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Reading matter: modernist short fiction and things

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Declaration

I, Aimee Gasston, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own, other than where I have indicated.

Abstract

Looking at Katherine Mansfield, Virginia Woolf and Elizabeth Bowen, this thesis examines the ways in which the everyday ‘things’ of their modernist short fiction reflect the aesthetics of their creators. Looking specifically at Mansfield and snack food, Woolf and armchairs and Elizabeth Bowen and hats and gloves, it explores the ways in which each type of object models a particular way of reading. Pitched against conceptions of the novel as the most apt literary vehicle for ideas and modernism as a highfalutin and inaccessible enterprise, it argues that the modernist short story is a philosophical form which encourages revelatory reading in quotidian contexts.

Through examination of the intrinsic interrelation between stories and everyday objects, each fitting ergonomically around the other in terms of their production, consumption and contents, this thesis calls for a reappraisal of the importance of the short fiction genre to the development of modernist aesthetics.

It conceives of Katherine Mansfield’s short fiction as a type of literary snack: accessible, quickly consumed and working against restrictive traditions. Examining moments of snacking in Mansfield’s short fiction via Walter Benjamin’s conception of *Jetztzeit* (from ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, 1940) – time that is poised, abundant and filled with potential revolutionary energy – it argues that snacks and stories allow access to the insight enabled by the ‘presence of the now’. Next, it goes on to consider how the armchair functions in Woolf’s stories as both noun and adjective, a space for reading stories and the wider world, which also encourages a democratising, amateur perspective. Employing Martin Heidegger’s concept of phenomenology as necessitated by a questioning mode of being (as set out in *Being and Time*, 1927), it suggests both the armchair and story as routes to authentic being. Finally, it examines Bowen’s short fiction, exploring peripheral detail as epitomised by hats and gloves as philosophical expression of her emphasis on the eccentric. Using Jacques Derrida’s notion of the parergon from *The Truth in Painting* (1987) as a framework for examining Bowen’s aesthetics, it establishes accessory detail in her stories as a rich and anarchic site of meaning which encourages eccentric and creative reading practices. This thesis argues that in modelling ways of reading, these modernist stories also recommend ways of being.

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Finally, thanks to Kierran Horner, who first incited me to start a PhD by making me jealous of his, moved to South-East London with me so that we could house our books, and talked and walked with me over many hours and miles, arguing about art and philosophy.

This research is dedicated to the memory of Charl, Edward, Gab, Roly, Seb and Terry.

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List of Abbreviations

- B: Elizabeth Bowen, *The Bazaar and Other Stories*.
- BT: Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*.
- CF: Katherine Mansfield, *The Collected Fiction of Katherine Mansfield*.
- CI: Elizabeth Bowen, *Collected Impressions*.
- CL: Katherine Mansfield, *The Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield*.
- CS: Elizabeth Bowen, *Collected Stories*.
- D: Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*.
- E: Virginia Woolf, *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*.
- HH: Virginia Woolf, *A Haunted House: The Complete Shorter Fiction*.
- I: Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*.
- J: Katherine Mansfield, *The Journal of Katherine Mansfield 1904-1922*.
- L: Virginia Woolf, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*.
- LI: Elizabeth Bowen, *Listening In: Broadcasts, Speeches, and Interviews by Elizabeth Bowen*.
- MT: Elizabeth Bowen, *The Mulberry Tree*.
- N: Katherine Mansfield, *The Katherine Mansfield Notebooks*.
- OG: Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*.
- PPT: Elizabeth Bowen, *People, Places, Things*.
- TP: Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*.

In addition, *OED* will be used to refer to the *Oxford English Dictionary* and specifically the *OED Online* (www.oed.com) in the year 2017.

All books cited for content are listed in the bibliography.

Note on quotations

I have reproduced text from letters, diaries etc. as written to include any idiosyncrasies of spelling or grammar. There are so many of these that I have not pointed each out with the word 'sic', as this tended to impede rather than aid clarity.

Introduction

As Hermione Lee has observed, '[b]ooks change their readers; they teach you how to read them'.¹ This thesis argues that modernist short fiction changes its readers and does so in directing unique ways of reading. This research is concerned with the relationship between stories and things inside them – both '[n]arratives that are generated by objects' and 'objects generated by means of narrative' – and asks how this reciprocity affects our consumption of the texts in question.²

Examining modernist short fiction through the everyday objects that shape its form and contents, this thesis examines the ways that specific objects align themselves with the aesthetics of their writers and, by consequence, shape the reading process. Looking specifically at Katherine Mansfield and snack food, Virginia Woolf and armchairs, and Elizabeth Bowen and accessories, my research asks how each of these 'things' model specific ways of reading. In the case of each of these authors, stories function like the objects they describe: in Mansfield's to induce awareness of temporal plenitude (like the snack); in Woolf's to bring about a democratisation of vision (like the armchair); and in Bowen's to inculcate an eccentric epistemology (like hats and gloves). In exploring how the stories of Bowen, Mansfield and Woolf are shaped by the objects they depict, I will show how all three writers, in directing ways of reading, also recommend ways of living.

Rather like the short story genre, each object considered here can be thought of as *nomini's umbra*: an insubstantial thing. In her work on the importance of objects in Victorian literature, Elaine Freedgood argues that '[t]hing culture survives now in [...] marginal or debased cultural forms and practices'. Within such forms and practices, Freedgood argues, 'apparently mundane or meaningless objects can suddenly take on or be assigned value or and meaning'.³ This thesis will conceive of the short story as precisely such a marginal cultural form and

¹ Hermione Lee, 'Virginia Woolf's Essays' in *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Susan Sellers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 91.

² Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993), p. xii.

³ Elaine Freedgood, *The Ideas in Things: Fugitive Meaning in the Victorian Novel* (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 2006), p. 8.

practice, where objects loom large and derive their value and meaning from their relevance to these writers' aesthetic practices, which also effects an influence which extends to the reader.

This introduction will go on to consider the canonical and critical attention paid to the modernist short story before looking at the relationships the writers considered here had with each other as well as with the short story. It will also consider Woolf's short fiction practice in more detail as a case study which is revealing of the form more widely. Delineating the field of scholarship where modernist studies and material cultural studies intersect, it will go on to explore the mutual cultural history shared by stories and objects. Briefly taking account of doctoral research which does not naturally fit into any of the individual literature reviews in the forthcoming chapters, the introduction will conclude with an overview of the specific thesis of each chapter and set out the original contribution to knowledge which this research asserts.

Modernist short fiction, the canon and criticism

Michael Hollington argues that the 'keynote' of artistic modernism is 'liberation, an ironic distrust of all absolutes, including those of temporal or spatial form'.⁴ The modernist aesthetic is delineated in terms of a cognitive disorientation: a disbelief in and, by consequence, dislocation from, both the fact (empirical absolutes) and fiction (traditional art forms and contents) of the world. If modernist aesthetics sought, as Samuel Beckett would put it, to 'eff' the 'ineffable',⁵ then this was an aim to which short fiction was well-suited with its particular focus on the moment and the glimpse which refuse the position of omniscience.⁶ In recognition of the limited human ability to comprehend the world in all its fullness, modernist short fiction sensibly dedicates itself not to truncation – as the Victorian story did – but to rendering the fullness of human experience on a smaller scale – 'the wider circumference of the moment' as well as its 'nucleus'.⁷ In so doing, the short story challenges 'the tyranny of the whole book' – that is, the

⁴ Michael Hollington, 'Svevo, Joyce and Modernist Time' in *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature 1890–1930* (London: Penguin, 1991), pp. 430–442 (p. 432).

⁵ Samuel Beckett, *Watt* (London: John Calder, 1998), p. 61.

⁶ Clare Hanson defines the modernist short story through its 'emphasis on the single moment of intense or significant experience'. Clare Hanson, *Short Stories and Short Fictions 1880–1980* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1985), p. 55.

⁷ Virginia Woolf, 'The Moment: Summer's Night' in *The Moment and Other Essays* (London: Hogarth Press, 1947), pp. 9–13 (p. 10).

idea that a work of literature is capable of representing a ‘complete, unified world’.⁸

Despite these tendencies toward ‘disjunction, inconclusiveness and obliquity’, which might easily suggest the form as a resinous encapsulation or epitome of modernist aesthetics, it is surprising how often the short story is canonically side-lined and often disremembered by modernist scholarship except where short fiction comprises a specialist concern.⁹ For example, Bradbury and McFarlane’s seminal work on early modernism, *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature 1890-1930*, dedicates sections to lyric poetry, the novel and drama, bypassing short fiction altogether. David Trotter’s *The English Novel in History 1895-1920* refers to the stories of both Mansfield and Bowen without noticing the short story as a genre distinct from its focus – the novel,¹⁰ while *The Penguin History of English Literature: The Twentieth Century* takes the century’s literature to be comprised solely of the novel, poetry and drama. Similarly, Peter Gay’s *Modernism: The Lure of Heresy* (2007) does not look at the short story across its 600 pages, describing Franz Kafka as a novelist,¹¹ and Gabriel Josipovici’s *What Ever Happened to Modernism?* (2010) likewise relies on the novel and poetry in building its argument, without considering the form that sits between.

These recurrent oversights are puzzling, especially as the short story has often been identified as a ‘specifically Modernist form’¹² and because in the ‘modernist period the short form came to have, for the first time in its history, a status almost equivalent to that of the novel’.¹³ They can only be partially explained by the logic of E. M. Forster’s comment that ‘one tends to over-praise a long book simply because one has got through it’.¹⁴ In behavioural psychology, work on aesthetic judgments has established that ‘people will generally prefer larger objects over smaller ones’ with such decisions ‘influenced by a simple “bigger is better”

⁸ Clare Hanson, ed., ‘Introduction’, in *Re-reading the Short Story* (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1989), pp. 1-9 (p. 7).

⁹ Hanson, *Re-reading the Short Story*, p. 6.

¹⁰ David Trotter, *The English Novel in History 1895-1920* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006). See pp. 70-73 for discussion of Mansfield’s ‘A Cup of Tea’ and pp. 228-9 for Bowen’s ‘The Cat Jumps’.

¹¹ Peter Gay, *Modernism: The Lure of Heresy - From Baudelaire to Beckett and Beyond* (New York: Norton and Company, 2007), p. 214.

¹² Emma Liggins, Andrew Maunder and Ruth Robbins, eds, *The British Short Story* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), p. 155.

¹³ Hanson, *Short Stories and Short Fictions 1880-1980*, p. 56. This perspective was not necessarily shared by writers of the form, such as Mansfield and Woolf.

¹⁴ E. M. Forster, ‘T. E. Lawrence’ in *Abinger Harvest* (London: Penguin, 1976), pp. 156-162 (p. 157).

heuristic'.¹⁵ Of course, this theory does not explain the routine canonisation of poetry, except if one argues that poetry secured its hierarchical standing at the inception of literary history and 'familiar objects tend to be preferred over unfamiliar objects'.¹⁶ As Mary Louise Pratt points out: 'Genres are not essences. They are human institutions, historical through and through' – as such, the short story's partial erasure from authoritative histories warrants examination.¹⁷ One argument put forward for this disremembering is that short fiction's 'connections with folklore, with speech, humor, children's literature, with didacticism, the very notion of lack that goes with shortness, all conspire to deny it the status of art'.¹⁸ Given the 'high art' niche that modernism has been accorded, such theories may have particular relevance to this period.

Literary criticism of the short story has succeeded in tracing its own path and while some discerning work has arisen,¹⁹ there is a recurring tendency towards the oneiric, imprecise and conjectural: the antithesis to Vladimir Propp's 1928 interrogation of the folktale. Dominic Head has observed that because an established critical language has been largely absent from short story criticism, the 'elements of ambiguity and paradox' inherent to the form have not been properly examined. As a result, 'critics have taken refuge in the nebulous concept of "mystery"' which has devalued short fiction's critical canon.²⁰ This inclination is well-evidenced in Frank O'Connor's *The Lonely Voice* (1962) which remains a bastion of short story criticism despite its vague terminology, inescapable prejudices and meandering gaze.²¹ Some criticism attempts to rally against this approach by focusing on genre definitions and the creation of sub-genre classifications, but these can serve to cloud rather than elucidate examination of the form. William Boyd does this in taxonomising the short story into the categories of the 'Event-Plot', the 'Chekhovian', the 'Modernist' (a term used to 'convey the idea of obscurity and deliberate

¹⁵ R. Brian Giesler, Robert A. Josephs and David H. Silvera, 'Bigger is Better: The Influence of Physical Size on Aesthetic Judgments', *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making*, 15:2 (2002), 189-202 (p. 190).

¹⁶ Josephs, Giesler and Silvera, pp. 189-190.

¹⁷ Mary Louise Pratt, 'The Short Story: The Long and the Short of It', in *The New Short Story Theories* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1994), pp. 91-113 (p. 92).

¹⁸ Pratt, p. 110.

¹⁹ For example, *The Modern Short Story* by H. E. Bates (first published 1941) and Ian Reid's slender but valuable volume *The Short Story* (first published 1977).

²⁰ Dominic Head, *The Modernist Short Story: A Study in Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 23.

²¹ Frank O'Connor, *The Lonely Voice - A Study of the Short Story* (New Jersey: Melville House, 1984).

difficulty'), the 'Cryptic/Ludic', the 'Mini-Novel', the 'Poetic/Mythic' and the 'Biographical'.²²

More extended criticism specific to the modernist short story, of which Dominic Head's *The Modernist Short Story: A Study in Theory and Practice* (1992) forms a crucial part, can also follow the historical tendency of fixing solely on the story's formal properties, rather like a biologist seeking to define a newly-discovered, enigmatic species. In privileging definition above all else, conclusive statements become at once technical and generalised, such as this, on Woolf's short fiction: 'effects are generated by a formal disruption deriving from a tension between a conventional, ordered narrative style, and an all-embracing, multi-accentual alternative'.²³ Broad statements such as these wear the clothes of specificity, but simply alert us to general truths – here Woolf's tendency toward experimentalism – they are not helpful in getting us any closer to the stories or in clarifying the ways we might read them. The formalist approach can also unshore the story from important contexts such as authorial aesthetics, the practice of reading, cultural history, ethics and the interplay between text and contents. More recent works have fruitfully focused on themes within modernist short fiction, such as Claire Drewery's *Modernist Short Fiction by Women: The Liminal in Katherine Mansfield, Dorothy Richardson, May Sinclair and Virginia Woolf* (2011), but there is still much territory left unexplored.

Further works have discussed the modernist short story as part of the form's wider context comprehensively and with sensitivity and originality. Adrian Hunter's work, *The Cambridge Introduction to the Short Story in English* (2007), stands out with its astute analysis of modernist short fiction, crucially arguing for an appraisal of the short story against 'the context of the whole culture of modernism in Britain, rather than just in formalist terms'.²⁴ *The British Short Story* (2010), edited by Emma Liggins, Andrew Maunder and Ruth Robbins, contain salient overviews of the modernist British short story, but its analysis is limited by the sweeping scope of study which aims at a complete history of the form. The work of Clare Hanson, in relation to the short story more widely as well as Mansfield and Woolf specifically, also deserves mention

²² William Boyd, 'The Short Story' in *Bamboo* (London: Penguin, 2005), pp. 237-244.

²³ Dominic Head, *The Modernist Short Story: A Study in Theory and Practice* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), p. 108. This excerpt describes Woolf's 'The Mark on the Wall'.

²⁴ Adrian Hunter, *The Cambridge Companion to the Short Story in English* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 46.

here as it permeates each of the three chapters. While Hanson has not produced a book-length work dedicated specifically to modernist short fiction, her analyses of the modernist short story which feature as part of wider surveys or author-specific commentaries have been invaluable to this research. Her focus on the marginality and obliquity that are intrinsic to the short story as form underpin some of the key arguments of this thesis.

The faltering and at times incoherent relationship criticism has had with the modernist short story supports the need for its further engagement with the subject, as well as demonstrating the diverse and rich quality of the material itself. This relationship is perhaps unsurprising given that the essence of what it is to write short seems even to escape those who dedicated their lives to doing just that. As Anton Chekhov, widely accepted as the founder of the modern short story, wrote in a letter of 1890: 'But in short stories it is better to say not enough than to say too much, because, – because – I don't know why!'²⁵

Short fiction practice

The writers researched here were linked personally as well as professionally – it is well-known that Mansfield and Woolf were both friends and rivals. Later, Bowen and Woolf would become close friends, although Woolf considered Bowen disparagingly at first, in 1934 considering her a 'conventional'²⁶ individual 'who tries to write like me' (*D* 4, 74). Bowen would not become acquainted with Mansfield, who died before Bowen had published her first book, but reviewers of that first collection, *Encounters* (1923), cited Mansfield as a likely influence, leading Bowen to read her for the first time and become a life-long admirer. Bowen came to select a collection of Mansfield's stories for publication in the United States in 1956, in whose introduction she describes Mansfield as a 'genius' with the capacity to produce stories that are 'more than moments, instants, gleams' because they are bestowed with 'touches of eternity'.²⁷

²⁵ Anton Chekhov, 'The Short Story' in *The New Short Story Theories*, ed. by Charles E. May (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1994), pp. 195-198 (p. 198).

²⁶ Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie, 5 vols (San Diego, New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1979-84), 4, p. 86. Hereafter referred to as *D*, followed by volume and page number, with further references given after quotations in the text.

²⁷ Elizabeth Bowen, 'Introduction', in Katherine Mansfield, *Stories* (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), pp. v-xxiv (pp. x, xxiv). Here Bowen captures the temporal ambivalence attained by Mansfield's stories which the first chapter of this thesis also probes.

Each of the writers this thesis examines had a unique relationship with the short story. Elizabeth Bowen, arguably best known for her work as a novelist, was a short story writer first and a fiercely enthusiastic proponent of the form. Her introduction to the *Faber Book of Modern Short Stories*, in which she lauded the story's affinities with the cinema, is a stalwart of short story theory²⁸ and she taught a course on the short story at Vassar College, New York, in 1960.²⁹ Mansfield, fascinated with the miniature since a child,³⁰ dedicated her working life to the form yet at times doubted its capacity to be recognised as 'great' literature, with an attitude that seemed to blame the form itself rather than external perception of it, sometimes almost as an extension of her own artistic self-doubt – as if so much of 'her' was in 'it'. As Mansfield's complex relationship to the story will be explored at length in the first chapter, I will not discuss it further here. I will, however, dwell on Woolf's affiliation with short fiction, as it makes for a useful case study in bringing to the fore themes of professionalism, experimentalism and appraisal which are of wider relevance to the genre.

In the second chapter of this thesis, I will consider the idea of amateurism as part of Woolf's 'armchair philosophy', one which complements the terrain of short fiction, which is often considered a test ground for apprentice novelists before they graduate to the professional field of literature. Likewise, historically, Woolf's short fiction has rarely been viewed as serious literary output, at times considered an infrequently practised hobby to which too much attention need not be paid – as Nena Škrbic notes, 'Woolf's short story writing can be explained as a private rather than a public pursuit'.³¹ The first Hogarth Press publication comprised short fiction, one piece by Virginia, one by her husband Leonard, under the simple yet bold title *Two Stories*. Further, the only writer of whom Woolf ever felt jealous was a short story writer,

²⁸ See Elizabeth Bowen, 'The Faber Book of Modern Short Stories' in *Collected Impressions* (London: Longmans Green and Co., 1950), pp. 38-46. Hereafter referred to as *CI* with further references given after quotations in the text.

²⁹ Heather Bryant Jordan, *How Will the Heart Endure: Elizabeth Bowen and the Landscape of War* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1992), p. 131.

³⁰ Gerri Kimber, *Katherine Mansfield – The Early Years* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), p. 45.

³¹ Nena Škrbic, 'A sense of freedom: a study of Virginia Woolf's short fiction' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Hull, 2000), p. 2.

Mansfield.³² Arguably, the short story was what made Woolf a modernist – it was in the writing of ‘The Mark on the Wall’ that she found a suitably experimental voice for her fast-roving meditations. Yet Woolf often viewed her own short fiction with an excess of diffidence, describing her stories as mere ‘short things’.³³ When her writing is rationed by well-meaning doctors, she continues to produce short stories on the side, as if they don’t properly constitute literature.³⁴ Woolf spoke derogatively of accomplished stories such as ‘Kew Gardens’ and ‘The Mark on the Wall’, describing the former as ‘vague’, ‘slight and short’ and finding ‘a good deal of fault’ (*D* 1, 271) with the latter, despite the praise each received. When in 1921 the sales of *Monday or Tuesday* picked up and broke previous records, the stories themselves praised highly by Lytton Strachey and Roger Fry, Woolf found herself ‘not nearly so pleased as [she] was depressed’ (*D* 2, 109) when it was first published, suggesting a negative economy of appraisal which could be read as generic.³⁵ She alludes to historical prejudice towards the short story, or at least the experimentalism it encourages, when she reflects the following year that *The Voyage Out* is now held in high critical esteem and that if ‘they say the same of N. and D. [*Night and Day*] in 7 years I shall be content; but I must wait 14 for anyone to take Monday or Tuesday to heart’ (*D* 2, 169).

Yet perhaps precisely because it was a hobby rather than a serious enterprise, the short story form brought to Woolf the unfettered enjoyment of the amateur enthusiast. In a letter to Ethel Smyth, she describes the ease with which ‘The Mark on the Wall’ came to her after wrestling with *Night and Day*: ‘I shall never forget the day I wrote [it] – all in a flash, as if flying, after being kept stone breaking for months’ (*L* 4, 231). Although, as Hermione Lee indicates, this is a conflated memory – the novel was published before the short piece was written – the

³² When Mansfield died, Woolf described her work as ‘the only writing I have ever been jealous of’ (*D* 2, 227, entry of 16 January 1923). Woolf also observed in a diary entry of 28 January 1923 that she would need to go on writing ‘but into emptiness’ as there was now ‘no competitor’ (*D* 2, 228).

³³ Virginia Woolf, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann Banks, 6 vols (New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977-82), 2, p. 167. Hereafter referred to as *L* followed by volume and page number, with further references given after quotations in the text. Later that month, Virginia wrote similarly to her sister, Vanessa: ‘it makes all the difference writing anything one likes, and not for an Editor’ (*L* 2, 169).

³⁴ See the second chapter of this thesis for further discussion of this issue.

³⁵ Although it should be noted that Woolf was generally acutely sensitive to the public reception of *all* her published works.

description conveys Woolf's conception of the form as enabling unchecked fluidity and autonomy.³⁶ Short fiction was for Woolf an amateur, armchair category of literature derived from the same freedoms it documents and promotes. In 1925, Woolf would similarly write of her desire 'to dig deep down into [her] new stories, without having a looking glass flashed in [her] eyes' (*D* 3, 9) – to be left alone to her own devices without external criticism or self-regulation. For Woolf, short fiction affords a uniquely protected and private space, below the radar: a place of experiment where anything goes. Bowen treated the form similarly – in contrast to the novel, which she treated more seriously, it allowed her to give free rein to her idiosyncrasies, to write of ghosts and murders if she so wished. She described the form as working in opposition to the 'rational behaviour and social portraiture' which she felt the novel called for instead allowing for 'what is crazy about humanity'.³⁷

In her essay 'The Short Story – The Long and the Short of It', Mary Louise Pratt argues that the traditional conception of the short story as an experimental genre stems from its relation to the professional, established sphere of the novel. The story, she argues, is seen always in relation to 'the ("full-fledged") novel', and used as a 'controlled lab for preliminary testing of devices before their release into the world at large'.³⁸ She also posits the short story as a type of 'craft', rather than 'art' – something which can therefore never be recognised as internal to the realm of aesthetics.³⁹ The customary conception of the genre that Pratt describes is pertinent to the canonical view of Woolf's work, which clearly privileges the novel (as, arguably, Woolf did herself). When Alexandra Harris writes 'Virginia Woolf's short stories look to have opened a new chapter in the history of literature', it is *Jacob's Room*, rather than the short fiction, to which she refers.⁴⁰ Similarly, Julia Briggs views the short fiction as a precursor to *future* successes, observing that the short story 'remained for Woolf a place for experiment and an occasion for

³⁶ Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, p. 376.

³⁷ Elizabeth Bowen, *The Mulberry Tree*, ed. by Hermione Lee (London: Vintage, 1999), p. 130. Hereafter referred to as *MT* with further references given after quotations in the text.

³⁸ Pratt, p. 97.

³⁹ Pratt, p. 110.

⁴⁰ Harris, p. 70. Woolf would also likely have agreed with Harris, conceiving of *Jacob's Room* in her diary as 'The Mark on the Wall', 'An Unwritten Novel' and 'Kew Gardens' 'taking hands and dancing in unity' (*D* 2, 14) to become more than the sum of these individual parts.

learning' and stating explicitly that 'the value was primarily for her, rather than her readers'.⁴¹ In removing the reader from the textual equation, Briggs casts Woolf the short fiction writer as decidedly amateur, still practising at home before more public excursions. Leonard Woolf would also corroborate this view of Woolf's short fiction as sub-professional by stating in his introduction to *A Haunted House and Other Short Stories* that whenever an idea for a short story occurred to Woolf, she would 'sketch it out in a very rough form and then [...] put it away in a drawer', to later rescue the sketch and 'rewrite it, sometimes a great many times', suggesting short fiction as work which is never quite finished or presentable.⁴² Dominic Head too describes Woolf's short fiction as having 'an incomplete, investigative "workshop" quality' about it, viewing the experimentalism of the stories in the scientific rather than artistic sense of the term – as products not tested or finalised.⁴³ This thesis will treat stories as experimental and workshop-like without the corollary suggestion that they are either sub-literary or a rehearsal for longer fiction.

Modernist literature, everyday things

Following the lead of cultural studies which burgeoned from the 1960s onward, modernist studies has taken a growing interest in the everyday, which this thesis shares in its concern with quotidian objects. Books such as Bryony Randall's *Modernism, Daily Time and Everyday Life* (2007), Liesl Olson's *Modernism and the Ordinary* (2009) and Lorraine Sim's *Virginia Woolf: The Patterns of Ordinary Experience* (2010) evidence acceptance of the ordinary as a category integral to modernism, in opposition to Terry Eagleton's view of the modernist artwork as aloof and removed from the everyday, a luxury commodity: the 'impenetrable modernist artefact' that is 'autonomous, self-regarding [...] in all its isolated splendour'.⁴⁴ Accordingly, in his introduction

⁴¹ Julia Briggs, *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life* (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 224.

⁴² Leonard Woolf, 'Foreword' in Virginia Woolf, *A Haunted House and Other Short Stories* (London: Triad Grafton, 1985), pp. 7-8 (p. 7).

⁴³ Head, p. 108. Importantly though, Head does not locate this quality as one intrinsic to the genre, contrasting Woolf with Mansfield whom he considers 'displays a greater control' and whose 'major innovations in the genre, far from being experimental, display an accomplishment unsurpassed by other modernist writers' (ibid.) Similar criticisms were levelled at some of the products produced by the Omega Workshops, with Woolf acknowledging: 'Sometimes there were failures. Cracks appeared. Legs came off. Varnish ran.' Virginia Woolf, *Roger Fry* (London: Vintage, 2003), p. 196.

