decades leading up to and after the century's turn, can be seen as the missing link in the connection between Romanticism's celebration of the ancestral peasant and the adoption and translation of it in the age of modernism as a locus for communal and national self-image.

[395] Amy Palmer, 'Radical Conservatism and International Nationalism: The Peasant Arts Movement and Its Search for the Country Heart of England', *Cultural and Social History*, 15.5 (2018), pp. 663-80, pp. 665-6.

[396] In Germany, the Nazi's 'Blut und Boden [Blood and Soil]' slogan reflects the belief in the German peasantry as the basis of Aryan race and thereby symbolised a purity of German citizenship. Conversely, the kulaks (land-owning peasant) became a figure of struggle in the Soviet Union, representing a resistance to the policies of Stalinist collectivisation; see Oleksandr Dovzhenko's 1930 film *Earth* which illustrates this. Finally, the peasant became a symbol for the Republican resistance to fascism during the Spanish Civil War; for example, see discussion of Hanns

When the rural is considered in these terms as spaces of disruptive absence/presence, the two novels explored in this chapter draw upon the strangeness of folk cultures and lore to ask questions about the relationship between selfhood, ideology, and environmental change. Positioning folklore in diverse ways within their narrative schemes, these texts are unified in drawing upon the pliability of the supernatural and a nonstandard, even anarchic, approach to history as a route to pointing to the opportunities and risks of the future. This engagement with, what Macfarlane calls, the 'eerie counter-culture' or 'occulture' hold radical undercurrents in its exploration of the rural as a potentially disruptive entity that might offer various counternarratives to an otherwise uniform system of progressive modernity.[397] Both novels employ narratives which centre the experience of female protagonists who live in rural environments and remain peripheral in relation to a larger social order or community structures. They are, furthermore, both engaged with some degree of folk culture and ritual practice, drawing upon association with witchcraft to produce texts that problematise the line between the rational and the supernatural. The line between folk practices and the occult is often indistinct, and writers of the mid to late Victorian age such as Hardy (e.g., *The Return of the Native*) or Machen (*The Great God Pan*), and those of the same period such as Mary Webb, have demonstrated the complex affiliation and discursive pressure that emerges between traditional customs and institutionalised, hegemonic rationalism. This enquiry is continued in the work of Butts and Warner, who, like Hardy, Machen, and Webb, nonetheless find opportunities for cultural coherency in these apparently fading or obsolete epistemological systems.

The role of the folk as a political entity within this period is germane to wider societal investigations into the way history might afford the unification and/or psychical balm for a nation still in the aftershock of the Great War's decimation. As a space of less rapid and obvious modernity, rural England offers a legible landscape in which to read into the cultural assumptions that frame these environments as holding the source of an authentic identity (be it national, gender, or racial). For both writers, the female body acts as a doorway or threshold linking modernity and tradition. Sensory experience and its relationship to knowledge is used as

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Eisler's 'Peasant Canata', Diego Alonso, 'Transnational Networks of Communist Musical Propaganda in the Spanish Civil War', *Journal of War and Culture Studies*, 14.4 (2021), pp. 454-78.

[397] Robert Macfarlane, 'The eeriness of the English countryside', *The Guardian*, 10th April 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/apr/10/eeriness-english-countryside-robert-macfarlane> [accessed 3 Mar 2021].

the bridging mechanism to open up questions of female autonomy, ecological contiguity, and the aestheticisation of rural folk cultures.

Despite their divergent approaches, both authors explore the connection between rural space and the emergence of self-consciousness through the sensory capacities of the body. For Warner, this becomes an enquiry into liberation, in which the process of self-knowledge is intimately connected with the capacities of the self to be attuned to the physical world. Conversely, Butts sees the rural as a space in which self-knowledge is already embodied in those who have a native locality, and in which femininity is shown to be ontologically enmeshed with the landscape around it. This chapter will explore this question of the interaction between folk and rural cultures with modernity through these distinct propositions. Commencing with Butts, we will look at her novel *Armed with Madness* as an example of a wider culture of nativist modernism. Butts's mysticism fuses landscape politics and histories with a metaphysics of the female body, drawing upon classical and pagan fertility models to produce a text that advocates for a true rurality as being the domain of the racially pure, heterosexual union. Warner's adaptation of traditional spinsterhood-witchcraft narratives for her novel of self-discovery uses moments of haptic contact to investigate the ways in which attention to sensory modalities can stimulate changing ethical and personal ontologies. The limits and possibilities of gender identity and the apprehension of nature through sensorial and somatic systems of being are brought out in both texts which position the female body as a contested territory in the socio-cultural landscape of 1920s England.

Ancient-Modern Bodies: Mary Butt's *Armed with Madness*

In her memoir, *The Crystal Cabinet*, recounting her childhood spent growing up in a country manor on the outskirts of Poole Harbour, Dorset, Butts describes a memory of playing with pebbles on the nursery floor. Recalled in sensual terms, in which the 'chink and shine and colour and lick' of the 'hot-smell' of 'fire-stone' when struck against a flint, it was from this instance of juvenile tactility that she 'began to learn the meaning of stone.'[398] This meaning was not an apprehension of geological properties or even an optical awareness of the relationship between light and form, rather it concerned the inherent aliveness of things. This is an aliveness that is hidden from rational perception and only comprehensible to those in possession of a particular

[398] Mary Butts, *The Crystal Cabinet: My Childhood at Salterns* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1988), <https://archive.org/details/crystalcabinetmy00butt/page/n5/mode/2up> [accessed 11th May 2023], p. 12.

sensitivity: 'The life, the potency that lives in the kind of earth-stuff that is hard and coloured and cold. Yet is alive and full of secrets, with a sap and pulse and a being all to itself.'[399] Butts's conflation of multiple different expressions (pulse, sap) that are representational of vitality demonstrates her interest in finding linguistic parallels reflective of the kind of secret aliveness and ontological vibrancy that she believes the world to possess. It furthermore demonstrates her relationship to the concept of animism as a central principle in her model of what a pure version of rurality might mean. This is comprehended as an awareness of the potency of nature and understood as the enchantment of the sensible world through its being invested with a spiritual dimension that underlies its material properties.

With pebbles functioning as synecdochic fragments of the entire natural world's geological foundations, Butts plays with this sense of scale by moving the view out towards the wider region of south-west England. The landscape of Dorset, with its moorland tors and Jurassic-era coastline, are part of the body of the region:

> So that now, living in a country with all its bones showing, whose fabric and whole essence is stone, which is dominated and crowned by stones; standing stones on the moors, cairn and castle and 'coty-house', each field transfixed by a phallos; on whose beaches are found jewels, in whose quarries veins of marble and crystal: neither stone nor flesh are without contact with the other, in extension of the contact made so many years before on the nursery floor.[400]

For Butts, landscape and corporeality are brought into contiguity within the personal temporality of memory; it is through the sensuous capacities, in this instance hapticity, that stone and flesh give form to one another. Indeed, in this region of south-west England, Hardy's Wessex, Butts finds ripe possibilities for experiencing intensities of aesthetic and political forces. Just as with the elision between a handheld pebble and the lichen-rooted standing stones, for Butts the region is a psychic landscape in which personal memory is stratified into broader historical narratives.

In Butts's writing, the landscape is revealed to be an environment in which the scales and forms in which selfhood is conceived are shown to be pliable. With its standing stones and remnants of Celtic and Druidic mythos, it is a landscape that is borne out of enchanted instabilities and uncertain histories. Functioning within the same dynamic of myth, certainties, such as material actuality are transformed into ambivalent entities, with objects and narratives

[399] Ibid.
[400] Ibid.

becoming upended from their definitionally singular physical state. National identity for Butts is tied to this ability to access a mystic rendering of the world through genealogical heritage. Under her comprehension, this is accessible only through those possessing 'patrician virtue' and the instinctive insight to make legible 'an elliptical and august code alien to "foreigners"'.[401] In this exclusive terrain, the ancient continually inflects into the contemporary, and forms of modernity are qualified by their relationship to a living past that is supreme. When framed in these terms, Butts's work offers an opportunity for examining how the modernist avant-garde, of which her prose is engaged with both stylistically and discursively, can be redirected into non-metropolitan contexts. This confrontation between an environment defined by its historic identity and an aesthetic style that employs difficult effects of high modernist style that Butts's version of rural England is animated into something discursively restless.

As a site with long and diverse histories, Dorset offers her the opportunity to explore this interest in the energetic ontologies of things rooted in sites of their genealogical origin. It is this fixation upon history and multiple forms of lineage (historical, genetic, cultural, racial) within her work that causes Butts to sit somewhat tangentially to her peers.[402] Despite her somewhat peripheral fame within today's modernist canon, Butts's personal friendships and relationships show a figure at the centre of the decade's most aesthetically radical innovators, associating with figures such as Jean Cocteau, Ezra Pound, and Wyndham Lewis amongst others. Her interest in the potential for rurality to be afforded unique spiritual and aesthetic intensities unavailable to other kinds of space might explain why her work has always been an awkward fit into any coherent group or school of the modernist avant-garde. Although perhaps suitably, it is her peripherality, both aesthetically and geographically (being a Dorset native and eventually settling in Cornwall), chimes with her own discursive concerns with the rural being tied up with questions of exclusivity and impenetrability.

It is these concerns with bewilderment that suffuse her novel *Armed with Madness*, in which Butts explores this confluence of modernist aesthetics placed in dialogue with an environment animated by a disorienting sense of historicity. Her interrogation of this acute sense of the rural places at its centre a dependency between the individual and their genealogical

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[401] Andrew Radford, *The Lost Girls: Demeter-Persephone and the Literary Imagination 1850-1930* (Amsterdam; New York, NY: Rodopi, 2007), p. 279.

[402] Although as the decade matures, there is a swing from more canonical figures such as Woolf (for example, in 1928 novel *Orlando: A Biography*), towards exploring the accretions of the past in their work. This is an area of interest that revealed greater flourishing during the following decade. See, Esty, *A Shrinking Island*.

lineage (both familial and cultural/racial). In the novel, she investigates the relationship between the individual and place by casting her characters into a landscape that is disparately readable or hostile depending upon one's genealogical relationship (familial and cultural/racial) to its complex temporo-spatial dimensions. As we will see, this understanding of place in Butts's vision rests upon a determinist dependency in which the self is either expanded or closed off by the landscape's many enchanted dynamics.

The narrative of *Armed with Madness* follows a rippling structure, in which the central event — a discovery of a chalice — reverberates through a narrative whose action is more concerned with the accrual of responses and effects than with any psychological development or emotional trajectory. The text revolves around a group of bohemians who congregate at the country house of the Taverner siblings, Scylla and Felix, located in an isolated corner of Dorset. Two of the group, Picus and Clarence, both former soldiers living together not far from the manor, perhaps romantically, bring to the house a jade cup that Picus has discovered down a well. This cup is charged by Picus to be the lost chalice of the Sanc-Grail myth, a claim of provenance which is hotly debated by others within the set. Concurrently, Picus and Carston, a visiting American, become engaged in a rivalry for the affection of Scylla, whom they are drawn to, in part, through her ambiguously presented supernatural authority. After some contestation, the chalice is found to be fraudulent, placed in the well as a prank by Picus who also wins Scylla's affection, much to Carston's disdain. In light of these rifts, the group disbands, and the novel proceeds to follow each character's subsequent movements. Felix, Scylla's homosexual brother, heads to Paris and engages in a heady but ruinous love triangle amongst the bohemian café society of Montmartre — a ripe send up by Butts of much of the avant-garde's shallow posturing. Scylla goes off to London, and strikes the ire of an old friend, Lydia, who had once been enamoured with Picus. In revenge, Clarence is sent a letter from Lydia outlining Scylla's treachery. On return, Scylla visits Clarence, who has been gradually going mad due to the severing of his relationship with Picus combined with some implied post-traumatic stress disorder from his time in the trenches. A sculptor, he has become fixated upon Picus and has been modelling him in clay in order to 'torture' the sculpture with arrows. On her appearance, the now-deranged Clarence assaults Scylla, tying her to Picus' statue and begins to throw arrows at her, in which she is wounded but not killed. By chance, Carston manages to rescue Scylla and the next morning Clarence seems restored, unaware of his moment of insanity and the violent assault. The novel ends with Felix, having overindulged in Paris' vices, returning with a displaced

White Russian in tow, whose encounter with the Dorset landscape reminds him of the land from which he is now exiled.

Drawing from both Grail and Ancient Greek mythology, Butts's narrative is told in cacophonous registers, in which the aforementioned plot developments are half buried under a linguistic territory that is thick with a sense of ambiguity and disarray. It is this aesthetics of disjunction that creates much of the novel's energetic complexity which, when brought into contact with a narrative that moves between modernist tropes (e.g., Montmartre, sculpture, madness) and discourses of ancient legend, demonstrate Butts's interest in exploring aesthetic hybridity. This investment in modernist stylistics itself animates a politics of exclusivity that is reflected in the text's adaptation of avant-garde cosmopolitanism alongside an elitist tendency to create an aesthetics of obscurity and inaccessibility.[403]

From its opening paragraph, *Armed with Madness* reveals itself as a narrative concerned with questions of the inexpressible, of potent presences that are unspoken, but which nonetheless structure the ways in which consciousness is experienced through the sensory capacities. Butts constructs the environment of Dorset as a vibrant terrain which is energised by an intensity of the sensory domain; the text opens with an auditory framing of the scene through competing contrasts of the jays 'screeching in the wood', the 'clattering' of a hay-cutter, and the 'light wind, rising off the diamond sea.'[404] This picture of a lively environment introduces a sense of circularity through its implication of simultaneity which disrupts any hierarchical point of focus. Therefore, when this 'Marvellously noisy' cacophony is disturbed by silence being 'let through', the discursive implication is that the silence of the scene possesses greater significance to the essential components of this environment. This is furthered through Butts's animation of silence as not an absence of sound but rather as a presence in itself. The weight of this presence, we are told, is so substantial that it requires a particularly attuned sensitivity for its endurance on behalf of those who come into this place: 'The silence [...] was a complicated production of stone rooms, the natural silence of empty grass, and the equivocal, personal silence of the

[403] We can place Butts's work within the larger school of modernist avant-garde works that are constructed to reflect a degree of disorientation and bewilderment upon the reader, such as with Eliot's 'The Waste Land'. Furthermore, John Carey comments on this self-conscious obscurity as born out of a suspicion of mass politics and culture. Focusing upon Eliot's notion that poetry 'in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be difficult', Carey writes that 'the placing of art beyond the reach of the mass was at times deliberate.' He continues, 'As an element in the reaction against mass values the intellectuals brought into being the theory of the avant-garde, according to which the mass is, in art and literature, always wrong. What is truly meritorious in art is seen as the prerogative of a minority'. John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880–1939*, (New York, NY: St Martin's Press, 1993), pp. 17-18.

[404] Butts, 'Armed with Madness', p. 3.

wood.'[405] The rural environment in Butts's novel is textured by its tricky relationship to the perceptual faculties. This mystifying nature of the Dorset landscape is present throughout the text, with one such example being when Carston walks across the cliff tops, encountering a sense of 'a formidable other world, its edges drawn in fire'.[406] This manifold actuality of Butts's vision of the natural world is something which is both apprehended by the senses and also at times rejected as being too intense for any sustained relationship. As with this question of a weighty silence — in which the life of the land is present in the very interstices between things — this concentration of the environment's otherness offers a spatial iteration of exclusivity as a natural phenomenon of rural Dorset's innate enchantment, in which only those whose 'nerves could stand it' can exist in harmony with this dense immanence.[407]

With the woods functioning as a zone in which nature is at its most concentrated, it is through the isolation of its auditory capacity, its active struggle against noise that creates a landscape that is vitalised by its sheer presence. That silence is shown to be 'personal' in this context, demonstrates two sides of Butts's project: firstly, it encapsulates her interest in producing a textual environment in which the divisions between self and world are obliterated, and in which a social category such as 'personal' is upended by its affixation to an object typically outside of its cultural convention. Secondly, Butts also harnesses semantic juxtapositions and incongruities, such as the 'visible fight' between silence and noise, to redraw the lines in which the world is determined by the assumptions of human consciousness. In this landscape, the earth is active and vital, drawn into the same linguistic framework as the human characters that traverse the text. In animating silence into a living presence, the environment of the novel's Dorset locale is made responsive and self-productive, its life force implicit in its ability to corrupt rigid categories of the self and not-self, the real and the fantastic, or the absent and the present.

This extremity of presence, in which spaces such as 'empty grass' are vitalised, is produced as a question of sensitivity for those individuals who come into contact with it. This contact sees comprehension being registered at the corporeal level, becoming a question of somatic relation and nervous sensibility rather than intellectual rationalisation: 'Not many nerves could stand it [the silence…] When it got worse, after dark or at mid-day, they said it was tuning-up. When a gale came up-Channel shrieking like a mad harp, they said they were watching a visible fight with

[405] Ibid.
[406] Butts, 'Armed with Madness', p. 34.
[407] Ibid.

the silence in the wood.'[408] The aural intensity of this environment is used to implicate the body and its sensory capacities as being at the centre of this vibrant and uncompromising version of rurality. It is the body whose response facilitates a relationship to the landscape and the contact zone is given as the centre of consciousness akin to the intertidal space between pantheistic nature and the self.

In *Armed with Madness*, the body is produced as the site in which the natural world forces a taxonomy between those who can accommodate its vibrant forces and those that cannot. Butts redraws the rural as a type of space which is far from *everyone's* home; rather, it is an exclusive place that demands a specific compatibility in order to allow harmonious coexistence. We can see within this opening framing of the novel how she constructs a series of oppositions (such as silence/noise) that lay a framework for a latent essentialism that the novel experimentally investigates as its narrative progresses. This narrative arc — in which a group of both natives and in-comers gather at the manor house only for the group to splinter and disperse in the narrative's second half — mirrors the gathering and expulsion trajectory which Butts intimates through this opening passage of the silence overwhelming those unsuited to its concentration. Andrew Radford charges Butts with having a nativist sensibility in narratives that centre the mystical force of 'indigenous "soil"', in which only those with the appropriate racial heritage will be able to access its ecstatic potencies.[409] McCarthy's reading echoes this notion by describing her writing as harbouring 'nativist, exclusionary presentations of national identity' which 'treats awareness of physical nature as an acid test for Englishness.'[410] This kind of nationalism (or regionalism) that binds personhood and place, and was contemporarily emerging in comparable forms in various European fascist movements, demonstrates how Butts draws upon the myth of environmental topography as bestowing essential character upon a national and racial type. This reflects her concern with the genealogies of place in which material and cultural histories are construed as producing a selfhood that is innately formed through this legacy of metaphysical nationalism. As with the notion of the stone and flesh being within constant contact with each other, Butts is interested in version of selfhood that is dependent upon racial and cultural origination, and *Armed with Madness* is a novel that proposes through its narrative of patrician

[408] Ibid.
[409] Andrew Radford, *Mary Butts and British Neo-Romanticism: The Enchantment of Place* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), p. 51.
[410] McCarthy, *Green Modernism*, pp. 166-7.

union (Scylla and Picus) that true rurality is by virtue of its very environmental character an anti-democratic space.

The most significant way in which this essentialism is explored by Butts is in the relationship between the female body and the Dorset topography. Butts adapts Jane Ellen Harrison's reading of the Persephone myth, which foregrounds an understanding of the narrative as concerned with an earth-goddess figure who is both generative and protective of a divine ontology that suffuses through the material world.[411] We can see Butts's interest in exploring the figure of the earth-goddess in the narrative's introduction to Scylla Taverner. In the scene, Felix, Scylla's temperamentally restless brother, is swimming in the sea, whilst both Scylla and their friend Ross, an artist, watch from the shore. As is the case throughout the text, Scylla is drawn in relation to the land, in which we are told that 'Naked, the enormous space, the rough earth dressed her. The sparking sea did not.'[412] Earth, with its fecundity of soil, is drawn intimately alongside Scylla's body. The sea, by contrast, implied to be far more inconstant and temporally fickle, is a discursively variable space that abjures a version of femininity defined by its grounded-ness in its native soil. There is a sense of Scylla's body being both physically and spiritually in contact with the earth, thereby locating at the centre of the female body an ethical framework that connected femininity with a metaphysics of place.

Harrison's work exploring the role of ritual practices and fertility deities in classical Ancient Greece can be seen as having influence upon Butts's ideological conflation of nature and femininity. Butts draws upon Harrison in order to stage a narrative celebration of an essential primitivism lying at the heart of the pure rural woman. As the text progresses and the narrative conspires to bring Scylla to the centre of the novel's mythological discourse, we can see how Butts's feminism is rooted in an ethics of place. Both Harrison and Butts's stance toward the 'primitive' explicitly rejects James George Frazer's and Sigmund Freud's readings of primitivism as a necessary but *temporary* state of being in the evolutionary development of civilisations.[413] Rather, as Martha C. Carpentier argues, the rise of the female archetype during this period, as characterised by Harrison's work, typically produced three interdependent variations consisting of 'the Earth-mother, witch, virgin (or, more precisely, maiden)', all of which

[411] Radford, *The Lost Girls*, p. 292.
[412] Ibid., p. 5.
[413] Freud's writing on 'primitivism' can be seen in work such *Totem and Taboo* (1913) and the later *Civilisation and Its Discontents* (1930). Ibid., p. 301.

are used as generative modes for exploring variations of mythologised feminine experience.[414] For Butts's purpose, Scylla seems to function in the novel as a fusion of all three in that she is described as 'sometimes a witch and sometimes a bitch'.[415] Additionally, Carpentier describes the emergence of Harrison's school of matriarchal primitivism as an essential influence in modernism's fixation upon questions of cultural renewal: 'The world of primitive myth and ritual opened to the modernists through anthropology showed that, contrary to Christianity, eternity in primitive matriarchal religion was envisioned through regeneration, through sexuality. Suddenly, Earth could provide a fruitful alternative to Heaven'.[416] With this new possibility of spiritual salvation attainable through a focus upon the earth itself, the moral possibilities of a feminine-centred ecological hybridity meant that ritualistic practices and narratives of enchantment emerge as not only spiritually rewarding but also imbued with an ethical-social potential. This is reflected in Scylla's assertion that 'If the materialist's universe is true, not a working truth to make bridge with and things, we are a set of blind factors in a machine. And no passion has any validity and no imagination.'[417] Here, Scylla's antiphrasis implicitly rejects the materialist model of the universe implicating an alternate vision in which the world is composed of metaphysical dimensions that supersedes the totality of material reality.

This suspicion of materialist understandings of history is similarly central to the text's exploring of the discursive effects produced by the recovered Sanc-Grail chalice. The prominence of archaeology during the decade in both in intellectual and popular cultures was promoted by many high-profile digs, most famously the 1922 Egyptian excavations of Tutankhamun's tomb or, more locally, the continued excavations of Carn Euney in Cornwall. The importance of archaeology to the development of thought within many prominent thinkers such as Freud, Woolf, and Lawrence (see Chapter 3) positioned it as an aesthetic as well as scientific pursuit, such as drawing from the metaphoric possibilities of unearthing that the psychoanalytic framework models.[418] Schnapp, et al. comment that 'the depth model of excavation' was not the only element of interest to the appropriation of archaeology within cultural works but also 'its stratigraphic mapping of temporality onto spatial relations; its conscription of fragmentary

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[414] Martha C. Carpentier, *Ritual, Myth and the Modernist Text: The Influence of Jane Ellen Harrison on Joyce, Eliot, and Woolf* (London: Routledge, 1998), p. 6.
[415] Butts, 'Armed with Madness', p. 5.
[416] Carpentier, *Ritual Myth*, p. 7.
[417] Butts, 'Armed with Madness', pp. 89-90.
[418] 'Freud had introduced archaeology as a methodological correlate to his developing theories of therapeutic psychology.' Jeffrey T. Schnapp, Michael Shanks, Matthew Tiews, 'Archaeology, Modernism, Modernity', *Modernism/modernity*, 11.1 (2004), pp. 1-16, p. 5.

evidence into a causal narrative.'[419] This motivation and opportunity of producing 'causal narrative[s]' out of the fragmentary data, transforming the way temporal-spatio relations could be conceived is useful in framing Butts's relationship to archaeology, excavation, and artefacts.