⁴⁴ Terry Eagleton, 'Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism', *New Left Review*, 1.152 (Jul-Aug 1985), 60-73 (p. 67).

to the special edition of *Modernist Cultures* dedicated to modernism and the everyday, Scott McCracken writes of modernism's 'continual, almost anxious, perhaps neurotic, return to the everyday' as constituting 'one of its most productive and creative concerns'.⁴⁵

Bill Brown has been central to moving modernist research from the broad category of the everyday towards the specifically material, or thingly. Alighting on Francis Ponge, Henry James, Aleksandr Rodchenko, André Breton, Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp through its course, his influential essay 'Thing Theory' (2001) has a distinctly modernist flavour.⁴⁶ In a further essay, first published as an article then included as a chapter in his 2015 book, *Other Things*, under the title of 'The Secret Life of Things (Virginia Woolf)', Brown discusses Woolf's story 'Solid Objects' (1920) at length, a text which will also be analysed in the second chapter of this thesis. In this essay, Brown detects a unique relation between materiality and the modernist story, observing that in Woolf's stories things seems to propel the work, with 'material objects' becoming 'a condition of narratability'.⁴⁷

Brown was not the first to notice a correlation between stories and objects. In his introduction to *Writing Degree Zero* (1953), Roland Barthes traces the trajectory of literature towards thingliness, charging Flaubert with 'finally establish[ing] Literature as an object'.⁴⁸ Barthes argues that in Flaubert's work, 'form became the end-product of craftsmanship, like a piece of pottery or a jewel'.⁴⁹ Here, Barthes relies on similar terminology employed in Walter Benjamin's 'The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov' (1936), in which he characterises storytelling as an artisanal craft, such as that of the potter or the gem-cutter, crafts which have diminished since the industrial revolution. Benjamin argues that the story passes on accrued wisdom in a way which the data-laden novel cannot, positing in the essay's final paragraphs that the relationship of the storyteller to human life is 'a craftsman's relationship',

⁴⁵ Scott McCracken, 'Editor's Introduction: Modernism and the Everyday', *Modernist Cultures*, 2.1 (May 2006), 1-5 (p. 4).

⁴⁶ Bill Brown, 'Thing Theory', *Critical Inquiry*, 28.1 (Autumn 2001), 1-22.

⁴⁷ Bill Brown, 'The Secret Life of Things (Virginia Woolf)', in *Other Things* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2015), pp. 49-77 (p. 65).

⁴⁸ Roland Barthes, 'Introduction', in *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012), pp. 1-6 (p. 4).

⁴⁹ Ibid.

their task to ‘fashion the raw material of experience [...] in a solid, useful, and unique way’.⁵⁰ I will here argue for Bowen, Mansfield and Woolf as just such craftspersons in conceiving of their stories not only as containing crafted objects but also functioning like those objects. If storytelling had become divorced from its roots in 1936 as Benjamin suggested, this thesis functions as a counter-assertion,⁵¹ showing how modernist stories pay homage to the artisanal craft of storytelling, ‘manifest[ing] their origins in cultures dedicated to artisanal repetition’.⁵² This latter quotation is from Marina Warner’s chapter on ‘The Thing-World of the *Arabian Nights*’. In that collection of stories which all others followed, Warner argues that an ‘Egyptian legacy of magic activates the treasures which fill the pages: rings, jewels, stones, lamps, sofas and couches, statues, toys, weapons and other devices possess talismanic powers’.⁵³ This thesis argues that the legacy of the *Arabian Nights* stories persists in modernist literature, where ordinary objects still possess a mesmeric power. Viktor Shklovsky wrote of how familiarisation with the everyday has the capacity to ‘devour[...] work, clothes, furniture, one’s wife and the fear of war’, whereas art serves as a counterforce to ‘recover the sensation of life’, to famously ‘make the stone *stony*’.⁵⁴ Specifically looking at food, furniture and clothing, this thesis will show how Mansfield, Woolf and Bowen recovered the sensation of the everyday by recreating its components with such vigour and dedication that form and content aligned – as Beckett would put it, where ‘form IS content, content IS form’, ‘not about something’ but ‘that thing itself’.⁵⁵ By positing the story as an everyday craft, contributed to by readers as much as writers, this research shows how modernist short fiction was shaped by and around the quotidian, constructed with the

⁵⁰ Walter Benjamin, ‘The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov’ in *Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), pp. 83–107 (p. 107). Hereafter referred to as *I*, followed by volume and page number, with further references given after quotations in the text.

⁵¹ The stories examined here pre- and post-date ‘The Storyteller’. In choosing a time frame for this research, I was primarily guided by my subject material – the objects with which each chapter is concerned – snacks, armchairs, hats and gloves. Thus, Mansfield’s later two collections are focused on (produced prior to 1922), in which she moves away from the saturated gluttony of her early work. With Woolf, I concentrate on those experimental stories produced between the creation of ‘The Mark on the Wall’ in 1917 and 1921, when she published her only collection of short fiction, *Monday or Tuesday*. While these stories of Mansfield and Woolf were written well before Benjamin’s 1936 essay, Bowen’s have a wide-ranging span, dating from the 1920s to 1952.

⁵² Marina Warner, *Stranger Magic: Charmed States and the Arabian Nights* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2001), p. 201.

⁵³ Warner, p. 200.

⁵⁴ Viktor Shklovsky, ‘Art as Technique’, in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, ed. by Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 15–21 (p. 16).

⁵⁵ Samuel Beckett, ‘Dante...Bruno. Vico...Joyce’ in *I Can’t Go On, I’ll Go On, A Selection from Samuel Beckett’s Work*, ed. and introduced by Richard W. Seaver (New York: Grove Press, 1976), p. 117.

craftsperson's objective of enabling, ameliorating and enriching day-to-day life.

As if in support of such an argument, Lorna Sage appositely describes Mansfield's stories as 'intensely crafted and evocative objects-on-the-page'.⁵⁶ Clare Hanson too observes that 'short stories often do not "tell" us things, [...] they "are" things'.⁵⁷ Arthur W. Frank draws a similar comparison between stories and solid objects, writing 'stories not only work with objects; stories take the form of objects'.⁵⁸ Susan Stewart further argues that books which feature 'minute descriptions of the material world' tend to 'draw attention to the book as object'.⁵⁹ This thesis will argue the reduced scope of the short fiction form accentuates thingliness, where objects tend to loom and cast long shadows. Peter Schwenger suggests another line of argument for this affiliation between object and story when he observes that 'in the end, at its moment of ending, every narrative is stilled in a kind of objecthood', because the proliferation of endings the reader of short fiction is subjected to is far greater than the reader of the novel.⁶⁰ When Simone de Beauvoir observed that '[r]eading alone creates new and lasting relationships between things and myself', she refers to the important interrelationship between things and reading with which this thesis is also concerned.⁶¹

There may be a further reason for short fiction's close relationship with the everyday. If for 'both those who produce and those who consume it', art 'staves off boredom – itself an emotion that evolved to reactivate curiosity – and counters habituation', short fiction's brevity enables the curiosity it stimulates to be redirected towards the reader's everyday surroundings which are newly observed as defamiliarised.⁶² Certain psychologists have argued for the self-altering quality of reading which borders on the hypnotic, stating that it fosters an altered sense of reality which may lead to fixation on animate or inanimate objects that 'acquire an importance

⁵⁶ Lorna Sage, *Moments of Truth: Twelve Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (London: Fourth Estate, 2002), p. 53.

⁵⁷ Hanson, *Re-reading the Short Story*, p. 28.

⁵⁸ Arthur W. Frank, *Letting Stories Breathe: A Socio-Narratology* (Chicago & London: Chicago University Press, 2010), p. 43.

⁵⁹ Stewart, p. 29.

⁶⁰ Peter Schwenger, *The Tears of Things: Melancholy and Physical Objects* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minneapolis Press, 2006), p.115.

⁶¹ Simone de Beauvoir, *All Said and Done*, trans. by Patrick O'Brian (London: Penguin, 1988), p. 155.

⁶² Brian Boyd, *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition, and Fiction* (Cambridge, Mass., London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 91.

and intimacy normally reserved for the self'.⁶³ The relationship between reading and phenomenology, especially pronounced in Woolf's experimental stories, is likely therefore stronger than mere resonance between broadly similar interpretative acts. Short does not always equate to quick or easy, especially when modernist stories such as Woolf's cover so much ground and make considerable demands of the reader with their 'long fluid sentences endlessly bifurcating, the host of semi-colons leading down the garden path' and continual 'refusal to close off possibilities; or to follow a straight line'.⁶⁴ The stories of Bowen, Mansfield and Woolf demand what Roger Chartier has termed 'intensive' rather than 'extensive' modes of reading – with 'intensive' reading applying 'only to a few texts and sustained by concentrated and memorable experience' in contrast with 'extensive' reading: 'consuming many texts, passing without constraint from one to another, granting little consecration (*sacralité*) to the object read'.⁶⁵ Yet, concurring with Barthes' idea of 'writing reading', research has shown that the more difficult a text is, the more likely we are to leave it⁶⁶ – to gaze at the mantelpiece, to fiddle with a glove nearby or bite on an apple.⁶⁷ In 'How Should One Read a Book?' Woolf describes the immense pleasure of 'rubbish-reading' with literature that may not be considered of artistic merit nonetheless stimulating creativity, with reading interspersed by daydreaming and staring out through windows.⁶⁸ The craft of the short story anticipates, welcomes and reflects such everyday interruption as part of its elastic ergonomics which actively encourage thinking outside of it. Although I have suggested above that these modernist short stories are not 'quick or easy', this thesis does not argue that the effortful interaction which their reading necessitates renders them inaccessible or remote. Instead, it makes a case for the form as democratically accessible and requiring little more than willing and creative engagement from its readers.

⁶³ Victor Nell, *Lost in a Book: The Psychology of Reading for Pleasure* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), p. 275.

⁶⁴ Helen Simpson, 'Introduction', in *A Haunted House: The Complete Shorter Fiction*, ed. by Susan Dick (London: Vintage, 2003), p. viii. Hereafter referred to as *HH* followed by page number, with further references given after quotations in the text.

⁶⁵ Roger Chartier, 'Labourers and Voyagers: From the Text to the Reader', in *Readers and Reading*, ed. by Andrew Bennett (London: Longman, 1995), pp. 132-149 (p. 143).

⁶⁶ This phenomenon is exemplified by the character John in Woolf's 'Solid Objects' whose found objects arranged upon the mantelpiece serve as 'a natural stopping place for [his] eyes when they wandered from a book' (*HH* 98).

⁶⁷ Nell has observed that the 'more effortful the reading task' is, the 'less we are able to resist distractions and the more capacity we have available for other tasks – such as listening to the birds in the trees or other forms of woolgathering'. Nell, p. 74.

⁶⁸ Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader*, 2 vols (London: Vintage, 2003), 2, p. 263.

In its exploration of the reflective activity which these stories encourage, this thesis argues for the importance of the modernist short story as an instrument for enabling philosophical realisation in its readers. Working against conceptions of modernism as an inaccessible enterprise, and of the novel as the most apt literary vehicle for ideas, it argues for the modernist short story as a philosophical form which encourages revelatory reading in everyday contexts. The first chapter conceives of Katherine Mansfield's short fiction as a type of literary snack: accessible, quickly consumed and working against restrictive traditions, considering moments of snacking in Mansfield's short fiction as encapsulating Benjamin's idea of *Jetztzeit*. *Jetztzeit* is time that is poised and bursting with revolutionary potential: a moment in which past, present and future explosively converge and which must be seized or its radical and future-shaping capacities left to dwindle and pass. I will argue that in her stories, Mansfield not only allows her characters to access such pivotal moments where the 'presence of the now' can be experienced, but also offers them up in turn to her readers. The second chapter contemplates the armchair in Virginia Woolf's short stories, examining how the armchair functions as both noun and adjective. It will employ Heideggerian phenomenology, which conceives of engagement with the world as necessitated by a questioning mode of being, to throw light on Woolf's promotion of amateurism and democratisation, suggesting both the armchair and story as routes to authentic being. Finally, exploring Elizabeth Bowen's short fiction, the third chapter of this thesis explores peripheral detail as encapsulated in hats and gloves as philosophical expression of Bowen's emphasis on the eccentric. Using Jacques Derrida's notion of the parergon from *The Truth in Painting* as a framework for exploring Bowen's notions of eccentric aesthetics, this chapter establishes peripherality in Bowen's stories as a site of subversive creativity which disrupts conventional reading practices. It will conceive of her work as giving voice to the marginal while offering eccentric objects as clues which lead the reader away from direct, forensic meanings towards more complex, poetical truths. By conceptualising reading as embodying *Jetztzeit* via the snack, democratising phenomenology via the armchair and eccentric poetics via hats and gloves, each chapter will show the influence of each type of object on the production and consumption of the short story.

While individual chapters will contain author-specific literature reviews, there is one thesis which deserves mention here, as it considers all three of the authors examined by this thesis in the context of materialism, demonstrating the broad relevance of the subject. Elisabeth Vialle's 1995 thesis, 'L'objet dans la littérature britannique de l'entre-deux-guerres : Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield et Elisabeth Bowen' is closely aligned with the concerns of this study, with its concentration on objects and its identical choice of authors. Vialle suggests that in the 1920s and '30s, 'an imaginary and symbolic structure' comes to be 'built around objects',⁶⁹ arguing convincingly that objects in the writing of these authors 'participate in the elaboration of a "pictorial writing" (objects becoming frames, canvasses, but also objects of representation – portraits, still lives...)' as well as participating in a "theatrical writing" in which objects are elements of the setting, props and true "actors" in the narrative'.⁷⁰ As previously mentioned, this thesis will also think about objects within texts, as well as texts as objects, sharing Vialle's bi-directional focus. Vialle does not limit the types of objects she analyses, which range from doors to crockery to lamps, and as such, the thesis functions as a broad survey of materiality, also taking in photography, symbolism, the Bloomsbury Group and the painterly effects of impressionism and cubism. Vialle's concern with aesthetics and the overarching importance of the object is shared by this thesis, although the more narrowed focus of this study and its overarching focus on the short story genre means that it nonetheless covers quite separate territory.

Snacks, armchairs, hats and gloves

Correlating with the canonical view of short fiction itself, the things with which this thesis is concerned – snack food, armchairs, hats and gloves – carry with them an association of the unimportant and frivolous. Steven Connor, in his book *Paraphernalia: The Curious Lives of Magical*

⁶⁹ Elisabeth Vialle, 'L'objet dans la littérature britannique de l'entre-deux-guerres : Virginia Woolf, Katherine Mansfield et Elisabeth Bowen' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle (Paris), 1995), p. 3.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

Things, observes that in Roman Law *parapherna* were ‘those items of property which were held by a wife over and above the items in her dowry’, these items would remain her own, typically, consisting of ‘clothing, jewellery, and even furniture’.⁷¹ As we will see in the first chapter on Mansfield, snack food is similarly associated with the feminine as food which was available to women otherwise engaged in the preparation of meals for others. Connor goes on to note that this ‘association with women’s personal things means that “paraphernalia” unfortunately connotes the incidental and the accessory, with a suggestion of the trivial’.⁷² Connor suggests a gender-bound prejudice here as Virginia Woolf did in *A Room of One’s Own*, observing how it is the ‘masculine values that prevail’, meaning that football and sport are considered important and serious subjects, while clothes and fashion are dismissed as trivial.⁷³ These values, Woolf argues, are ‘inevitably transferred from life to fiction’, which is one of the points this thesis will raise in relation to the way in which short fiction has been evaluated by the canon and even (in the case of both Woolf and Mansfield) by the writers who produced it.⁷⁴ If short fiction is a ‘vehicle for different *kinds* of knowledge, knowledge which may be in some way at odds with the “story” of dominant culture’, I suggest that this knowledge is told through paraphernalia, with short fiction functioning as a type of literary rhopography.⁷⁵

Claire Drewery explains the critical neglect of the short story due to its liminality and resistance to categorisation, observing that this has enabled the form ‘to develop unhampered as a more unrestricted, experimental form than the conventional novel’.⁷⁶ Equally, it is the ideological under-evaluation of paraphernalia from which it draws its strengths. To be marginal and irrelevant is to be unobserved and unpatrolled, a libertarian state from which autonomy and experimentalism can flow. In writing about the diminutive, one might also assume a proportionate audience and respite from both scrutiny and precedent. My research aims at a refined exploration of the terrain where short fiction, literary modernism and the everyday object

⁷¹ Steven Connor, *Paraphernalia: The Curious Lives of Magical Things* (London: Profile Books, 2011), p. 11.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (London: Penguin, 2004), p. 85.

⁷⁴ Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, p. 86.

⁷⁵ Hanson, *Re-reading the Short Story*, p. 6.

⁷⁶ Claire Drewery, *Modernist Short Fiction by Women: The Liminal in Katherine Mansfield, Dorothy Richardson, May Sinclair and Virginia Woolf* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), p. 13.

meet and will argue that this nexus demonstrates a democratic space where a small-scaled, experimental *écriture* was able to blossom without restraint in the hands of these female writers. Sheila Rowbotham observes how, at the end of the nineteenth-century, women were beginning to question ‘not simply how life might be lived but, more existentially, how they might *be*’ – a theme which inflects these stories from the twentieth-century.⁷⁷ In looking at modes of being alongside objects and reading, this thesis will also suggest ways in which reading can change lives, affecting the way everyday life is experienced.

Yet why these specific objects: snacks, armchairs, hats and gloves? In *The Second Sex* (1949), Beauvoir argues that woman’s capacity for critical thought has been nullified by her domestic slavery, her world defined by cooking, cleaning and domestic items, to the extent that time is defined as a commodity of ‘deterioration’ which ‘wears out furniture and clothes’.⁷⁸ The snack, the armchair and accessory all connote this realm of the feminine and the domestic – what Beauvoir perceives as the frivolous. Beauvoir views the female obsession with the small things of life as a result of her oppression and her limited range: ‘Her frivolity has the same cause as her “sordid materialism”; she considers little things important for lack of any access to great things’.⁷⁹ Beauvoir viewed short fiction in a similarly dismissive light, writing of her annoyance that a visitor to her home had eyed the papers piled on her desk to advise her that she should hone her technique by writing short stories before attempting a novel. Indignantly determined that she would not do this, Beauvoir explained in her memoir: ‘There was no question of my scribbling little anecdotes; I wanted my book to be a totality’.⁸⁰ These attitudes run in contradistinction to Woolf’s belief, voiced in ‘Modern Fiction’ (1925) that bigger does not equate to better: ‘Let us not take for granted that life exists more fully in that which is commonly thought big than in what is commonly thought small.’⁸¹ The use of snacks, armchairs, hats and gloves in the work of Mansfield, Woolf and Bowen amounts to a reappropriation and subversion of the traditional domestic sphere, each showing ways of thinking against and outside of

⁷⁷ Sheila Rowbotham, *Dreamers of a New Day: Women who Invented the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 2011), p. 37.

⁷⁸ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, ed. and trans. by H. M. Parshley (London: Everyman’s Library, 1993), p. 630.

⁷⁹ Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p. 635.

⁸⁰ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, trans. by Peter Green (London: Penguin, 1965), p. 149.

⁸¹ Woolf, *The Common Reader*, 1, p. 150.

ideological norms and the entrapment of which Beauvoir writes. In short, these writers exploit the frivolity to which Beauvoir refers but use it to their own ends, finding the possibility for scope, extension and meaning in the things of everyday life and casting doubt on the existence of ‘great things’ beyond these.

Derrida’s *The Truth in Painting* (1987) is closer to the spirit of this study than *The Second Sex*. Although I will only draw on Derrida’s work extensively in analysis of the accessory in the stories of Bowen, his philosophy of the parergon – that which comes beside or in addition to the main work (or ergon), something ‘extra, *exterior* to the proper field’ such as the statue’s robes or the painting’s frame – can equally be applied to the snack and the armchair.⁸² Derrida’s work reappraises and celebrates the work of the accessory or *bors-d’œuvre*, as does this thesis, conceiving of it as ambivalent, subversive and influential. As well as functioning as accessories to the practice of everyday life, the objects explored here (preserved within the parergal form of the short story) also work as accessories to the processes of reading and to thinking about reading. Importantly, I will argue, the particular ways of reading they model incite philosophical reflection and influence being – each testament to the potency of the parergon.

Derridean deconstructionism’s aim of undoing established hierarchies and championing that which is normally overlooked or dismissed clearly complements this research which reads the short story as an ‘underdog’ genre which challenges normative assumptions. As mentioned above, as well as analysing Bowen’s treatment of accessories with the help of Derrida, this thesis will also draw on the work of Benjamin in the chapter on Mansfield, and Martin Heidegger in consideration of Woolf. Individual chapters will provide longer justifications for these choices, but Benjamin and Heidegger also complement this project well as philosophers of the everyday. The overarching project of Heidegger’s *Being and Time* (1927) was to oppose the grand, abstract and rationalist philosophical frameworks that were so unsuited to the human condition through interrogation of the everyday human experience of being in the world, that which he termed *Dasein*. Benjamin too is a thinker preoccupied not with lofty, remote concepts, but with the

⁸² Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. by Geoff Bennington and Ian McLeod (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 56. Hereafter referred to as *TP* with further references given after quotations in the text. Italics here and in further references as in the text.

phenomena of everyday life – shopping arcades, walking, story-telling.⁸³ He was, in Esther Leslie's words, dedicated to 'decod[ing] the unapparent and everyday'.⁸⁴ Leslie also observes that Benjamin's work aimed at disseminating 'new and liberating modes of reading, thinking and acting'.⁸⁵ I argue here that the stories of Bowen, Mansfield and Woolf achieved similar outcomes, using the same materials – the stuff of everyday life, what Woolf called 'that precious stuff of which books are made [which] lies all about one, in drawing-rooms and kitchens where women live' (*HH* 69).

The original contribution to knowledge this thesis offers is in its triangular examination of form, object and reading, through which it finds a new niche in textual materialism. Analysis of these important, under-examined experimental short stories of the early twentieth-century via everyday objects illuminates the ways short fiction showed us how to read the world differently. Through its exploration of the reading practices modernist short fiction encourages, this thesis also shows how these stories embodied modern philosophies prior to their formal articulation, encouraging readers to arrive at moments of realisation in everyday contexts both on and beyond the page. Examining the intrinsic interrelation between stories and everyday objects, each fitting ergonomically around the other in terms of their production, consumption and contents, it calls for a reappraisal of the importance of the short fiction genre to the development of modernist aesthetics, as well as of its readers.

⁸³ As Peter Osborne observes: 'Everyday life flows through the whole of Benjamin's later writings'. Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 1995), p. 180.

⁸⁴ Esther Leslie, *Walter Benjamin* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007), p. 106.

⁸⁵ Leslie, p. 232.

Chapter 1: Snacks and Katherine Mansfield

‘The most magical objects of all [...] are those which we can actually incorporate and make part of ourselves, in the process effecting changes in them and in us.’

- Steven Connor, *Paraphernalia: The Curious Lives of Magical Things* (2011)¹

‘When I pass the apple stalls I cannot help stopping and staring until I feel that I, myself, am changing into an apple, too – and that at any moment I may produce an apple, miraculously, out of my own being like the conjuror produces the egg.’

- Katherine Mansfield, letter to Dorothy Brett (1917)²

Ali Smith summarises Mansfield’s work as comprising ‘stories whose sharpness of shape and [...] bite would change the form of the short story’.³ It is this literary bite and its effect on the short fiction form which this chapter will explore in its examination of Mansfield’s use of snack food as an ingredient in the creation of literature whose content assimilated with form. Instances of snacking in Mansfield’s stories nourish moments of creative, incorporative insight not only for their characters but also their readers, with reading becoming an active process of consumption and engagement with the external world. This chapter aims to show how the act of snacking creates what Walter Benjamin termed *Jetztzeit*, time that is ripe with the ‘presence of the now’ (I 252-3) and full of revolutionary possibility, something Mansfield herself experienced in the act of creation before passing it on in her fiction.

Mansfield’s prose is redolent and gastronomic. The prevalence of the alimentary in her work has been noted by critics before, for example, Diane McGee observes that an ‘emphasis on eating is a striking characteristic of Mansfield’s work’, with most of her stories including ‘at least a reference to some kind of meal, tea, or snack’.⁴ In a key letter of 11 October 1917 to the

¹ Connor, *Paraphernalia*, p. 198.

² Katherine Mansfield, *The Collected Letters of Katherine Mansfield*, ed. by Vincent O’Sullivan and Margaret Scott, 5 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984–2008), 1, p. 330. Hereafter referred to as *CL*, followed by volume and page number, with further references given after quotations in the text.

³ Ali Smith, *Artful* (London: Penguin, 2013), p. 137.

⁴ Diane McGee, *Writing the Meal: Dinner in the Fiction of Early Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (Buffalo, London and Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), p. 87.

painter Dorothy Brett, cited in the epigraph above, Mansfield set out her aesthetic recipe for such creation, describing the process thus: ‘at any moment I may produce an apple, miraculously, out of my own being like the conjuror produces the egg’ (*CL* 1, 330). The conjoining of the aesthetic, the instantaneous and the gustatory in this statement parallels the synthesis with which this thesis is also concerned. The axis between food and writing in Mansfield’s work is further exemplified by one of her most prized and faithful objects, a travelling fruit knife which she kept with her in her handbag wherever she went. This knife was used for its intended purpose, slicing fruit, as well as for sharpening pencils, particularly when travelling.⁵ Utilised equally for preparing snacks and preparing to write, signifying freedom and autonomy while connecting food and literature, the knife is a useful tool for considering Mansfield’s strongest stories, where creativity, liberty and incorporation commingle and coalesce.

In what follows I will set out the importance of food to Mansfield’s literature and explore the correlation between her complicated relationship with eating and her knotted affiliation with the short story form. My overarching concern will be with the ways of reading that Mansfield’s stories direct, with this chapter arguing that her fictional encapsulation of snacks (which I will show she re-creates, rather than simply depicts) instigates *Jetztzeit* and frames the reading process as an ‘epistemology based on lived immediacy’, where fast food, consumed and enjoyed in the moment, rapidly brings future energy, propelling the body and all its history from the present into an amended future.⁶ If to starve is ‘to renounce the past’, to snack is to embrace not only the moment, but also what becomes before and after in a convergence which opens up radical possibilities.⁷

Benjamin’s moment of *Jetztzeit*, conceptualised in his ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’ (1940), is rich and poised, gathering up the energies of the past and present to take ‘the

⁵ The knife was given to Margaret Scott by Ida Baker, who remembered its habitual use in the note to Scott that accompanied it. Laurel Harris, Mary Morris and Joanna Woods, *The Material Mansfield – Traces of a Writer’s Life* (Auckland: Random House, 2008), p. 82.

⁶ Kate McLoughlin, ‘Moments of Insight in Long Novels by Henry James and Dorothy Richardson’, *Modernist Cultures*, 10.3 (2015), 299-315 (p. 301).

⁷ Maud Ellman, *The Hunger Artists: Starving, Writing and Imprisonment* (London: Virago, 1993), p. 10.

“tiger’s leap” into the future’.⁸ Mansfield’s short story, with its overwhelming emphasis on the moment and the presence of the now which it embodies, was ideal for the demonstration of *Jetztzeit*. As Ian Buchanan points out, *Jetztzeit* is not ‘naturally occurring’ – instead it ‘takes the intervention of the artist or revolutionary to produce it by “blasting” it free from the ceaseless flow in which it would otherwise be trapped’.⁹ I argue here that fictional snacks reveal Mansfield’s revolutionary aesthetic by which she ‘blasted’ moments free in her texts to produce reaching effects on readers. If, as Benjamin argues in ‘The Storyteller’, a story does not ‘expend itself’ but instead ‘preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time’ (I 90), we can conceive of this dynamic release as the re-creation of *Jetztzeit* which is reactivated through the experience of reading. This chapter will explore Mansfield’s ambivalent attitudes to both food and the short story as form to argue that she reached resolution in her literature through the ‘snack’, demonstrating the ways in which her most sophisticated stories both contain (in their subject matter) and enact (through their elliptical short form) ‘snacking’. It will show that snacking is used as a way to negotiate personal and literary freedoms in defiance of convention, questioning boundaries via *Jetztzeit*, and working against the restriction of the endless, Victorian many-coursed meal and novel, in deference to the modernist ambition to make it new.

By ‘snacks’, I mean small portions of food – fruit, cake, eggs, bread, for example – generally eaten in moments of personal freedom and engagement. Almost all of the snacks considered here are consumed in an outdoor setting, complementing the snack’s outsider status. Where snacks are consumed in more traditional settings indoors, they are eaten in subversive circumstances, without due regard to expectation or politeness. Etiquette, which relies on backward-facing tradition, is jettisoned in these stories in preference for engagement with the present instant. Benjamin’s concept of *Jetztzeit* relied on the embracing of the moment that snacking also required: the moment that is rich, ripe, and capable of changing the course of

⁸ Ian Buchanan, *Oxford Dictionary of Critical Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 272. While in the ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, the tiger’s leap Benjamin describes is ‘into the past’ (I 253), here we will concentrate on the forward leap into the future which distinguishes Mansfield’s incarnation of *Jetztzeit*.

⁹ Ibid.

history if properly seized. It is an instant not only of intense communion with the present tense, but also of mingled, fizzing temporal diversity, in which ‘time stands still’ (*I* 254) to allow past and future to converge explosively in the present moment.

Using Benjamin’s theory as a framework, I will argue that snacking allows both readers and characters to glimpse the revolutionary possibilities of their own futures. These glimpses enable a perceptual and temporal range which can free individuals of the rigid boundaries that governed the society Mansfield’s stories describe. As McGee observes, the unstructured approach to meal taking apparent in Mansfield’s later work evidences a ‘possible release – for both men and women – not only from the entrenched rituals of the Victorian dinner table, but from the social structures implied and reinforced by such rituals’, also allowing for a ‘potential liberation from gender roles’ and a ‘loosening of class distinctions’.¹⁰ Such miniature but meaningful revolutions are enabled by *Jetztzeit*, moments in which the full potential of the future tense might be seized, however understated their contexts might appear.

Mansfield’s dedication to the everyday in prose via the alimentary was not without its risks. As she wrote to William Gerhardt in November 1921:

You know – if I may speak in confidence – I shall not be ‘fashionable’ for long. They will find me out; they will be disgusted; they will shiver in dismay. I like such awfully unfashionable things – and people – I like sitting on doorsteps, & talking to the old woman who brings quinces, & going for picnics in a jolting little waggon [...] But you see I am not a high brow. Sunday lunches and very intricate conversations on Sex and that ‘fatigue’ which is so essential and that awful ‘brightness’ which is even more essential – these things I flee from. (*CL* 4, 323)

Picnics, like short stories, were neither fashionable nor entirely traditional, yet Mansfield dedicated herself to them and their like nonetheless. Evading both the stodginess of tradition (as epitomised by Sunday lunch) and the artifice of modishness,¹¹ Mansfield’s stories navigate

¹⁰ McGee, p. 88.

¹¹ Mansfield’s biting story ‘Sunday Lunch’, published in *Rhythm* magazine in 1912, while not discussed in this chapter, satirises both Sunday lunch and empty rhetoric. I discuss this story in view of Mansfield’s colonial attack on

between the two to encapsulate moments simultaneously old and new, where ‘brevity meets longevity’ – a temporal ambivalence which we will see is well suited to *Jetztzeit*.¹² In Mansfield’s stories, the act of snacking deliberately counteracts the outward display inherent to the fashionable circles she resisted by privileging actual interaction over superficial and feigned dilettantism. Acknowledging her quotidian subject matter as likely to limit her perceived intellectual reach (‘I am not a high brow’), Mansfield pledged herself to creating something more tangible and ‘real’, making it possible for her readers to ingest her stories and be changed by them.

William Boyd, in his preface to a recent edition of ‘Prelude’, puts the uniqueness of the tone of Mansfield’s prose down to a ‘sense of controlled delirium: a combination of [James] Joyce’s idea of the epiphanic moment with something more transcendent and passion-filled’.¹³ In this chapter, I will suggest that this ‘something’ is *Jetztzeit*, which enables transformational moments which are as incorporative as transcendent. Stories are ideally placed to capture not only *Jetztzeit* but the ‘single gustatory experience’ which enables it, utilising the moment which is the temporal habitat of the short story genre.¹⁴ As Nadine Gordimer has observed: ‘Short story writers live by the flash; theirs is the art of the only thing one can be sure of – the present moment’.¹⁵ Both the snack and the short story are ephemeral, existing in the present moment, yet also allowing insights which encompass the past and future. The evanescent possibilities they offer up may be grasped, tasted, or left to pass. Reading becomes an act that involves immersive, direct experience – like eating, it is an activity that is vital, of the moment and, like *Jetztzeit*, one full of revisionist potential.

In what follows, I will set out some biographical context for Mansfield’s relationship

the metropolitan elite in the following article: Aimee Gasston, ‘Katherine Mansfield, Cannibal’ in *Katherine Mansfield and the (Post)colonial*, ed. by Gerri Kimber, Delia da Sousa Correa and Janet Wilson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), pp. 15-28.

¹² Ali Smith, ‘Introduction’, in Katherine Mansfield, *The Collected Stories* (London: Penguin, 2007), pp. v-xxx (p. xxviii).

¹³ William Boyd, ‘Foreword’, in Katherine Mansfield, *Prelude* (London: Hesperus Press, 2005), . vii-x (p. ix).

¹⁴ Nicola Perullo, *Taste as Experience: The Philosophy and Aesthetics of Food* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), p. 9.

¹⁵ Nadine Gordimer, *Telling Times: Writing and Living 1950-2008* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011), p. 170. Gordimer elaborates that short story writers aim at recreating a ‘discrete moment of truth’, ‘not *the* moment of truth, because the short story does not deal in cumulatives’ (ibid.)

with food before exploring the interplay between eating and reading. The literature review will precede analysis of the connection between illicit snacks and stories by way of a dream encounter between Mansfield and Oscar Wilde. I will then set out those wider historical and cultural contexts which evidence the resonance between the short story and snack food beyond Mansfield's work. The chapter will then go on to examine the final two of the three collections which Mansfield published during her lifetime: *Bliss* (1920) and *The Garden Party* (1922). By exploring these collections, I will show Mansfield's developing aesthetic and increasing production of an incorporative literature whose consumption would involve a type of reading closely aligned to the act of eating itself, both containing and invoking the moment of insight experienced in *Jetztzeit*.



Figure 1: *The Snack Bar*, 1930, Edward Burra (1905-1976). Photo credit: ©Tate, London 2016.

Hors-d'oeuvres: the life outside the work

Mansfield grew up in two separate houses on Tinakori Road in the suburbs of Wellington, New Zealand, where she would come to set stories such as 'The Garden Party' and 'Prelude'. The word 'Tinakori' itself denotes hunger; it derives from the cries of the Māori workmen who built the road and were forced to work through meal-times and means 'unsatisfied' or 'meal-less'.¹⁶ By contrast, it seems Mansfield herself was rarely hungry as a child – Anthony Alpers describes her as having 'grown fat [...] moody and resentful' by the age of six, an impression which family photographs corroborate, with the child Mansfield (then Kathleen Beauchamp) captured as both serious and plump.¹⁷ She would look back on such photographs to describe herself drily as the 'Fat Girl from Fielding' with curls like 'luscious fat sausages' and implore 'why wasn't I given lean meat & dry toast' (*CL* 4, 266)?

In 1898, age ten, Mansfield was greeted by her mother after a long absence with the words: 'Well, Kathleen... I see you are as fat as ever'. Mansfield's fierce reaction to this was documented by her friend: with eyes 'flash[ing]', face 'flush[ed] with anger', she turned away with 'a toss of her ringlets'.¹⁸ However steely her defiance, it would have been difficult for this denunciation not to have marked the young Mansfield, whom Alpers asserts was already conscious of feeling less loved than her siblings,¹⁹ and she would later be renounced more officially when her mother wrote her out of her will in 1909.²⁰ The biographical material that details Mansfield's early years document many similar incidents, to such extent that one can only assume that they were manifold: local children would shout over the fence at her: 'Fatty! Fatty! Fatty!' while family members and associates recall the child Mansfield as "'dull", "slow and fat"', the 'last child in the world they ever expected to become a writer'.²²

As an adult, though, Mansfield metamorphosed, becoming lean and wiry though of diminutive height, her appearance likely prompting Woolf's assessment of her as 'of the cat kind'

¹⁶ John Middleton Murry and Ruth Elvish Mantz, *The Life of Katherine Mansfield* (London: Constable, 1933), p. 59.

¹⁷ Anthony Alpers, *Katherine Mansfield* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1954), p. 43.

¹⁸ Claire Tomalin, *Katherine Mansfield: A Secret Life* (London: Penguin, 1988), p. 13.

¹⁹ Alpers, p. 43.

²⁰ Kathleen Jones, *Katherine Mansfield: The Story-Teller* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), p.109.

²¹ Murry and Mantz, p. 78.

²² Murry and Mantz, p. 107.

(D 2, 44). The First World War broke out when Mansfield was twenty-five, inducing scarce availability of food and a debate in the House of Commons in February 1915 on the motion '[t]hat this House regrets the rise in the price of the necessities of life, and calls upon the Government to use every endeavour to prevent a continuance of this unfortunate consequence of war, which is causing much hardship, especially to the poor'.²³ Mansfield herself wrote an amusing satire of a wartime public notice entitled 'Egg cards at Munich', which concluded that: 'People entitled to a medical certificate will be given special and slightly more complicated advantages'.²⁴ Accordingly, at this time, a pervasive focus upon food (the most necessary of 'necessaries') grew, its absence making it the stuff of persistent desire and, appropriately enough, fiction.

For Mansfield, the war brought with it personal tragedies; as well as the death of her younger brother Leslie in 1915, there was her diagnosis of tuberculosis a year before its end in 1917. This would change Mansfield's relationship with food dramatically; as Patricia Moran notes, 'her emaciation required an obsessive attention to diet'.²⁵ Writing to her mother about her illness at the beginning of 1918, Mansfield perversely sought approval for the ravages it had brought: 'Farewell to my portliness, for I who weighed 10 stone 3 at the age of fifteen now weigh 8 stone 6. At this rate I will be a midget tooth pick at fifty' (CL 2, 17).²⁶ Her letters to her husband John Middleton Murry, conversely, focus on the nutritious benefits of her meals, with comments such as the following of 22 January 1918 being typical: 'I set sail across tureens of nourishing soup stagger over soft mountains of pommes purées and melt in marmalades. So you see how well I am looking after MYself' (CL 2, 30). Another from the following month assures in childish tone: '*Im much better* [...] Im going slow & eating and trying to collect flesh at least – Im not a bit an ill girl –

²³ See Hansard, HC Deb 17 February 1915, vol 69, cols 1151-1224.
http://hansard.millbanksystems.com/commons/1915/feb/17/government-proposals#S5CV0069P0_19150217_HOC_320 [accessed 6 December 2015]

²⁴ *The Katherine Mansfield Notebooks*, ed. by Margaret Scott, 2 vols (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press: 2002), 2, p. 74. Hereafter referred to as N, followed by volume and page number, with further references given after quotations in the text.

²⁵ Patricia Moran, *Word of Mouth: Body Language in Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1996), p. 90.

²⁶ This extract is taken from a letter of 17 January 1918, Bandol.

just a slightly “faible” one’ (CL 2, 87). Laid up at the Isola Bella in Menton years later, Mansfield describes being ill in bed, poisoned by mosquito bites, while ‘soups & rice climb up the stairs’ (CL 4, 38), capable of activity where Mansfield is not.

Mansfield’s personal writings are stuffed with expressions of disgust relating to family, friends and food, with her father, her companion Ida Baker and Frieda Lawrence all coming under repeated fire.²⁷ Yet Mansfield’s own voraciousness remained undiminished; of her self-description sent to the editor of the *Native Companion*, that she was ‘poor – obscure – just eighteen years of age – with a rapacious appetite for everything and principles as light as [her] purse’ (CL 1, 26), her hunger would remain a relative constant. Her notebooks evidence literary endeavours interrupted by famished declarations such as: ‘Im so hungry, simply empty, and seeing in my minds eye just now a surloin of beef, well browned and with plenty of gravy and horseradish sauce and baked potatoes I nearly sobbed’ (N 2, 61), while the margins of her account books are peppered with playful gustatory poems.²⁸ In Mansfield’s life, as in her art, food had a saturating reach. These contexts trace a complex and mutable relationship with food that resonates through Mansfield’s stories. Food was a comforting, plentiful and desirable luxury during Kathleen Beauchamp’s affluent upbringing, yet one which had the propensity to make the overindulgent undesirable. During wartime, it would become a sparse commodity, reduced to its use value while provoking a richly imaginative fantasy life. And food, of course, was of even more acute importance to the consumptive patient whose weight loss would provoke a Sisyphean chase to intake ever-increasing volumes of nutrition, in an effort to prevent the disease enacting its sobriquet and devouring its patient entirely.

²⁷ For example, Mansfield wrote of her father in her notebook: ‘he watches me at meals, eats in the most abjectly blatantly vulgar manner that is describable’ (N 1, 79). She described Frieda Lawrence thus in a letter of 1915: ‘What a great fat sod she is – I should like to send a pig to kill her – a real filthy pig’ (CL 1, 183). Of Baker, Mansfield wrote: ‘[s]hes never content except when she can eat me’ (CL 2, 68). This is just one example (and a mild one) of a vast number of comments relating to Baker’s eating habits.

²⁸ One example transforms the ingredients listed in her account book to the following:

‘Tea, the chemist & marmalade
Far indeed today I’ve strayed
Through paths untrodden, shops unbeaten
And now the bloody stuff is eaten
The chemist the marmalade & tea
Lord how nice & cheap they be!’ (N 2, 266).

Literary fodder

Shortly after her diagnosis with tuberculosis in December 1917, perhaps when the illness was new enough to allow for frankness, Mansfield wrote to Murry: 'Although I am still snapping up fishes like a sea-lion, milk like a snake (or is that only a 'tale'?) and eggs, honey, creamb, butter and nourishing trimmings galore, they all seem to go to a sort of Dead Letter Office' (CL 1, 357). Here, an idea of consumption without satisfaction is introduced that is tied directly to writing and by mention of the dead letter office. Messages are sent but not read by their intended recipient, drawing on one of Mansfield's most fundamental concerns, that of failed communication, one also key to literary modernisms more widely.²⁹ Yet it also picks up a wider motif of hunger or absence which is intrinsic to the short fiction form, where we are always presented with less than the 'whole' story. Although this brevity should be viewed as an attribute, as Beckett would put it, a '[t]otal object, complete with missing parts, instead of partial object', the sense that the reader is being denied something is key to an understanding of the voraciousness the form induces.³⁰ This view of the story as something less than whole, customary to comparisons between the story and the novel,³¹ complements the etymology of the word 'snack' which also means a 'share, portion or part'.³²

As Mansfield would record in her notebook on 17 January 1922, a year before her death:

The truth is one can only get so much into a story; there is always a sacrifice. One has to leave out what one knows & longs to use. Why? I haven't any idea but there it is. It's always a kind of race, to get in as much as one can before it disappears. (N 2, 318)³³

²⁹ See Thomas Karshan, 'Notes on the Image of the Undelivered Letter', *Critical Quarterly* 53.2 (2011), 12-29.

³⁰ Samuel Beckett, 'Three Dialogues: Samuel Beckett and Georges Duthuit', *Proust and Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit* (London: John Calder, 1999), pp. 95-126 (p. 101). Hunter also draws on this quotation to saliently demonstrate the modernist approach to brevity in short fiction, which tended towards omission over contraction. See Hunter, *The Cambridge Companion to the Short Story in English*, pp. 84-93.

³¹ As Mary Louise Pratt notes, 'shortness cannot be an intrinsic property of anything, but occurs only relative to something else' (Pratt, p. 96).

³² OED, 'snack', n.2, 3.a.

³³ This description resonates powerfully with Mansfield's wider view of life threatened by mortality. As early as 1909 she wrote in a letter to an unidentified recipient, 'I do not think I shall live a very long time [...] that is the reason why I want to get so much into a short time [...] [and] [m]ake use of short daylight' (CL 1, 94).

There is a sense here that, like food, the stuff of fiction is subject to decay, that one must bottle and preserve it while one can – the act of creation for Mansfield relies on the moment of *Jetztzeit* which must be grasped with both hands or lost forever. Although this entry begins with a reprimand to Chekhov, stating that he ‘made a mistake in thinking that if he had had more time he would have written more fully, described the rain & the midwife & doctor having tea’ (N 2, 317-8), Mansfield’s description of the creative process uncannily recalls Chekhov’s own.³⁴ The ‘less is more’ approach to the short story complements its emphasis on the fleeting and the comestible, that quality which Mansfield’s stories particularly exploit. As Lorna Sage observed: ‘Mansfield’s work speaks about what’s irretrievably lost, material, mortal, unless it is turned to artifice’.³⁵ By dedicating her stories to gustatory moments, Mansfield managed to preserve the food her own body could not and, also, in allowing access to *Jetztzeit* through such moments, a temporal plenitude that countered the brevity of both human life and the story.

Food both fuels and influences work, whether the writer would wish it or not, as the following journal entry by Mansfield demonstrates: ‘Worked from 9.30 a.m. to a quarter after midnight only stopping to eat’ (N 2, 188). As Sarah Moss notes, ‘[f]ood “keeps body and soul together”, holds the mind that thinks and the body that works, and most importantly, writes, in the endlessly questionable relationship to which we are endlessly devoted’.³⁶ Filippo Tommaso Marinetti similarly proclaimed in *The Futurist Cookbook*, ‘men think dream [sic] and act according to what they eat and drink’,³⁷ while in *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf famously declared: ‘One cannot think well, love well, sleep well, if one has not dined well’.³⁸ It is clear that a room of one’s own is not the only necessary ingredient for artistic wellbeing. Given its significance, food in literature evidences an embroilment with sensuous materiality that works at a more profound level than pure motif. As Mansfield wrote in 1919: ‘I spring from [Life] and feed on it’ (CL 3, 107). Conversely, Woolf described Mansfield as creator rather than consumer in a diary entry of

³⁴ As cited in the introduction, Chekhov wrote in a letter of 22 January 1888: ‘But in short stories it is better to say not enough than to say too much, because, – because – I don’t know why!’ Chekhov, p. 198.

³⁵ Sage, p. 81.

³⁶ Sarah Moss, *Spilling the beans: Eating, cooking, reading and writing in British women’s fiction, 1770-1830* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), p. 5.

³⁷ Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *The Futurist Cookbook*, ed. by Lesley Chamberlain, trans. by Suzanne Brill (London: Penguin, 2014), p. 33.

³⁸ Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, p. 21.

12 November 1917, recording: ‘K.M. has broken with Ott. [Ottoline Morrell] in a letter which says “You shan’t play the Countess to my cook any more” or words to that effect’ (*D* 1, 75). Mansfield’s decision to act the cook to varying degrees in her writing was one which would profoundly influence its production, from the effortful many-coursed meals of the early stories, to the ingestive literary and philosophical freedom of the later stories in which, with supreme casualness, we witness her play the conjuror producing the egg.

One of Mansfield’s most quoted letters describes one of the two main ‘kick off[s]’ of her writing as being its function as ‘*a cry against corruption*’ (*CL* 2, 54). She arrives at this summary in a letter of 3 February 1918 by describing her ‘deep sense of hopelessness – of everything doomed to disaster – almost wilfully, stupidly – like the almond tree and “pas de nougat pour Noël”’ (*CL* 2, 54). This background suggests a further motivation for Mansfield’s inclusion of sweets and snacks within her stories as a site of resistance against a wider, trudging context of despair and corruption. In an early letter, dated 17 September 1908 to Garnet Trowell, Mansfield describes eating a ‘sandwitch’ on her own in the back of a hansom cab, a ‘tremendous two pen’north one – almost too big to hold with both hands’. A combination of ‘[s]tarlight and a glad heart and hunger and beef in hansoms’ leads her to the conclusion that she ‘could not be a suffragette’ as the ‘world was too full of laughter’ (*CL* 1, 60). Snacking on sandwiches under the stars embodies a commitment to joy and the fullness of life which could be eclipsed by the serious struggle of the campaign forgetting its libertarian roots. The snack is Mansfield’s own form of protest against corruption, a dissent against injustice, as we will see later in stories such as ‘The Garden Party’.

Snacking undermines the etiquette of meals and also destabilises the limiting and harmful traditions and roles which it can perpetuate. For example, Margaret Visser has detailed the way in which Victorian etiquette dictated that young women should not eat cheese or other savoury foods so that their breath was not displeasing for men.³⁹ One way Mansfield would articulate her

³⁹ Margaret Visser, *The Rituals of Dinner: The Origins, Evolution, Eccentricities and the Meaning of Table Manners* (London: Penguin, 1993), p. 279. Looking globally, she also notes that as late as the 1950s in the Pedi tribe of South Africa, women were only allowed to use porridge dishes when decided ‘no longer sufficiently respectable’ for the male members to use (*ibid.*).

own brand of feminism would be through her fictional portrayal of moments of insight similar to her experience in that hansom cab, with the past, present and future converging in *Jetztzeit* to produce revelation about her personal direction. The effectiveness of this approach can be measured against an article entitled 'Meals in Fiction' published in Wellington's *Evening Post* on 25 July 1923, which asserts that it is in novels that one finds 'the most delicious, solid, convincing meals' and that 'the most enjoyable meals' are 'eaten in the books of men'.⁴⁰ The unsigned piece asks: 'What woman writer has described a good meal for its own sake?' to conclude that in Mansfield's stories 'the pangs of a hearty appetite, the savour of hearty appreciation, are lacking'.⁴¹ The writer argues that depiction of food in these stories is stifled by authorial gender, and is particularly disapproving of Mansfield's tendency to populate stories with pastries, iced puddings and sandwiches:

Again, it is easy to understand how the inferior sex, cooking the food, waiting upon the men before they regaled themselves, acquired the snack habit, which they like and understand. The Tulliver children with the jam puffs; Laura eating her bread-and-butter as she runs out to supervise putting up the marquee – these are creations of women enjoying bits of meals in a woman's way.⁴²

The *Evening Post* article unwittingly suggests a way into Mansfield's fiction that forgoes the usual negative reading of her depiction of food, particularly in relation to gender, which will be explored in the literature review that follows. By deliberately showing characters 'enjoying bits of meals in a woman's way', Mansfield can be viewed as celebrating the rapture inherent to an activity which figured a way out of the constraints implicit to the accident of being born 'the inferior sex'. This allows individuals to rise above the limitations of retrogressive tradition, to remove ideological shackles and glimpse a way forward through the unlimited *nunc stans* of

⁴⁰ Anonymous, 'Meals in Fiction', *Evening Post*, 25 July 1923, p. 3.
 <<http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/cgi-bin/paperspast?a=d&cl=search&d=EP19230725.2.14>> [accessed 24 June 2013].

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

In her book about a peacock eaten by seven male poets, including Ezra Pound and W. B. Yeats on 18 January 1914, Lucy McDiarmid asks why an equivalent peahen dinner was not arranged and eaten by the female poets working at this time. Her answer: 'Because cultural power was in the hands of men'.⁴³ This chapter's mutual exploration of the short story and the snack examines Mansfield's response to this balance of cultural power, which chose subversive, small-scale feasting over fasting. Even with the issue of gender put to one side, Mansfield's aesthetic choice to represent snacks in the short story form was doubly non-canonical, a combining of two marginal categories which resulted in an amplified revolutionary potential. Perhaps it was through this intensification that snacks in stories and stories-as-snacks allowed increased access to *Jetztzeit*, that moment full to burst, containing the 'entire history' of humankind 'in an enormous abridgement' (I 255), allowing capacity for insight in the present and change in the future.

Literature review

Two notable studies have devoted substantive consideration to Mansfield's treatment of food: Moran's *Word of Mouth: Body Language in Katherine Mansfield and Virginia Woolf* (1996) and Diane McGee's *Writing the Meal: Dinner in the Fiction of Early Twentieth-Century Women Writers* (2001). Each of these works approach the prevalence of food in Mansfield's work from an explicitly feminist point of view, with Moran relying on a Kleinian psychoanalytic model, revealing women as threatened by their own bodies. While admitting that acts of eating and feeding can function as 'metaphors for writing and female creativity', Moran argues that eating in Mansfield's work specifically demonstrates 'maternal engulfment from within and the subsumption of the woman writer by her female body'.⁴⁴ Above all, for Moran, it is 'alienation [which] is frequently expressed in food' – a view at odds with this thesis which argues for consideration of snacking in

⁴³ Lucy McDiarmid, *Poets and the Peacock Dinner: The Literary History of a Meal* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 8.

⁴⁴ Moran, *Word of Mouth*, p. 28.

Mansfield's alimentary literature as a route to engagement.⁴⁵

McGee reads Mansfield's presentation of eating more broadly as indicative of wider cultural shifts which affected female roles and the ritual of the sit-down meal, demonstrating 'a pervasive anxiety about home, security and loneliness',⁴⁶ with '[f]ailed, insufficient or non-existent meals mean[ing] that meaningful communication suffers as well'.⁴⁷ While these key works serve to authenticate the act of eating as inextricably tied to both communication and creativity, they explore these ideas solely in relation to gender, neither explicitly linking Mansfield's treatment of food to her aesthetics, with each treating eating in Mansfield's fiction as an act overwhelmingly pervaded by anxiety. Crucially though, in a hypothesis not explored at length, McGee notes that 'from the reader's perspective, the novel, novella, or story may present itself as an invitation to dine'.⁴⁸ It is precisely this enticing line of enquiry which this chapter will pick up in its divergence from Moran and McGee's work.