Contrary to its cultural cachet within wider modernist circles, Butts held dissenting opinions with regard to the merits of excavation, suspecting it as being a form of object worship and limiting the true experience of engaging with the past to only its material conditions. Thus, *Armed with Madness*'s stance towards the Grail myth is structured around an implicit suspicion of modernity's faith in materiality as the singular mechanism in which to locate truth. The rise of archaeology as a discipline in both professional and amateur circles, gave credence, Butts believed, to this sense of artefact-finding as the best method in which to gain access to historical fact. Radford describes the function of archaeology within the novel as pointing to Butts's belief in its effect of producing forms of 'impoverished' intelligence that cannot harness imagination to 'think symbolically' and instead 'assumes that an object has scant aesthetic resonance unless the excavator demonstrates conclusively that it once existed physically.'[420] The cup possesses ambiguous status throughout the text, oscillating from at first being an enchanted relic, to nothing more than a foreign imitation to eventually discovering its historical pedigree as in fact 'a cup of the rare but occasionally found chalices of the Keltic church.'[421] The trajectory of the object from magical to fake to real artefact is part of the novel's point in framing this critique of materialist 'truth', in that the object held its greatest symbolic resonance with the group when it was at its most undisclosed; it functioned as a conduit for the imaginative possibilities of the Grail myth precisely because its historical ambiguity gave shape to the mystical propensities latent within themselves.

This direction away from certainty that the novel promotes is part of Butts's turning away from what she saw as the highly rationalist 'imaginative imperialism' implicit in Frazer's *The Golden Bough* and its successors, although she admitted her indebtedness to it serving as a gateway for her own intellectual development.[422] It is in the indices between what is known and what is not known that Butts identifies the greatest potential for accessing the mystical anterior side of being. Conversely to Butts's position, Kitty Hauser sees the boom in archaeological practices and

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[419] Ibid., p. 6.
[420] Radford, *Mary Butts and British Neo-Romanticism*, pp. 180-81.
[421] Butts, *Armed with Madness*, p. 141.
[422] Andrew Radford, *Mapping the Wessex Novel: Landscape, History and the Parochial in British Literature, 1870-1940* (London: Continuum, 2010), p. 144.

its adjacent 'topophilic' interests as exemplary of counter-modernism due to its assertion of a historical index into a landscape. Nonetheless, what Hauser argues as modernity's 'love of surfaces and the evanescent, and its desire constantly to remove, renew, remake' can be read as Butts's suspicion of archaeology as a worship of the surface of things, in which everything is reduced to its literalness of its material "reality".[423]

When placed back in relation to the dynamic between selfhood and nature, the body as the contact zone offers the best version of materiality for Butts's epistemology: operating at once on two registers as material entity and as psychic instrument. That the importance of the contact with the cup is rooted in its imaginative opportunities demonstrates the way in which Butts conceived of rural spaces as defined by their metaphysical potentials. We can see this in a small moment in which the text describes Ross, an artist in the group, as sitting drawing in silence, his sensitive self engaging in the process of tuning into the earth's 'growing stillness, of innumerable separate tranquilities, for ever moving, for ever at rest.'[424] This process of exchange, between multiple registers of being, is evidence that Butts envisions the rural as a space in which the dynamics of aperture and contingency is most effectively realised. Unlike archaeological materiality, with its evidence and desire for proof, the body grants unique opportunity to connect with the essential dynamic of the earth's vitality, demonstrating the way in which rural spaces are intimately bound up with the possibility for ecstatic spiritual transformation.

In positioning the rural as a space of religious potential, Scylla acts as a vessel for an ancient form of ecological consciousness. Through this Butts employs an essentialised epistemology that positions the female body's reproductive capacity as ontologically fused with the processes of the earth. This nature-cult rendering of Scylla is demonstrative of what Radford views as a '"white" fertility deity' that furthers Butts's advocation for myths of racial and national exclusion.[425] It is in the presentation of the Dorset landscape as something that is excessive in its vibrancy, alive through its long history of paganism and secret enchantment, that we can see the politics of feminism and landscape fusing to create a narrative of mythic nationalism. This sense of the landscape as its own kind of potency within the text is evident in Carston's first encounter with Scylla and the woods around the manor:

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[423] Kitty Hauser, *Shadow Sites: Photography, Archaeology, and the British Landscape 1927-1955* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 3.
[424] Ibid., p. 92.
[425] Radford, *The Lost Girls*, p. 284.

> The wood sighed at him. Just like that. Two kinds of life he did not want. The ash-fair tree-tall young woman downstairs, and the elaborate piece of leaf and wood, that was one thing and many. The wood and the woman might be interchangeable [...] Life to him was an elaborate theatre without scenery. Here the scenery seemed to be the play.[426]

Carston's metaphoric elision of Scylla with the woods demonstrates the ways in which imaginative contact is made synonymous with the physical world in Butts's text. The aesthetic position that Carston describes, in which life had been a decontextualised process of action and plot development, 'an elaborate theatre without scenery', implicates a vision of the United States (the new world) as a culture without a sense of place. By contrast, the Dorset landscape, defined by its ancientness, instead becomes the very focus and subject of what it is to be alive. Through the imaginative collapsing of Scylla and the wood into one another, she thereby bears a unique responsibility to be both spiritual custodian and psychic embodiment of life itself. Later, Scylla will inform Carston that 'memory produces imagination, and imagination is a state by itself'.[427] Here Scylla serves as Butts's mouthpiece to promote the notion of a feminine authority, perhaps even autocracy, which may function as a vessel for accessing the other side of being not otherwise readily breached in the state of sole actuality. Again, as with the tactile interaction of the pebble in the nursery, by investing the imaginative space with its own autonomous power, Scylla's words sanction acts of imaginative exploration, such as ritual, as legitimate forms of transformative contact.

In spite of this evident power of insight, Scylla's position as fertility symbol within the text is a hybrid one. Functioning as both passive conduit and active translator for the animistic reverberations of the earth's unmapped enchanted realm, she also fulfils the archetypal role of the virgin maiden. One distinct moment that captures this duality is when she attempts to 'detach herself' by playing 'an old game, that she was lying out on the wood's roof: translating the stick and leaf that upheld her into herself: into sea: into sky. Sky back again into wood, flesh and sea.'[428] Her ability to imbricate herself within the wildness of the landscape shows that she is a figure whose body is ecologically conceived and intimately connected to the landscape that shaped her. There is a careful ambiguity within this scene, induced by the uncertainty of to what degree of literalness should we read 'she was lying out on the wood's roof'. If we take this as

[426] Butts, 'Armed with Madness', p. 12.
[427] Ibid., p. 32.
[428] Ibid., p. 68.

imagination, even mental projection ('detach herself'), then Butts is offering an interesting account of the process of cognitive concentration as a route to subjective, even ecological, transformation. As with the discussion of Mew's deranged clerk in Chapter 2, the lines between imagination and materiality are hazy here. Regardless of the actuality of Scylla's material body, Butts nonetheless gives us an image of Scylla's body suspended upon the treetops. Also recalling Mew's speaker in 'Moorland Night', Scylla is merged into a chain of interrelation, in which her selfhood is expulsive, the margins of her body and the end of the tree's leaves indistinguishable. Butts is interested in tracing the causal link between divergent experiences of materiality in which, as with the stone in the hand, an enchanted history has to be drawn out through imaginative contact. This process acts as a reversibility between the physical and the imaginary and suggests that a truly rural subject is one who is attuned to the sensible and spiritual dimensions of place, someone who has access to the underside of actuality as easily as its material properties. In this scene, Scylla is a creative force enacting the spell of 'translating' mind into body. Recalling Thomas's thinking with scent in Chapter 1, it is interestingly conceived as a cognitive process of mental concentration that is able to expand the self out of its figural limits; through intensification of focus, the mind becomes a reflexive instrument that uncovers the world's inherent interdependencies: 'the stick and leaf that upheld her into herself: into sea: into sky.' In this act of translation, Scylla is bringing this model of self/world indistinction into being, whilst also demonstrating herself as decentralised within this model: her body is part of a whole but is not the inaugurating centre; rather, she is part of a chain of entities that are defined by their perceptual relatedness to one another.

It is in this moment of meditative self-expansion that Scylla's preternatural imaginative capacity is stymied. Instead, another version of her identity, that of the maiden, invades her consciousness and the attempt at detachment does 'not work, as it was meant to, to deliver her from herself'.[429] Concern about Picus's mischief over the grail hoax keeps her in a state of anxious contemplation, and, as in Carston's terms, the scenery around her is reduced. Scylla's inability to occupy in this moment the expansive capacities of the divine feminine reveals the deterministic subtextual narrative of the grail myth that implicates her as fated to emerge only once fulfilled within the dynamic of heterosexual unity. Therefore, Picus's irrepressibility in this moment is in itself part of the very archetypal trajectory she must rise to meet. Rather than envisaging a supreme feminine, Butts's narrative constructs a model of heterosexual virtue, in

[429] Ibid.

which the divine within Scylla must be mediated through her connection with Picus, himself is representative of a mischievous kind of masculine divinity.

The novel's discursive entwining of the feminine with nature reveals a text that is interested in essentialist narratives, based upon myth, that function as ethical frameworks in which to shape aesthetic and political reality. Scylla serves multiple ritual functions within the text: fertility deity, seer into other worlds, virginal maiden to be conquered. Her function as fertility deity reflects her status as embodied incarnation of the land in which she springs from. This elision of divine feminine with this regional landscape demonstrates Butts interest in lineage as a central of understanding of rurality. This imbrication of the feminine and the rural intimates an ideological structure which sees moral coherency as being brought out through the body of the native woman. If Scylla can be equated with the land, then the function of the jade chalice, recovered with a spear thrown by Picus, implicates this symbolic fertility order in which heterosexual union emerges as the novel's central narrative trajectory.

The central scene of this unification between Picus and Scylla is when they enter into a secret, hidden landscape, inaccessible to the non-native characters, specifically Carston. Leaving the manor early one morning, they steal off to Bari, a hidden 'warm wood' at the foot of the towering Gault Cliff, 'where the mica glittered like sweat'.[430] It is a schematic landscape in which the masculine and the feminine are brought into contact, with the arboreality of Scylla's 'Greenwood' positioned in proximity, a 'whispering distance', to 'the unharvested sea', with all its fluctuating uncertainties and potentialities that echo Picus' roguish vitality.[431] Both Picus and Scylla stage a ritual of their union when they lie either side of a brook and paddle their hands into its water. There they witness a woodpecker, Picus Martius, namesake and symbolic iteration of the human Picus; in mythology, she informs him, 'He was Zeus.' In Butts's landscape of heightened symbolic and aesthetic intensities, the woodpecker is a palpable correspondent to the text's allegory of masculinity with his active and penetrative nature – if Scylla is akin to the trees, then there is little doubt what the bird must do. Like Zeus to Leda, Picus must fulfil the fertility ritual, and at her behest, 'he put out his arms' and 'slung her over' the stream.[432] Jessie Weston's influence upon Butts is evident here, with the central importance of the fertility rite between the two opposing force of the female/male dyadic opposition corresponds with her belief that the

[430] Butts, *Armed with Madness*, p. 58.
[431] Ibid., p. 57.
[432] Ibid., p. 58.

Arthurian legends as Weston interpreted them in *From Ritual to Romance* (1920) were themselves 'descended directly from a pagan mystery religion concerned (in Frazerian fashion) with fertility.'[433] When reading *Armed with Madness* as a text responding to Harrison, Weston, and Margaret Murray (who will be discussed shortly), it is revealed as a novel intensely concerned with the intersections of contemporary speculative feminist thought, interrogating the extent to which the avant-garde is an adequate and appropriate language for its expression. Throughout the text, the landscape of Dorset serves to characterise this exchange between nature and an enchanted divine feminine. As was seen in the novel's opening, Butts's Dorset operates within a spatio-temporal incomprehension to those not attuned to it. This highlights her interest in presenting an ontological model of place that is necessarily uncomfortable for the rationalist point of view. Instead, like Scylla herself, the landscape of the novel is one of riddles and diversions, protective of its essential character through deceptive ruses that obscure itself to the incoming trespasser.

For Butts this image of the Dorset landscape as necessarily difficult and disorienting to interlopers who wish to traverse its topography had a real-world import as well. Her book *Warning to Hikers* frames the newly mobile urban populace traversing the countryside with ordnance survey maps and hiking guides as examples of the destructive realities of mass culture and democratic politics. Butts had warned that through rising democracy 'the worst is coming to the worst in this civilisation.'[434] Certainly, she was no friend to working class mobility, with Radford charging her with 'proto-fascist politics' that lie barely latent within her work.[435] McCarthy, whilst agreeing that 'racism and classism are facts set in a troubling national history', argues for a more nuanced reading of Butts as a writer whose advocacy for the 'symbolic structure of nature' might be seen in more progressive terms as part of a desire for 'cultural renovation via rural life' and not solely reactionism.[436] Given her ambivalence to the cosmopolitan possibilities that urban experience represented, Butts must be seen as operating within the right-wing of modernist reformist politics. As in line with Radford's argument, behind any kind of crotchety implication inherent in her exclusionary wish to stave off tourism, there is a narrative expression of the conservative ecological politics and experimentation that mirror such radical fringe figures as

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[433] Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 125.
[434] Mary Butts, 'Confessions and Interview', *Little Review* (1929), Radford, *Lost Girls*, p. 296.
[435] Radford, *Lost Girls*, p. 312.
[436] McCarthy, *Green Modernism*, p. 170.

Rolf Gardiner and Viscount Lymington.[437] Both Gardiner and Lymington have been aligned to varying degrees (Lymington undeniably, Gardiner more debatably) with fostering an English fascism through their advocacy for socio-cultural transformation through organic farming and soil reform as part of a wider promotion of a reactionary version of English nationalism.

As a counterpoint to the conservatism that Gardiner and Lymington represent, the emergence of the Kibbo Kift in the mid-1920s demonstrates a fusion of progressive politics alongside esoteric re-inscriptions of an abstracted sense of history. One newsreel documenting a meeting in 1923 describe the Kibbo Kift as a freshly established 'camping fraternity [...] who aim at a race of Intellectual Barbarians', and whose ideological underpinnings attempt to combine 'the ideals of Scientists and Red Indians'.[438] The Kindred of the Kibbo Kift was founded in 1920 by John Hargrave, former Commissioner for Camping and Woodcraft in Robert Baden-Powell's Boy Scout Movement. Hargrave presented his criticisms of modern civilisation in two manuals, both published in 1919: *The Great War Brings It Home* and *Tribal Training*. As Hargrave saw it, the war had revealed the true face of modern society, and had resulted in nothing more than 'Organised Death—Civilised, Mechanical Death sprang upon the world [...] swept away the flower of our manhood, devouring thousands upon thousands of lives per day'.[439] Owen Davies reflects this in describing the contemporary perception by many that the war was 'a great cosmic movement, an inevitable battle between the powers of Good and Evil'.[440] It is within the thick of this righteous ferment that we can see Hargrave's founding principles of the Kibbo Kift as a vital attempt to salvage humanity from an inevitable tipping point of physical inertia; if the cataclysm of the War could come to mean anything, it had to be a seized upon as a catalyst for radical change.

With this wish for total social and bodily reform, the promotion of strength as the essential characteristic of the Kindred unveils a masculinist, hierarchical view of the world (failing civilizations were termed 'effete') that belies the movement's eugenic undercurrents in promoting

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[437] Ibid., p. 295.
[438] 'The Kibbo Kift (1923)', BFI National Archive, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uko6ppVRWDE. 'Topical Budget: "Great Missenden – The 'Kibbo Kift'", Topical Film Company, 23/8/1923, http://www.screenonline.org.uk/film/id/1256380/index.html, accessed 2/4/2023.
[439] John Hargrave (published under 'White Fox'), *The Great War Brings It Home: The Natural Reconstruction of an Unnatural Existence* (London: Constable, 1919), p. 50. https://archive.org/details/the-great-war-brings-it-home/page/n11/mode/1up?view=theater [accessed 23 April 2023].
[440] Owen Davies, *A Supernatural War: Magic, Divination, and Faith During the First World War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 44.

a strict moral and physical regulation of its membership.[441] Hargrave argued against mainstream scientific development and the progress narratives of industrial modernity, finding 'increasing inability and degeneracy' across the class divisions: 'It is impossible to deny that *the race as a whole* under our system of civilisation was becoming weak, mentally and physically–and it was obvious that the more we "bolstered" it up by medical science and greater comfort *the weaker we were becoming.*'[442] The solution, he argues, is a return to the natural world, in which 'the new environment [...] is the old environment of the pre-conventional period,—the real out-door world with all its hardness to which men submitted in the childhood of the race'.[443] As David Prynn points out, this championing of reformist practices of health and wellness for future generations was a widespread concern following the conclusions of 1904 Committee on Physical Deterioration in light of the unexpected levels of men found to be unfit for service in the Second Boer War.[444] Rather, Hargrave took on this question of social reform through eugenics and its 'objectification of bodies'.[445] He envisioned the propagation of a new, self-sufficient race that would be born out through the establishment of a 'Spartan elite' membership.[446] He saw the organisation as a form of correction against the failure to engage the body in favour of the mind, collateral damage of the urban bourgeois professional man (recalling aspects of Thomas, Mew, and Lawrence's variegated positions on the rural as the place for embodied reawakening). This kind of stasis and lack of physical engagement, he saw as having the effect of 'atrophying the remainder' of the human organs. Instead, woodcraft living would induce a return to the 'sensitive senses of the savage', producing a community of highly developed individuals, both physically and mentally attuned to the demands of the future.[447]

Although Butts has no relationship to this short-lived and eccentric organisation, its emergence and her writing exist within the same continuum of desiring to find a coherent way

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[441] Indeed, the very name of 'Kibbo Kift', which emerges from an archaic Chesire dialect term meaning 'Proof of Strength'. Hargrave, *Great War Brings It Home*, p. 313; see also Annebella Pollen, '"More Modern than the Moderns": performing cultural evolution in the Kibbo Kift Kindred', *Being Modern: The Cultural Impact of Science in the Early Twentieth Century*, ed. Robert Bud, Paul Greenhalgh, Frank James and Morag Shiach (London: UCL Press, 2018), pp. 311-36.
[442] Ibid., p. 4.
[443] Ibid. p. 13.
[444] David Prynn, 'The Woodcraft Folk and the Labour Movement 1925-70', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 18.1 (1983), pp. 79-95, p. 81.
[445] Hargrave, *Great War Brings It Home*, p. 314.
[446] Ibid.
[447] As a project of reformist idealism, the Kibbo Kift is mirrored with the Wandervogel movement that emerges concurrently in Germany and Austria, although remained less formally organised than the Kift. Hargrave, *Great War Brings It Home*, p. 80.

to be within a world that was reeling from the cataclysm of the War. Like her, the Kibbo Kift offer an interesting test case in their ambivalent relationship to cultural modernism. Although they were never a large movement, at their peak consisting of only a few thousand members, they nonetheless represent an aspect of 1920s British society in their interest in forging new community structures and identities through revitalising a (fictive) history of society's lost origins. Furthermore, both invested the body as the given site of social and racial "progress" through the re-enactment (and re-embodiment) of imagined primitive forms of being.

Feminine agency and the power of connecting to an anti-rationalist dimension within the landscape is a vital part of Butts's project in reclaiming the rural as a potentially radical space. For Butts this form of enchantment was tangible through an imaginative attention to the land as a space stratified with complex temporal and emotional registers. In foregrounding the myth of the fertility deity as an essential route into accessing these registers, Butts reveals a politics of essentialism that, whilst it animates femininity with an implicit divinity, also begets a discourse surrounding nativism as the chief arbitrator over a landscape's complex ontology.

'Her fingers searched among the leaves': *Lolly Willowes* and Transforming Touch[448]

Whereas Butts has used sensory modalities in order to indicate a living mythos embedded in the female body's procreative and genealogical power, by contrast, Warner, in her novel *Lolly Willowes*, homes in on tactility as offering particular opportunities for a feminist rediscovery of selfhood in the climate of post-Great War Britain. The novel charts the disillusionment of a middle-aged single woman, Laura Willowes, who has spent the previous few decades performing the duties of the spinster aunt (patronizingly dubbed 'Aunt Lolly' by the family) in residence at her brother's London townhouse. After the end of the Great War, in the early years of the 1920s, Laura's restlessness has become too acute to ignore and she decides to move to a village, Great Mop, in Buckinghamshire's Chiltern Hills. It is whilst living in Great Mop that she comes to the epiphany that she is, in fact, a witch, and the villagers are also servants of Satan. Anticipating the kind of feminist tract that Woolf would produce in *A Room of One's Own* three years later, the novel closes with Laura in dialogue with the Devil, expostulating upon her newly discovered identity and decrying the plight of all women who are 'living and growing old, as common as blackberries, and as unregarded [...] being thrust further down into dullness'.[449] Processes of self-

[448] Sylvia Townsend Warner, *Lolly Willowes: or The Loving Huntsman* (London: Penguin, 2020 [1926]), p. 57.
[449] Ibid., p. 153.

discovery and the limits to sacrificing personal dignity are the animating engine to Warner's novel which explores the notion of becoming one's own self as a process of coming into embodied cognition as much as it is a question of material or social orientations.

Throughout the course of the novel, Warner plays with genre traditions and preformed cultural discourses to produce a text that is lively with ironic subversion. Unlike Butts, *Lolly Willowes* is a novel that strains at the edges of any singular ideological position. The text's playful shifting with genre sees it move from being a pastiche of Victorian realist fiction (concerned with property and inheritance) to being a supernatural tale of a Satanic cult of witches (reminiscent of Machen's supernatural fiction) to its conclusion which ventriloquises a version of the manifesto genre. This shifting into polemic mode by the novel's close, which has Laura conversing with Satan, functions at once to give her own voice a prolonged space for expression and self-reflection (a feature rarely employed in the rest of the text), whilst also curtailing this outpouring of independent will with the ambivalent reproach of her ultimate status as being under his 'satisfied but profoundly indifferent ownership.'[450] Therefore, despite it being situated as a reworked bildungsroman narrative of mid-life self-fulfilment, Warner is careful to unsettle any surety that this entry into counter-cultural forms of living are always wholly liberatory. Warner's implication of a progressive momentum underwritten with a note of pessimism is helpful in complicating her novel away from any charges of simplistic idealism; for Warner the intersection of the self and the world is a process of negotiation, and Laura's development over the course of the text sees her becoming more equipped to contend with securing her place within this dynamic.[451]

In light of this uneasiness at the centre of the text, questions of knowledge as embedded within wider hierarchical power structures are never simply glossed. Rather than a narrative in which Laura learns to master her social position, Warner creates a text that places dissension as its central moral drive, with Laura searching for a new kind of self-knowledge that is not already acceptably modelled but which grows organically out of the needs and realities of individual, private experience. This subversion allows the text to resist any easy conclusions about the direction women's political and social positions should take in response to a changing society.

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[450] Ibid., p. 161.

[451] The effect of ending on an atonal uncertainty is something Warner regularly features in her work. Claire Harman, in describing one of Warner's musical compositions, could be talking about the denouement of *Lolly Willowes* when she writes that 'the ending, lifting through a long diminuendo, is not wholly consolatory; it is quiet rather than peaceful [...] a deliberate friction is set up between form and tone.' Claire Harman, *Sylvia Townsend Warner: A Biography* (London: Penguin Books, 1989), p. 60.

Laura's search for satisfaction through rural living and her subsequent discovery of her latent witchcraft abilities demonstrates Warner's engagement with traditional tropes of divergent womanhood, such as the spinster. The associations of the spinster positions Laura as being synonymous with a kind of surplus, framing her from the off as outcast from the socioeconomic and moral security of the productive married union.[452]

It is this larger social question of how women might live in a Britain that is both modernising and grieving in the face of the Great War's aftermath, that animates much of the narrative propulsion of the novel. This is echoed by Stella Deen's reading of the rural spinster figure in literature as a type that, by the interwar period, was being recast in fiction for more active and productive ends. She argues that in *Lolly Willowes* and other later interwar fiction, the figure of unmarried woman is presented as a social type who possesses a great socio-political potential that proves to be instrumental in assisting with the reordering of a society fractured by the war's aftershocks. Deen writes, 'the formerly pitiable spinster has been energised and empowered by her new citizenship and by her war experience, and that her insights and gifts uniquely suit her to regenerate postwar civilisation.'[453] Despite the novel's contrary positions on the empowerment of war work (which Laura finds dull) and the newly won right to enfranchisement (which is unmentioned), these contextual developments feed into the narrative background as a time of significant social change for women.

The text places the solitary female body at the heart of its exploration into the intersections between social traditions and their radical reformations. These intersections are brought about for Laura through moments of haptic contact which activate psychological transmutations that propose alternate modes of being. These modes of being are registered as epiphanic psychic revelations, in which the act of tactility generates a new version of selfhood that is distinct through its embodiment. Our first introduction to Laura within the text is during her father's funeral at their village in Somerset. We are told that she 'is not thinking at all', having 'picked a red geranium flower, and' is 'staining her left wrist with the juice of its crushed petals.'[454] Laura's action of crushing the petals can be read as a gestural manifestation of an inner-

[452] 'The pejorative identity assigned to spinsters as 'superfluous' or 'redundant' was not only a consequence of losses suffered in the First World War, but was also in response to the demographic trend in Britain since 1851 that saw a growing gap between the number of females and males.' Bonnie White and Johnathan H. Pope, 'Spinsters, war widows, and wounded soldiers: the Great War novels of Berta Ruck', *Women's History Review*, 27.7 (2018), pp. 1085–1102, p. 1086.
[453] Stella Deen, 'The Spinster in Eden: Reclaiming Civilisation in Interwar British Rural Fiction', *Rural Modernity in Britain*, pp. 135-48, p. 135.
[454] Ibid., p. 4.

turmoil that is inexpressible for her in thought or speech; the red wrist a symbolic imitation of both a stigmata wound and an act of self-harm. Laura's unconscious act of destruction is representative of her feelings of being sacrificed by the death of her father, now to be held to the whim of her brother's family and uprooted from her country home to live in London. It is an example of the sensory modality of touch offering a welcome respite from the rationalised world of the social and psychological self, of being able to express emotions without have to articulate them even to her own mind. In this act, Laura is subconsciously re-entering a phase of childish play as we are told that 'when she was younger, she had stained her pale cheeks' in the same manner. This briefly bonds her with a lost sense of freedom and the kind of experimentation with social codes that she feels that she no longer can choose to disengage from. Furthermore, this also bridges her back to a sense of the feminine, in which touch is intimately connected with a dormant female emotional repository. This is shown through Laura's mother, who died when she was still a child, and whose memory is conferred to Laura through instances that foreground her mother's tactile capacities, such as reminiscing on the sound of 'her mother's touch on the piano' or through encountering 'a pair of old gardening gloves [which] repeated to her the shape of her mother's hands.'[455] Evidently, Warner aligns divergent codes of femininity (we are told that Laura's mother was a woman who 'needed bracing up to a sense of her responsibilities') with the realm of the sensory, in particular instances of touch, which work to interrupt the demands of the social self by returning Laura into a space of embodied yet abstracted femininity.[456]

This interrelation of the sensory and selfhood manifests in instances of psychological imagery, such as when we are told 'Her mind was groping after something that eluded her experience'.[457] Here, the tactile is harnessed to animate the emotional contours of Laura's consciousness. Access to her true self, both in terms of memory and desires, is centred around acts of touch or other variants of hapticity. Therefore, the novel's narrative arc of self-discovery is dependent on Laura's process of embodiment, of coming into contact with both herself and the material reverberations of the land around her. In crushing the petals, Laura uses this act of tactile expression as a way to divert herself into a different mode of being, centring the somatic in favour of the mental (she 'was not thinking at all'), and straying into a selfhood in which she does not have to reckon with the feelings that construct her 'as if she were a piece of family

[455] Ibid., p. 14.
[456] Ibid. p. 12.
[457] Ibid., pp. 52-3.

property forgotten in the will'.[458] James Harker argues that the text's focus upon Laura's lack of inner dialogue, even thoughtlessness, means that she 'stands apart from the murky inwardness so frequently attributed to the modernist protagonist.'[459] Harker is astute in highlighting the text's emphasis upon Laura's lack of mental interiority in comparison to a writer such as Woolf, however this formal diversion on Warner's part offers us an equally insightful reading of modern consciousness through this psychological flattening. Whilst Warner's novel eschews the formal experimentations that spotlights interior psychological states, such as stream of consciousness, nonetheless, like Lawrence, her interest in exploring the transformative potential of touch, and thereby questions of corporeal experience, highlights an interest in the body as instrumental in figuring our relationship to consciousness. Questions such as the connection between consciousness and the experience of temporal states are implicit in the text's accounting of embodiment as an essential part of emotional fulfilment, and demonstrates Warner's subtle alignment, if not complete investment, with some facets of literary modernism's experimental enquiries of how the modern world can be aesthetically and formally managed through representation.

This placing of the corporeal at the forefront of the novel's exploration of self-discovery reflects Warner's interest in charting the development of selfhood's relationship to empowerment. Whilst touch is one aspect of haptic modality, so too is proprioception ('the body's sense of its orientation in space'), which offers a new approach to thinking about how tactility might be conceptually expanded to explore the ways in which the body exists within space without us being dependent upon the physical contact between entities as an event-based instance.[460] We can see this at play in the text when, at her father's funeral, Laura stands in the cemetery: 'Her small body encased in tremendous sunlight seemed to throb with an intense vitality, impersonally responding to heat, scent, and colour.'[461] Although this is not a moment of touch in its purest form, there is a process of contact between the somatic system and the world outside it. As has been disclosed in Chapter 3, touch is always a process of exchange intimately related to the skin, and here, Laura's body being energised by the caress of the vibrant sunshine echoes this notion of the skin as a porous boundary between the self and the world. Warner's

[458] Ibid., p. 4; p. 6.
[459] James Harker, "Laura was not thinking": Cognitive Minimalism in Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Lolly Willowes*', *Studies in the Novel*, 46.1 (2014), pp. 44-62, p. 45.
[460] Garrington, *Haptic Modernism*, p. 16.
[461] Warner, *Lolly Willowes*, p. 27.

choice of the word 'impersonally' is significant in demonstrating the somatic system's curious relationship to selfhood — operating as it does independently of identity or personality, it nonetheless is at the heart of an individual's consciousness; that Warner implicates this discursive divide between mind and body in this moment reflects the novel's interest in portraying Laura undergoing a journey of coming back into a sense of her own embodiment. This implicit focus upon Laura's epidermal facets reflects Garrington's reading of 'the skin as a means of control, indicating that a continent epidermis is essential to the imaginative projection of a coherent selfhood.'[462] As with Lawrence's bathing miners, so too does Laura's inner life become translated through her corporeal interrelation with the world — even when she herself is not cognizant of it.

The connection of tactility to the possibility for imaginative fulfilment reflects the novel's exploration of the aesthetic slippages that emerge when the corporeal self comes into contact with its psychic iteration. This is evident during a pivotal scene in a grocer's shop in Bayswater that will motivate her exile to Great Mop, in which Laura's imagination is inspired by the rows of jarred and bottled preserved fruit. In seeing these items, she envisions a 'solitary old woman picking fruit in a darkening orchard, rubbing her rough fingertips over the smooth-skinned plums'.[463] Folkloric and biblical resonances are evident within Laura's symbolic musings, and the historic fusion of womanhood with ripening fruit demonstrates Warner's interest in drawing from cultural tropes as a way to recontextualise Laura within a larger historical continuity. It is the emphasis upon the tactile act of the fingers against the fruit, the rough in opposition to the smooth, that we can see the old woman's hand as being representative of a concentration of long-developed knowledge and skill, her rough hand reflective of her history of labouring and of being tactilely engaged with the production of the fruit. This knowledge accumulation is written upon the epidermis of her body in which the condition of the hand is resonant of the woman's class position. That Laura finds such delight in this imaginative fancy of a labouring hand demonstrates the anti-bourgeois sentiment, but also aestheticisation of the rural peasant figure, that suffuses the text. The association between ripened fruit and the hand of an old woman is rooted in the fairy tales of European folklore, particularly Snow White. The malevolent power of the crone's hand, offering up the poisoned apple or gesturing a curse, is reconfigured to Laura as a talismanic image of the possibility of her own future. Indeed, perhaps the very fantasy of the

[462] Garrington, *Haptic Modernism*, p. 19.
[463] Warner, *Lolly Willowes*, p. 57.

old woman functions a kind of prolepsis, an imaginative iteration of Laura's return to the ecological abundance that she had known before her move to London.

Laura's fantasy of the ripening fruit imaginatively transports her from the shop in which she stands. She finds herself 'alone in a darkening orchard, her feet in the grass, her arms stretched up to the pattern of the leaves and fruit, her fingers seeking the rounded ovals of the fruit among the pointed ovals of the leaves.'[464] The resonance with the biblical Eve, whose disobedience was one of haptic transgression, is prominent within this scene.[465] That Laura recontextualises herself into a world of bodily consciousness — her feet in the grass, the fingers searching through the foliage — demarcates how the rural, or at least its promise, functions in Warner's text as a sensuous zone in which the self is expanded through its encouragement of tactility. Merleau-Ponty describes the experience of touching as the one sensory component that 'adheres to the surface of our body; we cannot unfold it before us, and it never quite becomes an object' in the way that olfactory, auditory, or, especially, visual modalities often maintain a proximal quality that can allow the perceptual field to become objectified.[466] To add to this sense of haptic intensity, Laura's fantasy recalls the 'personal silence' of the beginning of *Armed with Madness* in that in the orchard there is 'no sound' except the 'soft thud of a ripe plum falling into the grass.' As an imaginative state it also evokes the strangeness of the infinite wheat fields of Mew's disturbed clerk in that the experience of touch is brought to the fore through an absence of the other modalities.

As we have seen in the case of Lawrence's colliers, touch often functions as a transition point, bringing with it transformative potencies that alter the state of both the self and its wider environmental context. Garrington views 'the human hand as a synecdoche, a kind of "poster boy" for the haptic, since it not only participates in active and passive touch sensations of temperature, texture, solidity and shape [...] but also operates as a symbol of other, more obscure and difficult to decipher haptic experiences.'[467] Thereby, if Laura's searching hand is understood as offering her the whole of the somatic experience, the picking of the fruit acts as a representation of the quickening of the corporeal system. Furthermore, given that touch, as Merleau-Ponty points out, is always of the body, never truly able to be separate from its perceptual

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[464] Ibid.
[465] *The Holy Bible Containing the Old and New Testaments*, Authorised King James Version (London: Collins, 2016), I Genesis 3.6.
[466] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 2005 [1945]), p. 369.
[467] Garrington, *Haptic Modernism*, p. 31.

field given that the mechanism is physical contact through proximity, Laura's psychic world is structured around her own suppressed feelings of displacement. In looking for the fruit to pick, she is testing the possibility of re-entering her whole self, body and mind. That she cannot find it before the fantasy is broken — 'Her fingers searched among the leaves' — begets a sense that the truly embodied self is that which is in full contact with the world, and that when the fruit is picked, the fulfilment of her ecological consciousness has been achieved.

In line with this, at the end of the text, Laura, after delivering her speech to Satan who has quietly disappeared, gets up to wander back to Great Mop. In her possession is a bag of apples she had purchased. Before heading off, she digs a hole and buries them in the earth, echoing Satan who was disguised as a gardener and reflecting the ways in which rural primitivism ritualises agricultural and horticultural activities.[468] This symbolic act represents the coming to full embodiment that the fantasy of the fruit orchard had promised. As with the image of the old woman harvesting the fruit (which might have been a vision of her own future), the implication of the text is that witches are begotten by the temptation from the Tree of Knowledge. In the act of picking the ripe flesh from the tree — an echo of the very first moment of Eve's sense of herself as a body — is the symbolic union between flesh and the world. Therefore, Laura's planting of the apples denotes an alliance to the cause of embodied self-knowledge.

With both this fantasy image of picking fruit and the crushing of the geranium petals, we can see how Warner is interested in exploring the tropes of the rural as a space of emotional plenty that becomes expressible through a relationship to the organic life of the natural world. In the funeral scene, the crushed flower becomes a channel for emotional expression, emerging as a figural compression of the restorative power that rural environments have held and will hold again for Laura. This act of crushing the geranium petals mirrors back to Laura's youth as a kind of wise woman in which she scoured hedges, fields, and 'the forsaken green byways of the rural pharmacopoeia' to make all variety of healthful remedies and tonics.[469] Her connection to the healing powers of plant life demonstrate an attunement to the correlation between the body and rural environments, having self-published 'a little book called "Health by the Wayside" commending the use of old-fashioned simples and healing herbs.'[470] Therefore, the crushing of the geranium petals functions as a glimpse at the search for, perhaps even return to, an ecological

[468] Warner, *Lolly Willowes*, p. 159. See Dominic Head, *Modernity and the English Rural Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), p. 96.
[469] Ibid., p. 21.
[470] Ibid., p. 22.

model of being that will later become graspable to her once her latent witchcraft comes to the fore. Whereas Butts approached a more generalised understanding of touch as part of a wider sensory system in her novel, Warner more explicitly proports experiences of tactile contact with the rural as the locus that effects emotional and psychological development.

Thus, in *Lolly Willowes* the relationship between identity and desire are expressed through instances of tactility. This passionate will for haptic exchange often implicates an erotic fixation upon nature as the site of sensual fulfilment. This is evident during the same scene of Laura's visit to the Moscow Road grocer, in which she sees some 'deep garnet' and 'tawny yellow' colour chrysanthemums, to which we are told 'She longed for the moment when she might stroke her hand over those mop heads.'[471] This impulse for sensuous engagement with the flowers demonstrates not only Laura's acute sensitivity to the world's material and aesthetic registers, but also shows us how her erotic identity is redirected towards entities of non-human status. Indeed, the one instance of physical contact between Laura and another human provokes an uncomfortable response in her after an initial thrill of touch. This takes places during the scene of the witches' sabbath, towards the novel's end. In this scene, Laura is pulled into the dance by Emily, a villager whom the text (perhaps parroting Laura's entrenched snobbery) describes as 'an anaemic young slattern.'[472] Their dance is described in language of thrilling kinesis:

> They whirled faster and faster, fused together like two suns that whirl and blaze in a single destruction. A strand of the [Emily's] red hair came undone and brushed across Laura's face. The contact made her tingle from head to foot. She shut her eyes and dived into obliviousness — with Emily for a partner she could dance until the gunpowder ran out of the heels of her boots.[473]

This imagery of the fusion of their bodies implicates an erotic exchange that is elided at the level of text's surface. The dance as a 'blaze of destruction' indicates a transgression of the ego in which the ecstasy of touch eradicates the corporeal and subjective boundaries to produce Laura as more than her single self.

The description of Laura tingling 'from head to foot' shows us how Warner is interested in the physical responsiveness of the body, specifically how the body acts as the bridging entity that interacts and translates the self and the world to one another. That it is a strand of Emily's

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[471] Ibid., p. 58.
[472] Ibid. p. 127.
[473] Ibid.

red hair that induces this intensity of reaction in Laura belies a queer ontology at the root of her identity, with the hair offering a specific kind of codified dangerous femininity that harkens back to the Pre-Raphaelite fetish for the erotically potent red-haired woman.[474] Nonetheless, the dance with Emily, soon disrupted by Mr Jowl spinning her away from Laura, can be read as encounter frustrated only by this outside interference. Peter Swaab identifies a series of novels in this period (such as Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway* or Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*) that feature queer relationships that are ultimately abandoned by the narrative's close: 'Each book naturalises homosexual proclivities as a feature of their well-established worlds, but shows the regulation of these worlds by sexual taboo.'[475] There is room to think of the intensity of touch within this scene as having a narrative subtext of sexual repression for Laura, who is a character that has displayed little to no desire for romantic love. However, in reading this as Laura's recoil at being confronted with her repressed homosexuality, which leads to a reading of the novel's denouement of her embracing misanthropic isolation as a kind of neurosis, the point of her journey to Great Mop has been bypassed. Indeed, even for Laura, this touch is a seductive experience of the tactile in excess, yet because of this disorientation it proves to be ultimately unsustainable; as she later moves away from the Sabbath group, there is an unconscious recognition that this was a misdirection in which self-fulfilment will not be achieved through that kind of subjective incomprehension. Whilst Laura certainly operates within the text as a queer figure, any centrality in the diagnosis of her ontological malady as being sexually provoked is too narrow a prescription that misses her larger searching for a cohesion of self. Laura's rejection of the Sabbath should be read as her recognition that trading one social environment for another is not pulling up the root of her despondency: that it is for her alone to contend with through communion with the enchanted environment of the woods and plants that she will cohabit with.

Lolly Willowes was begun by Warner in the shadow of Margaret Murray's influential *Witch-Cult in Western Europe* (1921). Murray, an Egyptologist, with the publication of her book

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[474] For example, see works such as Dante Gabriel-Rossetti's *Lady Lilith* (1866-68; 1872-3), Delaware Art Museum, Wilmington, DE; *La Ghirlandata* (1873), Guildhall Art Gallery, London; or *Venus Verticordia* (1864-68), Russell-Coates Museum, Bournemouth.

[475] Peter Swaab, 'The Queerness of *Lolly Willowes*', *The Journal of the Sylvia Townsend Warner Society*, 11.1 (2020), pp. 29-52, p. 33. See also Jane Garrity's discussion of the novel's sexuality in *Step-daughters of England: British Women Modernists and the National Imaginary* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003). For general contextual discussion of the literary representation of spinsterhood and lesbianism across this period, see Emma Liggins, *Odd Women? Spinsters, Lesbians and Widows in British Women's Fiction, 1850s–1930s* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014).

spearheaded a revival in witchcraft within the academic and intellectual arena. A text of, what Mimi Winick, calls 'fantastic scholarship', Murray's 'was the first that empowered [...] witches' and was the driving influence on the revival of the witch as a figure of intellectual and scholarly debate.[476] In her book, Murray argued that during the period of the witch trials in early modern Europe, those accused and condemned were in fact the last vestiges of a once thriving witch-cult that had existed before the rise of Christianity and had continued for many centuries to exist covertly alongside. Working in the immediate context of Frazer's work on fertility rituals in the ancient religions, Murray's thesis 'rested upon a small amount of archival research' of trial records and early modern pamphlets in order to construct the 'impression of a fairly uniform pagan religion' that had survived until the seventeenth century.[477] Although her scholarly practices and subsequent conclusions have since been discredited, nonetheless, her work provided the opportunity to think about the empowerment of women through investing with a hidden source of power those who had been accused. According to Murray's interpretation 'the witches do not occupy the submissive position they had typically occupied in traditional accounts', instead they are 'enthusiastic practitioners of a far more ancient religion that originated in goddess worship.'[478] The creative opportunities Murray's thesis engendered can be seen in the example of the establishment of a 'witch-group' in Oxford University in 1928, during which attendees ate passionfruit whilst papers were read by the light of 'black candles'.[479] As an inadvertent example of creative activism, Murray's feminism offered an exciting alternative perspective on a heavily patriarchal narrative.

Perhaps due to Murray's influence, the mid-1920s saw a 'concentrated witchcraft zeitgeist' in the British literary scene, with at least fourteen books published concerning the topic.[480] Amongst the noise of this lively scene, Warner began her debut novel. In addition to Murray's writing, she supplemented her research by reading Robert Pitcairn's 1829 histories of Scottish witch trials in the early modern period. In his study, she found accounts recording the voices of women accused of witchcraft. It was this direct access to voice of these women who

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[476] Mimi Winick, 'Modernist Feminist Witchcraft: Margaret Murray's Fantastic Scholarship and Sylvia Townsend Warner's Realist Fantasy', *Modernism/modernity* 22.3 (2015), pp. 565-592, p. 569.
[477] Ronald Hutton, *The Triumph of the Moon: A History of Modern Pagan Witchcraft* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 195.
[478] Mimi Winick, 'Modernist Feminist Witchcraft: Margaret Murray's Fantastic Scholarship and Sylvia Townsend Warner's Realist Fantasy', *Modernism/modernity* 22.3 (2015), pp. 565-592, p. 569.
[479] Graham John Wheeler, 'An Esbat among the Quads: An Episode of Witchcraft at Oxford University in the 1920s', *The Pomegranate,* 20.2 (2018) pp. 157-178, p. 159.
[480] Kate MacDonald, 'Witchcraft and Non-Conformity in Sylvia Townsend Warner's *Lolly Willowes* and John Buchan's *Witch Wood*', *The Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, 23.2 (2012), pp. 215-38, p. 219.

were defending their right to their own existence in the face of those attempting to diminish them that Warner found particularly moving and inspirational: 'the actual speech of the accused impressed on me that these witches were witches for love [...] it was the romance of their hard lives, their release from dull futures.'[481] The composition of the novel was completed in a 'leisurely manner' over the course of a year and by 1924 Warner was ready to find a publisher. Upon its release in 1926, *Lolly Willowes* became a bestseller, receiving positive notices on both sides of the Atlantic, with American reviewers drawing comparison with one of Warner's favourite writers, Jane Austen, and declared her as 'the girl who is responsible for the sudden interest in witchcraft that has seized on London'.[482] One such anecdote from this period is that Warner had tea with Margaret Murray herself, who had enjoyed the novel and the character of Lolly, although, as Warner relayed to her friend David Garnett in a letter, 'she was doubtful about my devil'.[483] Given her own qualified appreciation for Murray's book (claiming that her own reading of the Scottish witch trial records showed 'that witchcraft was more than Miss Murray's Dianic cult'), this dissenting opinion between the two women was perhaps fitting.[484] Winick reads this as an example of diverging, perhaps generationally distinct, feminisms, in which Murray's witch-cult modelled the kind of 'organization, conversation, and active participation' that was reminiscent of 'suffrage discourse', whereas Warner's 'rejection of sociability' reflected an 'introverted avant-garde feminism.'[485] This reading is certainly supported by the novel's investment in Laura's personal discovery rather than her entry into an alternate society via her witchcraft; rather, the witch-cult only appears to offer an alternate vision of social relations, but ends up eventually being caught up in the same kind of interpersonal power dealings that had prompted Laura's rural undertaking in the first place.

Laura uses sensory modalities as a bridging device to bring her into proximity with the natural world. This allows her to produce an emotional identity which is ecologically oriented, turning the rural environment into an intersubjective entity which is reciprocally responsive to her as well. This is visible in the text where the landscape of the Chiltern hills which she explores daily come to be personified into the imagery of a closing palm: 'Wherever she strayed the hills folded themselves round her like the fingers of a hand.'[486] The rural is produced as a sympathetic

[481] Warner quoted in Harman, *Sylvia Townsend Warner Biography*, p. 59.
[482] Ibid., p. 65.
[483] Ibid.
[484] Warner quoted in Harman, p. 59.
[485] Winick, 'Modernist Feminist Witchcraft', p. 566.
[486] Warner, *Lolly Willowes*, p. 84.

conversant, a space in which Laura's aloneness is counteracted by the animation of the landscape as supportive. By contrast, when her nephew Titus comes to live in the village, his attitudes reflect a possessive impulse, one in which the landscape is to be reduced to a space for petty leisure: '"I should like to stroke it" — and he waved his hand toward the pattern of rounded hills embossed with rounded beech-woods. [...] He loved the countryside as though it were a body.'[487] As with Butts's novel, the impulse to animate the landscape into a more-than-material plain is reflective of wider interest in exploring the animistic undercurrent that haunts rural spaces. This interest in the spiritual resonances of place works to transform rural sites into spaces in which the history of a location is registered in emotional terms as a form of social or cultural memory (regardless of the factual validity of this impulse).[488] This attempt to metamorphosise rural Britain into a topography of temporally and spiritually vibrant pathways reflects the contemporary interest in the novel as affording the opportunity to explore the practice of folk rituals and ancient traditions and how they might propose a route to (re)gaining coherency. In these terms, Warner's novel shows us how rural locales could be adapted as spaces for radical personal and social re-organisation. Her interest in landscape as holding unique abilities to alter consciousness is an idea she returns to in her 1929 novel *The True Heart* (itself a narrative of gendered class struggle intersecting with myth and folklore), in which she writes that 'each new landscape remodels the mind.'[489] Evidently, for Warner the crux of gender, power, and the development of a coherent selfhood is structured around the way particular spatial iterations and environments interact both politically and aesthetically.

Lolly Willowes positions rural spaces as politically radical through their opportunity of disrupting hegemonic relations to the world. Reflective of Warner's interest in uncovering the radical possibilities that rural spaces can engender, we can see Laura's socioeconomic position changing through the narrative's progression. Despite her bourgeois class position, Laura's

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[487] Ibid., p. 107.