A clutch of articles published over the past thirty years also explore Mansfield's relationship with food, the first being the genesis of Moran's book – an article entitled 'Unholy Meanings: Maternity, Creativity, and Orality in Katherine Mansfield' (1991). In this piece, Moran examines ambivalent attitudes to the body and oscillation between appetite and illness or starvation, relying on Freud, Klein and Kristeva's theoretical models to explore both Mansfield's biographical and fictional works. Moran's sensitive textual readings include linking hunger and orality in 'Prelude' to both sexuality and motherhood; observing an 'unstated hostility toward both mothers and eating' in the *In a German Pension* collection; and detecting in Mansfield's personal papers a misogyny catalysed by denial of her illness and rejection of those who cared for her as a result.⁴⁹

Lorna Piatti-Farnell's 2013 article 'A taste of conflict: Food, history and popular culture in Katherine Mansfield's fiction', as its title suggests, takes a broad approach to the culinary in

⁴⁵ McGee, p. 86.

⁴⁶ McGee, p.106.

⁴⁷ McGee, p. 107.

⁴⁸ McGee, p. 148.

⁴⁹ Patricia Moran, 'Unholy Meanings: Maternity, Creativity, and Orality in Katherine Mansfield', *Feminist Studies*, 17.1 (Spring 1991), 105-125 (p. 116).

Mansfield's work. Considering the politics of hunger and food, Piatti-Farnell concentrates on the historical contexts of the stories: capitalism, sexual politics and international communication as framed by travel and war.⁵⁰ Eating is conceived of as the 'ideal medium for Mansfield to communicate the modern angst of solitary experience', with Piatti-Farnell again reading consumption, and particularly solitary eating, as expressive of the anxiety of the age.⁵¹

Sarah Schieff's article 'Katherine Mansfield's Fairytale Food', published in the *Journal of New Zealand Literature* in 2014, explores Frank Sargeson's view of food in Mansfield's work as 'fairytale', considering biographical material as well as fiction such as 'A Suburban Fairytale' to explore Mansfield's use of food in the context of a dark, Wildean underworld. Schieff concludes that the stories 'show Mansfield channelling the disruptive qualities of her bad-fairy alter-ego', using examples of poisoning within the stories to support this argument.⁵² Schieff does not, however, link eating in Mansfield's stories to her creative endeavour or aesthetic development, as I do in a 2013 article published in the same journal, 'Consuming Art: Katherine Mansfield's Literary Snack',⁵³ which summarises postulations explored at greater length in this chapter, as well as in a further article published the same year entitled 'Katherine Mansfield, Cannibal', which takes a postcolonial approach to her gustatory aesthetics.⁵⁴

More recently, in *Katherine Mansfield and Psychology* (2016), Polly Dickson has argued, in the article 'Interior Matters: Secrecy and Hunger in Katherine Mansfield's "Bliss"', that in that story 'a desire for the emergence of an authentic self is articulated through a rhetoric ambivalently poised between the expression and frustration of appetite'.⁵⁵ This argument, which links consumption with authenticity, largely complements my own, although this thesis will take a more positive approach in focusing on moments where appetite is more successfully expressed.

⁵⁰ Slightly confusingly, in this article *In a German Pension* is read without qualification as a square commentary on warfare amongst a wider context of First World War food policy even though it was published before the war in 1911.

⁵¹ Lorna Piatti-Farnell, 'A taste of conflict: Food, history and popular culture in Katherine Mansfield's fiction', *Australasian Journal of Popular Culture*, 2.1, 79–91 (p. 88).

⁵² Sarah Schieff, 'Katherine Mansfield's Fairytale Food', *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 32.2, 68–81 (p. 81).

⁵³ Aimee Gasston, 'Consuming Art: Katherine Mansfield's Literary Snack', *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 31.2, 163–182. As this article summarises the initial findings of research conducted here, some material overlaps.

⁵⁴ Gasston, 'Katherine Mansfield, Cannibal', pp. 15–28.

⁵⁵ Clare Hanson, 'Introduction', in *Katherine Mansfield and Psychology*, ed. by Clare Hanson, Gerri Kimber and Todd Martin (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), pp. 1–8 (p. 3).

In arguing that the moments of *Jetztzeit* enabled by snacking allow for genuine insight, it fundamentally disagrees with the argument that ‘real nourishment [is] impossible, even in narratives ostensibly about food’.⁵⁶

In the same book, Clare Hanson explores the influence of vitalist psychology on Mansfield’s work, looking specifically at William James and Henri Bergson. Hanson’s article draws out the relevance of Bergson to Mansfield’s stories with regard to his redefinition of freedom ‘in terms of being able to act in the moment with the entirety of one’s being’.⁵⁷ Bergson is also referred to in Janet Wilson’s article, ‘Veiling and Unveiling: Mansfield’s Modernist Aesthetics’, published in the *Journal of New Zealand Literature* in 2014, where Wilson notes how Mansfield combines durational time with phenomenological time to emphasise the moment, ‘halting [...] the flux of time so that it is spatialised and framed’.⁵⁸ Angela Smith’s comprehensive article, ‘Katherine Mansfield and *Rhythm*’, published in the same journal in 2003, also sets out the extensive influence of Bergson on Mansfield’s thinking. Smith observes the way in which Woolfian ‘moments of being’ permeate Mansfield’s work, which evidences her ‘playing with time, and holding an object or a moment in stasis as a perceiving consciousness observes it, directing the reader’s gaze’.⁵⁹ Rather than pursuing this Bergsonian route, which is of clear relevance to Mansfield’s work, this thesis instead employs Benjaminian thinking to explore her stories’ moments of being. While Bergson, as Hanson summarises, ‘conceptualises the past, present and future as seamlessly interlinked’, Benjamin’s notion of *Jetztzeit* relies on specific circumstances for these three temporal zones to explosively converge and emphasise revolutionary possibility – it is Benjamin’s thinking rather than Bergson’s which I argue is best suited to Mansfield’s fictional treatment of snacking.⁶⁰

One PhD thesis is of key relevance to this research, a 2009 University of Iowa thesis entitled ‘Alimentary Modernism’ by Lisa Angelella, which dedicates a chapter to Mansfield

⁵⁶ Polly Dickson, ‘Interior Matters: Secrecy and Hunger in Katherine Mansfield’s “Bliss”’, in *Katherine Mansfield and Psychology*, ed. by Hanson, Kimber and Martin (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), pp. 11-22 (p. 21).

⁵⁷ Clare Hanson, ‘Katherine Mansfield and Vitalist Psychology’ in *Katherine Mansfield and Psychology*, ed. by Hanson, Kimber and Martin (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), pp. 23-37 (p. 35).

⁵⁸ Janet Wilson, ‘Veiling and Unveiling: Mansfield’s Modernist Aesthetics’, *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 32:2 (2014), 203-225 (p. 210).

⁵⁹ Angela Smith, ‘Katherine Mansfield and *Rhythm*’ in *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, 21 (2003), 102-121 (p. 102).

⁶⁰ Hanson, ‘Katherine Mansfield and Vitalist Psychology’, p. 32.

alongside work on Ernest Hemingway, Woolf, Joyce and Willa Cather. Unlike the scholars cited above, Angelella argues far more positively that Mansfield's 'food ecstasy' possesses 'political and social relevance because it imagines a way out of the prevalent modernist mood of alienation, engaging characters who would be otherwise disengaged or uninvolved with each other'.⁶¹ Angelella also picks out sweets and snacks for special attention in her chapter on Mansfield, treating them with due significance and arguing that through their consumption, 'alienated characters' succeed in 'achiev[ing] an intersubjectivity with food' through which they can fruitfully engage with the wider world.⁶² This view resonates powerfully with the rationale of this thesis, as does her view of the ingestion of these foodstuffs as 'liberating sensation to exist outside [a normative] social structure'.⁶³ While this research and Angelella's share rich parallels, key differences exist. First, in considering fewer writers, this thesis is able to explore Mansfield's gustatory prose at greater length. Secondly, where this research focuses on the aesthetic implications of Mansfield's 'alimentary modernism' upon the short story as genre and the ways of reading it engenders, Angelella's scope does not investigate this aspect.

Other research without a primary focus on food also covers territory directly relevant to this thesis. In the concluding pages of *Illness, Gender and Writing: The Case of Katherine Mansfield* (1994), Mary Burgan argues that Mansfield's 'experience of pain gave a sharp edge to her representation of physical sensation'.⁶⁴ Like McGee and Moran, Burgan takes a feminist, psychoanalytical approach and, with a primary focus of illness and death, makes incisive observations about Mansfield's relationship with both food and body. Her argument that Mansfield's engagement with everyday sensation was key to her aesthetic will also be central to this thesis. An article published in the previous year, also by Burgan, makes divergent observations that are also key to this chapter. In the essay 'The "Feminine" Short Story: Recuperating the Moment', Burgan makes the case for 'a connection between the notion of an

⁶¹ Lisa Angelella, 'Alimentary Modernism' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Iowa, 2009), p. 64. <<http://ir.uiowa.edu/etd/225/>> [accessed 18 January 2016].

⁶² Angelella, p. 65.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Mary Burgan, *Illness, Gender, and Writing: The Case of Katherine Mansfield* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), pp. 174-5.

écriture féminine as inflected by an atunement [sic] to the moment'.⁶⁵ She also traces 'the evolution of the twentieth-century epiphanic short story as a woman's tradition that is intent upon the intimation of signification that punctuates rather than halts the density of flowing sensation'.⁶⁶ This idea of the moment as crucial to Mansfield's aesthetic and of its function as a quiet, full, pause rather than an overpowering, arresting event – like the snack consumed without ceremony – is extremely pertinent to the thesis of this chapter.

Travelling in the opposite direction to this emphasis on the story and the moment, Kate McLoughlin's work on the experience of reading the long modernist novel is a touchstone for this chapter. Her article 'Moments of Insight in Long Novels by Henry James and Dorothy Richardson' relies on Benjamin's conceptions of experience to theorise the ways in which the long modernist novel can be read. McLoughlin concludes that James' and Richardson's lengthy novels 'depict *Erfahrung* (the wise yield of reflected upon experience)' and also shows how their size 'inculcates *Erfahrung* in the reader, too, who achieves insight based upon memory, resemblance, repetition and recognition'.⁶⁷ This chapter builds on McLoughlin's work to consider how the short story's length directs a distinct mode of reading through the enactment of a Benjaminian *Jetztzeit*, and I am grateful to her for the conversations which have informed this chapter.

While it does not specifically consider Mansfield, one critical work on philosophy and food deserves mention here – Nicola Perullo's *Taste as Experience: The Philosophy and Aesthetics of Food* (published in Italian in 2012 and in English in 2016). As its title suggests, this work focuses on the transformative powers of consumption, not only from a physical perspective but also from an ontological and artistic point of view, as this thesis will also do in its consideration of the story as a type of snack. Perullo's work is distinguished by its phenomenological approach to understanding our experience with food, describing the process of eating as a 'specific perception: a direct relationship, a unique piece of the external solid world that we incorporate

⁶⁵ Mary Burgan, 'The "Feminine" Short Story: Recuperating the Moment', *Style*, 27.3 (Autumn 1993), 380-386 (p. 381).

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ McLoughlin, 'Moments of Insight', p. 299.

into ourselves'.⁶⁸ This, argues Perullo, 'suggests important assumptions and consequences for the way we think'.⁶⁹ So too, this thesis will argue, for the way we read. Perullo also argues for the concept of 'taste as an individual response, in terms of pleasure and knowledge' as specific to modernity, bound up with the emergence of subjectivity, which 'goes together with the idea that *outside* there is a world made up of objects'.⁷⁰ This idea of ingestion as a means of establishing independent perspective and of incorporation as a means of understanding the wider world in modernist times will be key to my suggestion that Mansfield's later work offers up moments of realisation and insight, via *Jetztzeit*, in contradistinction to her early work which signifies consumption without allowing it.

To return to criticism which directly considers Mansfield, Angela Smith's salient biography, *Katherine Mansfield - A Literary Life*, asserts that Mansfield had a 'food complex' that was exacerbated by the First World War, noting a 'shift in her attitude to the war, from excited curiosity to an almost anorexic fear of eating as cannibalism'.⁷¹ Smith also detects in Mansfield's wartime correspondence with Dora Carrington 'the observer's fear of being eaten rather than eating',⁷² which resonates with her contraction of the 'disease that is aptly named consumption'.⁷³ A similar phenomenon is noted in Claire Tomalin's biography, where she observes that in the stories relationships consist of one who eats and another who is eaten: 'couples are like cannibals'.⁷⁴ In my article on Mansfield and cannibalism, I argue that Mansfield's return to New Zealand through her mature stories can be viewed as a type of endocannibalism, where one eats one's dead relations as an act of respect, postulating that after the death of her brother, Leslie, Mansfield developed an inclusive, incorporative aesthetic by which she reanimated their shared childhood. The notion of incorporation and assimilation, as applied to aesthetics, will also be explored in the pages that follow, although from a distinct direction.

⁶⁸ Perullo, p. viii.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Perullo, p. ix.

⁷¹ Angela Smith, *Katherine Mansfield - A Literary Life* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave, 2000), p. 99.

⁷² Smith, *Katherine Mansfield - A Literary Life*, p. 105.

⁷³ Smith, *Katherine Mansfield - A Literary Life*, p. 98.

⁷⁴ Tomalin, p. 6.

Leaving food aside entirely, in *Double Lives: Women in the Stories of Katherine Mansfield* (1990), Heather Murray argues that ‘there are no radical females in Katherine Mansfield’s fiction’, suggesting that rebellion is a project only engaged with by Mansfield’s male characters and relying heavily on the unfinished 1921 piece ‘A Married Man’s Story’ as evidence.⁷⁵ Murray argues that rebellious activities of various groups of females (infant, single, married, invalid, ‘modern’) all ultimately fail, while my thesis takes a decidedly more hopeful stance. While I agree that almost all of Mansfield’s stories are concerned with corruption in one form or another, and prove that liberty is difficult to grasp, I do not view her stories as studies in oppression. This thesis focuses on small freedoms which are largely negotiated by female characters – that these liberties on the whole are negotiated by women is of course expressive in itself. Here I will argue that these stories, in a typically understated way, often chart a path for women to escape from convention by means that are subversive, promising and empowering. Like Sydney Janet Kaplan, I too will argue for Mansfield’s ‘[f]eminist[a]esthetics’ although, following the author’s lead, I will do so without relying on an explicitly feminist theoretical framework.⁷⁶

A thousand leaves, with cream: tea with Oscar Wilde

Before going on to analyse Mansfield’s stories, I would first like to consider the way in which the gustatory permeated her thinking about literature, and particularly reading. I will do this by first looking at a dream which Mansfield recorded in her journal, before going on to consider the implications it might signal for her aesthetics. Writing on 1 November 1920, Mansfield described a dream encounter with Wilde. After the pair have been ushered into a café by Mark Gertler, the following conversation takes place (in which, for the purposes of this thesis, cake, armchair and accessory obligingly converge):

‘You know, Katherine, when I was *in that dreadful place* I was haunted by the memory of a *cake*. It

⁷⁵ Heather Murray, *Double Lives: Women in the Stories of Katherine Mansfield* (Otago: University of Otago Press, 1990), p. 3.

⁷⁶ Sydney Janet Kaplan, *Katherine Mansfield and the Origins of Modernist Fiction* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991), p. 145.

used to float in the air before me – a little delicate thing *stuffed* with cream and with the cream there was something *scarlet*. It was made of *pastry* and I used to call it my little Arabian Nights cake. But I couldn't remember the name. Oh, Katherine it was *torture*. It used to *hang* in the air and *smile* at me. And every time I resolved that next time *they let some one* come and see me I would ask them to tell me what it was but every time, Katherine, I was *ashamed*. Even now...' I said, 'Mille feuilles à la crème?' At that he turned round in the armchair and began to sob, and Ottoline [Morrell] who carried a parasol, opened it and put it over him. (CL 4, 95, italics as in the text)

Mansfield clearly thought this dream worthy of record – like Freud, she considered dreams a crucial part of the creative machinery, two years earlier having dreamt the story 'Sun and Moon' in its entirety, from the title down to the melted plate of ice-cream with which it ends.⁷⁷ The dream discernibly alludes to Wilde's time in prison ('*that dreadful place*'), with the cake itself embodying a miraculous temptation. Almost supernaturally light (it floats), it is also decadent, overflowing with cream which is laced with scarlet, a colour associated with both danger and sex.⁷⁸ The cake is something for which Wilde achingly hungers and yet which causes him both shame and torture; the analogy with a forbidden homosexual desire is not difficult to fathom. Gone is the aphoristic Wilde who would have Lord Henry pronounce '[t]he only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it'.⁷⁹ Further, in referring to the *Arabian Nights*, the dream evokes not only its richly erotic content, but also its framing story which clearly associates indulgence with punishment.⁸⁰

Literature is also intrinsic to this dream beyond the appearance of its literary hero, whose mouth is metaphorically torn between speaking and eating. The mouth is an organ commonly

⁷⁷ Mansfield described the process to Murry in a letter of February 1918: 'I dreamed a short story last night, even down to its name, which was *Sun and Moon*. [...] In my dream I saw a supper table with the eyes of 5. It was awfully queer – especially a plate of half-melted icecream' (CL 2, 66).

⁷⁸ These shades recall 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol': 'But neither milk-white rose nor red / May bloom in prison air'. Oscar Wilde, 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol' in *Plays, Prose Writings and Poems* (London: Everyman, 1996), pp. 485-502 (p. 498).

⁷⁹ Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (London: Penguin, 1994), p. 26. This phrase was copied by Mansfield into her notebook during her teens (N1 96-9) along with many other quotations from Wilde.

⁸⁰ Mansfield was taught the *Arabian Nights* during her time at Queen's College, London, see Murry and Mantz, p. 192.

associated with the primarily physical acts of eating, respiration and sex, but of course also has more intrinsically cerebral links as a vehicle for language, literature and, in the earliest centuries of the written word, reading too, with recorded words on the first Sumerian tablets put together to be pronounced out loud, with reading taking the form of oral performance.⁸¹ Over twenty years before Mansfield's nocturnal vision, Freud also recalled a dream (about dumplings and plagiarism), which strongly associated the act of reading with that of eating.⁸² Michel Delville describes the tongue as the 'organ of taste and self-expression' which 'becomes the site of aesthetic and philosophical negotiations in which bodily processes and self-consciousness run in parallel and interact with each other'.⁸³ Similarly, reading is also a process of negotiation between the physical and the cerebral, as emphasised in Mansfield's stories where the consumption of morsels (such as cakes) also enables aesthetic and philosophical realisations.

The cake's dubbing by Wilde as his 'little Arabian Nights cake' not only appropriately emphasises the oneiric, referring to those tales told at night from the site of the bed, but also alludes to the life-extending and -enhancing propensity of stories embodied by that collection, with Scheherezade (re)telling stories to preserve her life.⁸⁴ Like food, the stories succeed in extending her existence, one day at a time. This connection between food and literature is further strengthened by the choice of cake, *mille feuilles* (translating as 'a thousand leaves'); the cake is effectively an edible book. Moreover, its name echoes the original title of the *Arabian Nights* collection, *One Thousand and One Nights*. Like the cake, the book functions as both an aesthetic object and the enabler of a nourishing process, again highlighting the parallels between eating and reading. Further, in referring to the object of desire as the 'Arabian Nights cake', Mansfield/Wilde reveals an entangling of literature (and specifically short stories) with food and hunger, an important commingling which is reinforced throughout Mansfield's writing. If we accept the connection between eating and reading evidenced both by Mansfield's dream and the

⁸¹ Alberto Manguel, *A History of Reading* (London: HarperCollins, 1996), p. 45.

⁸² Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, trans. by James Strachey (London: Penguin, 1991), pp. 294-297. As Moss acknowledges, 'Freud's analysis connects the pleasures of reading with the gratification of eating'. Moss, p. 2.

⁸³ Michel Delville, *Food, Poetry and the Aesthetics of Consumption: Eating the Avant-Garde* (New York and London: Routledge, 2012), p. 3.

⁸⁴ Warner, p. 143.

critical work discussed in the literature review, it becomes clear that reading is cast in the Wilde dream as a dangerous activity, and by consequence something which demands to be understood as something more than a vicarious experience. Reading is portrayed in Mansfield's dream as a vital, experiential practice, requiring direct engagement from which authentic consequences can flow. The idea of the short story, as embodied by the cake, as something tempting but associated with potential punishment bears relevance to Mansfield's own preoccupation with her literary reputation and her uncertainty that it could be sustained by short stories alone. As late as 1920, Mansfield likely still worried that readers and critics could not survive only on snacks.



Figure 2: *Woman of Words*, 2013, Virginia King. Image courtesy of the Wellington Sculpture Trust. Virginia King chose words from Mansfield's journals to build up her 'Woman of Words' piece, choosing foodstuffs such as 'cake' and 'figs' to feature prominently as a frame to the writer's face.

The fact that Mansfield was still dreaming about Wilde at the age of thirty-two, around two years before her death, demonstrates his lasting influence on her personally beyond a teenage infatuation and, I will argue here, on the aesthetics which governed her mature work. It is widely accepted that Wilde's influence on the young Mansfield was extensive; as Angela Smith

notes: 'Wilde is the dominant literary presence in [Mansfield's] early notebooks',⁸⁵ while Alpers observes that it was 'thus equipped, by Wilde and the decadents, that [Mansfield] entered the emotional anarchy of middle adolescence'.⁸⁶ Critics such as Kaplan have noted the significant influence of Wilde on the teenaged Mansfield in personal and literary senses, emphasising homosexuality as a basis for this connection, with Kaplan writing: 'It should be noted that Wilde was Mansfield's principal stylistic influence in 1906-8, the years of her most active lesbian experiences'.⁸⁷ Placing similar emphasis on this early period, Gillian Boddy views the influence of Wilde as one which was 'waning' as early as 1908.⁸⁸ However, other critics have been convinced of the longevity of a Wildean influence on Mansfield's adult thinking and writing, with Gerri Kimber arguing that when Walter Rippmann, Mansfield's teacher at Queen's College, introduced her to the likes of Oscar Wilde, Walter Pater and other decadents, he 'alter[ed] the course of her reading – and writing – life'.⁸⁹ Vincent O'Sullivan similarly argues that Wilde's 'traces' can be found 'in her work for the rest of her life', locating his lingering influence in Mansfield's description of flora, in her parody of the 'language of the aesthetes' and in the 'brittleness' of conversation in her fiction.⁹⁰ I argue here that another way that Wilde's presence can be felt in Mansfield's mature fiction is not via the motifs or satire of the decadent movement, but by the revelatory moment whose encapsulation shaped the form of her fiction and its eventual consumption. As Jeffrey Meyers observes, it was Wilde from whom Mansfield learned to claim the 'freedom of the artist' – key to her pronouncement of July 1922: 'If only I can be a good enough writer to strike a blow for freedom! It is the only axe I want to grind' (*CL* 5, 225) – as well as the idea that 'intensity was the touchstone of experience'.⁹¹ This chapter will argue that both liberty and intense experience were key to the *Jetztzeit* which Mansfield's snack stories inculcated.

Rachel Bowlby argues in her book *Everyday Stories* that the conception of the

⁸⁵ Smith, *Katherine Mansfield - A Literary Life*, p. 31.

⁸⁶ Alpers, p. 64.

⁸⁷ Kaplan, p. 21.

⁸⁸ Gillian Boddy, *Katherine Mansfield: The Woman and the Writer* (London: Penguin, 1988), p. 172.

⁸⁹ Kimber, *Katherine Mansfield: The Early Years*, p. 112.

⁹⁰ Vincent O'Sullivan, 'The Magnetic Chain: Notes and Approaches to K.M.', in *The Critical Response to Katherine Mansfield*, ed. by Jan Pilditch (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1996), pp. 129-53 (p. 131).

⁹¹ Jeffrey Meyers, *Katherine Mansfield: A Darker View* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2002), p. 25.

‘psychological moment’ is a phenomenon that can be traced back to Wilde through Lord Henry’s use of the phrase in *The Portrait of Dorian Gray* (1891), a book which Mansfield quoted extensively in her journal in 1907,⁹² also noting the phrase’s recurrence in Freud’s *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* in 1912.⁹³ The psychological moment, Bowlby argues, can suggest ‘that a time, *the* time to decide to do something has come’.⁹⁴ This reading of the psychological moment bears resonance with the argument that, through the snack, Mansfield’s stories both describe and enact a Benjaminian *Jetztzeit* in which possibilities are glimpsed through engagement with the present which allows for insights comprised of a flashing vision of past, present and future. Bowlby elaborates that the ‘psychological moment’ refers to ‘a turning point for the individual mind: a point at which, or after which, there will be a tilt, a decision, in one direction or another’.⁹⁵ It is a moment of :

opportunity or fatality, when there is a suspension between a before and an after: an after at which point there will have been an irrevocable or at least significant change, and a before which has opened up a one and only chance that will soon be gone.⁹⁶

Bowlby characterises the psychological moment as imbued with *kairos*, the ancient Greek term for significant time, a moment replete with possibility which will be grasped and seized or simply pass, as distinguished from *chronos*, ‘standard’ sequential time. The psychological moment is the point ‘at which everything hangs in the balance, a time out of time that appears to be both minute – a mere moment – and infinitely protracted’.⁹⁷ Bowlby’s psychological moment, replete with potential for intervention, momentary yet eternal, bears rich resonance with Benjamin’s conception of *Jetztzeit*, which I will argue characterises Mansfield’s treatment of snacking in her stories, and is open to be experienced not only by her characters but by her readers.

⁹² Kimber, *Katherine Mansfield: The Early Years*, p. 182.

⁹³ Rachel Bowlby, *Everyday Stories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), p. 99. Bowlby also identifies the psychological moment in the work of Marie Bashkirtseff, who along with Wilde was another significant influence on Mansfield in her teenage years – see Kimber, *Katherine Mansfield: The Early Years*, p. 205.

⁹⁴ Bowlby, *Everyday Stories*, p. 100.

⁹⁵ Bowlby, *Everyday Stories*, p. 102

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

Following Benjamin's lead, in my consideration of Mansfield's stories I treat the moment as philosophical rather than psychological. I would now like to consider *Jetztzeit* in more detail before moving on to consideration of Mansfield's aesthetics. Benjamin's idea of *Jetztzeit* was put forward in the short, rich essay 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' (1940), the last major work before his death. Here, Benjamin conceives of *Jetztzeit* as a near-mystical moment replete with revolutionary potential, detached from ordinary conceptions of time and full of the 'presence of the now' (I 252-3). As in kairological time, in the moment of *Jetztzeit* 'a new order becomes possible, in which new possibilities for life, knowledge and the whole human conduct open up', yet 'it is also a time in which new misfortunes become possible' – hence the dangerousness implicit to the act of reading embodied by Wilde's cake, with risk and material effect bringing with it the chance of failure as well as success.⁹⁸ In *Jetztzeit*, the moment is detached from the normal chronology of history, becoming a rent in which the past and future converge, where 'thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions', with that confluence of tensions producing 'a shock' (I 254). Burgan conceives of the modernist, epiphanic story as 'intent upon the intimation of signification that punctuates rather than halts the density of flowing sensation'⁹⁹ and it is this punctuating shock of *Jetztzeit* which I will argue is catalysed by the snack, in which intense gustatory, incorporative, bodily experience allows a pause that reconfigures perception so that revolutionary possibility may be tasted, glimpsed and grasped. This intensity implicit to both *Jetztzeit* and the snack is embodied by the modernist story's form; as Ira Nadel has observed, it was the modernist short story which embraced its brevity and 'intensified its expressiveness precisely because of its boundaries'.¹⁰⁰ This intensity of expression characterises the convergence of snack, story and *Jetztzeit*, and is embodied by the overarching aesthetic which was part of Mansfield's inheritance from Wilde.

The last line of Pater's *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Literature* (1868), a work which influenced both Wilde and Mansfield, suggests the entire purpose of art as lying in fidelity to the

⁹⁸ Felix Ó Murchadha, *The Time of Revolution: Kairos and Chronos in Heidegger* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 1.

⁹⁹ Burgan, 'The "Feminine" Short Story', p. 381.

¹⁰⁰ Ira Nadel, 'The Bloomsbury Short Story' in *Fudan Journal of the Humanities and Social Sciences*, 10.1 (March 2017), 5-19 (p. 4).

moment, rendering the moment implicit to an art-for-art's-sake aesthetic: 'For art comes to you proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments' sake'.¹⁰¹ Pater's description in the same work of 'this sense of the splendour of our experience and of its awful brevity' works as a pertinent summary of what Mansfield's best stories capture.¹⁰² The idea of a life not only made up of moments but of moments of choice and opportunity which can either be seized or left to pass was encapsulated in turn by Wilde, who wrote: 'there are moments when one has to choose between living one's own life, fully, entirely, completely – or dragging out some false, shallow, degrading existence that the world in its hypocrisy demands'.¹⁰³ Wilde advocates kairological time over chronological time, advancing the case for the urgent grasping of *Jetztzeit*, as Mansfield did also. The tension that Wilde evokes between false lives and selves and the authentic grasp for freedom is one which permeates all Mansfield's strongest stories, as demonstrated by self-reflective Beryl pondering in 'Prelude': 'And for what tiny moments she was really she' (CF 2, 91).

I would like to end this section with one final quotation from Pater's *The Renaissance*:

While all melts under our feet, we may well grasp at any exquisite passion, or any contribution to knowledge that seems by a lifted horizon to set the spirit free for a moment, or any stirring of the senses, strange dyes, strange colours, and curious odours, or work of the artist's hands, or the face of one's friend.¹⁰⁴

Here Pater pre-emptes the *nunc stans* of the blended past, present and future tense of *Jetztzeit* with his description of the spirit 'set [...] free for a moment'. He also relates its instigation to sensory triggers, and specifically unconventional sensory triggers. This chapter shows how Mansfield effected such moments in her stories by recreating and offering up just such catalysts in the form

¹⁰¹ Walter Pater, *The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry* (London: Senate, 1998), p. 239.

¹⁰² Pater, p. 237.

¹⁰³ Wilde, 'Lady Windermere's Fan' in *Plays, Prose Writings and Poems*, pp. 167-226 (pp. 193-4).

¹⁰⁴ Pater, p. 237.

of the snack, which will be explored in the section that follows.

Mansfield's aesthetics: re-creation and the story-snack

Enabling readers to share in the experience of the *Jetztzeit* her stories depicted required a specific artistic method, which Mansfield usefully elaborated in a letter to the painter Dorothy Brett of 1917. Part of this letter is cited in the epigraph to this chapter, but here I will quote this passage at length due to its key relevance to Mansfield's aesthetics and in order to fully preserve its sense:

It seems to me so extraordinarily right that you should be painting Still Lives just now. What can one do, faced with this wonderful tumble of round bright fruits, but gather them and play with them – and *become them*, as it were. When I pass the apple stalls I cannot help stopping and staring until I feel that I, myself, am changing into an apple, too – and that at any moment I may produce an apple, miraculously, out of my own being like the conjuror produces the egg. [...] When I write about ducks I swear that I am a white duck with a round eye, floating in a pond fringed with yellow blobs and taking an occasional dart at the other duck with the round eye, which floats upside down beneath me. In fact this whole process of becoming the duck (what Lawrence would, perhaps, call [...] ‘consummation with the duck or the apple’) is so thrilling that I can hardly breathe, only to think about it. For although that is as far as most people can get, it is really only the ‘prelude’. There follows the moment when you are *more* duck, *more* apple or *more* Natasha [of *War and Peace*] than any of these objects could ever possibly be, and so you *create* them anew. (CL 1, 330, italics as in the text)

In this letter Mansfield refers twice to the vital currency of the moment. The first is included in the excerpt above, in which she describes the intensity of the artistic method by which she thinks herself into the form of whatever it is she seeks to duplicate in the text, which may occur ‘at any moment’. Then *through that moment* – itself an instant of *Jetztzeit* in its melding of past observations and the realisation of future creation all bound up with the presence of the now –

she succeeds in re-creating the objects of her attention. The second mention comes later in the letter in which she describes her writing of the story ‘Prelude’ as an ‘effort to catch that moment – with something of its sparkle and its flavour’ (CL 1, 331). It is as if the very writing of that story was an effort to pass beyond the ‘prelude’ of its title, that period which Mansfield describes as coming before the successful artistic experience of *Jetztzeit*. The story as a whole, which will be explored at length shortly, can be read about the choice each of us has to strive for *Jetztzeit*, to grasp the temporal plenitude of past, present and future and project ourselves forward into the unknown, or to remain within the safe and steady progression of chronological time.

The articulation of Mansfield’s aesthetic in the ‘conjurer’ letter clearly demonstrates her understanding that literature needs not only to think through but also ‘re-creat[e] the very objects of thought’ so that they might be experienced directly and incorporated by the reader.¹⁰⁵ It was by re-creating objects within her fiction, and particularly snack food, that Mansfield succeeded in producing a contingent literature which allowed readers a sensual interaction with the material world. This talent for re-creation was observed by Woolf in a letter to another painter, Jacques Raverat, that Mansfield had ‘the greatest senses of her generation’, capable of ‘reproduc[ing] this room for instance, [...] to the life’ (L 3, 59). Mansfield paid D. H. Lawrence a similar compliment in a letter of 4 July 1922 when she wrote in a letter to S. S. Kotliansky: ‘When he mentions gooseberries these are real red, ripe gooseberries that the gardener is rolling on a tray. When he bites into an apple it is a sharp, sweet, fresh apple from the growing tree’ (CL 5, 217). This method of direct representation expresses the belief that ‘things should be rooted in life’ (CL 5, 217), particularly the thing that is art, and is evidenced by Mansfield’s prose years before she makes this observation of Lawrence. This process of re-creation was part of ‘giv[ing] the moment whole’ as opposed to what Woolf called the ‘appalling narrative business of the realist: getting on from lunch to dinner’ which is ‘false, unreal, merely conventional’ (D 3, 209).¹⁰⁶ In giving the moment whole, Mansfield also afforded the reader the opportunity to receive the moment whole and to experience the possibilities of *Jetztzeit* first-hand.

¹⁰⁵ Philip Davis, *Reading and the Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 4.

¹⁰⁶ This formulation is from a diary entry of 28 November 1928 – Woolf wrote these words years after Mansfield died and Mansfield’s stories may well have influenced her thinking here on some level.

Before proceeding to set out historical contexts which anchor the parallels between stories and snacks, I would like to briefly consider two early stories which show nascent evidence of the *Jetztzeit* experience through snacking. ‘How Pearl Button Was Kidnapped’ was published in *Rhythm* in 1912 and shows Mansfield experimenting with a literary impressionism facilitated by the unfiltered perspective of a child’s point of view, well-suited to the capturing of direct experience. It tells the story of a white New Zealander (Pākehā) child who is happily taken from her garden by two Māori women. It is arguably Mansfield’s first modernist short story. Transgression of boundaries is a key concern in the story and one clearly articulated in the following passage:

She carefully pulled up her pinafore and dress and sat on her petticoat as she had been taught to sit in dusty places, and she ate the fruit, the juice running all down her front. ‘Oh,’ she said, in a very frightened voice to one of the women, ‘I’ve spilt all the juice!’ ‘That doesn’t matter at all,’ said the woman, patting her cheek.¹⁰⁷

Here, ‘impolite’ eating takes a new, positive form – far removed from the disciplined gluttony of Mansfield’s first collection, *In a German Pension and Other Stories* (1911) – where consumption can be more properly aligned with both illicit freedom, and the experimental aesthetic of the short story. The eating of the peach – which the child has specifically asked for, signifying an active and individual engagement at odds with the prescribed etiquette which leads her to sit carefully on her pinafore – begins an engagement with materiality, with excess, which offers up possibilities. Margaret Visser observes that politesse dictates that there must be no ‘squirting’ or ‘spouting’ during eating, arguing that the reason for the upkeep of ‘manners’ is ‘precisely that they pressure people to behave in a predictable fashion’.¹⁰⁸ Manners offer templates for living which preclude the need for thoughtful engagement with the present moment or individual

¹⁰⁷ Katherine Mansfield, *The Collected Fiction of Katherine Mansfield*, ed. by Gerri Kimber and Vincent O’Sullivan, 2 vols (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 1, 97. Hereafter referred to as *CF*, followed by volume and page number, with further references given after quotations in the text.

¹⁰⁸ Visser, pp. 323, 21.

response to it; thus, manners also preclude the possibility of *Jetztzeit*. In ‘Pearl Button’, the child enters into the *Jetztzeit*, the presence-of-the-now that is replete with revolutionary transgression, through her unbridled enjoyment of the peach, but then is immediately tugged back out by her fear of the ramifications of that transgression. She is pulled back from the prelude before the moment can blossom, as she will soon be taken away by policemen, ‘a crowd of little blue men’ and returned to her ‘House of Boxes’ (CF 288).

A comparable moment occurs in an earlier unpublished story of 1907, the year in which Mansfield transcribed so many Wilde quotations in her journal. In ‘Summer Idylle’, Mansfield again describes an encounter between two females, one Māori female, Marina, and one Pākehā, Hinemoa, with the reversal of expected naming suggestive of a narrative ambition to alter traditions. Like ‘Pearl Button’, this story is concerned with exploring transgression and ends in description of Hinemoa eating a peach ‘with the juice running down through her fingers’, while Marina snacks on a blue kumara (a New Zealand sweet potato) which Hinemoa rejects because it is ‘too unnatural’ (CF 1, 70). In the penultimate line of the story, Marina defends her preference for the kumara: ‘I eat it for that reason [...] I eat it because it *is* blue’ (CF 1, 70). This story, like ‘Pearl Button’, aligns eating and snacking with a disruption of normative traditions or ideologies which would become more frequent in Mansfield’s later works – in ‘Summer Idylle’, this disruption also works alongside the erotic homosexual undertones of the story. The unusual emphasis on the word ‘is’ in the story’s penultimate sentence, rather than on the more conventional ‘because’, also indicates the significance of being intrinsic to these acts of snacking, as well as *Jetztzeit*. It is *Jetztzeit* which ‘makes the present come or emerge’, a process signified by the word ‘is’ and one which Marina purposefully courts by eating the blue kumara.¹⁰⁹ Marina’s embracing of her own unconventionality takes into account present desire, future actions and a past tradition which she chooses to defy. Both the ‘table’ and ‘manners’ of table manners are absent from these illicit moments of ingestion. If, because it is ‘pre-ordained’, etiquette ‘always expresses order, and [...] predicts endurance’¹¹⁰ and therefore a stolidly linear experience of time,

¹⁰⁹ Aris Fioretos, ‘Contraction (Benjamin, Reading, History)’, *MLN*, 110.3 (April 1995), 540-564 (p. 554).

¹¹⁰ Visser, p. 24.

its absence helps to facilitate the revolution of *Jetztzeit*, in which we are ‘blast[ed]’ (I 254) out of a plodding chronology of time to experience the rich multivalence of past, present and future converging in an instant of clear-sighted succour.

Stories, snacks, scraps

Throughout her letters and journals, Mansfield analogises the act of reading with that of eating, particularly when at her most frank, writing to her closest friends and family. She tells Murry his letters are ‘such perfect letters that one *feeds* on them’ (CL 5, 38), while in a letter of 6 June 1918 she states: ‘God how I love telegrams – I could live on them *supplémenté* par oranges and eggs’ (CL 2, 222). Elsewhere, she describes herself to Murry as a caged animal which ‘LONGS for fat envelopes to eat’ (CL 3, 245). She tells her sister Charlotte that her correspondence has ‘such a flavour’ that they are ‘[a]ll the difference between very dull cold mutton and very excellent lean beef with chutney & a *crisp* salad! I start with an appetite and end with one’ (CL 5, 57). Compare these examples with this excerpt from a letter from Wilde to Lord Alfred Douglas, describing the letter to which it responds as ‘delightful – red and yellow wine to me’.¹¹¹ Mansfield is, as Roland Barthes would describe Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin, ‘linked to language – as [...] to food – by an amorous relation’, she ‘desires words, in their very materiality’.¹¹² In Mansfield’s life as in her fiction, words are orexigenic.

It should be no surprise then that gustatory expression comes naturally to description of the specifically literary. On 18 November 1919, Mansfield describes Murry’s ‘*Friday* letter & the paper & the Lit. Sup. & the Guardian’ as a ‘great feast’. In the same letter she tells Murry, who is editing *The Athenaeum*, that the current issue is ‘the best [he’s] ever cooked’ (CL 3, 101). An earlier letter ruminates on the magazine in similar terms, suggesting Murry finds help for the routine work: ‘it is ridiculous that the editor should have to peel the potatoes as well as squeeze the white & pink icing over the puddings & be responsible for the savoury and the plat du jour’,

¹¹¹ Oscar Wilde, *A Life in Letters*, ed. by Merlin Holland (London and New York: Fourth Estate, 2003), p. 165.

¹¹² Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans. by Richard Howard (Berkeley, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), p. 258.

afterwards apologising that her letter is ‘*too digestive*’ (CL 3, 38).

A letter of 1921 from Mansfield to her cousin, the writer Elizabeth von Arnim describes Milton’s poetry as sustenance: ‘There are times when Milton seems the only food to me’ (CL 4, 300). Elsewhere, she writes of the ‘sudden sweet shock’ of delight that Henry James gives her (N 2, 56) and describes the work of Frank Harris, recently published in the *Nation*, as ‘enormously feed[ing] one’s literary appetite’ (CL 2, 206). Aldous Huxley’s satirical rendering of the Garsington set in *Crome Yellow* is dismissed in a letter to Ottoline Morrell with the phrase: ‘It gets very awkward if young men are forced to feed out of their friends inkpots in this way’ (CL 5, 20). In the same month, Mansfield describes rereading Chekhov’s *The Cherry Orchard* to ‘take the taste of Clemence Dane away’ (CL 5, 26),¹¹³ while she criticises G. K. Chesterton’s influence on the prose of J. N. W. Sullivan as a pernicious condiment: ‘I do wish S. would eat his dinner for once without a bottle of G.K.C. on the table’ (CL 4, 130). Woolf’s lengthy *Night and Day* also comes in for culinary criticism, dismissed as ‘over-ripe’; ‘hung in the warm library too long’; like an old fruit, it has ‘gone soft’ (CL 3, 199), in a comment which might suggest the fresh immediacy and quick sustenance of the short story as an alternative to the potential deterioration involved in reading at length, where the meal might decay before one has finished it. In a telling letter of 13 July 1922, Mansfield turns to describe literary influence in alimentary terms, writing: ‘Anatole France would say we [writers] eat each other, but perhaps nourish is a better word’ (CL 5, 223). To Mansfield, literature and nourishment are indivisible, or should be.

This particular and pervasive use of metaphor is not particular to Mansfield, and even the etymology of the word ‘read’ can also be traced back to the alimentary, with its oldest use referring to the ‘stomach of an animal’.¹¹⁴ Alberto Manguel argues that the first recorded use of alimentary metaphor in relation to reading occurred in 593 B.C.,¹¹⁵ while Raymond Williams dates the first use of the word ‘taast’ with reference to good understanding to 1425.¹¹⁶ Manguel

¹¹³ This quotation is taken from a letter of late January 1922 to Elizabeth von Arnim.

¹¹⁴ Julian Wolfreys, *Readings: Acts of Close Reading in Literary Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p. viii. See also John Jamieson, *Supplement to the Etymological Dictionary of the Scottish Language*, 2 (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1825), p. 286, which defines ‘reid’ or ‘rede’ as the fourth stomach of a cow.

¹¹⁵ Manguel, p. 171. Manguel refers to the recording of a vision experienced by a priest named Ezekiel in which God appeared to him and stated, in relation to a book he proffered: ‘Open thy mouth, and eat what I give you’ (ibid.).

¹¹⁶ Raymond Williams, *Keywords – A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (London: Fontana, 1977), p. 264.

asserts that in Shakespeare's time gustatory metaphor was 'expected in literary parlance',¹¹⁷ and in his 1625 essay 'Of Studies', Francis Bacon meets this expectation by writing:

Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some few to be chewed and digested; that is, some books are to be read only in parts, others to be read, but not curiously, and some few to be read wholly, and with diligence and attention.¹¹⁸

This conceptual mode continued to permeate the thought of the reading public, with Sarah Moss writing of the Romantic era: 'It is not exaggerating much to say that nearly all images or accounts of women's reading in this period use eating as a metaphor for the consumption of text.'¹¹⁹ Over a century later, writing in 1979, Pierre Bourdieu views consumption as a 'stage in a process of communication, that is, an act of deciphering, decoding',¹²⁰ while the novelist John Fowles describes books as 'both a delight and a fodder', explaining: 'one lives to eat and eats to live'.¹²¹ In the twenty-first century, Anne Fadiman devotes a chapter of her book *Ex Libris* to what she calls 'The Literary Glutton'.¹²² These alimentary metaphors cast reading as an activity of importance to both mind and matter, a necessity which is nonetheless capable of bringing intense gratification.

Writing to S. S. Kotliansky in 1922, Mansfield praises Lawrence's latest novel, *Aaron's Rod*, as a warm, breathing book, successfully synchronised with the world around it. 'Oh, Kotliansky,' she exclaims, 'what a relief it is to turn away from these little predigested books written by authors who have nothing to say!' Reading Lawrence, a 'living man with *conviction*', is for Mansfield 'like walking by the sea at high tide eating a crust of bread and looking over the water' – he evades what Mansfield sees as the contemporary literary trap of 'seeking which ends

¹¹⁷ Manguel, p. 171.

¹¹⁸ Francis Bacon, *Bacon's Essays*, ed. by Richard Whately (Boston: Lee and Shepard, 1863), p. 472.

¹¹⁹ Moss, p. 16.

¹²⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. by Richard Nice (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), p. xxv.

¹²¹ Antonia Fraser, ed., *The Pleasure of Reading* (London: Bloomsbury, 1992), p. 74.

¹²² Anne Fadiman, *Ex Libris: Confessions of a Common Reader* (London: Penguin, 2000), pp. 78-84.

in seeking' (CL 5, 225).¹²³ Mansfield sees Lawrence's book as rich, vital, not pre-prepared and easily swallowed but requiring an enlivened and effortful aesthetic interaction with its reader, offering 'the *taste of the world*' which also brings '*knowledge of the world*'.¹²⁴ This process is no dilatory Eucharist; to ingest Lawrence, it is implied, the reader must be involved in a process of 'active' consumption. As Paul Ricoeur would observe of modernist writing more broadly, reading 'becomes a picnic where the author brings the words and the readers the meaning'.¹²⁵ Despite her snack analogy in which she refers to the crust of bread, which might more readily suggest the story, it is possible that Mansfield saw the novel as the most natural site for such active literary consumption.

The 'predigested' metaphor was not new, it was likely borrowed directly from the author E. F. Benson, whose short stories Mansfield had reviewed ferociously in *The Athenaeum* in 1920:

But it is perhaps hardly fair to take to pieces what the author himself calls 'digestible snacks'. This, we venture to suggest, should have been the title of the volume. And would it not be an admirable idea if there were a covering title for stories of the author's own description? 'Snacks' for instance, could hardly be improved upon. 'Digestible Snacks' is illuminating; it tells us exactly what we are buying.¹²⁶

In this review, Mansfield's disapproval is sharply voiced through continued use of the alimentary metaphor, and is especially intriguing given the fact that the short story has historically been thought of as a lightweight genre, and that the very criticisms she levels against Benson were ones which would be brought against her own writing.¹²⁷

¹²³ This may seem a peculiar metaphor but for Mansfield bread (broken apart and taken away or eaten out of doors) often signifies freedom from obligation and implies a sense of full living. For example, in May 1915, she wrote from Paris: 'Instead of having dinner today I ate some bread & drank some wine at home & went to a cin  ma. It was almost too good' (CL 1, 182).

¹²⁴ David Le Breton, cited in Perullo, p. 64.

¹²⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative, Volume 3*, trans. by Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 169.

¹²⁶ Katherine Mansfield, *Novels and Novelists*, ed. by John Middleton Murry (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1930), p. 310. The quotation is from the 'A Set of Four', a review of several works including *The Countess of Lowndes Square and Other Stories* by E. F. Benson, originally published in *The Athenaeum*, 26 November 1920.

¹²⁷ For example, in 1922, she deplored the fact that the *London Mercury* had misunderstood 'At the Bay': 'Good God! How I worked at [my characters] and tried to express and squeezed and modelled ... and the result was a "pretty little story"! (CL 5, 11).

In correspondence of 27 February 1918, Mansfield similarly sweepingly dismisses French literature as insubstantial, asserting: 'I get up hungry from the french language. I have too great an appetite for the real thing to be put off with pretty little kickshaws' (CL 2, 96). This, she concludes, is the result of being spoilt by too much Shakespeare, drawing sharp relief between the 'rich' language of English, and the French which she finds 'hard to stomach' (CL 2, 96). The word 'kickshaw' itself derives from the French (*quelque-chose*) and is defined as a 'fancy but insubstantial cooked dish, especially one of foreign origin'.¹²⁸ In this summation, literature is a comestible object, but one which should not yield too easily to its consumer – it should satiate a voracious appetite with a succulent and varied heartiness, not reciprocate hunger with titbits, perhaps attractive to the eye and sliding down easily but ultimately failing to satisfy or sustain. Like a kickshaw, to be eaten and forgotten, or a snack (a 'mere bite or morsel of food', 'a light or incidental repast', my italics),¹²⁹ the short story has been viewed as a disposable object, with Mary Louise Pratt observing that in the traditional home of the story, the magazine, 'the text literally becomes garbage after reading', like chip wrappings.¹³⁰ I would further argue that this mode of thought, strengthened by the authority of the traditional canon, was one which influenced Mansfield on some level to the point of prejudice against the short story form. Aware of the prejudice that faced the genre she had chosen, she may yet have shared the scorn intended by Wyndham Lewis's condescending description of her as 'the famous New Zealand Mag-story writer' (CL 5, 269).¹³¹

Beyond these affinities between the story and the snack, there are also cultural resonances between the two objects. In his book on the history of meals, Arnold Palmer notes: 'Already, in 1900, we are on the threshold of the snack and the snippet age'.¹³² The word 'snack' derives its meaning from 'short time', encapsulating both the story's brevity and its emphasis on

¹²⁸ OED, 'kickshaw' n., etymology.

¹²⁹ OED, 'snack', n.2, 4.b.

¹³⁰ Pratt, p. 100.

¹³¹ Mansfield wrote to her father in 1922 of how *The Garden Party* had been nominated for the Vie Heureuse French Literary Prize but had 'no chance of success, for the French never take short stories seriously' (CL 5, 344). Ironically, France would come to idealise Mansfield to the point of hagiography. See Gerri Kimber, *Katherine Mansfield: The View from France* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2008).

¹³² Arnold Palmer, *A Moveable Feast: A Reconnaissance of the Origins and Consequences of Fluctuations in Meal-Times with special attention to the introduction of Luncheon and Afternoon Tea* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1953), pp. 141-2.

transience and mortality.¹³³ The proliferation of the short story in England at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth-century can be related materially to advancements in printing techniques and the establishment of a magazine culture which required episodic, consumable fiction appropriately sized to its format.¹³⁴ The appetite for the story even grew to outstrip availability, with the author Sydney Aumonier describing it in 1923 as ‘the only art in which the demand is far greater than the supply’¹³⁵ – in contradistinction to Brander Matthews’ summation in 1901 that: ‘It is the three-volume Novel which has killed the Short-story in England’.¹³⁶ While the modern(ist) tendency towards the ‘single effect’ in short fiction ‘facilitated the short story’s easy consumption’,¹³⁷ the same era also saw the industrial production of fast food and individually wrapped snacks such as chocolate bars and biscuits for travelling and picnics.¹³⁸ In *Roald Dahl’s Cookbook*, the chronology of the chocolate bar is methodically charted, from its invention in 1876, to the introduction of Cadbury’s Dairy Milk bar in 1905, the Bournville bar in 1910, the Dairy Milk Flake in 1920 and the Fruit and Nut bar in 1921.¹³⁹ In 1906, the holiday resort of Blackpool boasted an overwhelming ‘182 sweet-shops, 129 ice-cream dealers, 79 fish, chip and tripe shops and 58 restaurants’.¹⁴⁰ Lyon’s Corner Houses also burgeoned in the first decades of the twentieth-century, serving inexpensive breakfasts, light lunches and high teas to customers at rapid speed.¹⁴¹

However, like the short story, fast food was not itself a recent innovation. In the medieval period, fast food most often sustained the poor, who could scarcely afford it but had no kitchens to allow for the alternative, but fast food was shunned by the wealthy.¹⁴² This disdain survived to

¹³³ *OED*, ‘snack’, n.2, 2.

¹³⁴ Winnie Chan, *The Economy of the Short Story in British Periodicals of the 1890s* (New York and Oxford: Routledge, 2007), pp. ix–xxiii. Also see Hunter, *The Cambridge Companion to the Short Story in English*, pp. 6–7.

¹³⁵ Quoted in Ann-Marie Einhaus, *The Short Story and the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 33.

¹³⁶ Brander Matthews, *The Philosophy of the Short-Story* (New York: Longmans, Green and Co., 1917), p. 60.

¹³⁷ Chan, p. xi.

¹³⁸ As discussed by Angelella, see p. 67.