[488] We can see the development of this impulse more keenly in the years following the Second World War and into the 1960s countercultural movement, with the range of Earth mysteries credo (such as various neopaganism groups or ley hunting communities) which argues for specific ancient places harbouring unique spiritual energies. Much of this New Age ritualising of specific sites in rural Britain have some relationship to Alfred Watkins' 1925 book, *The Old Straight Track*. Watkins, who was an amateur archaeologist, proposed a theory of straight tracks that connected various neolithic and pre-Christian sites, dubbed ley lines — a theory which had little support from the wider archaeological community. Watkins' notion of ley lines was then taken up in the post-WW2 period and adapted for the spiritual ends of the Earth Mysteries movement. See the work of John Michell, for example, as exemplary of this esoteric reimagining of the legacies of the ancient British landscape. See also, Alfred Watkins, *The Old Straight Track: Its Mounds, Beacons, Moats, Sites and Mark Stones*, 3rd edn. (London: Abacus, 1977 [1925]).

[489] Sylvia Townsend Warner, *The True Heart*, (London: Penguin, 2021 [1929]), p. 112.

movement from the material markers of the pre-modern gentry class to the urban bourgeoisie to eventually becoming, due to her brother's mismanagement of her finances, a member of the unpropertied rural class reveals her essentially precarious position as someone always at risk of becoming displaced. As a figure whose status as a spinster already places her as contrary to social mores, Laura's economic trajectory demonstrates an antithetical relationship to the progressive direction of property ownership and the spirit of accumulation that is promised by capitalism. We can witness this shift from bourgeois spinster to unfettered witch at the novel's close when, after expounding to Devil about her true position within the world, she begins 'to wander off in search of a suitable dry ditch or an accommodatingly loosened haystack [...] She could sleep where she pleased'.[490] This marks the text's radical political undercurrent, closing on a vision of England defined by common lands, boundaryless for those elected and enlightened outsiders such as Laura. It is both a regressive inference — recalling the pre-enclosure landscape of early-modern rural society, as well as the kind of Rousseauvian philosophy of the Enlightenment[491] — whilst also indicating Warner's left-wing political interests, by envisioning a version of rurality that is defined by a mutuality of collective use, opposed to a fenced-off territory of restricted private domains.[492]

Not only does Warner's implication of an unbounded relationship with nature reflect a vision of rural England that would be recognisable in Hardy's work, it also recalls John Clare's more explicitly political anti-enclosure poetry of the 1820s.[493] Clare, described by his publisher as 'a young Peasant, a day-labourer in husbandry', brought his experience as a member of the rural labouring class of his native Northamptonshire to his work, which, unlike some of the

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[490] Ibid., p. 161.

[491] Rousseau's criticism of materialism and property requisition is exemplified in his treatise *A Discourse on Inequality*, in which he writes: 'The first man who, having enclosed a piece of land, thought of saying "This is mine" and found people simple enough to believe him, was the true founder of civil society. How many crimes, wars, murders; how much misery and horror the human race would have been spared if someone had pulled up the stakes and filled in the ditch and cried out to his fellow men: "Beware of listening to this impostor. You are lost is you forget that the fruits of the earth belong to everyone and that the earth itself belongs to no one!"' Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *A Discourse on Inequality*, trans. Maurice Cranston (London: Penguin, 1984 [1755]), p. 109.

[492] Both Warner and Valentine Ackland, her partner, would later join the British Communist Party in the spring of 1935. See Harman, *Sylvia Townsend Warner: A Biography,* p. 140.

[493] The Inclosure [sic] Acts, which granted landowners the rights for common land was divided up and bounded with hedges and fences, had been increasingly enforced from the mid-18th century onwards, although had existed since in legislation since the early 17th century. E. P. Thompson describes the process of Enclosure as 'a redefinition of the nature of agrarian property itself. [...] what was "perfectly proper" in terms of capitalist property-relations involved, none the less, a rupture of the traditional integument of village custom and of right: and the social violence of enclosure consisted precisely in the drastic, total imposition upon the village of capitalist property-definitions. [...] Enclosure was the culmination of a long secular process by which men's customary relations to the agrarian means of production were undermined.' E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin, 2013 [1963]), pp. 237-9.

earlier Romantic writers, carried with it a genuinely inhabited understanding of agricultural practices and of peasant culture and traditions.[494] In his poem 'The Mores', he describes the division of the common land once used and worked for centuries by villagers now being apportioned up into 'little parcels [for] little minds to please'. The process of enclosure in this poem becomes synonymous with both the loss of childhood innocence and the shutting down of creative and communal epistemologies:

> Each little tyrant with his little sign
> Shows where man claims earth glows no more divine
> But path to freedom and to childhood dear
> A board sticks up to notice 'no road here'[495]

For Clare, the state of the countryside is reflective of the state of both the national and personal soul, and with the coming of the divisions of rural territories, so too does this effect a cutting off of the self from the experiences of enchantment that the natural world might afford if left unencumbered. Both Clare and Warner, despite a century dividing them, suggest a picture of modernising Britain as inherently antisocial and anti-communal. Bate has described Clare's poem as positioning enclosure as 'an impediment to dwelling in the world'.[496] Like Clare, Laura's disavowal of conventional social mores by the close of the novel is similarly interested in the possibility of channelling rebellion into forms of re-enchantment. With her new sense of inner freedom is able to become translated to a psychological refashioning of the landscape into a terrain in which she is intimately connected and somewhere she can exist with because of its unfixity. Now that she has become the embodied self of her fantasy, she and the world are unified so that the spaces which she will inhabit become the spaces that reflexively inhabit her psyche, in a reversible process of corporeal and psychological intersubjectivity. Much of Laura's development is in many ways similar to those subjects of Mew's writing: like Dave in 'Arracombe Wood' or the speaker of 'Moorland Night', the realm of rural nature offers a space of refuge that is also restorative and responsive to a version of being that is animated with the mutual enchantment of living. As with Butts, Warner draws upon the folkloric resonances of rural England in order to articulate a vision of modernity that is defined by ambiguity and echoes of

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[494] John Taylor, quoted in 'Introduction', Tom Paulin, *Major Works*, ed. Eric Robinson and David Powell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. xvii-xxix, p. xvii.
[495] John Clare, 'The Mores', *Major Works*, pp. 167-9, p. 169.
[496] Bate, *The Song of the Earth*, p. 163.

furtive cultures that exist organically, undercutting systems of rationalism and sanctioned accounts of official history.

By centring a narrative of an outcast in self-exile, *Lolly Willowes* presents a vision of England as a nation defined by a fundamentally radical conception of ruralism. Rather than viewing the countryside as an aestheticised space framed by a hegemonic pastoral ideology, Warner's portrait of rurality casts it as the site for a metamorphic future that the post-War age might require. This latent version of a rurality which accommodates the outcast necessarily casts the hostile cities and parcelled and planned landscapes as spaces only waiting to be reterritorialized by those who might be able to undo a fettered national psyche. In closing the novel with the implication of the landscape as a space of mutuality and common usage, eschewing the orderliness of property, rural England no longer becomes tied to the neatness of socioeconomic uniformity but rather is invested with a wildness that mirrors Laura's newly discovered internal consciousness. By the close of the novel, there is a sense that, in her vision, whatever her fingers were searching in the leaves has now been grasped, and that now that Laura is in the full flush of her convictions, she will not be letting it go.

Conclusion: 'Once a wood, always a wood'

As both novels have shown, an imaginative capacity for ecological contiguity and radical spatial reformation was a central concern in the 1920s. One of the most striking examples of this is found towards the end of *Lolly Willowes*, during Laura's long conversation with the Devil. Encountering him at the site of an old Folly, the environment around is bare of trees. In spite of this, Satan tells Laura that these 'thick brown woods' where they are, 'Folly Woods[,] is especially dense.'[497] Laura is confused and questions him, '"Is?"', to which he responds, '"Is. Once a wood, always a wood."' Suddenly she is awakened to a new understanding of unfixed materiality, in which linear temporal scales are transmuted into the aperture of potential eternity, accessible through imaginative inscription: 'Once a wood, always a wood.' The threshold to an alternate world, a world of enchanted immaterialities, begins to seem porous. In entering into the ideology of the witch, Laura is able to un-map the known world and re-territorialise it with a personal vibrancy born out of her own imaginative perception. Satan allows Laura to see that time is in fact plastic, and the natural world will in the future repossess all the wild places that humanity has tried to claim as its own.

[497] Warner, *Lolly Willowes*, p. 150.

In many ways both texts cohere across an interest in revitalising a disappearing or even lost version of the rural past. *Armed with Madness* combined a complex stylistic scheme alongside a narrative that draws upon mythic tropes in order to argue for an understanding of the rural as a space charged with the potencies of sacred constancies. For both Butts and Warner, the sensory capacities of perception are engendered as routes into personal and temporal expansion. In a decade which saw some radical attempts to assert coherent definitions of the past's relationship to place, the rural of Butts's and Warner's novels is a space which invites the connective reach of imaginative contact. However, unlike Butts or a figure like John Hargrave, Warner does not see the past as an abstracted place in which to forge a benighted society of racial elites; nor too does she reflect Butts' sense of patrician exclusivity, in which the native is afforded sole and supreme access to space in all its mythic capacities. Rather, *Lolly Willowes* uses the framework of the folk story tradition, drawing upon its potentialities and its limits, in order to explode ideological fixity through an assertion of the embodied self as the harbinger of a radical version of rural England.

The fifth and final chapter of this study will pivot away from focusing on the textual production of rural selfhood and will explore the visual representations of coastal communities on film. Often depicted as the last holdouts of an authentic folk culture, these cinematic elegies to "primitive" island communities tells us much about the cultural concerns and ideological positions at play in late 1920s and '30s British cinema.

Chapter 5

'Ultima Thule': 1930s Coastal and Island Cinema and the Edges of the Rural

The 1937 documentary short *Farewell Topsails*, by Humphrey Jennings, depicts the declining days of an old cargo schooner. Opening with a close-up shot of an accordion, the voiceover tells us: 'Far down in the Romantic West Country, Will, the accordion player, grinds out a haunting old tune to an audience which is composed of the last survivors of a great race of sea men.'[498] In tandem with the narration, the image of Will the accordion player then cuts to a wide shot, panning across an industrialised rural landscape: spoil tips turned into hills tower adjacent to solitary farmhouses and electric pylons. We are told that Will, once a sailor like his forebears, now works in the pits at St Austell, Cornwall, mining kaolin, mineral clay, for export to be used in the making of 'fine porcelain or the shiny pages of illustrated magazines'. The landscape is one of steep and rocky quarries, seemingly more like weathered alpine trails than the sites of ugly industrial activity that Lawrence conjures up. Cutting across to the harbour now, we see the clay being loaded into the boats from trucks. The voiceover describes the network that emerges from extraction of kaolin, in which it is shipped to the papermills of the Thames Estuary or to Runcorn, before being brought inland by barges to the Staffordshire potteries. This process of distribution had been for sixty years orchestrated through the sailing of topsail schooners, of which hundreds used to depart from the Cornish coast and now only a dozen remain in operation; the rest, in their obsolescence, are now 'rotting in the mud' of local harbours. With muted pathos, the voiceover positions the schooner vessel as a once-essential cog in the industrial boom of the nineteenth century; now, like the very tacky magazine or mass-produced pottery it supplies, they are rapidly being replaced by steam- and motor-powered vessels: 'No more will they heel gracefully over into the freshening breeze; they're gone, and their crews with them'. Jennings cuts between footage of one of the remaining schooners, which has been, we are told, adapted with auxiliary machinery 'in a pathetic attempt to compete', as it leaves the harbour and close-ups of the now-unemployed men watching it set out to sea.

Farewell Topsails is a narrative of obsolescence as a by-product of modernity. Although Jennings's focus on the twilight days of the topsail schooner appears to be only a minor

[498] 'Farewell Topsails', *The Complete Humphrey Jennings Volume One: The First Days*, dir. Humphrey Jennings (BFI, 2011 [1937]) [Blu-Ray].

development in the expansion and progression of industrialisation's modes and networks of trade, it nonetheless harbours a wider concern with the processes of capitalism as affecting various forms of social erosion. As with current debates around the future of Artificial Intelligence, Jennings's documentary captures, with an extremely light touch, an existential question facing Britain in the 1930s concerning the side-effects of progress: what are we losing and how is this loss affecting communities? In transitioning away from manually operated sea power which requires the physical toil of the seamen to climb masts and rigging to the coal- or petrol-powered engines of the mechanised vessel, Jennings's Cornish sailors are cast in the same tenor as Lawrence's colliers whose move from the butty system of old to a mechanised product-line organisation is seen to concede much of the inherent autonomy that was gained through their nonmechanical labour. It is not an indictment of industrialism itself, indeed that transition from fishing to mining seems to have been integrated enough over time that it no longer registers as a rupture; however, the abrupt cessation of the intuitive, generationally contiguous mode of sailing that the topsail schooners require, demonstrates that modernity's streamlining will effectively make this kind of application of bodily skill no longer indispensable.

As discussed in the chapters on Thomas and folk culture revivals, this question over the erosion of the rural locale's customs and practices has been fairly commonplace since at least the Romantic era, with Wordsworth and, later, John Ruskin, foregrounding a mood of melancholic elegy over rural spaces' depletion and desertion. In *Farewell Topsails* Jennings is working within this same discursive tradition, reflecting a kind of national anxiety that is aiming to reacquaint notions of vernacular community, homegrown and representative of continuity, as central to comprehending identity and its relationship to nationhood. It is significant that Jennings focuses upon a community that has been defined by its relationship to industrialisation, in that by drawing upon the continuities of the previous two centuries, the picture of the nation is reflective of the realities of its place in a global industrial system. Indeed, the voiceover informs that the open quarries of the pits are 'still worked with the almost primitive gear that has been used since they began' (in the mid-eighteenth century). It is a curious dichotomy that Jennings presents here, at once aiming to strike a melancholy note at the loss of ancestral traditions, yet in the brief glimpses of the Cornish mining landscape, it does not visually implicate modernity as a disjunction in the shift from maritime and fishing cultures to an extractive land-based industry. Though he frames the scene within an aesthetic of the pastoral (so much so that the quarry seems relatively unpeopled), it nonetheless *is* a quarry, and is not attempting to convey an ahistorical

representation of rurality outside of the Industrial Revolution. The suggestion of the 'primitive gear' furthers this implication, with the presentation of the industrial heart of St Austell as itself exemplary of a kind of continuity which is unobstructive, perhaps because its once-modern systems and processes have begun to ossify and slip into an almost antiquated form of production.

There is a subtle ambivalence at the heart of Jennings's film, one in which the ends of continuity are lamented, but in which the process of aestheticising this lamentation, the object becomes in some ways mournable and subsequently beautiful. The voiceover tells us that the skipper of the schooner cannot give her up despite it running at loss, as 'for him she's a person, she's alive'. Whilst *Topsails* is not a film that foregrounds grief as a social phenomenon, in its documentation of the underside of progress, the spectre of tradition, with all its irresolute emotional bindings, is necessarily invoked. Recalling J. M. W. Turner's *The Fighting Temeraire* (1838), Jennings's film about the end of vitality, and the ways in which the slippages between time, modernity, and progress, all carry with them a rough hand that does not always land softly, it offers a gentle reflection upon the tightening mood of Britain as it edges with increasing febrility into the coming Second World War. Furthermore, like Turner's painting, it is similarly a portrait of an Empire nation undergoing a turning point, one in which its own greatness is celebrated through a melancholic acknowledgement of the forward momentum of "progress." Nonetheless, the lament that suffuses *Topsails* reflects a latent uneasiness with the apparent inevitability at the heart of modernity, one in which locality and commonality are threatened by the upending of socioeconomic structures that are barely holding communities together.

Although, as the previous chapter has demonstrated, inward-looking and self-examination through terms of national and local customs was a common interest in the 1920s, by the 1930s it had begun to increasingly attract the attention of the metropolitan elite and avant-garde sections of British culture. Esty's notion of the 'anthropological turn' of the 1930s continues to provide a useful model for thinking about how this decade looked to the rural to provide framework(s) of coherency.[499] This 'anthropological turn' understood by Esty as a shift within British modernist discourses and aesthetics in which the commitment to transnational concepts of *art* as a redemptive force is abandoned, and instead *culture*, which is 'restricted by national or ethnolinguistic borders', is looked to as satisfying the demands of a nation

[499] Esty, *A Shrinking Island*, p. 2.

increasingly in need of articulating a certain kind of particularity.[500] This turn towards the particular, the local, and the vernacular, is rooted in feelings of 'imperial contraction' that emerge during this decade.[501] In light of this attention to the rural as a nationally redemptive space, this chapter explores several filmmakers with abiding interests in the at once local and necessarily trans-local spaces of the coast of Britain (and by extension, Ireland) and its islands. In doing so, it discovers that Jennings's tone of lamentation is reflective of a broad emotional tenor that emerges in cinematic representations of coastal and archipelagic communities as spaces of Neo-Romantic cultural ossification. Both Robert J. Flaherty's *Man of Aran* (1934) and Michael Powell's *The Edge of the World* (1937), to differing degrees, draw upon discourses of pre-modern cultural practices to present a vision of Northern Atlantic Island communities that are either divorced entirely or are resistant to the cultural incursion of the mainland's modernity. By contrast, John Grierson's *Drifters* (1929) presents a lively and spirited account of the new possibilities in both fishing and in representational forms of perception through its narrative of a modern fishing trawler as it heads out into the North Sea to fish for herring. All three films explored in this chapter show us how the representation of island and coastal relations during this period offered a window into the grander structures of modernity, at times holding up a mirror to the costs of progress whilst also asking questions about the inbuilt ethnographic viewpoint that much of these films tend to engender.

Coastal and island cinema, by virtue of its attention to the limits of geographical boundaries, naturally engages with questions of territory's implication in processes of cultural development. Building on Jameson's theories of modernism as intractable from imperialism (see Introduction), Esty describes the expansionist politics of the British Empire in the previous half century as aiming to constitute its peripheral territories through a process of cultural homogeneity that emerged both organically and through conscious implementation. The consequence of this was to inadvertently produce feeling of loss within the mother-country, in which the British self-imagination becomes defined by a sense of absence as its own inherited particularities and regional idiosyncrasies are smoothed over in favour of a uniform cultural polity that could be exported to overseas territories:

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[500] Ibid., p. 3.
[501] Ibid., p. 4.

> Thus, while the culture of imperial modernism represented itself as an expanding and synthesizing universalism at the periphery (where it encountered the putatively whole cultures of tribal premodernity), it registered an attenuated or absent totality at the core, where knowledge of the inside was mystified into the atomized but dazzling unreality of metropolitan perception.[502]

The "metaphor of lost totality" is a central tenet of modernism's intractable imperial facet. Therefore, the awareness by the 1930s of the British Empire's fading supremacy, had the effect of galvanising homegrown culture as a form of emotional stability — what Esty calls 'the repair or reintegration' method as a means of cultural steadying.[503] Therefore, this dynamic of looking inwards and backwards for the cultural continuities borne out of a sense of place produces an imaginary that aims to chart the relationship between the local within its broader national (in this case, mostly British) context. This trajectory is evident within the previous chapter's discussion of folk cultural revivals in the 1910s and 1920s and evinces an increasing clamour for a sense of national coherency which the fulfilment of traditional practices is seen to promise to provide. Esty's study draws upon bastions of British so-called 'high' modernism (Woolf, Forster, Eliot, et. al.), positioning their work in the 1930s and '40s as indicative of this process of cultural contraction, in which the spatial limits to English cultural dominance are checked, along with an interrogation into the temporal momentum of modernity itself; indeed, these works of late modernism, in Esty's viewpoint, reflect a 'faltering' confidence in the supremacy Anglo-cultural integrity.[504]

Therefore, a cultural text such as Jennings's *Topsails* documentary, whilst working in a less avant-garde mode than Eliot or Woolf, nonetheless can be seen as speaking to this interest in recording the particularity of the local. Indeed, rather than focusing upon the technological and administrative improvement of the kaolin mining industry, Jennings draws upon the ulterior side of this advancement. Shots of the sailors at work on the rigging demonstrate at once a corporeal vitality, in which their bodies display an easy coordination, implicating a choreographic display of inherited knowledge and well-rehearsed mechanics. These shots, when combined with the music emanating from a former sailor playing the accordion on the harbour, offers a picture of temporal continuity, in which the long tradition of the St Austell sailors, whose bodies would have moved in much the same kind of kinaesthetic relation on the ships of old, is kept vital in

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[502] Ibid., p. 7.
[503] Ibid., p. 8; p. 7.
[504] Ibid. p. 22.

the methods of labour that is still engaged (though not for much longer). Reflecting Esty's notion of the 'anthropological turn', Jennings's camera frames these men in such ethnographic terms, with their activity of manning the schooner undercut by the voiceover accounting for the eventual obsolescence of both the ship and their labour. It is a framing of the community that purposefully smooths over any historical development, eliding the multiple instances of technological change that had become assimilated to the point of naturalisation. This impulse to capture the coast in terms of an abstracted past is an approach that we will see employed in other such films.

In cinema, depictions of coastal and island communities surrounding Britain and Ireland emerge as a semi-coherent subgenre by the close of the 1930s. As typified by Jennings's short, the coast as a site of struggle and of innovation offers a focal point for larger questions that attempt to ask about the effects of modernity and the risk this poses to local communities, folk customs, and established regional identities. Although part of the geographical and cultural subsets that define rurality, coastal communities, such as fishing villages, and their agricultural practices are often of secondary concern when considering the depiction of life and labour in the countryside. However, what coastal and, particularly in the corpus examined in this chapter, northern, Scottish, and Irish locations offer to our understanding of rurality in this period is the implication of struggle and hardship, danger and peril, as central facets to the lived experiences of rural communities, as well as presenting the tension between the land's edge and the sea's start as a spatial invocation of simultaneous remoteness and connectivity. In foregrounding experiences of jeopardy within topographies not easily traversed or cultivated, both *The Edge of the World* and *Man of Aran* engage with traditions of the Romantic sublime as a structure of comprehension that is distinct and unusual in a world in which living and travel has been made comparatively accessible. Both films are interested in an aesthetics of the sublime and its relationship to the way landscape recontextualises and dwarfs the human body, positioning the individual as a constituent part within a wider aesthetic scheme. In depicting places bounded by shorelines and imbricated within the sea as a space of socioeconomic interrelation, these films offer a way into thinking about a phenomenology of place, in which the self is both anchored and unmoored by the sea's surface as a terrain of constant change and extreme volatility. Furthermore, in depicting lives dependent upon the weather's interaction with a sea/landscape, topographical features such as crashing waves and towering sea cliffs are transformed out of their material realities and become symbolic entities in which to examine being as a both

simultaneously fragile and exhilarating phenomenon. Like the mountain film, coastal cinema places questions of scale at its very centre, engaging with Romantic tropes as ambivalent counterpoints to the homogenising effects of socio-cultural restructuring brought about through the imperial-industrial modernity of early twentieth-century Britain.

In the films of Flaherty and Powell, images of a figure within an awesome landscape are afforded a mythic resonance that visually distils a politics of place interested in the relationship between ontological experience and cultural loss. The depictions of island and coastal communities during this period are all suffused with a sense of elegy, offering narratives which portray the inevitability of modernity as a process of erasure as much as it is one of progression. Coastal cinema during this period aims to rework a version of the sublime through the modernist technological apparatus of the film camera. Grierson's *Drifters* diverges from Powell and Flaherty in its unabashed celebration of the advancement of industrial technologies. As a highly influential figure within the contemporary British film industry, his aesthetic rubric serves as a useful counterpoint to the Romantic tendencies of the other films discussed here. Through his loyalty to advocating the positive advancement of modernity we are able to see the contiguities and divergences that filmic representation of coastal and marine-based communities can contribute to our understanding of rurality in this period.

All three perspectives on island experience during at this time offer an outsider's point of view. Whilst this chapter is concerned with the ways in which these landscapes/seascapes and their communities provided these filmmakers opportunities to engage with a specific aesthetic credo, it is important to acknowledge that their act of impressing often metropolitan assumptions upon these places had the effect of creating texts that, perhaps inadvertently, engage in an imperialist project of contextualising these places for the comprehension of a centralised, non-local (or non-specific) audience. Contemporary writing from more national and local origins did emerge during this period, with writers grouped within the Scottish Renaissance engaging in questions of place and landscape from diverse perspectives such as Scottishness or dispersal and contraction of Highland communities. These include figures such as the novelists Neil M. Gunn (from Caithness), Edwin Muir (Orkney), and Lewis Grassic Gibbon (Aberdeenshire), and nationalist poet Hugh MacDiarmid (Shetland via Edinburgh and Glasgow). Nan Shepherd, also part of this broad milieu, similarly has much to contribute to these questions of rurality and its

relationship to national and regional identities, and her non-fiction account of her experiences walking the Cairngorm mountains will be discussed in this study's conclusion, to follow.[505]

In looking at the intersection between cinema and archipelagic cultures during this decade, the role of the body is vital in constituting narratives of elegy and decline in the face of an imperial modernity. By focusing upon texts which are embedded within various degrees of colonial ethnographic approaches, these island landscapes are placed within a context which offers the aesthetic sublime as a coherent language of continuity. As with the previous chapter, the legacies of Romanticism's foregrounding of history as a mechanism in which to interact with place are sustained here. However, in focusing upon the experiential qualities of island and seafaring cultures, the filmmakers discussed here also foreground the edge-ness of coasts and islands, which offer not hard boundaries but rather permeable spaces, a 'liberated zone; a site of possibility' as Peter Hay, theorist within the critical school of the blue humanities, has termed it.[506] Finally, in coming to these locations and cultures through the medium of film, these cinematic depictions of archipelagic and coastal rurality offer new aesthetic framings through their formal properties and narrative grammar, helping us to understand the ways in which rurality and modernity during this period are not only interrelated but also mutually constitutive.

Metaphysical Realism: Flaherty's *Man of Aran* and the Ethnographic Gaze

In the opening titles of Flaherty's *Man of Aran*, the text describes the setting of the forthcoming film as taking place on the small 'wastes of rock' that constitute the three Aran Islands (Inishmore, Inishmaan and Inisheer) that lie off the west coast of Ireland.[507] These islands, we are told, are almost 'smothered' by the 'gigantic' swells of sea during winter storms. It is a hostile landscape, one in which living is an elemental experience. The titles continue:

> In this desperate environment the Man of Aran, because his independence is the most precious privilege he can win from life, fights for his existence, bare though it may be. It

[505] Louisa Gairn's examination of Scottish modernist literature and its relationship to environmental discourses, *Ecology and Modern Scottish Literature*, offers a useful counterpoint to the interests of this chapter, foregrounding many of the writers mentioned above and providing an account for the lively divisions within the Scottish literary scene during this period. See, Louisa Gairn, *Ecology and Modern Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008).

[506] Peter Hay, 'A Phenomenology of Islands', *Island Studies Journal*, 1.1 (2006), pp. 19-42, p. 22.

[507] *Man of Aran*, dir. Robert J. Flaherty (Gainsborough Pictures, 1934), online film recording, YouTube, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cwmc05qW0xc> [accessed 2 April 2023].

> is a fight from which he will have no respite until the end of his indomitable days or until he meets his master — the sea.

Flaherty frames his film within a mythic language of wild encounter, in which the psychological geographies of islands and its people are melded into a project of sheer survival. It is a discursive premise that positions the people of the island, represented by the titular Man of Aran, as essentialised iterations of a primordial world, archetypes in a universal story of struggle for existence. It is with this set-up that Flaherty fades into a, perhaps ironical, opening shot of a young boy crouched on a rock at the edge of a rock pool (fig. 1). This opening scene follows the boy, Son of Aran, as he fishes for a crab which he will later use as bait when casting off the huge cliffs of the island. As an inaugurating image, it has a disarming effect in its gentle depiction of juvenile activity. The water in the tidal pools is shown to be almost transparent, and a massed swirling of long tendrils of seaweed capture a sense of the island as a place that moves between two worlds through various scales of perception.

(Fig. 1)

As an image of the boundary between land and sea, these opening shots portray a permeable border, in which the two zones are shown to be mutually coextensive. Rachel Carson has described the ontology of shorelines and the edge of the sea as 'an elusive and indefinable boundary.'[508] She characterises the shore as having 'a dual nature, changing with the swing of the tides, belonging now to the land, now to the sea.'[509] In opening his film on an image of the island's littoral zone, Flaherty characterises the film in terms of fluctuating duality, in which states of being will be defined as much by their relationality and propensity to oscillation as by any fixed order. Furthermore, by focusing on the boy at the intermediate zone between land and sea, the metaphysics of the film establishes itself as concerned with transitional entities: like the shoreline, the boy is framed within a semiotics of between-ness. As will become evident, his parents are characterised by their connection to distinct zones of the sea (father) and land

[508] Rachel Carson, *The Edge of the Sea* (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2021 [1955]), p. 1.
[509] Ibid.

(mother), though even these display tendencies to complexify these zonal attributions. As we open on the boy reaching into the water, Flaherty presents us with a metaphorical distillation of the boy's position between the maternal ties of the land and the trajectory of his archetypal journey into manhood and a life upon the sea.

The narrative of *Man of Aran* is purposefully simple in its emphasis upon subsistence activities in order to construct a narrative of mythic continuity. The film's foregrounding of the islanders' technologically unaffected ways of living forms the central crux of its narrative of difference, in which the Aran Islands apparent cultural isolation is emphasised to contrast to modern life of its contemporary 1930s audience. Opening on the boy catching a crab, we are soon shown the interior of, what we learn to be, his home. In the cottage, his mother is tending to the fire and rocking a baby in a wicker crib, whilst a hen and her chicks scratch around, and lambs lie huddled in a blanketed box in the corner. It is a scene of domestic harmony, human and animal coexisting in accord in the warmth and light of the hearth. Soon, the mother spots the shape of a distant boat nearing land. Both she and her son, who is coming home across the clifftops towards the cottage, head out to the shore to assist in bringing the currach up onto the beach. As it lands, and the men disembark amongst the stormy waves crashing around them, a mighty struggle ensues to pull the vessel up out of the surf. Succeeding after much effort, the family traipse back to the cottage to dry off.

The next day, the Man of Aran and his wife begin to prepare the rocky terrain near their cottage for farming. He swings a heavy sledgehammer, breaking up rocks to provide a level foundation for the seaweed that his wife is busy collecting from along the shoreline. After laying the seaweed, his wife and son go searching for soil in the crevices of the rocks. Later, the boy goes fishing using a long rope baited with the crab he caught yesterday which he dangles over the cliff edge into the water. It is during his fishing that he sees the arrival of a basking shark in the waters around the island.

The second half of the film focuses primarily on the hunting of the basking shark(s). The hunt is shown as one of long endurance by the Aran men, whose stalking, harpooning, and then waiting for the shark to die takes several days out upon the waves. Eventually they are able to haul the shark back to the island where its carcass is dragged ashore through effort of most of the community. The Woman of Aran then boils the shark's liver in order to extract the oil to be used in the village's lamps.

The final scenario of the film commences with the fishermen setting out to sea once more in hunt of more migrating basking sharks heading north. Whilst they are out on the water, the weather turns, and a storm transforms the sea into a dangerous tumult. The fishermen struggle to make it back to shore amongst the frenetic crashing waves. Both the wife and the son

(Fig. 2)

(Fig. 3)

head down through the cliffs sides where they have been keeping watch and rush to the shore to help the men out of the violent surf. After struggling amongst the foam and climbing up rocks that are being rhythmically submerged in the deluge of breaking waves, the family make it to higher ground, although the currach is now wrecked against the rocks. Flaherty closes the film by cutting between medium and close-up shots of the family and long shots of the violent sea battering against the rocks and pouring over the cliffs (fig. 2 & 3). Bruised and drenched but alive, the family turn away from the tumultuous scene and head back to their cottage, disappearing out frame. The narrative shape of *Man of Aran* is stripped down to its essential dramatic bones; by framing the life the Aran Islanders through the singularity of one family, Flaherty manufactures a narrative that connects the island with a primitive scale of survival, in which the terror of nature as an elementally powerful, almost deific, force is framed as the daily reality for these people who are geographically sequestered outside of time.

Flaherty's film offers a unique vantage point from which to think about rurality and its relationship to precarity with its unique combination of divergent genres and their respective aesthetic aims. In *Man of Aran*, he fuses the realist aesthetics (but not politics) of the documentary film alongside a poetic and metaphysical subtext which transfigures the image into more than its narrative depiction. Indeed, it should be emphasised, that although framed as a documentary, Flaherty's film in fact moves away from many of the lived realities of the islanders and thereby subverts the implicit ethical responsibilities of a true documentarian; one such 1933 manifesto

(Fig. 4)

argued that 'true documentaries reveal the world, not the plasticity of the cinema' — the latter of which could be charged at Flaherty.[510] How we should approach *Man of Aran*, then, provides several conflicting demands, all of which require a degree of attention. In a 1950 article in *Hollywood Quarterly*, Hugh Gray describes Flaherty's unique place within the canon of documentarians, writing that 'Because he is an artist and not just a reporter, he places effect, dramatic values, and emotional impact above what might be called literal accuracy, and this brings us to a major criticism of Flaherty's work, in which the sinister word "fake" plays a part.'[511] Perhaps the most infamous example of this fakery is in the shark hunting scenes, which was a practice 'that had passed into history a generation earlier' and which the island men had to learn how to do for the film.[512] In addition, the method of collecting seaweed, which the film depicts by showing the woman hauling a great basket on her back along the edge of 'Inishmore cliffs during a storm' (fig. 4), elides the fact that in reality, 'seaweed is collected only along low-lying shores [...] at spring tide when the sea is absolutely calm'.[513] Furthermore, the location of the plot in which the family are attempting to sow vegetables was in 'an area neither before nor since utilised for farming', and actual residents of the Aran Islands later called this depiction of 'field manufacturing technique [...] faulty to point of being ridiculous.' Evidently, Flaherty's aesthetic intentions had the effect of overwriting the actual lived practices of the real Islanders, resulting in many 'bitterly resent[ing] the film', as John C. Messenger found when surveying the population in the 1960s.[514]

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[510] Oswell Blakeston, 'Manifesto on the Documentary Film (UK, 1933)', *Film Manifestos and Global Cinema Cultures: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Scott MacKenzie (Oakland: University of California Press, 2020), pp. 460-1, p. 460.
[511] Hugh Gray, 'Robert Flaherty and the Naturalistic Documentary', *Hollywood Quarterly*, 5.1 (1950), pp. 41-48, p. 42.
[512] Cheryl Temple-Herr, 'Re-Imagining *Man of Aran*: The "First Wave" of Irish Cinema', *The Canadian Journal of Irish Studies*, 29.2 (2005), pp. 11-16, p. 12.
[513] John C. Messenger, '*Man of Aran* Revisited: An Anthropological Critique', *University Review*, 3.9 (1966), pp. 15-47, p. 41.
[514] Ibid. Additionally, the documentary *How the Myth was Made: A Study of Robert Flaherty's* 'Man of Aran' captured this continued unhappiness with both the film's depiction of the island and the financial gains Flaherty profited, with one local stating: 'There were lots of things that never really happened here at all. Flaherty, of course, made a good bit on that ... and got very cheap labour here.' However, as the documentary also shows, this sentiment was not uniform across the islands, with others embracing the film, including giving regular screenings of it, and seeing

In crafting a narrative under the guise of capturing reality as lived by the Islanders, Flaherty can be seen as operating within the tradition of the imperialist adventurer, questing to wild places in search of a primitive authenticity that is ultimately a projection originating in metropolitan expectations of remote communities. Cheryl Temple-Herr sees Flaherty's film as part of a wider trend within island films, in which 'the ever-present tendrils of a prefabricated sentimentality' are impressed, either consciously or not, onto the visual and narrative depictions of island life.[515] Flaherty's film reflects an intentionality of capturing and preserving a version of the world already outside of actuality. In privileging depictions of daily tasks presented as herculean efforts of survival, as opposed to reflecting both the social fabric — the family is not shown in the context of any community gatherings, religious services, or conversation with the other islanders — and coastal networks between intra-island and mainland polities, *Man of Aran* functions as a dream of primitive anthropology. Temple-Herr identifies the film as an example of 'salvage ethnography' in which 'native peoples' are shown 'performing tasks and rituals not as they were lived in the penumbra of modernity but according to the protocols of living memory.'[516] Flaherty's own defence of his approach to documentary filmmaking positioned himself as a translator, in that 'One often has to distort a thing in order to capture its true spirit', going on to say 'this is one of the main tenets of artistic creations.'[517] Evidently, then, question of factiousness is a prominent consideration when placing *Man of Aran* within a context of mid-1930s understandings of 'remote' communities. Often these representations are as much defined by the experience of encounter, in which the subject becomes concerned with the fissures between imaginative inscription and the actualities that confront the incoming artist. Unlike Powell, Flaherty's film abnegates any exploration, outside of an implication of nobility through poverty, of the political and economic realities of the Aran islands, avoiding discussion of absentee landlordism and its connection to the Islanders' destitution, and instead produces what Richard Corliss calls 'a tale of dewy-eyed urchins and anachronistic sea monsters.'[518] This approach was not uncontroversial even at the time of the film's release: Grierson, who produced the film, in a rebuke coded as a defence, said that for Flaherty's critics it was pointless 'to

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it as an aesthetically pleasing and entertaining depiction of former days. *How the Myth was Made: A Study of Robert Flaherty's* 'Man of Aran', dir. George C. Stoney, James B. Brown (George C. Stoney Associates, 1978).

[515] Temple-Herr, 'Re-Imagining *Man of Aran*', p. 11.

[516] Ibid., p. 12.

[517] Robert J. Flaherty quoted in the *New Yorker* 'Profile' of him in the June 1949 issue. Gray, 'Flaherty and the Naturalistic Documentary', p. 47.

[518] Richard Corliss, 'Robert Flaherty: The man in the iron myth', *Film Comment*, 9.6 (1973), pp. 38-42, p. 40.

complain of a pear that it lacks the virtue of a pomegranate', though also adding that for him, 'I like my braveries to emerge otherwise than from the sea, and stand otherwise than against the sky [...] they shine as bravely in the pursuit of Irish landlords as in the pursuit of Irish sharks.'[519] Evidently, Grierson's political bones cannot be elided, and his defence actually works to characterise Flaherty's film as a fantasy of insularity, in that by finding the monstrousness of life in the sea itself, as opposed to in the politico-economic structures that demand the kind of hard subsistence lifestyle that is rather shinily presented, the film avoids the real truth of the Aran Islands and its people.

Therefore, Flaherty's film serves less as a document of the Aran communities and instead offers an imaginative inscription that reflects an adherence to the paradigm of the Rouseauian 'Noble Savage'. Flaherty had first explored this archetype in his 1922 film, *Nanook of the North*, in which an Inuk man is shown surviving in the far north of Canada. Notably, as with the Aran Islanders, Flaherty had also recreated certain fictitious practices, such as costuming Nanook in more 'authentic' Eskimo attire.[520] In both films, Flaherty's adherence to an exoticism of 'hard primitivism' has the effect of transforming the documentary image into a figural representation of a 'mythos' with epic, allegorical, and ultimately 'a profoundly unsocial view of the world.'[521] Corliss calls Flaherty's approach across all his films a kind of 'safari into the darkest memories of the race'.[522] Certainly, *Aran*'s protagonists are often depicted alone against the island's harsh landscape. Often these pictorial arrangements of the body on the edge of an elevated cliff path are achieved through medium shots in which the camera is angled upwards, impressing the body against a vast sky representative of the greatness of cosmological forces. Flaherty's framing of the body in this way has the effect of emphasising a sense of the Islanders' experience as being akin to a morality tale of the individual at odds with an insensible world. Only when the family is together at the end of the film does Flaherty afford sustained close-ups (again as in fig. 2), all of which emphasises the family unit as the single coherent structure in the face of a fatalistic natural world. Mary Ann Doane has written on the close-up as a discursively complex entity, 'a spectacle of scale', in which sense of depth and perspectival orientation become temporarily disturbed by the experience of the image becoming, 'once more, an image rather than a threshold on to a

[519] Ibid.
[520] Ibid.
[521] Temple-Herr, 'Re-Imagining *Man of Aran*', p. 15.
[522] Corliss, 'Flaherty: iron myth', p. 42.

world. Or rather, the world is reduced to this face, this object.'[523] Typically, this thickening of the image into a sense of self-consciousness begets a shift from the material to the psychological plane of the text. In the case of *Man of Aran*'s montage of close-up and landscape shots, Flaherty uses this bifurcation of image systems to ground his metaphysic of man against nature. As will be discussed, Powell's use of filmic technique demonstrates a divergent grammar to Flaherty's system of mythic juxtapositions, and only helps us to see how the latter's aesthetics of rural primitivism is not only narratively but also formally achieved.

In treating *Man of Aran* as a poetic production that emphasises a truth in metaphysics rather than capturing the acute realities of life as lived on the Aran Islands, it offers a novel portrait of modernity through its emphasis on elemental struggle at the heart of the human story. In two of the film's most dramatic and memorable scenes, which bookmark the narrative action, violent gales and surging waves smash against the rocky shore of the island. As well as heightening the dramatic tension of the narrative, they also work to emphasise discourses of boundedness and peripherality endemic to the island's geographical setting.

Blue Humanities scholarship (or thalassology) has aimed to correct these value-based conventions of spatial location that indirectly designate places outside of urban centres, and particularly metropolitan capitals, as remote and define them in relation to a centralising (and often imperial) gaze. The study *Coastal Works: Cultures of the Atlantic Edge* describes the edge dynamic implicit with conventional discourses of islands as ignoring the 'littoral perspective' within the 'interfacial aspects of coastlines'.[524] As with Rachel Carson's description of the shoreline's dynamic variability, they describe coastal areas as examples of an 'ecotone', which is 'a boundary zone where two ecosystems meet and overlap'.[525] Typically, these areas possess 'a biological density far greater than that of the areas on either side of it'.[526] Therefore, in conceptualising the coastal zone, it is less accurate to frame it as a perimeter or brink between two distinct topographies, but rather should be thought of as a space of 'intensification of activity over a border zone.'[527] Indeed, John R. Gillis furthers this notion in stating that coastlines are 'more like a seam than an edge, a connection rather than a separation.'[528] Therefore, in

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[523] Mary Ann Doane, 'The Close-Up: Scale and Detail in the Cinema', *differences*, 14.3 (2003), pp. 89-111, p. 93; p. 91.
[524] Nicholas Allen, Nick Groom, and Jos Smith, 'Introduction', *Coastal Works: Cultures of the Atlantic Edge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 1-20, p. 5.
[525] Ibid.
[526] Ibid.
[527] Ibid., p. 6.
[528] John R. Gillis, 'Afterword: Beyond the Blue Horizon', *Coastal Works*, pp. 261-68, p. 262.

recontextualising these understandings of spatial and topographical order, we can begin to complexify Flaherty's depiction of the intertidal zones on the Aran islands. In reframing the sea not as a distinct boundary but rather as a permeable borderland, the assumptive dyadic separations of land/sea, man/woman, nature/humanity become problematised. This is not just retroactive imposition upon the film, but rather when we consider both the Man of Aran's fishing expeditions or his wife's gathering of seaweed or the opening scene in the rockpools, we can see that Flaherty's vision of island-ness is not as rigid as the narrative's mythic schema would suggest. Of course, content and form produce different responses and it is important to acknowledge the built-in division between the audience which comes to the filmic sea as a site of spectacle and the islanders for which it is a working site 'known primarily through senses of hearing, smell, and touch, feeling it as much as seeing'.[529] This is evident in the film's framing of the tidal surges and foamy surf through long shots, in which the power of the sea is enclosed as a moving pictorial landscape view.

In the opening sequence which sees the fishermen return home and the wife going into the tide to help haul the boat ashore, Flaherty uses techniques of editing to elongate the action of struggling against the surf. The manner in which the sequences are cut has a subtle effect of disturbing the continuities of the action — by threading together multiple different shots from divergent angles, and placing them in a sequential pattern, the film produces a rhythmic correlation built upon psychological repetition and kinetic return. This creates a dynamic between man and the sea that exceeds temporal linearity. Furthermore, this formal assemblage demonstrates the film's undeclared modernist aesthetics, in which linearity is covertly fragmented, and time becomes pliable in the service of a mastering subjectivity (the camera) that re-orders the universe. As with the judicious use of close-up shots, here the film plays with the porous divide between conscious and unconscious iterations of the image's ontology. The philosopher Bernard Stiegler describes film as 'essentially a flux: it consists of its unity in and as flow. The temporal object, as flux, coincides with the stream of consciousness of which it is the object: the spectator's.'[530] Therefore, if the filmic object is already produced within the spectator's consciousness, then Flaherty's technique of temporal manipulation in this scene suggests the ontology of the film is reflective of its mythic intentions. Indeed, myth itself is a response to the

[529] Ibid., p. 263.
[530] Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time 3: Cinematic Time and the Question of Malaise* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), p. 12.

terror of modernity's regulation of time, in that it disturbs linearity through its enfolding of an indefinite and enigmatic pastness into the certain specificity of the now. As an epistemology of the rural, we can see that Flaherty's disruption of the real into the language of myth is demonstrative of a sense of place defined by an antithesis to modernity's rationalist ontology. In a broader sense, there is also the implication in this and the other films explored here that the investigation into the 'border zone' of the littoral offered new ways of conceptualising flux in representational terms. Therefore, in placing the body at the centre of a system that is constantly remodelling itself, the maritime rural self is able to explore the dynamic between stasis and change that the wider area of rural modernity is similarly concerned with interrogating. Perhaps because of these opportunities for probing the grander, metaphysical questions that emerge from this symbolic framing of a version of actuality, we can understand why Flaherty might be able to justify jettisoning some of his documentarian responsibilities.

As seen in his manipulation of temporal sequence, Flaherty's formal composition of the film works to avoid decontextualising the human subjects from out of their allegorical environmental surroundings, such as by eschewing sustained use of close-up shots. The effect of this is to produce a visual schema which resists the kind of subjective interiority associated with the close-up's psychological associations. In framing the characters of the film only in terms of their corporeal situatedness, Flaherty compresses their interiority, positioning them as mobile scenic actors in, what James Carney calls, 'the semiotic form of a foundation myth.'[531] Carney's reading of the film offers the most sympathetic treatment of Flaherty's authorial intentions, arguing that it reflects an essential ethnographic impulse on the filmmaker's behalf in drawing out a mythological underpinning to the life of the islanders. In approaching the film in these terms, it becomes evident that its investment in portraying mythic narrative 'of cosmological creation' is itself reflective of 'the anxiety of historical change by identifying permanence in contingency.'[532] Therefore, the narrative action of *Man of Aran* can be seen as a process of bringing permanence through mythmaking, of reinscribing the past through the filmic language of the present in order to foster continuities that resist the cultural and psychological severing which modernity appears to endorse.

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[531] James Carney, 'Homo Hibernicus: Myth, ethnography and nationalism in Robert Flaherty's *Man of Aran*', *Studies in Documentary Film*, 6.1 (2012), pp. 61-79, p. 62.
[532] Ibid., p. 62; p. 63.

Though its narrative is one of strife in the face of the elements, at the heart of *Man of Aran* is a narrative of creation, one which becomes not only a story of survival but also one of habituation and acculturation. This is evident in the farming sequence, in which the labour of the Man and his wife demonstrate a will to creation through their backbreaking effort to foster organic life. The shots of the Man (fig. 5) looking out over the bay from the height of his craggy garden recall both Soviet filmmaking and Caspar David Friedrich's *Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog* (1818). Both influences in the discourse of this image centre the subject in distinct though diverse ways. The Soviet influence, seen for example in *Turksib* (1929), echoes the kind of shots which frame the common man within a larger system that support his inherent nobility as achieved through his labour for a common purpose. Conversely, the evoking of Friedrich's *Wanderer* offers several interpretive possibilities. Nina Amstutz reads Friedrich's focus upon solitary figures situated within liminal landscapes as part of the Romantic period's interrogation of the divisions between subjectivity and community.[533] Community for Friedrich, Amstutz argues, was a question of transcendence into a higher realm, of finding plurality in the singular experience of religious devotion. This form of piety was practised through situating the subject within a topographical environment of vast expanse that overwhelms the self in its boundlessness. The effect of this sensorial confrontation with a capacious not-self of the natural world has the effect of producing 'a silent reverence' in which 'the subject is lifted out of its empirical self and transported into the transcendental realm.'[534] Therefore, community in Friedrich's work becomes a concept envisioned within the kingdom of God, reachable only through rituals of solitary encounters with nature's (and God's) sublimity. Given the diversity in these two ways of approaching Flaherty's image, one in which the materiality of the subject is foregrounded versus another which privileges the metaphysical through its imbrication within a field of divine immanence, its discursive slipperiness is evident.

(Fig. 5)

[533] Nina Amstutz, 'Caspar David Friedrich and the Aesthetics of Community', *Studies in Romanticism*, 54.4 (2015), pp. 447-75.
[534] Ibid., p. 464.