¹³⁹ Felicity and Roald Dahl, *Roald Dahl’s Cookbook* (London: Penguin, 1996), p. 152.

¹⁴⁰ Derek J. Oddy, ‘Eating without Effort: The Rise of the Fast-food Industry in Twentieth-century Britain’ in *Eating Out in Europe: Picnics, Gourmet Dining and Snacks since the Late Eighteenth Century*, ed. by Marc Jacobs and Peter Scholliers (New York and Oxford: Berg, 2003), pp. 301–315 (p. 303).

¹⁴¹ Oddy, p. 304. See also Scott McCracken, ‘Voyages by Teashop: An Urban Geography of Modernism’ in *Geographies of Modernism: Literatures, Cultures, Spaces*, ed. by Peter Brooker and Andrew Thacker (London: Routledge, 2005), pp. 86–98.

¹⁴² Martha Carlin, “‘What say you to a piece of beef and mustard?’: The Evolution of Public Dining in Medieval and Tudor London”, *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 71.1 (March 2008), 199–217 (p. 202).

the late twentieth-century, with Bourdieu arguing that while the lower-class consumer is thought to seek instant gratification (of the sort catered for by fast food outlets), the bourgeois diner is intent on consuming at length, with such a painful attention to etiquette that they ‘deny the crudely material reality of the act of eating’.¹⁴³ The consumer of fast food is historically categorised as lower class and a seeker of quick fixes, one embroiled in the messy materiality of existence, as gestured to by many of Mansfield’s epicurean snack stories which are also shot through with an anti-bourgeois piquancy. This preconception also aligns itself with the short story form which, Gordimer has argued, ‘relies less than the novel on the classic conditions of middle-class life’ and ‘perhaps corresponds to the break-up of that life’.¹⁴⁴

It was on fast food that Mansfield and Murry subsisted early in their relationship. Tomalin describes how ‘like children, they lived mostly on the junk food of the day, meat pies and the cheapest possible restaurants’.¹⁴⁵ Jeffrey Meyers similarly observes how when *Rhythm* began to lose money, the pair would ‘eat at a meat-pie shop where they could have dinner for two-pence’.¹⁴⁶ Tomalin explains that ‘Katherine had no time or wish to cook, even though Murry tried to teach her to make stock out of cheap ham bones, throwing in a few vegetables to make a “*pot-au-feu*”’.¹⁴⁷ If Mansfield refused this culinary (and gender) role – as Bourdieu notes, ‘a woman entirely devoted to housework is called “*pot-au-feu*” – it was chiefly because she was wedded to her own ambition and had stories to simmer, season and arrange’.¹⁴⁸ At one point, she would rage to Murry ‘I hate hate HATE doing these things that you accept just as all men accept of their women. I can only play the servant with very bad grace indeed. Its all very well for females who have nothing else to do’ (*CL* 1, 125).¹⁴⁹

Like a chef too, she would find herself dedicated to an art form regarded as minor by the wider cultural world. As Albert Arouh observes, ‘in general, when reference is made to food as

¹⁴³ Bourdieu, p. 195.

¹⁴⁴ Gordimer, p. 171.

¹⁴⁵ Tomalin, p. 104.

¹⁴⁶ Meyers, p. 67.

¹⁴⁷ Tomalin, p. 104.

¹⁴⁸ Bourdieu, p. 183.

¹⁴⁹ In a later letter of February 1918, she told Murry: ‘Ill not do housework again or cook even though I long to because I think I do it so well’ (*CL* 2, 57).

art, it means either “craft” or at best “minor art””.¹⁵⁰ This argument is also made by Elizabeth Telfer, who devotes a whole chapter of her book *Food for Thought – Philosophy and Food* to arguing that food cannot be considered anything more than a minor art form,¹⁵¹ while Carolyn Korsmeyer observes that ‘because both the moments and the objects of enjoyment soon vanish, food and eating have been considered recalcitrant objects of aesthetic or social value’.¹⁵² Perullo refines this theory by suggesting that ‘[t]aste as aesthetic relationship lies on the margins of theory’, one which ‘can also be understood as a theory of the margins’ – an observation equally applicable to the short story.¹⁵³

The burgeoning of fast food enabled by industrialisation signaled a freer, more modern mode of consumption. As Angelella concludes, the availability of fast food in the early twentieth-century ‘increased the opportunities for eating independently and for pleasure, rather than for purposes of social ritual and nurturance’.¹⁵⁴ It can also be argued that short fiction provided the reader the same liberty, allowing individuals to graze or snack on literature, without the need of protracted periods of leisure time set aside for it, or the comfortable interior furnishings that were prerequisite to the three-course meal, or the triple-decker novel. Vita Sackville-West recalled the endless meals of her childhood which required guests to feast upon course after course of luxurious foodstuffs, a superfluity so overwhelming that guests would choose which courses to skip in advance, with meals also governed by a confounding rubric of etiquette.¹⁵⁵ Palmer notes how at the end of the nineteenth-century, it was routine for ‘normal households’ to have five courses when dining alone, and seven if company was invited.¹⁵⁶ Mansfield’s snacks were a brave and libertarian strike against these wasteful traditions and the restrictive and smothering modes of existence they engendered. The slow chronological time of the many-coursed meal was counteracted forcefully by the *nunc stans* of *Jetztzeit* initiated by the snack,

¹⁵⁰ Albert Arouh, ‘Food as Art and the Quest for Authenticity’, in *Authenticity in the Kitchen: Proceedings of the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery 2005*, ed. by Richard Hosking (Devon: Prospect Books, 2006), pp. 53-64 (p. 54).

¹⁵¹ Elizabeth Telfer, *Food for Thought – Philosophy and Food* (London: Routledge, 1996), pp. 41-60.

¹⁵² Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Making Sense of Taste – Food and Philosophy* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2002), p. 188

¹⁵³ Perullo, p. 26.

¹⁵⁴ Angelella, p. 68.

¹⁵⁵ Rich, pp. 24-52.

¹⁵⁶ Palmer, p. 134.

concentratedly and fully experienced at will, away from the usual constraints of conventional time and etiquette.

Like the snack, the short story is consumed quickly and can be ‘readily grasped as an aesthetic whole’.¹⁵⁷ A century after Mansfield wrote, short story vending-machines were introduced to Grenoble, France, enabling commuters to snack on literature after choosing between two-, four- and six-minute reads. Co-founder of the enterprise Quentin Plepé argues that stories are intrinsic to human lives, but that ‘[m]ore and more people don’t take the time anymore to sit and read a book’, explaining that the machines enable consumers to ‘have a little “bite” of a story, just for a couple of minutes’.¹⁵⁸ Slightly larger than these fictional bites, Mansfield’s stories were still feats of radical compression. She recorded in a letter of January 1921 to her brother-in-law: ‘If a thing has really come off there mustn’t be one single word out of place or one word that could be taken out’ (*CL* 4, 165).

The compression of the poetic or modernist short story obliges the reader to consume it in silo, as George Cloyne wrote in a 1959 article entitled ‘Short Rations’: ‘They have to be digested one by one, rather than gulped down by the half-dozen’.¹⁵⁹ Similarly, L. P. Hartley asks in a chapter entitled ‘In Defence of the Short Story’: ‘Why do readers devour [stories] singly on a newssheet, or between paper covers, but only nibble at them when they are contained in a book?’ to conclude that collected in book format, stories ‘induce a surfeit’.¹⁶⁰ Hartley reasons that ‘[a] dozen short courses are harder for the mind to digest than one long course’.¹⁶¹ The reader who forgets to treat a story like a snack, warns Hartley, may find themselves with mental indigestion.

Yet, for all this, the story-snack comparison is likely one with which Mansfield would have felt uneasy. When she wrote her disparaging review of Benson’s collection, she was still new to her mature literary voice: *Bliss and Other Stories* was to be published in December of that

¹⁵⁷ Hanson, *Short Stories and Short Fictions*, p. 68.

¹⁵⁸ Jack Shepherd, ‘Short story “vending machines” to be installed in Grenoble, France’, *Independent*, 10 November 2015 <www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/news/short-story-vending-machines-to-be-installed-in-grenoble-france-a6728926.html#gallery> [accessed 23 January 2015].

¹⁵⁹ George Cloyne, ‘Short Rations’, *The Times*, 10 December 1959, p. 15.

¹⁶⁰ L. P. Hartley, *The Novelist’s Responsibility* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1967), p. 158.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*

year. It is possible that her condemnation was so utter because it was defensive, an admonition to her writing self. In 1918, she wrote in her journal 'I ought to write something brief for the Nation today and earn a bit more money: a little lunch at the club or something of that kind. It's not difficult, in fact *its too easy* for me' (N 2, 138, my italics). Despite deeply admiring Chekhov, Mansfield seemed often to be on her way to writing a novel. As a young adult, she struggled but failed to complete novels entitled *Maata* and *Juliet*.¹⁶² In 1908, she writes in her notebook of how it would be 'colossally interesting' if she 'could only write a really good novel', revealingly clarifying: 'something that would make me really famous' (N 1, 161-2). Ida Baker too recalls Mansfield telling her once that she was 'determined to write a book, not *just* short stories' about New Zealand (my italics).¹⁶³

In correspondence with William Gerhardt, Mansfield describes the effects of a tea she had been drinking thus: 'But the idea, even, of *the short story* after a cup or two seems almost too good to be true' (CL 5, 257). She amusingly describes her handwriting as 'awkward', with the 'g' 'shy, with his tail in his mouth like an embarrassed whiting', but reticence is more palpably detected in that hesitant 'even' that precedes 'short story' and the italicisation which renders its pronouncement ridiculous (CL 5, 257). At the time the letter was written, on 26 August 1922, Mansfield was a famous writer, no longer in need of validation, and in writing to Gerhardt corresponding with an aspiring author who had sent her fan letters as an undergraduate. Kaplan has noted a 'rich irony in [Mansfield's] success with the short story, since she never accepted it as the highest form of fiction', observing how she was affected 'by the example of the literary greatness – critical acclaim and public success – of the major Victorian novelists', to the extent that '[a]s an aspiring writer, she believed that becoming "great" meant, finally, that she must write a major novel'.¹⁶⁴ Tomalin explains the unfinished state of Mansfield's novels as a result of recognising her own limitations, suggesting that '[a]s a writer, she always lacked stamina'.¹⁶⁵

In all these examples, the short story form is revealed either implicitly or explicitly as a

¹⁶² See CF 1, 520-528 for Mansfield's plan for the novel *Maata*.

¹⁶³ Ida Baker, *Katherine Mansfield – The Memories of LM* (London: Virago Press, 1985), pp. 96-97.

¹⁶⁴ Kaplan, p. 83.

¹⁶⁵ Tomalin, p.120.

negative choice – it is likely true that Mansfield was plagued by suspicion that a literary reputation could not rest solely on stories, or morsels. As late as September 1921, sixteen months before her death, she was writing: ‘I am stuck beyond words, and again it seems to me that what I am doing has *no form!* I ought to finish my stories first and then, when it’s gone, really get down to my novel, *Karori?*’.¹⁶⁶ Here, dissatisfaction with artistic fluidity is conflated with resentment towards the short story form. When she first discovered the foreboding signal of blood in her handkerchief, Mansfield recorded in a journal entry of 1917: ‘perhaps it is going to gallop – who knows? – and I shan’t have my work written. *That’s what matters.* How unbearable it would be to die, leave “scraps”, “bits” ... nothing real finished’ (*J* 129). Here Mansfield’s cardinal fear is articulated: that what she leaves behind will be insubstantial and inconsequential, mere bits and scraps.

While Mansfield would be accused of writing ‘chocolate box pieces’,¹⁶⁷ denounce others for the same and on darker days suspect it of herself, her living, breathing body of work (fuelled by its own comestible contents) refutes this heartily. While Mansfield’s neuroses about the form were articulated in private, they are not replicated in her work, which displays the deft confidence of an author in love with the genre and able to make the most of its defining characteristic – shortness – to explore the fleetingness of both human life and the insights glimpsed from within the midst of it. Mansfield’s strongest work does not only speak to the everyday and the momentary, it also embodies it in a way which the short story, uniquely, can allow. Her stories, in the words of Ali Smith, ‘celebrate life in face of the fact that neither the story nor life lasts’.¹⁶⁸ Snack food helpfully assists with this articulation, proof not only of engagement with the transitory and the mortal, but also of commitment to the short story itself. If *Jetztzeit* is ‘an instant in which the “whatness” of a particular situation ‘reveals itself in all its

¹⁶⁶ Katherine Mansfield, *The Journal of Katherine Mansfield 1904-1922*, ed. by John Middleton Murry (London: Constable, 1984), p. 262. Hereafter referred to as *J* with further references given after quotations in the text.

¹⁶⁷ Pamela Dunbar, *Radical Mansfield: Double Discourse in Katherine Mansfield’s Short Stories* (London: Macmillan, 1997), pp. ix-x.

¹⁶⁸ Smith, ‘Introduction’, p. xxiii.

temporal plenitude',¹⁶⁹ it is uniquely suited to the convergence of both the modernist short story which is 'timeless *and* transient'¹⁷⁰ and its culinary equivalent, the snack.

By contrast with the light bites of stories explored imminently, Woolf's modernist novel *To The Lighthouse* (1927) converges on a traditional dinner party at which *boeuf-en-daube* is served, a dish which took a servant three days to prepare, during which guests around the table unite 'their common cause against that fluidity out there'.¹⁷¹ In Mansfield's stories, snacking is more often a strike against solidity, a deliberate attempt at splintering away from a social group, as well as its beliefs and expectations – *Jetztzeit*, like modern reading, is at heart a solo enterprise. If anything solidifies in these encounters, it is resolve, commitment, a sense of self; however ephemeral these moments of assertion might be, they are expressions of what Beauvoir called 'pursuing the expansion of [...] existence and of retrieving this very effort as an absolute'.¹⁷²

If we move from the communal repast of Woolf's *boeuf-en-daube* to consider the nimbler morsel that features in Proust's sprawling *Remembrance of Things Past*, the madeleine, we can again observe differences in the effects of consumption. In Proust's work, the eating of the madeleine incites an overwhelming immersion in what has past, with history heaved into the present. As Gilles Deleuze described Bergson's conception of memory: 'We do not move from the present to the past, from perception to recollection, but from the past to the present, from recollection to perception'.¹⁷³ Proust describes 'the smell and taste of things' as 'remain[ing] poised a long time, like souls, ready to remind us'; they 'bear unfaltering, in the tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection'.¹⁷⁴ The madeleine instigates a sudden enrichment of the present with a richly invigorated past. Conversely, *Jetztzeit*'s 'presence of the now' (I 252-3) is inextricably bound up not only with the past but crucially also with the 'tiger's leap' (I 253) into the future. It 'open[s] up a space within which one is able to reconceive the possibilities of the past and the present' and thus shape the future, so freeing itself from a fixed

¹⁶⁹ McLoughlin, 'Moments of Insight', p. 302.

¹⁷⁰ Smith, *Artful*, p. 29.

¹⁷¹ Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse* (London: Everyman's Library, 1991), p. 111.

¹⁷² Simone de Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, trans. by Bernard Frechtman (New York: Citadel Press, 1976), p. 79.

¹⁷³ Gilles Deleuze, *Bergsonism*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Zone Books, 1991), p. 63.

¹⁷⁴ Marcel Proust, *Swann's Way*, trans. by C. K. Scott Moncrieff (London: Penguin, 1998), p. 58.

historicity and becoming capable of revolutionary influence on what might come after.¹⁷⁵

Burgan observes that writers such as Mansfield and Woolf, in conceiving of Dorothy Richardson's long novels as aesthetic failures, 'perceived that it was in their power to manipulate the signifying moment in narrative structures' enabled by the short story.¹⁷⁶ Burgan argues that 'the structure of temporality compressed within the epiphanic short story' was their achievement as it encapsulated 'the paradox of brevity [...] with its access to the material facticity of sensation, change, and process'.¹⁷⁷ This defining feature is encapsulated in Mansfield's stories via the paradoxical brevity of *Jetztzeit*, in which past, present and future explosively converge, enabled by material, sensory engagement allowed by the snack along with its opportunity for change and process. I will now move on to explore the increasing frequency and success of such moments in Mansfield's stories, beginning with her penultimate collection, *Bliss*.

***Bliss*: food for thought**

Rather than discussing at length Mansfield's first published collection, *In a German Pension*, a collection stuffed with extended gluttonous episodes but no snacking, I will instead begin with Mansfield's second collection, *Bliss and Other Stories* (1920). While in the *German Pension* stories the act of eating is only really alluded to, with feasts occurring with nauseating frequency but never really digested, *Bliss* is evidence of Mansfield finding a new gear as a writer. As she wrote herself after completing 'Je ne parle pas français': 'I have gone for it, bitten deeper & deeper & deeper than ever I have before' (CL 2, 56). The stories in *Bliss* follow the direction of travel suggested by the stories 'Summer Idylle' and 'How Pearl Button was Kidnapped', discussed earlier in this chapter, in linking eating explicitly to notions of individual authenticity and embryonic experiences of *Jetztzeit*. First though, I will survey some stories in which this incorporative ethic is still refused.

¹⁷⁵ Andrew Benjamin and Charles Rice, eds. *Walter Benjamin and the Architecture of Modernity* (Melbourne: re.press, 2009), p. 199.

¹⁷⁶ Burgan, 'The "Feminine" Short Story', p. 385.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

Abstention and rot

The story 'The Man Without a Temperament' describes a man who doesn't eat. Widely considered a commentary on Mansfield's relationship with Middleton Murry, the story documents an unhappily dutiful husband on holiday with his invalid wife, who suppresses his personality, desires and hunger to the point where they no longer exist. While the hotel guests around him eat, the husband, Robert, is asked: 'Is anything the matter?' His response: 'No. Off food, that's all' (CF 2, 207). His hunger strike is part of his martyred pose, distinct to that of his wife who describes him as 'bread and wine' (CF 2, 208) to her, for which she has keen appetite despite her illness. The story's devastating final line, the word 'Rot!' whispered by Robert to his convalescing wife, alludes not only to her disease but the wider decay of lives not fully lived. *Jetztzeit* cannot be experienced because there is neither a fullness of present life nor a future to leap into – engaged experience is kept at bay.

'Je ne parle pas français' is similarly an exploration of bad faith. It is a rare animal in Mansfield's oeuvre with its first-person narration yet the intimacy this device purports to establish is undermined by the subject matter which is concerned with surfaces and alienation. The word 'false' appears five times throughout the course of the story and the narrator-protagonist, Raoul Duquette, is a writer whose first book is titled *False Coins*, suggesting his currency of language as bogus. His narrative is dramatic, indulgent and removed from everyday experience: he describes a piece of pink blotting paper as a 'morsel', 'incredibly soft and limp and almost moist, like the tongue of a dead kitten', which he admits he has 'never felt' (CF 2, 114). Language is divorced from experience which suggests that the reader of the story might also be ultimately deprived of *Jetztzeit*. Duquette's natural habitat is the Parisian café, an ideal location for the snack encounter, yet he never orders any food. The story ends with the presumptive question from the café *patron*: 'You haven't dined yet?', to which Duquette responds tellingly: 'No, not yet, Madame'. He half-considers a desire to eat with 'Madame' and sleep with her afterwards, but decides against both on the basis that her pale skin would likely be decorated with moles, which 'remind [him] somehow, disgustingly, of mushrooms' (CF 2, 134). Again, rejection of food is

aligned with a refusal of experience and the *Jetztzeit* which might be derived from it.

'Bliss' expands on the theme of the inauthentic artist with its portrayal of the bohemian set which takes over Bertha's house, representing a type which sporadically punctuates Mansfield's mid-to-late stories and draws on her experience of the Garsington set.¹⁷⁸ The following passage describes the opening conversation between the first guests, discussing the impact of Mrs Norman Knight's 'most amusing' coat (CF 2, 146), decorated with a monkey print:

Why! Why! Why is the middle-class so *stodgy* – so utterly without a sense of humour! My dear, it's only by a fluke that I am here at all – Norman being the protective fluke. For my darling monkeys so upset the train that it rose to a man and simply *ate me* with its eyes. [...]

'But the *cream* of it was,' said Norman, pressing a large tortoise-shelled monocle into his eye, 'you don't mind me telling this, *Face*, do you?' (In their home and among their friends they called each other *Face* and *Mug*.) 'The *cream* of it was when she, being *full fed*, turned to the woman beside her and said: "Haven't you ever seen a monkey before?"'

'Oh, yes!' Mrs Norman Knight joined in the laughter. 'Wasn't that too absolutely *creamy*?'

And a funnier thing still was that now her coat was off she did look like a very intelligent monkey – who had even made that yellow silk dress out of scraped *banana skins*. And her amber ear-rings; they were like little dangling *nuts*. (CF 2, 146, my italics)

Food is signified everywhere, saturating thought, speech, and even self-consciously avant-garde clothing. And yet, ubiquitous and externalised, it is also meaningless. The Norman Knights do not only appropriate a gustatory language, and decorate themselves with comestible badges, they also appropriate nicknames for each other ('Face' and 'Mug'), which reduce them to metonyms for communicating and consuming. Yet they perform neither activity successfully, nor are their talking faces distinguishable from those of the other guests at the party, who speak using the

¹⁷⁸ In a letter to Murry of 28 February 1918, Mansfield wrote of 'Bliss', '*Eddie* of course is a fish out of the Garsington pond' (CL 2, 98).

same blithe alimentary discourse which struggles to signify. Marvin Magalaner was a critic early to observe the importance of food to this story, concluding that its presentation suggests the ‘ironic revulsion’ that Mansfield felt towards her subjects. For Magalaner, the story depicts the ‘grossness and materiality of such a society, behind the brittle façade of bohemianism and spirituality’ and ‘calls for imagery that will stress the physical, almost the animal, in the participants’.¹⁷⁹ I agree that irony is at work here, but not in the way that Magalaner describes. Instead it seems clear that any revulsion towards the dinner party guests is instead inextricably tied to their *inability* to immerse themselves in the materiality of the world they inhabit, which in turn brackets them off from *Jetztzeit* and entraps them in an existence they are powerless to influence.

Gushing languidly about artistic works in culinary terms, or food objects in artistic terms, the dinner party guests speak of plays entitled *Love in False Teeth* and *Stomach Trouble* (CF 2,148), discuss a plan for a fried-fish interior design scheme ‘with the backs of the chairs shaped like frying pans and lovely chip potatoes embroidered all over the curtains’ (CF 2, 150), and a poem called ‘Table d’Hôte’, which opens with the line: ‘Why must it always be tomato soup?’ (CF 2, 151). ‘It’s so deeply true, don’t you feel?’ asks one guest by the name of Eddie, ‘[t]omato soup is so *dreadfully* eternal’ (CF 2, 152). In equating the comestible with the eternal, Eddie reveals a profound misconception of the brief, diverse joy of life. As Mansfield would put it, postulating the urgent need to grasp *Jetztzeit* while one can: ‘Life is so short. The world is rich. There are so many adventures possible. Why do we not gather our strength together and LIVE’ (CF 5, 225). Mansfield’s understanding of the intensity of mortal brevity alongside worldly infinitude summarises the rich plentitude of *Jetztzeit*, in which the temporal diversity of past, present and future can be perceived and utilised in forward projection. Eddie is revealed to have access to no such diverse temporal abundance beyond the aching boredom of infinity, which is particularly damning in the light of his profession as artist – as Buchanan reminds us, *Jetztzeit* requires ‘the intervention of the artist or revolutionary’, or a consumer of snacks or stories who can behave like either, to ‘produce it by “blasting” it free from the ceaseless flow in which it would otherwise

¹⁷⁹ Marvin Magalaner, *The Fiction of Katherine Mansfield* (Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press, 1970), p. 83.

be trapped'.¹⁸⁰

The most promising alimentary moment in 'Bliss' counters Eddie's insulting comment about the tomato soup, when Bertha's feeling of affinity with Pearl Fulton seems to be catalysed by, rather than incidental to, their mutual 'stirring [of] the beautiful red soup in the grey plate' (CF 2, 148), which subsequently results in an epiphanic vision. As Angelella observes, 'Mansfield renders the soup itself the grounds of their connection'.¹⁸¹ In comparison with this contemplative rapport between two people and their food, the eating of the remainder of the party seems unfocussed, scattered and partial: 'dabbing their lips with their napkins, crumbling bread, fiddling with the forks and glasses and talking' (CF 2, 148). The communion over soup precedes the pair standing before the window, looking at the pear tree, experiencing (from Bertha's perspective) a feeling of wonderment at their own corporeal potential – 'all this blissful treasure that burned in their bosoms and dropped, in silver flowers, from their hair and hands' (CF 149).

The relation between Bertha and Pearl, and the *Jetztzeit* they seem to share, is ultimately undermined by the story's end, but stands out from the behaviour of the other guests at the party. Unable to function fully as sensual beings, the dilettante dinner guests are precluded from participating in a meaningful relationship with aesthetics, relying instead on a discursive mode removed from the objects it seeks to describe. Delville describes what he terms 'gastroaesthetics' as concerned with 'tak[ing] us to the body's direct confrontation with material reality'.¹⁸² Gastroaesthetics are not successfully appropriated by the guests, in demonstration of their separation from the art to which they appear to dedicate themselves, with food signified abundantly but never really tasted. As Mansfield would write to Dorothy Brett on 14 June 1922, 'I don't want to *discuss* literature or art, [...] I want to get on with it' (CL 5, 203). The empty cultural lives played out by characters in 'Je ne parle pas français' and 'Bliss' can be read as an expression of Mansfield's dissatisfaction with art removed from life, discursive rather than actively engaged. She would counteract this more effectively in other episodes of the collection.

¹⁸⁰ Buchanan, p. 272.

¹⁸¹ Angelella, p. 83.

¹⁸² Delville, p. 3.

Imaginative snacking

Despite these absent or empty culinary encounters, *Bliss and Other Stories* evidences a writer thinking her way through a more positive rendering of the alimentary than that depicted in the bitter burlesque of the feast-saturated *German Pension* stories. There are moments in *Bliss* which are ripe with gustatory meaning, including ‘Psychology’. As the title suggests, its narrative relates to cerebral processes and can be read as a warning of the entrapment that can accompany cold intellectualism, of thought as the repressive enemy of action, including consumption. However, there is hope here for the couple in the story despite their eventual awkward parting. They come together to share tea, with the narrative describing a diverse smorgasbord of snacking opportunity: ‘It was delightful – this business of having tea – and she always had delicious things to eat – like sharp sandwiches, short sweet almond fingers, and a dark, rich cake tasting of rum’. The male character, however, fails to capitalise on what the spread offers up, mistakenly viewing these intensely delectable foods negatively as an ‘interruption’, something to be skipped over rather than to be embraced like the pause of *Jetztzeit*. Instead, he rushes to skip to eating’s aftermath: a pipe and conversation.