Temptation to read it in light of Carney's creation myth interpretation would suggest it offers an image of conquest or acquisition, in which the Man of Aran looks out over a terrain he is beginning to cultivate through his productive labour. However, the Friedrich influence suggests it should be read as an image of infinity, in which the distant outline of the hills across the water come to represent a fantasy space of restful eternity. As a scene that foregrounds the arduousness of the Man's labour, this moment of pause lies in stark contrast to constant flux that the rest of the narrative centres. Here, waves are not visible, and their metaphoric cycle of temporal recreation is deferred. Instead, the rhythms of both nature and labour are suspended as the gaze of the subject is transferred to the faint horizon of the distant landscape. Anna Ryan describes the ontology of the horizon as an ambivalent phenomenon: 'The sense of outward movement and openness of the horizon offers a paradoxical feeling of enclosure and containment' in which the self is both subject to and an instrument of a perceptual fluctuation of spatial distance.[535] This sense of distance can conversely affect feelings of reduction rather that expansion in which 'the horizon *draws space towards*' the self, and becomes 'a measure of enclosure' instead of extension.[536] Given the image's own internal ambivalence, its spatial metaphysics should be read in terms of this ambiguity: at once Man is the organising subject, the world is occupied within his eyeline, whilst at the same time, the camera frames him as being enclosed with a cosmological system that defines being as a question of scale. Like Edward Thomas's sense of his own provisionality, Flaherty's enquiry into the place of the subject within nature's vast expanse becomes a recognition of smallness. Though the image seems to beget a sense of mastery latent within the Man of Aran, its instabilities work to up end the primal story of nature's overwhelming enclosure of the self.

Such enquiries over the experiential qualities of spatial situation and distance are often at the heart of understanding the way rural environments interact with the self and body. Whilst depictions of horizons emphasise a reduction in corporeality through their accentuation of visual interaction alone, experiences of immersion in coastal tidal zones necessarily engage the whole materiality of the somatic system. In the scenes amongst the waves, it is evident that body is placed at the centre of the film's aesthetic ontology, which thinks about immersion as both an experiential and epistemological phenomenon. In these moments, the scale of the body becomes

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[535] Anna Ryan, *Where Land Meets Sea: Coastal Explorations of Landscape, Representation and Spatial Experience* (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2012), pp. 23-4.
[536] Ibid., p. 24.

foregrounded when it is placed in relation to an environment whose size and power threatens to be overwhelming. Moments in which the Woman is almost pulled under by the strength of the ebbing tide demonstrate in stark terms a materiality of contact with nature. Here, the littoral zone becomes transfigured into a liminal space of metaphysical between-ness. These scenes of struggle on the shore portray a vision of rurality as primitive through its narrative enactment of man's fight for survival against the might of nature. Subsequently, by this attention to the physicality of being that such dynamics engender, the scene becomes, conversely, also metaphor through its resonance with these large discourses of the sublime and primordial. This echoes Lawrence's sense of the body as the site of true knowledge, powerful through an immanent materiality that is also at once expansive beyond its own literal physicality. In *Man of Aran*, the body is presented as the locus at which the elemental confrontation between nature and humanity is fought. It is the bodily precarity of the Islanders amongst the volatile topography that emphasises their metaphysical universality.

In rendering the psychology of man of as a question of acts of survival, Flaherty's film contributes to our understanding of rurality in this period as a zone in which the subject may be un-made through experiences which position them as corporeal entities first and foremost. As a wild space akin to Mew's turbulent moorland, representations of the sea instinctively 'may stimulate totalizing strategies of domination and exploitation.'[537] When understood as part of Flaherty's metaphysic of man's struggle against nature, or in Carney's reading as man's emergence out of the primordial realm, the sea becomes stripped of its material realities. No longer an ecological zone, it becomes only a metaphor in which to test the limits of modernity's self-possession. In contrast to this, Grierson's *Drifters* offers a counter-narrative of the sea as a space in which mankind's technological advancements can be unleashed and within which capitalist industrialism can exercise its imposition to extract from the marine environment more and more of its finite plenitude. If Flaherty's comprehensive bodily engagement was a route to the mythic resonance of the islander, Grierson instead suggests that the bodies of the fisherman in *Drifters* are part of a larger, integrated system of modernity that redraws knowledge systems through an attention to the possibilities afforded by the cinematic apparatus itself.

Drifters: Modernity's Ontological Plunge

[537] Serpill Oppermann, 'Storied Seas and Living Metaphors in the Blue Humanities', *Configurations*, 27.4 (2019), pp. 443-461, p. 447.

Man of Aran was financed and produced by John Grierson, himself a documentary filmmaker and then head of the General Post Office (GPO) Film Unit (although *Aran* was not produced under this company). During Grierson's time at the GPO he commissioned many documentary works which reflected his aim to bring 'about both social reform and national renewal' through 'new mass communication mediums' that would help 'foster a sense of collective national identity' and help strengthen democratic politics which seemed increasingly precarious in the face of new and energetic totalitarian regimes overseas.[538] Documentary film's central place within British film culture in the 1930s was reflective of Grierson's mission to combine the art of film with the social mindedness of the progressive left-wing bourgeoisie, culturally typified by organisations such as the *Film Society* (whose membership were 'relatively highbrow and bourgeois') and who echoed such reformist aims.[539] Spearheaded by Grierson's mantra of documentary filmmaking as 'the creative treatment of actuality', two notable examples of films made at the GPO under his management were *Coal Face* (1935) and the famous *Night Mail* (1936), both of which were produced in collaboration with W. H. Auden, who provided 'verse commentaries', and with Benjamin Britten providing the score.[540] Grierson's own pioneering documentary film, *Drifters* was made in 1929 while he was part of the Empire Marketing Board (EMB) — 'a minor government department charged with improving trade relations within the then British Empire.'[541]

Drifters reflected his interest in the promise of technology and its relationship to fostering new forms of class identity. First screened during the London premiere of Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925), its success helped to usher in a newly galvanised ideological bent to British film culture in the years that followed. Certainly, on the surface, *Drifters* appears to be diametrically opposed to Flaherty's metaphysic of primitive struggle, with Grierson's depiction of the distinctly contemporary world of Scotland's commercial fishing industry offering a forward-looking counter-argument to the elegiac tone of *Aran*. Despite the thematic divergence from Flaherty's film, *Drifters* is similarly interested in the role of the body and the role it might play in the face of a capacious natural world; although whereas *Aran* sought to depict mankind's

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[538] Ian Aitken, 'The British Documentary Movement in the 1930s', *Land of Promise: The British Documentary Movement 1930-1950* (London: BFI Publishing, 2008), pp. 2-5, p. 2.
[539] Malte Hagener, *Moving Forward, Looking Back: The European Avant-garde and the Invention of Film Culture, 1919-1939* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007), p. 82.
[540] 'Introduction', *Land of Promise: The British Documentary Movement 1930-1950* (London: BFI Publishing, 2008), u.p.
[541] Aitken, 'British Documentary Movement 1930s', *Land of Promise*, p. 3.

smallness, Grierson's take holds a more ambivalent vision by at once depicting the progress of humanity as it extracts nature's resources, whilst also capturing moments of uncertainty over the scale of humanity when enclosed within a natural world of seemingly ambiguous spatial capacities.

Notwithstanding Grierson's apparent divergence from Flaherty's Romantic aesthetic, his writing and approach to filmmaking does reveal significant overlap and mutuality of ideology, starting with his own mantra's premise of bringing a creative perspective to filmic renderings of actuality. In spite of this superficial divergence, Grierson's writing about the film demonstrates an affinity with Flaherty (to an extent), in which he envisions a cinema that captures an essentialised and heightened version of reality. In his book *Grierson on Documentary*, he advocates a mode of cinema which foregrounds the technological enthusiasm and intellectual vitality of the modern world. He writes:

> The life of Natural cinema is in this massing of detail, in this massing of all the rhythmic energies that contribute to the blazing fact of the matter. Men and the energies of men, things and the functions of things, horizons and the poetics of horizons: these are the essential materials. And one must never grow so drunk with the energies and the functions as to forget the poetics.[542]

Though Grierson would later turn against what he saw as Flaherty's inflated aesthetic, here his framing of the documentary film's affective potential seems remarkably in-tune with *Man of Aran*'s heightened scenarios. Unlike *Farewell Topsails*, *Drifters* depicts a dramatic propulsion of industrialisation as exemplary of unabashed progress, following a Scottish trawler as it sets out to fish for herring in the North Sea. Opening with the title card declaring that the herring fishing industry that was once 'an idyll of brown sails and village harbours, — its story is now an epic of steam and steel.'[543] Highly influential in its fusion of avant-garde techniques such as montage, cross-fades, and rhythmic editing, *Drifters* was also praised for its socially conscious subject matter which placed working-class labour within its context of British economic (and thereby political) might. In presenting a vision of a lively and economically fruitful industrial community, the film reflected the socially conscious impetus to document the developments of modern society that

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[542] John Grierson, *Grierson on Documentary*, ed. Forsyth Hardy (London: Faber, 1979), 20. Quotation taken from Laura Marcus, '"The Creative Treatment of Actuality": John Grierson, Documentary Cinema and "Fact" in the 1930s', *Intermodernism: Literary Culture in Mid-Twentieth Century Britain*, ed. Kristin Bluemel (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), p. 191.

[543] 'Drifters', *The Soviet Influence: Volume Two: Battleship Potemkin + Drifters*, dir. John Grierson (Empire Marketing Board, 1929). [Blu-Ray].

was at the heart of, what Scott Anthony calls, the 'educational mission' central to a 'strand of British middle-class thought'.[544] Therefore, whilst its seemed that *Aran* was intended to procure an aesthetic response of marvel and astonishment through its foregrounding of visual schemes of the sublime, *Drifters* seems much more interested in effecting a representation of class triumph and of displaying the promise of the future that technological development might bring to the rhythms of everyday life and work.

The political commitments of *Drifters* are reflected in its valorisation of the working classes as an essential part of the accomplishment and perpetuation of the British industrial system. William Empson, in his 1935 study *Some Versions of Pastoral*, positioned Grierson as the figure, irrespective of medium, who was 'nearest to a proletarian artist' in a British context.[545] Empson described the conditions needed in which to produce a truly proletarian art as being when 'the artist [...is] at one with the worker', something which, in actuality, 'is impossible, not for political reasons, but because the artist never is at one with any public.'[546] Empson identified within *Drifters* a version of pastoral, defined as the 'process of putting the complex into the simple', in the film's ability to convey 'the dignity of that form of labour'.[547] In the combination of the film's subject matter and visual presentation, Empson recognises an underlying aesthetic scheme which attempts to find continuity between pastoralised forms of rural labour in this modernised industry; he finds this aesthetic of the modern pastoral in 'the beauty of shapes of water and net and fish, and subtleties of timing and so forth.'[548] As will be seen in Powell's film (the latter discussed below), this transformation of scenes of reality into the visual schema of abstraction reflects the intersection in this period between realism and new forms of visual representations, such as expressionism, that are able to transmute the metaphysical into the everyday. Therefore *Drifters*, despite its claim to modernity above all else, offers several opportunities to identify commonalities and contrasts with both Flaherty and Powell's (Neo-)Romantic depiction of coastal communities. Using Empson's understanding of Grierson's intention to capture a figural beauty within the movement of the men at their work, we can see how *Drifters* affords a new, image-based way in which to approach the labouring body through

[544] Scott Anthony, *Night Mail* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018 [2007]), p. 9.
[545] William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral* (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1950 [1935]), p. 8.
[546] Ibid., p. 15.
[547] Ibid., p. 23; p. 8.
[548] Ibid., p. 8.

the aesthetic code of a pastoralised modernity which produce the men as vital components within a kinetic system of industrial capitalism at work.

In many ways Grierson's film aims to function as a record reflecting the changing nature of Britain's maritime economy along its eastern coastline. David Gange tells us that by 'the early twentieth-century, the North Sea had come to stand for shipping, industry, and progress', with films such as *Drifters* presenting trawlermen as 'icons of modern masculinity [who] demonstrate human dominance over nature.'[549] This framing of the working-class body as the heroic centre of a booming industrialised fishing industry offers an interesting counterpoint to Lawrence's complex relationship to the collier as both a mythic figure and the victim of modernity's excesses. Contradicting Empson's celebration of the film as dignifying its featured trawlermen, Jamie Sexton contends that whilst the film was praised for bringing the working classes to the screen, it ends up 'treating [...them] like machinery', in that by focusing singularly on their acts of labour, the film produces 'the bodies of the men [... as] fragmented' and, furthermore, allies their 'body parts with machine parts.'[550] Sexton's claim does have some merit; certainly, *Drifters* privileges a vision of modernity as masculinist and productive, and Grierson's 'creative treatment of actuality' seems much more concerned with formalist aesthetics rather than promulgating a sense of emotional relationship with the men who remain, for the most part, psychologically unexplored. Furthermore, more than likely due to its government funding, the film makes no indication of the real-world decline in the industry that was happening by the late 1920s, and which by 1937 required a parliamentary enquiry into the shrinking state of the herring fishery and its effect on the national and global markets.[551] Rather, its depiction of the choreography of the various kinds of labour that are engaged becomes the central, somewhat optimistic, point in which the larger reverberations of British economic power are impressed. However, it must be qualified that Sexton's charge that the film strips the men of their 'emotional content' and positions them 'as cogs within a vast apparatus of rhythmic and visual machinery' is only *somewhat* founded.[552]

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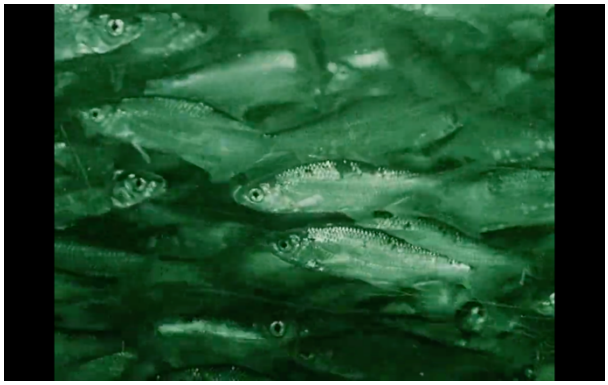
[549] David Gange, The *Frayed Atlantic Edge: A Historian's Journey from Shetland to the Channel* (London: William Collins, 2019), p. 11.
[550] Jamie Sexton, 'Grierson's Machines: *Drifters*, the Documentary Film Movement and the Negotiation of Modernity', *Revue Canadienne d'Études cinématographiques / Canadian Journal of Film Studies*, 11.1 (2002), pp. 40-59, p. 51.
[551] See Gange, *Frayed Atlantic Edge*, p. 71. See also Graeme Rigby, *The Herring Industry Abroad*, 2021 <https://www.herripedia.com/herring-industry-board/> [accessed 17 November 2023] (para 6).
[552] Ibid.

Indeed, whilst *Drifters* certainly does maintain a relatively triumphant tone throughout its narrative, this self-assuredness does briefly give space to a momentary glimpse of internal instability. In one short but critical moment, whilst most of the men are sleeping, the film focuses on the youngest member of the crew asleep in his bunk. As the morning dawns and they are called up to haul in the fish, the image cuts back to a shot of the quiet fishing village shown at the start of the film (fig. 6). This interpolation, lasting less than two seconds, quickly fades out and the scene cuts back to the cabin as the men awake and head up onto deck. Although only a brief interjection, this instance of the dream-image of the fishing village demonstrates a single break in the film's narrative scheme by entering the psychology of the fishermen. As the only instance of psychological fixation within the narrative of the film, it works to implicate the fishermen (for it is not completely clear if the dream is only the young crewmember or a collective fantasy) within a mood of displacement in which modernity has severed the intimacy of home and work by upending the socioeconomic practices of these traditional fishing communities. The image can be read as an example of 'the flash memory image', understood as 'involuntary intrusive flashback' whose brevity works to 'enhance the mimetic aspect of [...] representation'.[553] This formal interjection into the sequential course of an otherwise linear filmic narrative would become more commonly employed in the French New Wave films of the late 1950s and '60s. Its existence here in embryonic form does suggest a degree of concern with the representative possibilities of cinema to capture the interplay between narrative and the unconscious, although given Grierson's lack of return to the theme of home in the rest of the film, we can see how its presence seems to demonstrate a hidden psychology of loss that even the narrative itself cannot confront. Indeed, this disjunctive presence within the logic of Grierson's aesthetic indicates the flash-image as a form of subtextual ambivalence hidden beneath a narrative that seems energised by economic efficiency and the rhythmic mobility of productive industry.

(Fig. 6)

[553] Maureen Turim, *Flashbacks in Film: Memory and History* (New York, Routledge, 1989), p. 208.

Therefore, in recognising that *Drifters* employs its own subconscious register to cut through the narrative of progress it overtly expresses, we can see how even within texts that champion the cause of progress beyond all else, the notion of the rural as a space of loss and as a space of homesickness emerges to undercut the singlemindedness otherwise on display. It is within this context of the film exploring the psychological resonances of industrial progress that



(Fig. 7)

(Fig. 8)

the turn to the subaqeous world proposes complex questions for how the film wishes to position this point of view. *Drifters* deploys underwater shots of marine life as part of its narration of the rich opportunities available for acquisition through this new consolidated form of fishing. This opportunity for underwater spectatorship is something now possible through the magic of cinema's technological opportunities. Whilst on the one hand functioning as part of the narrative of plenty which the film sets up, the actual effect of these underwater shots is to broaden the perceptual field through inhabiting a divergent, subaqueous perspectival position. Grierson's shots of the herring underwater (fig. 7) — presumably filmed in a tank rather than the open sea — presents a vision of the aquatic world as vigorous, chaotic, and, when the dogfish and conger eels arrive to hunt the captive shoal, full of peril. This is a scene of pictorial intensity, in which the frame appears to be barely containing the febrile kinesis of the fish moving in and out of its edges. Whilst it is simultaneously a marine-eyed image which places the spectator inside the aquatic world, it also functions to produce this same world as apprehensible for the viewer, making nature into a kind of aquarium through the cinematic frame. This duality of being both of the fish and separate from them implicit within the scene's ontology only complicates the viewer's relationship to the scene. Additionally, the intensity of the underwater world is emphasised by the cuts back to a placid surface seemingly devoid of action (fig. 8). However, this surface world is engendered with its own discursive ambiguity generated through the juxtaposition of distance in contrast to the proximity of the fish pressed against the screen. This

has the effect of transforming the surface world into a place of spatial abstraction as much as the underwater space is one of excessive materiality as created through the total vitality of the herring shoal. When considered in relation to the presentation of the surface world of both the fishing boat and eventually the world of commerce on the quayside, the hectic energy of the shots seems to be in congruity with the vision of the modern world as its own teeming centre of vitality. What that suggests about the bodies of the fishermen then is that they are simply part of a larger structure of the natural world, themselves aligned with the conger eels or dogfish whilst also simultaneously lost within the fray of the ports when they arrive back at market. When read in these terms, Grierson's film offers a portrait of modernity as a grand system of material interrelation; just like the shot of the shoal, there is no centre within the system of capitalist endeavour.

With this plunge into the subaqueous point of view, we can see the film engaging in a subconscious un-working of its otherwise ardent anthropocentric politics. Spatial orientation is redrawn through these shots of the fish from within the middle of the shoal's mass, in which distance is collapsed through the use of a close-up shot (a camera position otherwise rarely employed at all throughout the film). Close-up shots always effect a reorientation of spatial politics through their fragmentation of the object, these produce a new perceptual relation that is both contiguous and disparate from the previous scale of coordination. In playing with the scalar orientation of the image-field through these shots, the film foregrounds a restructuring of experience that invites tactile forms of viewing. These close-up shots which produce a sense of haptic immersion are only strengthened when placed in contrast with the camera's prior position in long and medium shots. These types of shots, in contrast to the visceral quality of the close-up, invite a kind of distance-based ocular apprehension from the spectator.

Laura U. Marks's work on the phenomenological effects of film and its connection to intercultural cinema is useful in contextualising Grierson's discursive shift in this scene of the shoal and its contrasting surface world. Although *Drifters* is not an obvious example of intercultural cinema in Marks terms, given its built-in ambivalences which subtly contextualise (e.g. the opening shot of the village) the trawlermen as products of a forced industrial homogenisation, we can see that her definitions of its ability to 'express the disjunction between orders of knowledge' is applicable here.[554] Marks argues that the epistemological disjunctions

[554] Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), p. 31.

inherent within intercultural cinema are often communicated through the arrangement of formal strategies that work to 'juxtaposing [sic] different orders of image'.[555] As made evident through both the underwater/surface scene and the dream image interjection, Grierson's film proffers moments of instability through these different image orders that work disjunctively to the film's surface epistemology.

In Grierson's shots of teeming underwater life, the film implicates the viewer as participant in the construction of this new form of ontology that is being produced through the cinematic apparatus' bifurcation of point of view. This process of breaching selfhood and recontextualising the dynamic of film and viewer is dependent upon reorienting the body as an active participant within this discursive interface. Marks argues that audiences have an implicit 'embodied visuality' as 'Film is grasped not solely by an intellectual act but by the complex perception of the body as a whole.'[556] She continues to describe this experience of mutual interrelation that the model of embodied spectatorship she is proposing uncovers:

> The phenomenological model of subjectivity posits a mutual permeability and mutual creation of self and other. Cinema spectatorship is a special example of this enfolding of self and world, an intensified instance of the way our perceptions open us onto the world. [...] If one understands film viewing as an exchange between two bodies—that of the viewer and that of the film—then the characterization of the film viewer as passive, vicarious, or projective must be replaced with a model of a viewer who participates in the production of the cinematic experience.[557]

Therefore, in plunging the audience under the surface and figuratively into the centre of the marine life's tumult, Grierson effects a type of subjective disruption: suddenly, the self is enfolded within the other, and the permeability of the narrative space afforded by the fishes' mobility inside and outside the fixed frame of the shot implicates a new ontology defined by flux. When this is placed in contrast to the rest of the film's narrative and aesthetic formation, like the dream-image, these underwater shots work to destabilise a coherent epistemological position and instead offer the opportunity to inhabit a diverse ontology. Thus, whilst working within the framework of a governmentally sponsored industrial film, Grierson is able to expand outside of the remit of simply documenting the workings of commercial fishing to interrogate the limits of

[555] Ibid., p. 31.
[556] Ibid., p. 145.
[557] Ibid., pp. 149-50.

what film can be and how it can affect the spectator. In combining both realist and poetic shots within his visual scheme, Grierson at once elevates the working men through aesthetically framing them in heroic terms akin to Lawrence's colliers and as Empson so appreciated. However, at the same time, they are reduced through their location within a wider discursive contiguity that positions them primarily as figural actors within the system of industrial process. What the plunge under the surface achieves is to make alert the experience of spectatorship as one of diverse sensorial configuration, in which the close-up allows us to move into the realm of the optically tactile (akin to Connie watching Mellors).

It is in this context that we are made aware of the ethnographic filter in which, like Flaherty, the film indulges. As spectators of the cinematic apparatus, we are afforded diverse opportunities to confront the conflicting and intersecting registers of being that certain images induce. Marks describes the experience of film viewing 'as the meeting of two different sensoria', and that 'Spectatorship is thus an act of sensory translation of cultural knowledge.'[558] In multiplying the epistemological schema through the plunge under the surface, *Drifters* reveals itself as a text not only concerned with both the material possibilities for progressive technological capitalism, but also as being interested in the ways this technological development (both agricultural and cinematic) will produce new ways of being within the world. Where that leaves the working-class point of view, however, the film cannot really answer; rather, the industrial body is given to us as its own site in which the aesthetics of modernity might be impressed but not as a site which can offer its own narrative of experience.

In his representation of the sea as a space of contrasts, the dynamic of surface and depth induce questions of the metaphysical relationship between the self and the not-self. In framing the (ex-)rural body in the context of a larger system, both economic and ecological, Grierson's film offers a vision of the coast and its maritime exploits as a space of change and, subconsciously, of loss. Amidst the manner of this changing world, some forms of continuity remain in place; whilst *Topsails* lamented the end of generationally embodied sailing practices, the choreography of the fishermen in *Drifters*, with, as Empson identified, the formal beauty of their pulling in the net, demonstrates a way in which the dignity of labour need not always been sacrificed in the face of advancing modernity. What *Drifters* does offer to our understanding of the (ex-)rural body in coastal and maritime contexts is a self-reflexive investigation into the way epistemologies can be transformed through the formal opportunities of cinema; in bringing the spectator under the

[558] Ibid., p. 153.

water and producing, admittedly inadvertently, a sense of tactile relation to the non-human world, Grierson's film demonstrates the ways in which the aesthetics of modernity can move past the edges of standard knowledge and enter into a littoral space in which the experience of indeterminacies becomes the central metaphysical position.