As if willing him into the present tense from which *Jetztzeit* might become accessible, the female character cuts cake and implores her fellow diner to ‘[e]at it imaginatively’ (CF 2, 194). She receives this response:

‘You needn’t entreat me [...] It’s a queer thing but I always do notice what I eat here and never anywhere else. I suppose it comes of living alone so long and always reading while I feed ... my habit of looking upon food as just food ... something that’s there, at certain times ... to be devoured ... to be ... not there.’ He laughed. ‘That shocks you. Doesn’t it?’ (CF 2, 194-5)

Having previously privileged reading to the detriment of eating, intent on relegating food into the past rather than engaging with it in the present, here food begins to assert its presence more assuredly. This noticing of food beyond the book signals hope for transition to more

comprehensive, incorporative reading, a state in which he might be capable of receiving shocks as well as inciting them in his audience. Although the eating that occurs in this story might not be as imaginative as entreated, it nonetheless results in a shared insight in which the couple see themselves ‘as two little grinning puppets jigging away into nothingness’ (CF 2, 196), a vision which embodies the temporal plenitude of *Jetztzeit* by blending the specificity of the present with the eternal. In realising their inauthenticity, their susceptibility to ‘imitation’ (CF 2, 195), possible opportunities for less wooden encounters with food, each other, and *Jetztzeit*, open up.

‘A Dill Pickle’ is another story which focuses on an unsuccessful encounter between a couple, in which ‘the strangeness of talk, its mists and curtains, its final mystery and the isolation of the individual’ are explored, while eating offers a non-verbal alternative to failed communication.¹⁸³ In this story, two lovers meet after six years apart, with the meeting itself catalysed by food as the male is first recognised due to the particular way in which he peels an orange. The male protagonist speaks of a trip to Russia which the pair had once planned to take together, observing that life on the river is not impeded by not knowing the language: ‘You eat with them, pass the day with them, and in the evening there is that endless singing’ (CF 2, 100). He implies that meaningful interaction relies on activities other than speech, in the transience of eating or the continuousness of singing. He remembers with fondness a picnic taken by the Black Sea:

We took supper and champagne and ate and drank on the grass. And while we were eating the coachman came up. ‘Have a dill pickle,’ he said. He wanted to share with us. That seemed to me so right, so – you know what I mean? (CF 2, 101)

This is a moment of interpersonal, non-verbal communication and understanding which is enabled by a snack – the sharing of the dill pickle is ‘comprehen[d] as [a] coherent moment’ by the tale’s teller.¹⁸⁴ Its importance as a meaningful moment is reinforced by its crystallisation in

¹⁸³ Andrew Bennett, *Katherine Mansfield* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2004), p. 27.

¹⁸⁴ Ronald Schleifer, *Modernism and Time: The Logic of Abundance in Literature, Science and Culture 1880-1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), p. 78.

the story's title, yet the meaning of the moment is not directly explained, perhaps in reflection of the mystical nature of the '*nunc stans*' (I 252) which Hannah Arendt detected in Benjamin's vision of *Jetztzeit*.

As McLoughlin observes, *Jetztzeit* 'resembles that modernist moment of perception known as the epiphany' in its function as an instant that allows insight.¹⁸⁵ Separated from the usual chronology of time, *Jetztzeit* allows the individual partaking in it to reconceptualise the past, present and future. While the dill pickle moment encapsulates the epiphanic *nunc stans* of *Jetztzeit*, it captures an instant which cannot be dehistoricised – the story was written in 1917, the year of the Russian Revolution, and the moment of communion clearly depicts a breaking down of formerly entrenched social barriers. Although it is not possible to adequately render the experienced moment in language (it prompts the assurance-seeking query 'you know what I mean?' in its retelling), its significance is understood by its listener (whom we might also consider reader). What follows in response is a paragraph of clairvoyance or mind travel in which the entire party is imagined in great detail by the ex-lover, down to the specificity of the 'greenish glass jar with a red chili like a parrot's beak glimmering through', even provoking physical response in her: 'She sucked in her cheeks; the dill pickle was terribly sour' (CF 2, 101). The *Jetztzeit* of the moment manages to take a 'tiger's leap' (I 253) into another's mind in its recollection, such is its revolutionary potency. The listener to the story is involved in the same type of *Jetztzeit*-by-proxy which Mansfield's stories also set up for her readers to experience. The dill pickle manages, as Ali Smith wrote of the short story and specifically the story in Mansfield's hands, to capture 'the purely momentary nature of everything, both timeless *and* transient'; it 'emphasizes the momentousness of the moment'.¹⁸⁶ In *Jetztzeit*, 'two radically different notions of temporality' – 'the instantaneous, particular, and always perishing *Jetzt* and the chronological, general, and durative *Zeit*' – are gathered 'by way of an abbreviation which instantiates the very notion of nowtime'.¹⁸⁷ The dill pickle moment indicates a burgeoning perceptual awareness and understanding which Perullo refers to as '*gustative wisdom*' – a 'long and complex journey toward

¹⁸⁵ McLoughlin, 'Moments of Insight', p. 303.

¹⁸⁶ Smith, *Artful*, p. 29.

¹⁸⁷ Fioretos, p. 564.

increasing sensitivity'¹⁸⁸ and a 'flexible and elastic attitude that follows from the acquisition of the capacity to perceive differences'.¹⁸⁹ Such is the type of reading which Mansfield's stories engender.

Preludes

The story 'Prelude' was published in 1918 by the Hogarth Press, a process about which Mansfield complained in letter to Dorothy Brett: 'I threw my darling to the wolves and they ate it and served me up so much praise in such a golden bowl that I couldn't help feeling gratified' (CL 1, 330-1). Her metaphor complements the alimentary theme of the story whose plot is interspersed with food and meals, both real and imagined, with even birdsong rephrased as 'more pork' (CF 2, 65).¹⁹⁰ Most memorable is perhaps the duck served for dinner which only paragraphs earlier horrifically ran around after having had its head chopped off. The horror of the duck's demise is quickly forgotten as it is presented at the table in 'beautifully basted resignation' (CF 2, 84), perhaps intimating that the dinner guests are incapable of conceiving of past time and present time simultaneously. In another gesture key to the story, Stanley Burnell brings oysters and a pineapple jubilantly to his wife Linda in their new home, behaving 'as though he had brought her back all the harvest of the earth' (CF 2, 75), but his playful snacks are refused because they might spoil his wife's appetite for the planned dinner. Here, Linda is too wedded to the future to succumb to the present moment and what it might offer up. Despite these instances of thwarted *Jetztzeit*, there are other more successful instances of snacking and creative eating in the story.

Before Stanley arrives back at the new home with his pineapple and oysters, he experiences a moment of *Jetztzeit* while travelling in the back of a horse-drawn buggy, which carries with it echoes of Mansfield's experience in 1908 of eating a sandwich in the back of a hansom cab. Rendered in fiction, Stanley's moment is perhaps less clearly pronounced than Mansfield's, yet it palpably demonstrates his appreciation for the presence of the now while

¹⁸⁸ Perullo, p. xii.

¹⁸⁹ Perullo, p. 13.

¹⁹⁰ The owl which makes this sound is the Tasmanian spotted owl (*Ninox novaeseelandiae*), found throughout Tasmania and New Zealand and also known as the 'morepork'.

imagining a new direction in his future:

As they left the town finally and bowled away up the deserted road his heart beat hard for joy. He rooted in the bag and began to eat the cherries, three or four at a time, chucking the stones over the side of the buggy. They were delicious, so plump and cold, without a spot or bruise on them. (CF 2, 74).

The speed of travel in the horse-drawn cart is matched in pace by Stanley's pounding heart and his propulsion of the cherry stones out of the cart parallels his abandonment of town life while signifying a burgeoning disregard for propriety. These actions join the past (town life), present (eating the cherries), and future (casting the stones away, as if sowing seeds, as well as the energy the cherries will bring). He appreciates not only the eating of the cherries but also their beauty, sticking one in his buttonhole and conceiving of them as 'perfect' (CF 2, 74) – snacking becomes an aesthetic experience in which Stanley is equally receptive and creative. Stanley experiences what Beauvoir describes as 'that engaged freedom, that surging of the for-oneself' which precipitates revolution, in which the present tense blossoms into the future.¹⁹¹

From this appreciation of the presence of the now which the cherries enable flows thinking about the future. Stanley decides that he will eschew Saturday lunches at the club (we remember here Mansfield's disparaging letter in which she refuses to write a 'little lunch at the club', N 2, 138) and instead leave the office early to go home and eat a sort of picnic – a 'couple of slices of cold meat and half a lettuce' (CF 2, 74). Again, this moment encapsulates what Perullo calls 'the paradigm of *embodied knowledge*, which originates and develops in *and* through the body, and which is not conceivable otherwise', that which can lead to the multiplicitous temporal insight of *Jetztzeit*.¹⁹² These small changes represent a repositioning of values – an ideological shift away from bourgeois and capitalist priorities towards a fuller appreciation of the presence of the now. The change is not absolute – Stanley will return to his home with its rigid structure, with its servants and perpetuation of prescribed roles which impede individual freedom, sitting

¹⁹¹ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 10.

¹⁹² Perullo, p. 25.

down to a traditional roast, carving the meat himself because '[h]e hated seeing a woman carve' (CF 2, 85). However, it is the moment of revolutionary potential which is important here, the prelude referred to by the story's title and precipitating future change. That Stanley does not fully realise his revolution within the space of the story is evidence of a conundrum Mansfield would return to repeatedly, particularly in her illustration of *Jetztzeit*: that 'the freedom of man is infinite, but his power is limited'.¹⁹³

In 'Prelude', children are perhaps the most natural receivers of *Jetztzeit*, as demonstrated by this glimpse of an imaginary picnic hosted by Kezia and Lottie:

There were three daisy heads on a laurel leaf for poached eggs, some slices of fuchsia petal cold beef, some lovely little rissoles made of earth and water and dandelion seeds, and the chocolate custard which she had decided to serve in the paw shell she had cooked it in. (CF 79)

This diverse array of foodstuffs, albeit imaginary and enjoyed by ants and a snail rather than people, demonstrates the engaged spontaneity and creativity implicit to *Jetztzeit* as well as Mansfield's own aesthetic in conjuring magic out of the ordinary. Here, a picnic or a story can be fashioned out of what lies around one's feet and in one's head. The scope of a short story is often formulated in terms of the 'slice of life' – it might as easily be conceived of as a slice of beef or cake, involving all the impromptu engagement which its consumption entails, as well as the potentially revolutionary energy with which it might provide its reader.

Kezia is allowed a more real world alimentary encounter toward the beginning of the story, where she is tricked by her companions into choosing the strawberries and cream which don't exist over bread and dripping for her tea:

But Kezia bit a big piece out of her bread and dripping, and then stood the piece up on her plate. With the bite out of it made a dear little sort of gate. Pooh! She didn't care! A tear rolled down

¹⁹³ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 28. In illustrating the period that follows *Jetztzeit* to the reader, Mansfield encourages readers not only to grasp *Jetztzeit* where they encounter it but also to eke out its influence as far as possible.

her cheek, but she wasn't crying. She couldn't have cried in front of all those awful Samuel Josephs. She sat with her head bent, and as the tear dripped slowly down, she caught it with a neat little whisk of her tongue and ate it before any of them had seen. (*CF* 2, 58)

This section is notably absent from 'The Aloe', planned as a novel and the first draft from which 'Prelude' was created. It is a rare instance of addition during a rewriting process which was otherwise an exercise of radical truncation and omission – as Angela Smith notes, 'Mansfield's transformation of "The Aloe" into "Prelude" takes a giant bite out of it'.¹⁹⁴ Kezia's quiet demonstration of bravery through eating shifts the balance of power in a scene in which bullying, delusion and status quo has presided, ending with the false ring of the line '[e]ven Mrs. Samuel Josephs smiled indulgently. It was a merry tea' (*CL* 1, 470). Here though, a tear, which could have signalled defeat, is 'eaten' rather than drunk or simply licked away. It is a further gesture of defiance and incorporation – ingestion as a prelude to revolution. In her book on etiquette, Visser implies the subversion involved in letting one's tongue escape one's mouth, observing that tongues are 'questionable objects', 'slippery' and 'distasteful', belonging 'very definitely *inside* mouths'.¹⁹⁵ Here, the hole in the bread becomes not a gap but a subversive gateway to the presence of the now and the possibilities it might offer up.

The story which Mansfield wrote soon after 'Prelude' was 'Feuille d'Album', which, sitting between 'Prelude' and 'A Dill Pickle', can be conceived of as the filling in a revolutionary sandwich, telling the tale of a young artist in Paris in a very different key to that of its geographical sister, 'Je ne parle pas français'. The episode which precipitates its climactic ending arises from the eating of fruit by a window:

One evening he was sitting at the side window eating some prunes and throwing the stones on to the tops of the huge umbrellas in the deserted flower market. It had been raining – the first real spring rain of the year had fallen – a bright spangle hung on everything, and the air smelled

¹⁹⁴ Smith, *Katherine Mansfield - A Literary Life*, p. 116.

¹⁹⁵ Visser, p. 315 (italics as in the text).

of buds and moist earth. Many voices sounding languid and content rang out in the dusky air, and the people who had come to close their windows and fasten the shutters leaned out instead. (CF 2, 95)

From this position, the gaze of the artist, Ian French, falls upon a woman with whom he becomes smitten. The *Jetztzeit* of the moment is initiated by the engagement between mind and matter which snacking on the fruit encourages and which initiates an appreciation for the external world, itself ripe with the potential energy of the season – the past embodied by the community traditions of the flower market and the dead flowers it sells is counterbalanced by wider atmosphere of nascent growth which gestures toward the future. Neighbours lean out of windows instead of locking themselves away, and the prospect of communion hangs in the air alongside the scent of wet earth. Overpowered by sensory and temporal overload, we are told Ian's 'heart fell out of the side window of his studio, and down to the balcony of the house opposite – buried itself in the pot of daffodils under the half-opened buds and spears of green' (CF 2, 95). This is *Jetztzeit* figured in extravagant prose with unmistakable emphasis on the growth and potential future energy which it encompasses.

In the closing paragraphs, the protagonist builds the courage to approach the woman he has been watching from his window, transforming the *Jetztzeit* of his initial revelation into action. He goes into a dairy from which she has just bought just one brown, aesthetically perfect, 'beautifully shaped' egg, before audaciously confronting her on the steps of her house:

Blushing more crimson than ever, but looking at her severely he said, almost angrily: 'Excuse me, Mademoiselle, you dropped this.'

And he handed her an egg. (CF 2, 97)

No further eating is observed at the story's end: it stops (fittingly for its avian theme) in mid-flight. Yet the elements of risk, innovation and possibility intrinsic to successful snacking and *Jetztzeit* are so powerfully present, with the ending all at once anarchic, warmly humorous and

profoundly optimistic. The scene evokes the courtship between Mansfield and Murry, with Murry recalling:

[In the kitchen] I found the table laid, and a kettle boiling. Brown bread and butter and honey, and a large brown egg in an egg-cup. Fixed between the egg and the egg-cup, like a big label, was a half-sheet of blue notepaper, with this inscription: 'This is your egg. You must boil it. K.M.'¹⁹⁶

Like the note Mansfield left for Murry, the surreal scene with which 'Feuille d'Album' ends can also be read as instructional, but as a reminder to Mansfield's writing self, reminiscent of that which the protagonist, Ian French, has by his bedside, reading: 'GET UP AT ONCE' (CF 2, 93) – an invocation to seize the aesthetic moment fully when it arises. The egg, packed full of protein with its secret, glossy, centred burst of yolk, easily carried and consumed, is a perfect model for the short fiction of which Mansfield was capable: the yolk sits quietly within, poised like *Jetztzeit* itself, at a standstill yet packed with potential energy just waiting to be released. The straight-faced humour of the ending of 'Feuille d'Album' alludes to revolutionary future freedoms, while the acknowledgment of a world in which dropped eggs might not break articulates a vision of a world in which magic can happen. It is in this world that Mansfield could act the conjuror and gift her readers the egg.

Creative objects and illuminating experience

In conversation with the *New Age* editor, A. R. Orage, not long before her death, Mansfield spoke with frankness of her ambitions for literature with a clarity exceeding that of her written formulations of aesthetics. Orage recalls her as saying:

The greatest literature of all – the literature that scarcely exists – has not merely an esthetic object, nor merely a didactic object, but, in addition, a creative object; that of subjecting its

¹⁹⁶ Meyers, *Katherine Mansfield: A Darker View*, p. 67.

readers to a real and at the same time illuminating experience. Major literature is in short an initiation into truth.¹⁹⁷

Although she was not speaking of her own work, and was not convinced she had achieved this synthesis, the description of the ‘real’, ‘illuminating experience’ is key to conceptualising Mansfield’s stories as well as the way in which the form changed in her hands. These moments of insight or ingestion, are ‘complete, sudden, and nondiscursive’ – they do not translate or offer a digested summary of the moment, they recreate it.¹⁹⁸ In making her moments of change gustatory, Mansfield could demonstrate the alchemy of the reading experience by manifesting the chemical change and material influence which endures beyond the fleetingness of the moment conveyed.¹⁹⁹ In presenting reading as a type of eating, she articulated an aesthetics of incorporation which allowed access to *Jetztzeit* and all its revolutionary possibilities.

Before exploring Mansfield’s final collection, *The Garden Party*, I would like to end this section with a photograph of a letter held in the Alexander Turnbull library, written around 1909, likely to the musician Garnet Trowell. It reads: ‘Dearest – there is so much to tell you of and yet all my impressions seem to be put into a lolly bag and jumbled up together – sticking together, even, yet, the yellow against the green! You know. Take one?’²⁰⁰ Mansfield’s stories take the analogy further, offering up selected morsels for us to sample with that tempting question to which we must respond as readers: ‘Take one?’

¹⁹⁷ A. R. Orage, ‘Talks with Katherine Mansfield,’ *The Century Magazine*, November 1924, 36-40, (p. 37).

¹⁹⁸ Sarah Sandley, ‘Katherine Mansfield’s “Glimpses”’ in *Katherine Mansfield: In from the Margin*, ed. by Roger Robinson (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1994), pp. 70-89 (p. 73). Sandley has observed that it is Joyce and Woolf who are unfairly credited with the modernist rendering of the moment in literature despite Mansfield’s contribution which begun with *Bliss and Other Stories* (Sandley, p. 89).

¹⁹⁹ Recent brain imaging experiments have found that poetic or literary prose function as ‘brain waves’, capable of ‘lock[ing] into and then modify[ing] existing mental pathways’ (Davis, *Reading and the Reader*, p. 23), suggesting that reading is as capable of physically changing the human body as the process of ingesting food.

²⁰⁰ This letter is reproduced in *N* 1, 234. The word ‘lolly’ is used in New Zealand to refer to sweets in general.

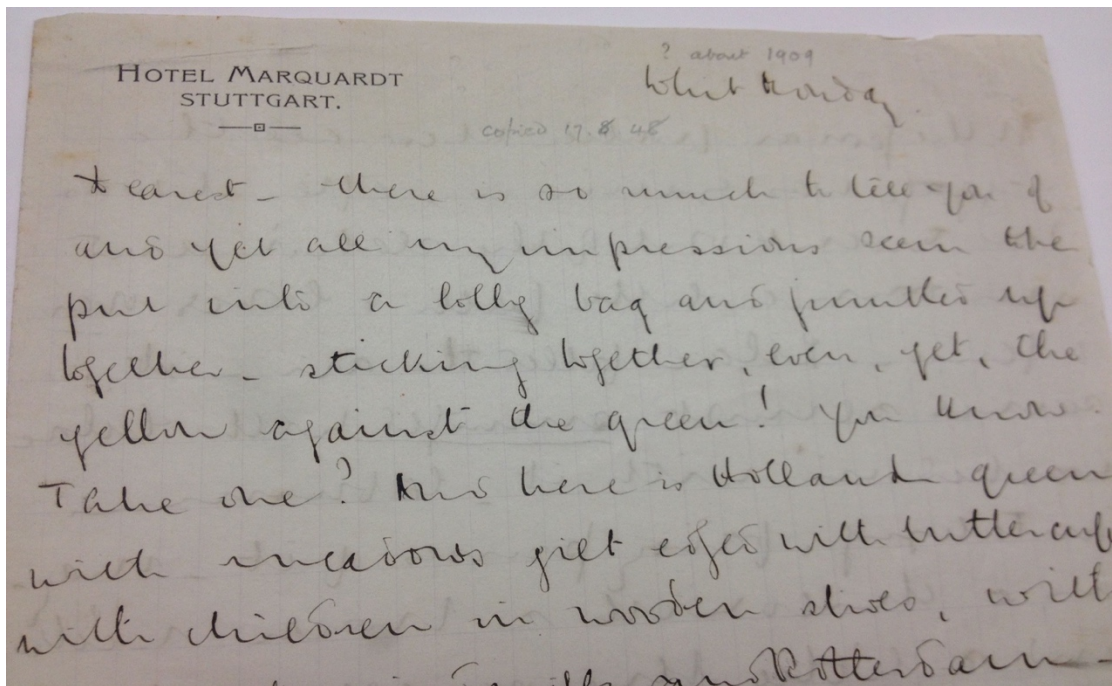


Figure 3: Letter of 1909, likely to Garnet Trowell, photograph reproduced courtesy of Alexander Turnbull Library.
MS-Papers-11326-017.

Dismantling the Victorian meal: *The Garden Party* and illicit snacks

Diane McGee observes that much of the eating in Mansfield's stories is 'done on the fly' with meals 'consumed in nameless restaurants' or 'replaced by snacks'.²⁰¹ We have already seen proof of Mansfield's 'snack habit', and in the later stories of *The Garden Party* (1922), it is increasingly evidenced, with alimentary encounters signifying freedom as well as an increased textual ease with, and dedication to, the short story form.²⁰² Jenny McDonnell argues that a reinvigorated commitment to the short story was explicitly and publically articulated by Mansfield in a short story review 'Wanted, A New Word' of June 1920, stating that this call for the expression of a 'new word' in fiction was 'fundamentally linked with her commitment to the short story genre'.²⁰³ One of Mansfield's most explicit statements about the short form can be found in correspondence to her publisher Alfred Knopf in 1922, the year in which *The Garden Party* was

²⁰¹ McGee, p. 88.

²⁰² Anonymous, 'Meals in Fiction', p. 3.

²⁰³ Jenny McDonnell, 'Wanted, a New Word: Katherine Mansfield and the *Athenaeum*', *Modernism/modernity*, 16.4 (November 2009), 727-742 (p. 727).

published. In this letter, she states, quite unashamedly: 'I think its possible the tide has turned in favour of short stories. But perhaps that's the optimism of one who loves the form' (CL 5, 116).

The specific references to snacking in the stories not only confirm and enact Mansfield's commitment to the short story but are indicative of content assimilating with form, with the snacks symbolising the liberty and compression of the short fiction form while enabling the transformative single effect. Just two months before her death, Mansfield wrote to Murry from a Paris hotel: 'I have a little cupboard with "snacks" in it. Youd like it' (CL 5, 286) – a seemingly odd pronouncement without knowledge of the snack's significance to Mansfield's personal mythology and literary heritage. It was her comprehension of the need to '[m]ake use of short daylight' (CL 1, 94) and windows of *Jetztzeit* where they open up, which led to her almost unprecedented understanding of the short story as a form, where a celebratory capturing of the life of moments and those moments which change lives is intrinsically bound up with endings and loss.

In *The Garden Party* collection, instances of liberated joy tend to work against such a wider context of decay or stagnation. One example is Miss Brill's honey cake which enables her atypical (if routine) experience of freedom and engagement with the present:

It was her Sunday treat. Sometimes there was an almond in her slice, sometimes not. It made a great difference. If there was an almond it was like carrying home a tiny present – a surprise – something that might very well not have been there. She hurried on the almond Sundays and struck the match for the kettle in quite a dashing way. (CF 2, 253)

Perhaps like a reader carrying home their purchase from a bookshop, Miss Brill is unsure as to what mysteries might unfurl when she consumes her purchase. In a story otherwise comprising thinly veiled tragedy, the almond slice allows Miss Brill access to *Jetztzeit*, however temporary that access might be, its 'surprise' equivalent to the explosive shock of the presence of the now. In contrast with Proust's madeleine, the almond slice incites Miss Brill's engagement not with her past but with the present moment; her striking of the match alludes to the volatile possibilities

which she might one day feel empowered to embrace, even within the traditional routine of a Sunday which signifies past experience. At the story's ending, she forgoes her usual trip to the bakery, rejecting the possibility of the freedom or joy that can accompany engagement with the moment. It is as if Miss Brill has come to terms with the fact that she has 'been an actress for a long time' (CF 2, 253) and so dully accepts the traditions of chronological time over the possibility of authenticity and change. This allows for the closing paragraph's growing sense of entrapment, which is epitomised by Miss Brill's fur necklet crying posthumously as it is put away in its box.

Conversely, in 'Bank Holiday', a cinematic portrayal of a communal scene, pleasure is both apparent and widespread, with convivial joy conveyed largely through acts of outdoor eating, individually-appreciated acts building into a carnivalesque mass enjoyment: the 'crowd collects, eating oranges and bananas, tearing off the skins, dividing, sharing' (CF 2, 223). Tongues become a very literal vehicle of investigation, and the reader also shares in their exploration:

Round the ice-cream cart, with its striped awning and bright brass cover, the children cluster. Little tongues lick, lick round the cream trumpets, round the squares. The cover is lifted, the wooden spoon plunges in; one shuts one's eyes to feel it, silently scrunching. (CF 2, 224)

With this story, Mansfield has completely left behind the restriction of the middle- and upper-class eating which characterises her *German Pension* and dinner party stories in depicting the out-of-doors celebration of a public holiday. The piece celebrates the spirit of 'convivial indulgence' that Bourdieu describes as epitomised by the *bon vivant*.²⁰⁴ Here, eating is part of the ebb and flow of vibrant, teeming sensory life, of dividing and bringing together and reconfiguring. Human behaviour emulates the music, which 'breaks into bright pieces, and joins together, and again

²⁰⁴ Bourdieu writes: 'A bon vivant is not just someone who enjoys eating and drinking; he is someone capable of entering into the generous and familiar – that is, both simple and free – relationship that is encouraged and symbolized by eating and drinking together, in a conviviality which sweeps away restraints and reticence' (Bourdieu, p. 175).

breaks, and is dissolved, [as] the crowd scatters, moving slowly up the hill', with food, sound and people breaking apart only to join together in a spirit of reincorporation. Street hawkers encourage consumption, while the sun makes men and women 'feel their bodies expanding, coming alive' (*CF* 2, 224) amongst a wider feeling of generative growth.