'Gone over': *The Edge of the World* and the Precipice of the Northern Sublime

Although working in a different form to Flaherty in being fictional narrative cinema, Powell's film *The Edge of the World* (henceforth *TEOTW*) holds many aesthetic commonalities in its interest in the way place is conceptualised in terms of periphery and precipice. Powell's film is one of big emotions and epic landscape conversely enacted through a small narrative that emphasises the tragic in the inevitability of cultural evolution. Set on a Scottish island distant from either the mainland or other larger archipelagos, the film is structured around the drama of the island's towering cliffs, in which the margin between life and death is played out in relation to the potencies of the edge in both literal and metaphorical terms. However, despite the mutual aesthetic and narrative intersections with Flaherty's film, for Powell, his film was decidedly not *Man of Aran*. Instead, through *TEOTW*, he aimed to correct what he saw as *Aran*'s indulgence in 'just a lot of waves and seaweed and pretty pictures', rounding off this dismissal with the assertion that 'Documentaries are for disappointed feature film-makers or out-of-work poets.'[559] Evidently for Powell, Flaherty's film had failed in its overemphasis of the dynamic between man and nature, seemingly having buried any narrative emotion in the fixation upon the drama of the waves and the hardness of survival. That Powell saw documentaries as a lesser art form is striking in its implicit assertion of the filmmaker as an imaginative artist: by designating the search for material reality as a subsidiary route taken by those who are unable to craft a fictional narrative, the line in the proverbial sand is drawn between art and life. This assertion of cinema as a form of artistic expression is significant in the way Powell crafts the narrative of *TEOTW* through a conscious amalgamation of realist and poetic registers in which the landscape of the island both reflects and facilitates the manifestation of the rural body as the site in which a metaphysical drama of change and loss is enacted. Despite his dismissal, much of Flaherty's hypnotic fixation upon the waves as representational of a broader ontological enquiry can be traced in Powell's treatment of the island's immense cliffs and craggy shoreline as spaces in which the self is unmade. Like the subaqueous plunge in *Drifters* or the stormy crashing of the waves in *Aran*, the act of falling over

[559] Michael Powell, *A Life in Movies: An Autobiography* (London: Faber and Faber, 1986), p. 241.

the cliff edge is used in Powell's film to explore the rural body as a scene of crisis, and in turn propose broader questions about the status of shrinking communities at the, apparent, edge of civilisation's peripheries. It is with this in mind that we can see the scene of cliff climbing as offering the most distilled example of the film's aesthetic and discursive aims.

TEOTW is a film concerned with the breakage of tradition and the subsequent dispossession that transforms landscape from living sites of dwelling into elegiac spaces charged with historic and cultural memory. A seemingly simple narrative, Powell himself called it 'merely a peg on which to hang the necessary emotions and incidents', the film depicts the process of depopulation inspired by the evacuation of St. Kilda in 1930.[560] The plot is focused upon the contention between two prominent island families at conflict over whether to stay and endure the increasingly hard to sustain existence within the landscape of their ancestors, or to migrate and resettle upon one of the bigger islands or the mainland itself. The narrative dynamics are mapped in a crossing structure, with one family, the Mansons, headed by Peter (John Laurie), who wants to stay placed in disagreement with the Grays, headed by James (Finlay Currie) who wishes to migrate. Peter has two twin children, Ruth (Belle Chrystall) and Robbie (Eric Berry), the latter of which has been working on the mainland on the kind of trawler depicted in *Drifters* and who wants the family to leave the island. Conversely, Andrew Gray (Niall MacGinnis), who is engaged to Ruth, cannot countenance the idea of leaving. With this interlocking framework, Powell is able to animate the essential dilemma that has been threaded through most of the writers explored in this study, namely the pull to the past as given through the land, whilst also confronting the inevitability of this relationship as necessarily coming into contact with change through an expanding modernity.

Powell's film does reflect the changing composition of the northern reaches of Scotland whose communities had experienced both voluntary and forced migration from their traditional locales since the late eighteenth century. Gange offers an account of this stark socioeconomic alteration that occurred in these coastal and island communities before and during the interwar period of Powell's film. He recounts one such example of Lord Leverhulme, the British industrialist whose fortune was built up on the manufacturing of Sunlight Soap, who bought the Isle of Lewis and later the south of Harris in 1918 and 1919 respectively.[561] Returning soldiers from the frontlines of the Great War were confronted with 'their waters and ports

[560] Michael Powell, *Edge of the World: The making of a film* (London: Faber and Faber, 1990 [1938]), p. 16.
[561] Gange, *The Frayed Atlantic Edge*, p. 101.

unrecognisable, plied by English and east-coast trawlers who channelled catches from the Minch directly south.'[562] It was, in many ways, the other side of Grierson's *Drifters*, that aforementioned unwritten background to the trawlermen whose livelihoods have been displaced into larger ports and who soon themselves would see a downswing in the industry's prosperity. This was also just another development in the nearly two centuries old history of northern parts of Scotland — the Highlands, Hebrides, and Northern Isles — being subject to the political, economic, and cultural policies spearheaded by Scottish lowland and English elites (both aristocratic and governmental).[563] It is with this background of erasure that we can see how Powell helps to formulate the narrative of rural culture's essential elegiac condition in the 1930s. Unlike Flaherty, the portrait of this island community is one in which modernity and tradition intersect in multiple and complex ways, for the film is not naïve in its approach to the processes of modernity but rather takes it as its central dramatic tension.

It is within the backdrop of these tensions between home and exile that the film's focus upon the cliffs reveal them as topographical sites in which the fissures between the self and community are exposed. This is shown explicitly in the film's central set piece, a cliff climbing competition between Andrew and Robbie. This comes about as the result of a deadlock of a vote in the island's (all male) parliament on whether to leave or to stay. Robbie's exposure to life outside of the island demonstrates a collapse of the insular community ('the world's changed, it's bigger, it's easier to get at'), in which he advocates for the supremacy of the individual above the group: 'A man must think for himself. As I see it, it's every man for himself.' This, when combined with the fact that he is working on the very trawler ships that are forcing the displacement of his native community, demonstrates a central tension within the film which asks to what extent modernity functions as a form of betrayal? The failure of the democratic system to procure a result in either direction means that the islanders turn to an ancient practice of the climbing contest that was formerly used to determine political action. That the solution within the divided politics of the island is to turn back to an explicitly pre-modern form of governance, one in which at the centre is a masculine morality determined through the male body,

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[562] Ibid.

[563] Gange writes about the way in which these communities of the Atlantic coast were considered 'as belonging to a bygone world', and how there was often rhetoric about the "Highland problem" that was used to justify imposed reforms. However, as he writes, 'This "Highland problem" had been an invention of the Scottish Enlightenment used to muster enthusiasm for the spread of "improved" farming. The grim irony is that, when invented, it had been wrong; but the new standardised agriculture instigated the famine and depopulation which amplified a thousandfold the perceived need for cities to "save" the coastal "victims" of history.' Ibid., p. 344.

demonstrates Powell's interest in engaging with the fantasy of primitive rurality as a form of spectacle. By centring the body as the remedy to a communal system that is otherwise breaking down, the film explores the relationship between the rural and pre-modernity as expressed through an ethics that places the corporeal as the primary seat of judgment.

Though the aesthetic of the sublime is dominant throughout the film, it is most significantly interrogated during this scene of the cliff race. The scene commences with the male islanders rowing out with Andrew and Robbie to the base of the largest cliff. The women gather and position themselves at vantagepoints along the nearby clifftops. Powell creates a sense of the community's cultural politics through this dramaturgical bifurcation of the ways in which gender impacts relationship to the spectacle: as with *Aran*, the men are tied to the murky sea through their boats, the women to the rocky terrain of the island. Both Andrew and Robbie start climbing, Andrew reminding Robbie of the danger of turning left at the waterfalls. The shots of them as they separately move up the cliff-face reveal an aesthetic of the body which is built around a sense of innate motor-orientation (not unlike Jennings's *Topsail* sailors), in which the self is made most aware of its materiality through its physicality which is balancing the self between life/death (Fig 9). This precarity can be understood as an aesthetic of the edge, in which the film uses the island's topography to propose a vision of the wild north as a place of metaphysical instability; their physical peril becomes representative of a larger cultural rupture, in which either the past or the future must inevitably plummet out of frame.

Both climbers are shown undertaking feats of great exertion in pulling themselves up the vertical outcrops, with both medium and long shots showing them engaged in what might be called a theatre of the physical. As examples of the kind of the 'open-air body' that was being promoted in the interwar years, both men demonstrate the kind of muscular healthfulness and

(Fig. 9)

somatic choreography that John Hargraves had wished to foster in his Kibbo Kift outdoors movement.[564] Furthermore, mountain and climbing culture that had emerged in the Romantic period had by the end of the nineteenth-century, after the 'Golden Age' of, often European, mountaineering, become imbibed into a general health culture, along with other such outdoor pursuits like hiking.[565] These cultures of the body promoted the development of an inner sense of 'choreography of physical movement' and the discipline of good posture as part of a healthful citizenship.[566] This celebration of 'the outdoor, active young male' had the effect of creating a 'landscaping of health', in that 'wild' places were now remapped as cartographies on which the fit young male body could exert its own powers of citizenry.[567] Given that the context of Andrew and Robbie's cliff climb is literally a civic act, one born out of the stalemate of the island's parliamentary system, we can see how Powell's film draws upon the interwar cultures of the outdoor body to present a rurality that is connected to the wider civic health (or not) of the nation. Furthermore, given that this climb also serves as a resurrection of one of the island's ancient customs, then the climbers bodies become temporal embodiments of the past akin to the kind of revival of folk rituals that was explored in the previous chapter.

Amongst these cultural resonances, the climbing contest also offers the rural body as the point in which the experience and the aesthetic of the sublime can be brought into contact. Various shots of Robbie and Andrew dwarfed within the frame that is otherwise full of towering, gnarled rock and vast empty space beneath the ridge's overhang have the effect of placing the stakes of their battle for the future of the island within a framework that sees the summit as the site of moral victory. Macfarlane describes the cult of the summit within mountaineering discourse as coming 'to represent an entirely new way of being', elsewhere explaining that in the Romantic conception of altitude, great height 'guaranteed enlightenment – spiritual or artistic epiphany [...] The mountain-top and the viewpoint became accepted sites of contemplation and creativity: places where you were brought to see further both physically and metaphysically.'[568] The legacies of the Romantic notion of altitudinous epiphany, whilst not narratively centred, are aesthetically at the forefront of this scene in that by reaching the summit of the cliff, the winner

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[564] Describing the championing of outdoor pursuits in the interwar years as part of a 'wider body culture', Matless identifies 'four key dimensions of the open-air body; discipline, exposure, healthy regularity and choreography.' Matless, *Landscape and Englishness*, p. 126.

[565] For the history of mountaineering see Robert Macfarlane, *Mountains of the Mind: A History of Fascination* ([London]: Granta, 2009), chapter 1, paragraph 54. Kindle edition.

[566] Matless, *Landscape and Englishness*, p. 129.

[567] Ibid., p. 140.

[568] Macfarlane, *Mountains of the Mind*, (chapter 7, paragraph 28); (chapter 5, paragraph 46), Kindle edition.

becomes, through their corporeal mastery, the source of future action. Furthermore, the film's aesthetic of capturing images of nature in a scale of grandeur has the effect of emulating the modified way of seeing that summit-seeking promises to bestow: the land and sea are transformed into abstracted versions of their ground-level iterations, and spatial relationships are recontextualised from the vantage of their new perspectival framing.

Therefore, in thinking about the way Powell suffuses discourses of the sublime through this scene, we have to pay attention to its manipulation of registers of expression. For example, the shot of Andrew almost dangling off the edge of the rock in fig 9, cannot help but induce a sense of internal crisis in the spectator, in which the precariousness of his bodily position in relation to the edge forces a recognition of our own bodily situatedness. This shot echoes an earlier one of him playfully balancing on a cliff edge (fig. 10), demonstrating the ways in which provisionality is at the centre of Powell's enquiry into the interactions between self and world, with the vulnerability of Andrew's bodily location during the climbing contest seeming more at risk than the sense of intuitive relation to rocky landscape that the earlier shot provoked.

(Fig. 10)

The emotional register of the sublime is one of intense fear and wonder, induced through the confrontation with an object whose proportional relationship to the subject forces a recognition of the subject's own powerlessness. This kind of corporeal response demonstrates how the film uses the sublime as an affective device to produce moments of great emotional resonance. Edmund Burke describes the sublime as kind of emotional 'passion' induced by the vastness of nature, taking expression as a form of 'Astonishment', which itself is 'that state of the soul, in which all its motions are suspended, [...] the mind is so entirely filled with its object.'[569] We have already seen how Flaherty uses tropes of the sublime in his emphasis upon the magnitude of the Aran Islands' tidal and geological formations, all of which are geared within his presentation to produce a narrative of humanity ever at risk of destruction through the larger forces of nature. With Burke's notion of the sublime

[569] Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Sublime and Beautiful*, ed. Paul Guyer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015 [1757]), p. 47.

as a state of intense mental fixation, the focus upon the scale of the climbers bodies amongst the rockface enacts the empathetic response that produces, or tries to produce, suspended subjectivity of the viewers; when the threat of the body's perishing is so acute, there emerges the recognition of the provisionality of the self within a larger system that could easily negate it.

The film embeds the very process of spectatorship as central to the relationship between the body's role in shaping our conception of the rural sublime. As the scene progresses with the two men scrambling up the cliff face, Powell cuts back and forth between the climbers and the islanders watching. He described this editing technique as producing a sense of reality within the scene, stating that 'every cut [has…] its personal history. […] The climbers, who are the focus of the interest, are still only part of the dramatic pattern.'[570] There occurs through this formal expression of the narrative's dramatic pattern a triangulation of the point of view within the scene. This triangulation is produced through the ambiguity of point of view, in which the climbers themselves, the islanders watching, and we the audience are placed in an emotional relation that transforms the ontologies of the images into that of the intersubjective realm. It is through this emotional structuring that the sublime is conjured as a relationship to the landscape. Therefore, if the sublime can be understood in Burke's terms as an excess of an object's presence, Powell's film, through a combination of camera positions and editing, effects a *representation* of the sublime, mediating between it as an affective phenomenon and its conveyance within the narrative context.

As terror and awe are central to the affective structure of the sublime, its narrative iteration therefore requires one of the climbers to fall in order to induce the heightened moments of emotional intensity. Robbie, despite having been warned about which route to take, either hubristically ignores this advice or naively forgets; either way, his error is demonstrative of his psychological and emotional divergence from the island's topography. Having advocated to leave for the mainland in terms that dismiss community consensus ('As I see it, it's every man for himself'), his hamartia, since Powell does frame this as a tragic narrative, is in his psychic (and thereby, in Lawrentian terms, corporeal)

(Fig. 11)

[570] Powell, *Edge of the World: making of*, p. 258.

disengagement from the terrain of the island. Conversely, Andrew continues to embody the sense of the landscape as akin to his sense of self; thereby his psychosomatic being is coordinated to be able to read the terrain of the cliff-face. Andrew sees Robbie's mistake and rushes to help him as he clutches at the slippery rocks to stop himself falling. Reaching out his hand, he tries to grab a hold of him to pull him up (fig. 11). The shot of the hands reaching out is a moment of final temporal intensity, in which the grasping seems both elongated and compressed. Powell draws upon the kind of melodramatic visual framing of silent cinema — with its totality of image — that he was continually interested in throughout his career.[571] This shot of Andrew and Robbie's hands reaching out recalls to us not only the discourses of tactility and fraternity as a form of salvation that we have explored in both Lawrence and Warner, but also points to the cinema's formal opportunities in its presentation of the sublime through such close-up details that would otherwise be unavailable to human eye. As with the plunge into the shoal in *Drifters*, the opportunities of film to induce spatial fragmentation and thereby a reordering of visual knowledge systems, this time through an almost metaphysical image encapsulating the close proximity, perhaps even edge, between life and death. Robbie, as we expect, cannot reach Andrew's hand, and falls off the edge of the cliff, plummeting to his death. Our last sight of him is from a shot of his father Peter, who has seen Robbie's directional error and is rushing up to with a rope to try to save him; as Robbie falls, Peter looks up and we see a blur of a body hurtle past him, out of the frame. Powell presents a vision of the northern rural as a space of grand metaphysical drama; like Flaherty's *Aran*, the landscape of the place begets the tonality of the action. With Robbie's death, the future of the island's continued habitation is agreed, albeit temporarily. Whilst Andrew had seemingly won the contest, the extent to which this is framed as a victory of the native corporeal instinct over the disengaged exile is muted by Robbie's death; now, the cliffs are once again embedded within an aesthetic framework of memory as the site in which the possibilities of the future were undone, despite the tragic inevitability of its eventual evacuation that film's narrative structure has already disclosed.

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[571] Ian Christie identifies the film as being a transitional picture which incorporated both out modish and forward-looking aspects: '*The Edge of the World* was indeed poised between two worlds, that of the romantic silent cinema which had originally seized Powell's imagination and the anticipation of a future cinema based on location shooting. But it lay closer to the 1920s in spirit. Many of the devices noted by [*Observer* critic C. A.] Lejeune are precisely those once common in silent film, but already anachronisms in 1937 – such as the superimposition of "ghosts" who make literal Andrew Gray's memory of the once-populated island in the film's prologue.' Christie, 'Introduction Returning to *The Edge of the World*', *Edge of the World: The making of a film*, vii-xiv, xiii. For melodramatic qualities within silent cinema, see Agustin Zarzosa, 'Melodrama and the Modes of the World', *Transpositions*, 32.2 (2010), pp. 236-55, p. 236.

At the very beginning of the film, a framing narrative of an upper-class tourist couple brings us to the island; their skipper is Andrew, who reluctantly disembarks with them. The island is shown as a place defined by its abandonment: cottages with once turfed roofs now half-stripped bare; the sign for the post-office split in two; the village is almost skeletal with exposed timber frames and crumbling drystone, turf grass springing up in the crevices of the subsiding walls. This vision of re-territorialisation by the island's plant and avian life is mirrored by Andrew's voiceover, in which he frames the island in terms of an ecological reclamation: 'the seabirds were its first owners, now seabirds have it for their own again.' *TEOTW* reflects what Hayden Lorimer identifies as the trend in early twentieth-century visions of the Highlands and Islands as a kind of 'memory-landscape' in which the mythic past is continually re-enacted by virtue of its (apparently) inherent anti-modernity.[572] This sense of long history is reflected in the film's pre-credit titles which states:

> The slow shadow of death is falling on the outer isles of Scotland. This is the story of one of them – and of all of them. When the Roman fleet first sailed around Britain, they saw from the Orkneys a distant island like a blue haze across a hundred miles of sea. "Ultima Thule": The Edge of the World.[573]

As with Flaherty, Powell's tourist gaze has the effect of simplifying the complexities of the Atlantic and North Sea archipelagos by reducing them all to failed or failing communities and which furthers a metropolitan notion of remoteness as a space where civilisation ends. Additionally, the designation of these island communities as being situated at the edge of the world overwrites the realities of their long histories as dynamic centres of commerce, industry, and cultural exchange. As an indication of intent, by placing the island in reference to 'Ultima Thule', and subsequently naming it as an approximate of St Kilda's Hirta, whilst implying its geographical position as being part of the Northern Isles (as opposed to Hebridean), the label of 'Thule'

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[572] 'Gaelic personalities were the next important thread linking past and present. A survey of the interwar literature reveals a memory-landscape peopled by an eclectic assortment of characters. Ancient Celts on horseback, clan nobility roaming hunting parks, romantic hunter-bards leading dogs, free-foresters and maverick poachers, all haunted-bards leading hunting dogs, free-foresters and maverick poachers, all haunted fireside whisky dreams in the shooting lodge.' Hayden Lorimer, 'Guns, game and the grandee: the cultural politics of deerstalking in the Scottish Highlands', *Ecumene*, 7.4 (October 2000), p. 403-31, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44252163> [accessed: 23rd February 2022], p. 408.

[573] The term 'Ultima Thule', as the text indicates, has its origins in the Roman navigation of northern Scotland. However, its application has extended to other territories, such as to Iceland or in the case of the Greenlandic-Danish explorer Knud Ramussen, who in 1910 named an area of north-western Greenland 'Thule' in reference to this sense of expansive northern periphery. For further discussion on the varied history the term, see Kristen Hastrup, 'High Artic Nostalgia: Thule and the Ecology of Mind', *Ecological Nostalgias: Memory, Affect and Creativity in Times of Ecological Upheavals*, ed. Olivia Angé and David Berliner (New York: Berghahn Books, 2021), pp. 39-59.

captures a sense of inherent unknowability and otherness of the island; it is a geographically transmutable site that the filmmaker as ethnographer and interpreter is going to translate through recognisable formal and narrative structures. Pippa Marland rightly quarrels with the framing of this narrative, highlighting the title as colonialist in its implication of distance from a centralised hub of power. However, she takes issue with Powell's substitution of Foula, an island north of Shetland, for St Kilda which is an unfair charge given Powell's inability to film there due to lack of permission and the film's own indication within the dialogue that the island is *not* St Kilda.[574] Therefore, as we have seen in the cliff climbing scene's negotiation between registers of affect and archetype, the film's engagement with discourses of the geopolitical edge-ness of rurality is by nature a hybrid proposition that wishes to see these communities as both real entities experiencing the ripple effects of modernity, as well as producing them as aesthetic objects that reflect back a narrative of the inherent majesty and sublimity of a metaphysical system in which man is secondary to the larger forces that enclose it.

The pre-credit titles' description of the encroachment of modernity as a 'a shadow of death' that 'is *falling*' [my emphasis] over these island communities is, perhaps unintentionally, resonant of the film's interest in the act of falling as a point of discursive rupture. As we have already seen with Robbie's death, the scalar implications of the cliffs draw upon representations of the sublime as a mode of experience which confronts that which is beyond the human through an intensification of our emotional and somatic responses. When this is combined with the various editing effects and in-camera trickery that Powell uses at various points in the film, such as double exposure, the relationship to a representational modernism emerges to locate the film as part of the contemporary Neo-Romantic schools that were thriving in 1930s and '40s Britain. Alexandra Harris defines Neo-Romanticism as the rediscovery of geographic and historic origins of 'the particular and local' in response to high modernism's liberatory aim to affect an 'abolition

[574] Marland charges: 'Powell's designation of St Kilda as "the edge of the world" and his dramatic substitution of one island for another demonstrates how easily overtly sympathetic accounts of islands are infiltrated by the very tropes and attitudes that have contributed to the demise of the island communities they celebrate.' Pippa Marland, *Ecocriticism and the Island: Readings from the British-Irish Archipelago* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2023), p. 12. To counter Marland's charge, whilst the film calls the island of the story 'Hirta', mirroring the name of St Kilda's main island, careful attention to the dialogue reveals that the island is in fact entirely fictional. This is shown during the parliament scene, in which St Kilda is namechecked, making it evident the island of the film is not supposed to St Kilda, and additionally, Robbie exclaims in frustration that 'what happened to the Hebrides will happen here', indicating the fictional island of the film is most likely part of the Northern Isles instead of the Western Isles (especially as Lerwick is depicted and Aberdeen mentioned). Whilst this does not change the overall issues of homogenisation that can be levelled at the film, it is important to acknowledge how Powell's narrative is careful to avoid depicting any specific place, particularly St Kilda.

of roots'.[575] This combination of an historicist interest alongside the new language of abstraction, surrealism, and expressionism meant that Neo-Romantic aesthetics often enacted a radical recontextualization of traditional forms. We can see this aesthetic credo in the film's opening shots of stark masses of gigantic rock rising up into frame out of a calm but dark sea. Shot from below in silhouette (fig. 12) or in contrasts of shadow and sunlight, it seems as if the clouds are almost tumbling over the sheer edge of the cliff's precipice, blurring the boundary between heaven and earth. As a sequence of images, they are striking in their hard-nosed objective, documentary realism, whilst somewhat incongruously also being almost abstracted in the photographing of their sheer bulk rising as if they were Malevich paintings made of adamantine granite or Barbara Hepworth sculptures climbing up out of the North Sea. Harris describes Piet Mondrian's grid paintings as offering a 'precarious equilibrium, distilling time and space down to the bare intersections of line.'[576] In some ways this reading could be applied to Powell's shots of Foula's cliff-lines, where the geometry of the edge produces an abstracted sense of space and

(Fig. 12)

in which the scales of spatial proportion and time (both linear, geological) are invoked to destabilise the sense of coherent subject orientation. Indeed, Marland describes depictions of islands as often experiencing time as 'plural', in which instead 'of this restrictive linear arrangement' of standardised sequential time, 'the co-presence of past, present and future on the islands resists the erasure of past events.'[577] We have already seen this play out in the embodied ritual of the climbing contest, but if we can see the actually geological presentation of the island as reflective of this fusion of historic and modern aesthetics, then we can see how the representation of the island offers a new way of thinking about the aesthetic sedimentation of the rural during the 1930s. With these opening shots of the dramatic cliffs, we can see how in

[575] Harris, Alexandra, *Romantic Moderns: English Writers, Artists and the Imagination from Virginia Woolf to John Piper* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2010), p. 12; p. 11.
[576] Harris, *Romantic Moderns*, p. 15.
[577] Marland, *Ecocriticism and the Island*, p. 225.

Powell's interest in the aesthetics of the sublime and of abstraction, the cliffs become almost surreal spaces.[578] Therefore, if the cliff edge can function as an abstracted line as well as an assertion of the materiality of the world, then the act of falling over its precipice seems to beget larger reverberations than just simply the melodramatic effect of the narrative.

This sense of the island as a space that enfolds time out of linear sequence is engendered from the start of the narrative, in which the opening scenes function as a return to a landscape no longer occupied by people. Andrew, on his walk up to the clifftops, comes across the grave of Peter, with the words 'gone over'. Later on, in the flashback portion of the narrative, Andrew departs the island in response to Peter's refusal for him to marry Ruth in light of his grief over his son's death. Despite Andrew's victory of the cliff climb, eventually the community accepts that their continuation on the island is no longer tenable as the crops fail yet again and the trawler's overfishing have left the native fishermen with little to catch. The final scene of the film depicts the islanders preparing to relocate, with Powell echoing the photographs and newsreel footage of the real islanders of St Kilda as they departed from Hirta in 1930. Peter, still unhappy about the decision, heads off to the cliffs, apparently, to hunt a guillemot's egg for a buyer on the mainland. Whilst over the cliff edge, his frayed rope snaps and he too falls to his death just as his son did.

Peter's death in the context of the film is purposefully ambiguous. His sudden disappearance to hunt for a guillemot's egg at the seemingly least opportune time as the boat is almost ready to leave, combined with the carelessness of his use of the damaged rope, does suggest a degree of self-destruction, perhaps unconscious, in his action. This seems even more convincing when considered in light of the poetic convenience of him being the man who does not want to leave the island now becoming in some sense enveloped in its material totality. As with *Man of Aran*, both the edge of the shoreline and the edge of the cliff is induced as a metaphoric collapsing of the self and the not-self. Peter as an embodiment of the traditions of rural cultures cannot be translated out of his intrinsic environment; as a symbol of historical process, he is the sacrificial figure, much like Hazel Woodus in Mary Webb's *Gone to Earth*

[578] For further discussion of Powell's relationship to Neo-Romanticism see Stella Hockenhull, *Neo-Romantic Landscapes: An Aesthetic Approach to the Films of Powell and Pressburger*, Cambridge Scholars Publisher, 2008. *ProQuest Ebook Central*, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/durham/detail.action?docID=1114357>, [accessed 15th May 2022], p. 51.

(1917), who cannot exist within the contexts of a changing modernity.[579] His grave at the edge of the cliff functions as a metonymic indication of the island as a space of history; it is a symbolic elegy to the kind of rural life that is no longer possible in the face of such expansive modernity. In seeing Peter as a sacrificial figure, he becomes not just victim but also instigator of historical process; by committing himself to the realm of the past, he necessarily enters the world of abstraction, meaning the space of memory, imagination, and material undoing. As a scene of the sublime, his death functions as a build-up of tension and sudden release. Macfarlane describes the 'sublime rush' as a dynamic of 'the improbable parading as the possible', in that 'the suggestion of harm, melded with the knowledge that no harm was likely to come [...] induced this delightful terror'.[580] This is the supreme advantage of the cinematic medium, the ability to affect an intense emotional reaction without any material risk; in a sense it is a medium structured around the resurrection of the 'sublime rush'. As Marks conceives it, the act of cinema spectatorship is a dialogical relationship between the viewer and the film as our bodies are the sites in which the comprehension of the visual is registered. Therefore, if in witnessing Peter's death, our 'embodied visuality' in part produces it through our psychosomatic response. When placed within this scheme of an affective tragic inevitability, Powell's film can really be read as a self-reflexive comment on the meta-cinematic realities of modernity's intersection with the rural: by witnessing the symbolic death of the pre-modern rural, we as spectators are implicated in its dissolution by virtue of our very witnessing.[581]

In engaging with a logic of the edge, these island and coastal films both effect and disrupt the codes of alterity that are built into their thematic presentation. By positioning the body as the site in which the scale of the natural world is able to enact an undoing of being, these coastal films demonstrate the ways in which the intersection between rurality and modernity could produce new systems of knowledge, in part through the friction that was embedded within the very aesthetic of their images. In mining the stakes of modernity as their narrative subject-matter, which includes purposefully obscuring it in *Aran*'s case, the role of the coast in the interwar years comes to represent much about the larger political insecurities over the role of borders, permeability, and the potential erosion of cultures through external forces. Through offering

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[579] Interestingly, Powell later adapted Webb's novel in 1950 and as with the text, the denouement was Hazel's fatal plummet. Falling deaths appear in many of Powell's filmography — *Black Narcissus*, *The Red Shoes*, the aforementioned *Gone to Earth*, and, as an inversion, *A Matter of Life and Death* (1946).

[580] Macfarlane, *Mountains of the Mind*, chapter 3, paragraph 28, Kindle edition.

[581] Marks, *Skin of Film*, p. 145.

distinct and diverse accounts of the underside of progress, coastal cinema allows us to ask, whether the apparent 'manacles of place' (as Douglas Dunn characterised St Kilda's geographical position) are not in fact keys in which we able to open up new ways of not only seeing but also being within our corporeal selves.[582] By looking at the edge-ness of these films, what becomes apparent is the very temptation to transgress its boundaries, to take the symbolic leap into unmappable zone, and to revive through a process of witnessing, a version of the rural that has otherwise 'gone over'.

[582] Douglas Dunn, 'St Kilda's Parliament', *St Kilda's Parliament* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), pp. 13-15, p. 14.

Conclusion

Nan Shepherd's Totality of Corporeal Being

We started this journey with a walk and so we shall end with one. This time, rather than in the beech and gorse-strewn dells of Leonard Bast's damp Surrey morning, we find ourselves in the company of Nan Shepherd on a granite plateau in the Cairngorm Mountains of Scotland's eastern Highlands. It is a wind-blasted place, blanketed in a dense mist that has spread its mantle over the filmy pools, now out of sight, in the corrie below. The mountain, recently so vivid in its mammoth materiality, has suddenly been cloaked from definite vision, causing things to shift within sightlines. For Shepherd this reorganisation of the phenomenal world's certainty has the effect of bringing a new form of truth to the fore: 'Mist, oddly, can also correct the illusions of the eye. A faint mist floating in a line of hills brings out the gradations of height and of distance in what had seemed one hill: there is seen to be a near and a far.'[583] Space, when it is reordered through occlusion or perceptual compression, can re-emerge with a fresh sense of orientation; suddenly what was a far-off single plane is now segmented into dimensional degrees of distance.

In coming into contact with the Cairngorms' erratic weather systems, Shepherd's account, *The Living Mountain*, offers a diamond-lensed point of view at the specificities of a particular environment, capturing the minutiae of the mountains' diverse components through an experience of sustained reorientation over time. The spatial extremity that the mountains' topography offers affords the opportunities of thinking and feeling its materiality through various degrees of scalar perception. Shepherd describes not only variation in objects of fixation but also the effect of accumulation on the sensory-memory system: 'This changing focus in the eye, moving the eye itself when looking at things that do not move, deepens one's sense of outer reality. Then static things may be caught in the very act of becoming.'[584] It is this interest in finding new ways in which to represent place that her text reveals an attention to the partiality of any single experience of an environment; rather, it is the return, both literally and psychologically, that allows a terrain to disclose its inherent complexity, often in conjunction with an open psychological approach to let the mountain offer whichever aspect of itself materialises.

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[583] Nan Shepherd, *The Living Mountain* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2014 [1977]), p. 100.
[584] Ibid., p. 10.

Shepherd's ranging from the macroscopic view of the plateau's visual expanse to the zoomed-in delicateness of pink moss campion flowers has the effect of offering a heightened subject position but also allows an imaginative leap into considering the world as a system of interrelated entities. She expresses this as, 'the focal point is everywhere'.[585] Macfarlane describes her writing as displaying a 'compound eye' that embeds a 'refusal to privilege a single perspective.'[586] This inherent diversity in her orientation to the mountain, means that no singular approach emerges as a constant other than that which fosters a careful surveillance of one's self and the environment. Knowledge is transmuted out of rational empiricism's totality of ideological framing, and Shepherd indicates that to know a place is more a process of familiarity than it is the privileging of discernible facts. One such illustration of this embodied knowledge is a narrow loch whose depth (at that point in time) had never been measured, to which Shepherd asserts: 'I know its depth, though not in feet.'[587] The process of coming into knowledge of the world, Shepherd teaches, is one in which the parameters of the easy conviction of things must fall away, and one must learn that knowledge apprehension is about seeing the same things in new ways, again and again. The mountain, despite its being millions of years old, is never the exactly the same as it was each time one returns to its corries and summits; it is both constant and impermanent.

Nan Shepherd was born in 1893 in the village of Cults, not far from Aberdeen, but also not far from the Deeside hills. She was raised in a middle-class household, attended the University of Aberdeen, and went on to teach literature at Aberdeen College of Education for most of her life. Her literary career saw her produce three novels over a period of five years from 1928 to 1933; a collection of poetry, *In the Cairngorms*, followed that in 1934. By the middle of the decade, Shepherd's momentum of creative output had somewhat stalled, though she did continue to write criticism and give lectures as part of her professional and personal interest in the Scottish modernist scene. From around 1943 until the manuscript's completion in 1945, Shepherd was working on *The Living Mountain*. Despite praise from fellow writer Neil Gunn, when Shepherd made enquiries as to its publication in 1946, the manuscript was rejected; it

[585] Ibid., p. 11.
[586] Robert Macfarlane, 'Introduction', *The Living Mountain* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2014), pp. vii-xxxiv, p. xxi.
[587] Shepherd, *Living Mountain*, p. 12.

would remain in a drawer for the following decades, occasionally glimpsed at by a select few, until it was finally published in 1977 in a limited print-run.[588]

As Charlotte Peacock writes, Shepherd 'led an outwardly conventional, but quietly anarchic, life', and her writing concerning her time spent upon the Cairngorms reveal a woman whose sense of curiosity propelled her into remaking her approach to both thinking and being.[589] One such incident recalls her swimming naked in Loch Etchachan and noticing the deep chasm of the loch's bed as it fell away beyond a 'submerged precipice'; Shepherd writes 'My spirit was as naked as my body. It was one of the most defenceless moments of my life.'[590] This sense of vulnerability of the body within a topography of such radical shifts and gradations presents moments of corporeal self-consciousness that engender the body as the site in which the character of place is truly registered. As in this case, and in others such as sudden blizzards or when she sleeps in the open air, the experience of bodily situatedness allows her fresh insights into the ways in which being is interrelated to its environmental context.

This investment in a materiality of selfhood allows Shepherd to explore the ways in which such experiences induce a rearrangement of the sensory modalities. Like Mew, Lawrence, and Warner, touch (what she calls 'the most intimate sense of all') remains the modality that offers the most acute sensation of corporeal relation, with Shepherd stating that the 'hands have an infinity of pleasure within them.'[591] By altering the focus of knowledge into its perceptual qualities, such as the haptic feel of walking barefoot over heather, Shepherd has the ability to reposition epistemology as produced through a somatic scheme of apprehension. She describes this approach to her mode of subjective relation as driving 'home the truth that our habitual vision of things is not necessarily right: it is only one of an infinite number, and to glimpse an unfamiliar one, even for a moment, unmakes us, but steadies us again.'[592] This slant tactic for coming into contact with the world can be traced in the reverberations of all the texts explored across this study, but, within Shepherd's work, it is in her notion of rethinking the shape of these relations and practicing what she would call a kind of 'vagabond' mode of being, that we can trace the familiarly radical politics of *Lolly Willowes*.[593] Like Laura, who ends the novel by

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[588] See Charlotte Peacock, *Into the Mountain: A Life of Nan Shepherd* (Cambridge: Galileo Publishers, 2017). Kindle edition.
[589] Ibid., Chapter 1, paragraph 34. Kindle edition.
[590] Shepherd, *Living Mountain*, p. 13.
[591] Ibid., p. 102.
[592] Ibid., p. 101.
[593] Shepherd, 'Foreword', *The Living Mountain*, pp. xxxv-xxxvii, p. xxxvi.

wandering away to find some quiet wood or ditch in which to rest, Shepherd also advocates for a similarly slow kind of interaction with her rural environment: 'often the mountain gives itself most completely when I have no destination, when I reach nowhere in particular, but have gone out merely to *be* [my emphasis] with the mountain'.[594] This diametrically opposite approach to the kind of summit seeking that had come to define the masculinist mountaineer reflects the undercurrent of hegemonic disruption that Shepherd's text imbues. Like the denoument of *Lolly Willowes*, the approach to the rural is defined by its aimlessness in which there is a purposeful purposelessness that characterises Shepherd's wandering pilgrim as a radical figure who recontextualises spatial politics through her foregrounding of a bodily rather than a cartological relation to the landscape. Macfarlane sees Shepherd's approach 'as a corrective to the self-exaltation of the mountaineer's hunger for an utmost point', rather by coming to the mountain with an egalitarian attention to its material and therefore for spiritual properties, Shepherd's 'pilgrim contents herself with looking along and inwards to mystery, where the mountaineer longs to look down and outwards onto total knowledge.'[595] As a space that promotes a form of knowledge acquisition through quiet imbrication and mutual observation of both its material properties and their effects upon the self, Shepherd's text offers a manual of how rural environments can disrupt and remake ontology into an experience of holistic connection.

In many ways, *The Living Mountain* is text that serves as the culmination of the various formations and conceptualisations of the rural body that we have traversed throughout this survey; or rather, those earlier examples provide a genealogy of what Shepherd would eventually distil within her account. As with Edward Thomas's work, nature as a site for both escape from and transcendence of the self becomes surmountable through the contextual reframings that the body finds itself within. Whereas Thomas had looked to nature as the place in which his agony of self could be soothed by becoming aware of time's great span, Shepherd conversely approaches this expansion of being less as medicine and more as a kind of spiritual invigoration that returns selfhood back to a version of an eternal consciousness that has been lost within the erosions of modernity: 'Here then may be lived a life of the senses so pure, so untouched by any mode apprehension but their own that the body may be said to think. [...] This is the innocence we have lost, living in one sense at a time to live all the way through.'[596] This notion of a purer form

[594] Shepherd, *Living Mountain*, p. 15.
[595] Macfarlane, 'Introduction', *Living Mountain*, p. xv.
[596] Shepherd, *Living Mountain*, p. 105.

of being that has been occluded from our grasp chimes with not only Thomas but also Lawrence, Butts, and Flaherty too. The sense of a primal way of relating to the world that the mountain offers to the sensitive pilgrim is demonstrated through her attention to the confluence of the landscape as a site in which its permanent materiality affords the opportunity for the immanent to emerge. Macfarlane calls this interest in the rural as a space for spiritual vivification 'A metaphysical mash-up of Presbyterianism and the Tao'.[597] Peacock furthers this notion of Shepherd having imbibed the thought systems of the eastern philosophies of Taoism and Zen, writing that it was towards the start of the Second World War that Shepherd encountered them in translation. When combined with the fact that 'so many men [were] away fighting', Shepherd experienced 'the hills [...as] an unpeopled landscape', further purifying this sense of the emptied-out consciousness being only in communion with its environment: like Mew, the rural promises respite from an otherwise fretful social world.[598] Shepherd calls the experience of such moments, particularly the muted stillness that materialises, 'not a mere negation', but rather 'like a new element [...] it is no more than the last edge of an element we are leaving'.[599] In this moment of aperture, the self is displaced out of any sense of its own singularity; as self-consciousness ebbs through this elemental refashioning and the presence of the subject is dispersed among the life of the mountain. It is a process of mutual ingress and egress, one in which, as Shepherd recounts, 'I am an image in a ball of glass. The world is suspended there, and I in it.'[600] This sense of the strangeness of such intense experience offers an understanding of being in which the self becomes only referential, a subsidiary component within a phenomenal world that has become unregulated away from any possibility of cognitive surety. Such instances of consciousness being emptied out of its insularity allow Shepherd's Emersonian transparent 'I' access to the full scope of temporal energies that make this experience not one of depletion but rather one of augmentation: 'Mankind is satiated with noise; but up here, this naked, this elemental savagery, this infinitesimal cross-section of sound from the energies that have been at work for aeons in the universe, exhilarates rather than destroys.'[601] It is an account of such experiential extremity that recalls Mew's heartbroken speaker on the darkened moorland, but unlike that self-elegy,

[597] Macfarlane, 'Introduction', *Living Mountain*, p. xii.
[598] Peacock, *Into the Mountain*, Chapter 11, paragraph 29. Kindle edition.
[599] Ibid., p. 96.
[600] Ibid.
[601] Ibid., p. 97.

here the vibrancy of Shepherd's subjectivity is unshackled from any sense of inner torment; the self is made buoyant, not discarded.

But of course, the mountain whilst offering glimpses at a version of being that is rooted in a sense of the eternal, is not excluded from the realities of the present-day. Shepherd's text is full of anecdotes of various encounters with groups of hikers, or with tales of some of their misfortunes, and occasionally of their miraculous survivals. One such example of the reaches of the modern world into the landscape of the Cairngorms describes the felling of the trees that had harboured roe deer and crested tit. These woodlands, cut down in 1914 and 1940 for use in the two world wars, left the land 'scarred', recalling the description of the woodlands of the Wragby Estate in *Lady Chatterley's Lover*; they will be replanted, but the effect upon the ecology of the site cannot be undone.[602] Similarly, the shadow of the aeroplane, both literally and metaphorically, materialises at several points within the text as a reminder of the technological incursion that the Cairngorms will still have to bear witness to. One reference describes a collision that occurred in a snowstorm, in which a plane containing five Czech airmen crashed into a deep drift; another, describes 'wrecked aeroplanes that lie scattered over the mountains', victims of the Cairngorms' volatile weather system that can suddenly cloak the summits in impenetrable fog.[603] Shepherd uses these anecdotes of the aeroplane's vulnerability to the mountain climate in order to explicate a sense of nature's overwhelming power: despite such technological advancements as being able to cut through a corrie pass like a bird, the ultimate say will remain with the mountain.

Woolf, in her final novel *Between the Acts* (1941), also peppers her narrative with the imposition of planes soaring overhead.[604] In the novel's opening, the topography of a rural English village is anecdotally revealed through the aerial perspective of a plane: 'From an aeroplane, he said, you could still see, plainly marked, the scars made by the Britons; by the Romans; by the Elizabethan manor house; and by the plough, when they ploughed the hill to grow wheat in the Napoleonic wars.'[605] For Woolf, the aeroplane offers the opportunity to witness temporal striations of place within a single optical sweep. Later in the novel, the historical pageant that the narrative is structured around is suddenly interrupted by noise from above: 'The word was cut in two. A zoom severed it. Twelve aeroplanes in perfect formation like a flight of

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[602] Ibid., p. 56.
[603] Ibid., p. 37; p. 77.
[604] See also *Mrs Dalloway*'s skywriting scene, pp. 16-17.
[605] Virginia Woolf, *Between the Acts* (London: Vintage, 2005 [1941]), p. 1.

wild duck came overhead.'[606] As with Shepherd's encounters, aeroplanes offer both literal and symbolic encapsulations of the wider incursion of war into the rural: the mountain, otherwise a space seemingly out of time, is suddenly reinscripted into the contemporary world. Therefore, whilst Woolf displays the ambivalent potentials of modernity to help witness the contours of the land's temporal reach, for Shepherd, this aerial perspective is simply a sped-up version of disembodied perception. Perhaps, her text suggests, these novel opportunities of modernity can simply lead to a regressive form of being, such as in Grierson's mechanised trawlermen. Furthermore, as with Lawrence's colliers, it is in the manual action of corporeal motor engagement (not mechanisation) that the self is given over to the world. If modernity is understood in this sense, then it emerges as a form of summit seeking. To counter this approach, Shepherd offers an alternate path that brings the whole somatic self into play.

Throughout this study, we have seen how the body has been the gateway through which the rural has afforded alternate modes of being. In Edward Thomas's poetry, rural environments came to represent that which was beyond the self, the relief space that operated in line with a dispersed consciousness and stretched back deep into the annals of time. The sensory system for Thomas became the life raft that he clung to in order to bring his busy mind into quietude within the immediacy of the moment. Similarly, with Charlotte Mew, the positionality of the self within nature, real or imagined, allowed a breach of the socially constricted self, and promised expansion into a world of sensory fulfilment that the threat of modernity could not otherwise supply. Unlike both Mew and Thomas, D. H. Lawrence saw in the rural a hybrid space that had been the scene of industrial capitalism's worst impulses of greed and aggressive mastery. This had left an environment depleted and the once-heroic labourers similarly degraded. Both Lawrence and Mew identified tactile contact as holding liberatory potential, with the physical enactment of proximity between contiguous entities reverberating and procuring a sense of the world as defined by its interrelation. Mary Butts and Sylvia Townsend Warner, though both drawing from the traditions and revived interests of folk cultures and the potentials of regionalisms and parochial identities, held distinct understandings of what rurality could mean for the future. For Butts, the promise of an essential body — that of the white, Celtic, fertility figure — offered a coherency through lineage that the modern world was otherwise upending with its depletion of the spiritual life latent within material nature; Warner, conversely, saw the body as the site in which personal power could come to be located and channelled. Like Lawrence and Mew, touch

[606] Ibid., p. 119.

for Warner held liberatory potential, and her final vision of her spinster-witch figure sees her as reterritorialising the landscape of the English heartlands with a newly radicalised potency that might (though this remains uncertain) redraw the power relations within the modern age. With the cinema of the coast and islands of the 1930s, we saw a mixture of approaches to the question of rurality, all of which drew upon the body as an extension of an environment that could overwhelm the self. Both Robert J. Flaherty and Michael Powell found legibility in the aesthetic configurations of the Romantic era, with Powell in particular drawing upon its elegiac potential to narrate a story of modernity as a wave of cultural erasure. For both, the primal body of the pre-modern islander becomes the site in which grand ontological questions are given emotional ratification. Conversely, John Grierson found great opportunity in the dynamics of the industrialised fishing industry, and the bodies of the workers on the herring trawlers became kinetic extensions of the wider rhythm of capitalism's boom, even if the film cannot always sustain this valorisation. Finally, we end with Nan Shepherd's account of the body as the place in which the mountain communicates with a self that is attuned to the larger rhythms and dynamics of a mysterious ecological system. Shepherd writes that her time upon the mountain makes her 'flesh transparent. The body is not made negligible but paramount. [...] Flesh is not annihilated but fulfilled.'[607] Nature offers an awareness of selfhood as form of process and the body becomes imbued with the currents of all that encompasses it.

In many ways this desire to make the body alive to the self through its engagement with place is the central animating desire of all of the writers and filmmakers studied in this survey. For them, the rural offers a space in which the body can become reoriented to itself, away from the melee of a modernity that is often experienced as a fractious affliction. By feeling out an alternate path in which to move in dialogue with the modern world, these figures have all engaged in their own alternate version of modernism, one in which continuity and proximity is valued over the thrill of rupture. In setting out for a walk among the trees, or on top of the moors, or along the narrow ridge of a clifftop, they are all unified in their search for stability. In heading back to the earth, one might just find oneself home again.

[607] Ibid., p. 106.

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