Mikhail Bakhtin posits eating and swallowing as acts intrinsically linked to death and destruction, observing the etymology of 'to die' as including among its connotations the meaning 'of "being swallowed" or "being eaten up"'.²⁰⁵ Similarly, Georges Bataille argues: 'Eating brings death'.²⁰⁶ Eating, and especially snack eating, simultaneously encapsulates the brevity of life and the longevity of growth, complementing the fleeting and eternal qualities of *Jetztzeit*. Along these lines, Mansfield's gloriously chaotic hymn to life also expands to encompass the aged (even babies are 'old, old') and does not shrink from the necessity of detritus and defecation: 'the fat old bodies roll together as the cradle rocks, and the steaming horse leaves a trail of manure as it ambles down the hill' (*CF* 2, 225). Liberty characterises this moving tableau, and the acts of eating contained within it, moving to the rhythms of growth and decay, oscillating like the jostling atoms that compose the scene. The story's style is breathless (as if, eating and talking, it barely has time to suspire) and abundant – its plenitudinous prose reaching a peak as the crowd it depicts does also:

And up, up the hill come the people, with ticklers and golliwogs, and roses and feathers. Up, up, they thrust into the light and heat, shouting, laughing, squealing, as though they were being pushed by something, far below, and by the sun, far ahead of them – drawn up into the full, bright dazzling radiance to ... what? (*CF* 2, 225)

Their freedom is yet orchestrated to a certain extent, they are 'pushed by something' towards an indistinct goal. While the crowd is submerged in the here-and-now, there are indications that the

²⁰⁵ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. by Hélène Iswolsky (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1984), p. 301.

²⁰⁶ Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy, Volume 1: Consumption*, trans. by Robert Hurley (New York: Zone Books, 1988), p. 34.

indulgence could serve to tranquillise minds rather than attune them (for example: the ‘reek of beer’ from the public house into which it is necessary to ‘savagely elbow [one’s] way in’; the fortune teller smiling ‘like a clumsy dentist’, *CF* 2, 225; the crowd ‘lift[ing] up their arms, for nothing’, *CF* 2, 224) and so demean its revolutionary potential. The sanctioned enjoyment of a bank holiday is perhaps less aligned with *Jetztzeit* than those transgressive moments which move rebelliously against existing structure and stricture. Yet the story’s climactic ending, which moves towards an unrealised revelation, hands over responsibility to the manifold individuals who make up the crowd, ending on that question which both crowd and reader must answer.

Cream puffs and bread-and-butter

The eponymous ‘The Garden Party’ demonstrates moments of unauthorised transgression, revolving around a party whose food is discussed in great detail, and where significant episodes take place only on its fringes, with food removed from the central nucleus of the party. It is a story used in the culminating paragraphs of Angela Smith’s essay “‘Looking at the party *with* you”: Pivotal Moments in Katherine Mansfield’s Party Stories’, which focuses on transformative moments and thwarted epiphanies at social gatherings but does not refer to the food as intrinsic to such moments.²⁰⁷ Naturally, here I will argue otherwise. An early example of a transformative gustatory moment is when Jose and Laura are covertly offered a cream puff before the party starts by the cook who assures them that their mother will never know. Despite debating with their consciences (or ideologies), we are told that ‘two minutes later [they] were licking their fingers with that absorbed inward look that only comes from whipped cream’ (*CF* 2, 407), with a sensuousness that verges on the sexual. Yet it seems doubtful that the ‘inward look’ is solely related to cream – surely it would not have been quite so absorbed had the consumption occurred within the supervised parameters of the garden party – and alludes to the mindful engagement which can flow from illicit snacking and the *Jetztzeit* it precipitates. Here, and elsewhere, freedom from convention and class are articulated through such moments of reckless

²⁰⁷ Angela Smith, “‘Looking at the party *with* you’: Pivotal Moments in Katherine Mansfield’s Party Stories’, in *The Modernist Party*, ed. by Kate McLoughlin (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), pp. 79-94 (pp. 91-93).

eating, in defiance of societal stricture, in ‘moments of socially libertarian [...] emancipation’.²⁰⁸

When Laura is sent outside to liaise with the men who have come to put up the marquee in the garden, she embraces the opportunity, finding it ‘so delicious to have an excuse for eating out of doors’ (*CF* 2, 402). Enamoured with what she perceives as the workmen’s natural and guileless behaviour, she is particularly struck by a ‘tall fellow’ pinching lavender between his finger and thumb to smell it – an act of appreciation for the presence of the now which she feels would be far beyond the ‘silly boys she danced with and who came to Sunday night supper’ (*CF* 2, 403). As the men work, Laura is enraptured by their insouciant friendliness with each other, and is so affected that she makes a deliberate expression of her excitement, contributing to this spirit of solidarity through an alimentary act:

Just to prove how happy she was, just to show the tall fellow how at home she felt, and how she despised stupid conventions, Laura took a big bite out of her bread-and-butter as she stared at the little drawing. She felt just like a work-girl. (*CF* 2, 403)

Here, pleasure seems to inspire eating, rather than being simply derived as a consequence of it, reinforcing its authenticity as a meaningful act, a deliberate encounter with the here-and-now which is bound up with joy and transgression in a feat of overwhelmingly positive rebellion. Laura’s rapture in eating the bread and butter helps complete the transformation from ‘passivity’ to ‘active sensibility’, inertia into what Perullo refers to as ‘perception: the awareness and voluptuous abandonment to the pure *material substance* of a food’ which leads to the temporal ‘upheaval’ of *Jetztzeit*.²⁰⁹ By eating the bread and butter, Laura experiences a moment of connection which is transformative, enabling a perceptual leap into another’s individual experience by imagining herself a work-girl, however much the reality of her existence as the daughter of a bourgeois family might appear to undermine such an experience. Laura not only takes part in this moment of empathy in the present tense, but also views the history of

²⁰⁸ Perullo, p. 35.

²⁰⁹ Perullo, p. 31 (italics as in the text).

humankind as bound up with ‘absurd class distinctions’ (CF 2, 403) to glimpse the possibility of a future characterised by liberty from such restrictive categorisation.

Although they incite abandon, the bread and butter are components of the fifteen types of sandwich that will be served at the party, which in their unrefined state draw sharp divergence with such luxury. Bourdieu, comparing working class and bourgeois eating styles respectively, writes of the ‘opposition between the immediate and the deferred, the easy and the difficult, substance (or function) and form’.²¹⁰ In choosing the immediate over the deferred, substance over form, Laura’s preference is for the heart of life, rather than its polite packaging. Yet (literary) form is also relevant to the success of this encounter, with the short story enabling a dissolving of the opposition Bourdieu describes to encompass immediacy, ease and substance.

In spite of Laura’s background which would apparently bracket her with Bourdieu’s bourgeois consumer, her alimentary performance is still successful, with *Jetztzeit* affording her the suspended perception which lifts her outside of herself far enough to perceive the ideology which shapes her life. Further similar negotiations take place elsewhere in the story which posit the bread and butter as instigating an ongoing development – for example, when Laura begs her father to allow the band members to share their refreshments. Laura’s concern that the party should be stopped out of respect for their grieving neighbours is labelled ‘extravagant’ (CF 2, 407) by her family, with her emotion deemed excessive and inappropriate in ironic contrast with the genuinely disproportionate backdrop of plenty that will result in lavish leftovers once the party is over. Laura’s consumption of the bread and butter encapsulates freedom as what Beauvoir called a ‘movement of liberation’ – it is this direction of movement which is key.²¹¹ The bread and butter moment demonstrates Laura’s understanding that ‘[e]xistence must be asserted in the present if one does not want all life to be defined as an escape towards nothingness’.²¹² Through her gustatory encounter, Laura engages with the present to negotiate a freedom from the rigidity of past social structures to allow an opening up of time in which revolution might shape her own future.

²¹⁰ Bourdieu, p. 194.

²¹¹ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 32.

²¹² Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 125.

Food, which offered so much potential earlier in the story, finally comes to represent failed communication and the decay which both it and the reader cannot resist. Laura goes to share the party's leftovers with her mourning neighbours, walking down to the cottages where there are only unappetising 'cabbage stalks, sick hens and tomato cans' (CF 2, 408), despite her awareness that it is likely inappropriate to bring these 'scraps from the party' (CF 2, 411) to a house populated by a dead man and his mourners, likely grief-stricken beyond appetite. Yet Laura's response to this situation, her empathy, tears and description of the difficult encounter with the mourners and the corpse of the dead man as 'simply marvellous' (CF 2, 413) – meaningful rather than uncomfortable and forgettable – reveal that she has grasped the fullest meaning of consumption and incorporation within the presence of the now. Korsmeyer observes that 'lurking in the background of all acts of eating one can discover that which is destroyed or being consumed, thereby losing its own identity while sustaining that of another' – it is this process which *The Garden Party*, where gluttony and luxury co-exist with death and poverty, describes.²¹³ Setting out her purpose in writing 'The Garden Party' in correspondence of 11 March 1922 with William Gerhardt, Mansfield explains that she had tried to convey '[t]he diversity of life [...] Death included' (CL 5, 101). In glimpsing the fullness of life, replete with decay and structural inequalities, Laura has to some extent succeeded in arbitrating her own freedom through engagement with the fullness of the moment and the diverse, ambivalent reach of the here-and-now. A similar moment occurs in the interlude of 'At the Bay' which takes place in Mrs Stubbs' parlour, in which tea is laid out – 'ham, sardines, a whole pound of butter, and such a large johnny cake that it looked like an advertisement for somebody's baking powder'. Mrs Stubbs commences a tea-time rumination on the death of her husband who was 'carried [...] off' by 'dropsy' (CF 2, 360) before concluding with a 'soft, fat chuckle [that] sounded like a purr' that 'freedom's best!', a mantra she subsequently reiterates (CF 2, 361). *Jetztzeit* here allows an awareness of her own past and future converged – cliché would pronounce Mrs Stubbs the mourning widow, characterised by loss, while *Jetztzeit* has her crowing of abundant liberty in the present tense.

²¹³ Korsmeyer, p. 188.

Chocolate cake, prepared foods and eggs in various forms

‘The Daughters of the Late Colonel’ is another story which maps out the possibility of a new type of freedom from the rigidity of tradition, manners and social expectations through real and imagined eating. It was also a story which Mansfield felt to be one of her strongest achievements. In a letter of 16 March 1922, she confessed to Murry’s younger brother:

I’m 33; I feel I am only just beginning to see now what it is... I want to do. It will take years of work to really bring it off. I’ve done one or two things, like the Daughters of the Colonel which were the right kind. But *one* or *two*! (CL 5, 113, italics as in the text)

As one of the only stories which Mansfield felt fully realised her artistic ambition, it is one crucial to consideration of her aesthetics.

The two sisters, Constantia and Josephine (‘Con’ and ‘Jug’), discover a new autonomy once their father has died, but one which they are almost too tentative to grasp. They are depicted as individuals whose lives have, in the words of Beauvoir: ‘slip[ped] by in an infantile world because, having been kept in a state of servitude and ignorance, they have no means of breaking the ceiling which is stretched over their heads’.²¹⁴ One such example is their asking the nurse who tended their father to stay on in the house, to satisfy the expectations of etiquette while denying their personal needs and freedoms:

Nurse Andrews had, of course, jumped at the idea. But it was a bother. It meant they had to have regular sit-down meals at proper times [...] And meal-times now that the strain was over were rather a trial. (CF 2, 268)

Rather than engage with the dull reality of meal-times with Nurse Andrews, the two sisters

²¹⁴ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 37. Beauvoir admired Mansfield’s work but does not specifically refer to it here.

displace themselves through projected imaginings, populating the table-cloth with a menagerie, with Josephine 'fastening her small, bead-like eyes on the tablecloth as though she saw a minute strange insect creeping through the web of it, while Constantia 'gazed away – away – far over the desert, to where that line of camels unwound like a thread of wool' (*CF* 2, 268). Each are annoyed by Nurse Andrews' presence, as well as her lavish indulgence in butter at their expense. Yet this asceticism is reversed later in the story, when for family guests Josephine 'cut[s] recklessly into the rich dark cake that stood for her winter gloves or the soling and heeling of Constantia's only respectable shoes' (*CF* 2, 275). In exchanging practical, material objects such as shoes and gloves for the short-lived decadence of a chocolate cake, Constantia chooses the short-term over the long-term, the moment over the financial year and a future which is not plotted but subject to revolutionary revisions. The coming forth of a temporal elasticity or revolution is perhaps also alluded to by Constantia's lack of clarity about whether their clock was 'fast or slow' (*CF* 2, 276), lingering in the past or skipping into the future.

While the sisters refuse to take communion to ease the pain of their father's death ('the idea of a little Communion terrified them', *CF* 2, 270), it appears that the rich dark cake may have affected a spiritual change in them, becoming an 'inner experience, something that internally changes or enriches'.²¹⁵ Intimations of bravery resurge and peak when Constantia and Josephine excitedly consider letting their house help go, to subsist autonomously:

'[...] if we did' - and this she barely breathed, glancing at the door - 'give Kate notice' - she raised her voice again - 'we could manage our own food.'

'Why not?' cried Constantia. She couldn't help smiling. The idea was so exciting. She clasped her hands. 'What should we live on, Jug?'

'Oh, eggs in various forms!' said Jug, lofty again. 'And besides, there are all the cooked foods.' (*CF* 2, 279)

This decision to manage their own lives rather than let them be managed by others is so

²¹⁵ Perullo, p. 8.

powerful that it has the feel of a eureka moment. The fond comedy of the scene plays with the fact that such huge worlds, just life-changing realisations, might be contained in vessels as small as eggs, yet this does not undermine the potency of the moment. Although no food has been ingested, this instant is full of the potential of which Benjamin spoke, poised and ready to take that tiger's leap into the future. This imagined gustatory experience speaks to an 'aesthetics of relation and implication, an aesthetics that attempts to overcome the stiff and hypostatic resistances and dichotomies that exist between the entities of mind and body, subject and object, or nature and culture'.²¹⁶ It is eating, and thinking about eating, which allow the sisters the explosive conception of potential autonomy, from a revelatory awareness of their lives as unbearably shaped by convention, they become aware of their independent power to overthrow their oppression, in which they are of course complicit. This vision is almost epicurean – by realising the 'link between good as (gustatory) pleasure and the good – the ultimate goal of human life, what makes life worth living', the sisters glimpse a 'manifesto for a new way of living'.²¹⁷ Appropriately enough, once this story was completed, Ida Baker (whose middle name, Constance, discloses the source of Mansfield's inspiration for the character Constantia) supplied tea and egg sandwiches late at night.²¹⁸

In postulating a vision of a future where eggs can be conjured not just in their raw state but in varieties of cooked forms, Jug reappraises the sisters' potential in a creative and imaginative act which renegotiates the path set out for them by others and bends it towards liberty and fulfilment. It is through more innovative consumption that the sisters will be able to elevate themselves from the monotony of capitalist and domestic oppression, 'running out, bringing things home in bags, getting things on approval, discussing them [...] and taking them back to get more things on approval, and arranging father's trays and trying not to annoy father' (*CF* 2, 282), towards a more effortless state of being, 'out of the tunnel into the moonlight or by the sea or into a thunderstorm [where] she really felt herself', which focuses on the satisfaction of desires that are more deep-rooted and enable a more authentic mode of being. Jug

²¹⁶ Perullo, p. 8.

²¹⁷ Perullo, p. 49.

²¹⁸ Sage, p. 67.

summarises her habitual existence with the phrase: 'It wasn't real' (CF 2, 282), in recognition of the deadening disengagement that her conventional, controlled routine of life has fostered, one which a material, explosive conception of snacking helps her to think through. Her realisation is evidence of the fact that the 'ruins of the past teach us to recognize and critique the present', and so influence the future.²¹⁹ This is the temporal convergence which *Jetztzeit* speaks to and through which questions can be both raised and answered.

Connor, writing of Samuel Beckett's *Ill Seen Ill Said*, observes that '[a]s the text approaches its end, the analogies between eating, seeing, seeking, seeming and speaking becomes closer and closer' and these are the same elements which go to make up the sisters' glimpsed insight.²²⁰ Constantia's realisation is not only of the absurdity of their previous existence, but also of the capacity to exist authentically, to 'really fe[el] herself' and bring meaning to her life. Her epiphany edges towards the realisation that '[o]ne can not start by saying that our earthly destiny *has* or *has not* importance, for it depends on us to give it importance'.²²¹ In other words, *Jetztzeit* allows access to the personal responsibility required to grasp freedom in the future tense. Although Constantia's searching ends in more searching, with the questions: 'What did it all mean? What was she always wanting? What did it all lead to? Now? Now?' (CF 2, 282), she is grappling with profound enquiry rather than evading it, engaging with the presence of the now, even if she might be inclined to reformulate it tentatively as a 'presence of the now?' We are left uncertain as to whether the sisters' burgeoning self-awareness will ever move from the 'revelation of a moment' to an 'act' or 'point of departure', but the point is really that once *Jetztzeit* has been instigated, almost anything can happen.²²² The future is there to be read and then written.

²¹⁹ Jim Hansen, 'Formalism and Its Malcontents: Benjamin and De Man on the Function of Allegory', *New Literary History*, 35.4 (Autumn, 2004), 663-683 (p. 675).

²²⁰ Steven Connor, *Beckett, Modernism and the Material Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 45.

²²¹ Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 16.

²²² Beauvoir, *The Ethics of Ambiguity*, p. 27.

Concluding remarks: aftertaste

I have argued in this chapter that by using snack food as a vehicle to express quiet but important moments of philosophical change, Mansfield also articulates a shift in her own personal aesthetics. The increase of these particular types of foodstuffs is symptomatic of a text becoming more comfortable with itself, recognising and celebrating its own difference from the novel and embracing the liberties afforded by the short form. In her later stories, where content comes to assimilate with form, Mansfield's acceptance of the short story mode is consolidated through its modelling of equally short forms of consumption. Bourdieu described a 'disposition to discipline food consumption by a conventional structuring' as an 'indirect, invisible censorship',²²³ viewing the 'forms and formalism imposed on the immediate appetite' by the bourgeoisie as a denial of instinct, a false 'affirmation of ethical tone and aesthetic refinement'.²²⁴ Mansfield evaded such censorship and false articulations by innovating a form which worked around and reflected the diversity of life rather than imposing a false order upon it, encompassing rather than denying the mortal and comestible, so engendering an aesthetic which was holistic, reflective and effective in its ability to render the moment whole. By refusing restriction in form and contents and aligning her work with appetite, dedicating it to capturing fleeting glimpses of vision via *Jetztzeit* derived from snacking, Mansfield's fiction adopted an organic reality of its own which embodied the transient yet timeless quality of its subjects.

Mansfield's best works are impermanent, delectable snacks, not predigested but requiring a holistic engagement from their readers, with the reading process inciting both material and philosophical engagement. Her relationship with the short story was as complex as her own relationship with food, but by allowing characters to work towards authentic realisation through snacking, transgressing convention and expectation in favour of autonomous insight, she also articulated a vision of a world in which the short story could survive, precisely because its readers would resemble her characters. It was only through admitting her divorce from more traditional literary modes that Mansfield could provide both with the type of nourishment they craved and

²²³ Bourdieu, p. 194.

²²⁴ Ibid.

deserved. Playing with our food, and appetites, Mansfield chose the elliptical form for her creative expression, evading didacticism or the comfortable structure of a teleological plot, comparable to etiquette or the courses of a formal meal. Knowing, as Baudrillard would put it, that '[c]onsumption is irrepressible, in the last reckoning, because it is founded upon a *lack*'²²⁵ – like snacks, Mansfield's short stories provoke an appetite which they can never quite fulfil, leaving their readers both hungry and questioning. In so doing, these stories will have partly achieved their end, having created individuals who read materially with both body and brain to arrive at personal, philosophical insights through which futures can be revolutionarily reconfigured – readers who are hungry for *Jetztzeit*.

Mansfield's strongest work enabled not transcendence but embroilment with the materiality of existence: an anti-aristocratic formulation of modernism where appetite and engagement was key. In her later stories, a piquant, shifting, comestible multiplicity of language leaves the reader unable to pronounce: '[i]t had somehow a *flat* taste – and I felt rather as tho' I'd read it curiously apart' (J 138) – reading instead becomes a direct experience, stimulating insights that distinguish what matters amongst the matter of the world. Mansfield's treatment of the everyday in her stories was based on an understanding of it, to use Scott McCracken's phrase, 'as the threshold between the ordinary and the extraordinary, between *what is* and *what might be*'.²²⁶ Founded through *Jetztzeit*, depicting *Jetztzeit* and enabling *Jetztzeit*, these stories allow access to the epiphanic insight of temporal abundance via engagement with a thoroughly worldly materialism.

Bakhtin wrote that in the act of consumption:

the body transgresses [...] its own limits: it swallows, devours, rends the world apart, is enriched and grows [...] The encounter of man with the world, which takes place in the open, biting, rending, chewing mouth, is one of the most ancient, and most important objects of human thought and imagery. Here man tastes the world, introduces it to his body, makes it part of

²²⁵ Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects* (London: Verso, 2005), p. 224.

²²⁶ Scott McCracken, 'The Completion of Old Work: Walter Benjamin and the Everyday', *Cultural Critique*, 52 (Autumn 2002), 145-166 (p. 163).

himself.²²⁷

By recreating such primal, engaging encounters in her fiction, Mansfield's texts enact an aesthetics of incorporation, encourage human interrelation with the world and its literature, and enable the philosophical enrichment and growth of their readers via the temporal plenitude of *Jetztzeit*. Barthes described Brillat-Savarin's language as 'literally *gourmand*: greedy for the words it wields and for the dishes to which it refers'.²²⁸ Mansfield's texts too are literally gourmand, leaving her readers greedy for the succulence they offer up as well as the new ways of thinking their consumption might help configure.

²²⁷ Bakhtin, p. 281.

²²⁸ Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, p. 259.

Chapter 2: Armchairs and Virginia Woolf

‘Let everyone make h[er]self an amateur’

- Clive Bell, *Art*, 1920¹

‘Reading has changed the world and continues to change it.’

- Virginia Woolf, ‘The Love of Reading’, 1931²



Figure 4: Virginia Woolf by Ottoline Morrell, June 1924. © National Portrait Gallery, London.

Beginning with the short story, ‘The Mark on the Wall’ (1917), the first piece of fiction in which Woolf forged her modernist style, this chapter uses Heidegger’s conception of phenomenology to explore how Woolf used the short story form to promote new ways of seeing (using armchair perspectives) and being (experiencing the world as an amateur). I suggest both armchair and story as objects which reclaim domestic space as a site of creative transformation and radical thinking, allowing the reader access to authentic being and instigating thinking beyond the page. Drawing on biographical and literary material, this chapter considers the concept of amateurism in terms of innovation as well as its relation to the short story form. It reappraises the armchair

¹ Clive Bell, *Art* (London: Arrow Books, 1961), p. 252.

² Virginia Woolf, *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Andrew McNeillie and Stuart N. Clarke, 6 vols (London: Hogarth Press, 2009), 5, p. 274. Hereafter referred to as *E* followed by volume and page number, with further references given after quotations in the text.

critic, usually considered in a negative light as a self-anointed expert, as an individual capable of fresh and far-reaching perception, unsullied by tradition or ideology, with an audacity of intellectual approach which also encompasses humility.

The armchair is an important piece of literary equipment, placing both writers and readers in a low sedentary position and enabling them to view the world from a receptive, deferential perspective. This perspective enables a democratisation which refuses to privilege the subject over the object, but instead recognises and celebrates the alterity of the external world, viewing the subject as just one more piece of the world's jigsaw. This egalitarianism is also enabled by an increased awareness of mortality, what Heidegger would in his broadly contemporaneous *Being and Time* (1927) term *being-toward-death*, a state embodied by the short story form where endings are always just within sight.³ Rather than acting as a cosy, protective locus, the armchair in which the reader sits allows her space to confront the world's more uncomfortable realities. In his book *Reading and the Reader*, Philip Davis argues that literature offers its readers a 'holding-ground' for thinking about the experiences which it offers up and enabling 'exploratory search for meaning'.⁴ This chapter will argue that for Woolf the armchair functions as exactly such a holding-ground, allowing the reader space to engage with the story and the world beyond it. The stories that contain these armchairs allowed Woolf to 'achieve her most sustained exploration of the human relation to the external world'.⁵ This was done via an armchair aesthetic, one uniquely suited to the short fiction form and which would also underpin her wider literary work.

I will begin by looking at the significance of armchairs in Woolf's life before considering the idea of the armchair critic and the types of critical reading which Woolf's stories encourage. The literature review will precede examination of the short story form as a type of armchair

³ This term will be explored at more length in the part of this chapter which primarily considers the story 'Sympathy'. It is also described by Heidegger as an '*anxious freedom toward death*', in which, aware of their own mortality, the individual is able to grasp what he calls 'an authentic potentiality-for-being whole'. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by Joan Stambaugh (New York: State University of New York Press, 2010), p. 255 (italics as in the text). Hereafter referred to as *BT*, followed by page number, with further references given after quotations in the text.

⁴ Davis, p. 134.

⁵ Michelle Levy, 'Virginia Woolf's Shorter Fictional Explorations of the External World: "closely united...immensely divided"', in *Trespassing Boundaries: Virginia Woolf's Short Fiction*, ed. by Kathryn N. Benzel and Ruth Hoberman (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 139-156 (p. 139).

literature, before moving on to sustained textual analysis, particularly focusing on the stories ‘The Mark on the Wall’ (1917), ‘Sympathy’ (1919) and ‘Solid Objects’ (1920) in exploration of the concepts of amateurism, perspective and democratisation set out above.

Woolf’s armchairs

Woolf’s memoirs resonate richly with seating, beginning with the rocking chair from which she heard her father drop books to the floor at Hyde Park Gate.⁶ Leslie Stephen had ‘written all his books lying sunk deep in that rocking chair’, Woolf would recall in the essay ‘A Sketch of the Past’, his feet clear of the ground, a writing board across his lap.⁷ An early edition of the *Hyde Park Gate News*, produced by the Stephen children during the Christmas of 1891, finds him similarly positioned: ‘We here give a picture of the celebrated author Mr Leslie Stephen’ reads the caption, before a sketch of the writer ensconced in an armchair, staring out at the world through prominent spectacles.⁸

Woolf herself did not begin as an armchair storyteller. As a young woman growing up in London she learned to write vertically, standing at a high desk at Hyde Park Gate in emulation of her sister Vanessa at her easel, and later, at Gordon Square, she had a high desk especially constructed for her (*D* 1, 247). The 22-year-old Woolf had a separate room to work and would stand writing at her high desk for two and a half hours each morning.⁹ It is claimed Woolf stood in a spirit of solidarity: Lyndall Gordon suggests that she wanted ‘to be even with Vanessa who complained of standing for hours at an easel’, and also notes that standing would have ‘suited the seething energy that she inherited from her father’.¹⁰ Woolf would, however, graduate to become a sedentary writer, with her nephew Quentin Bell observing that later Woolf’s ‘habitual position’ for writing was ‘seated in an easy chair with a board on her lap’ (*D* 1, ix). From 1923, when Woolf was in her early forties, in Tavistock Square, she worked ‘in a dishevelled armchair,

⁶ Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, p. 43.

⁷ Virginia Woolf, *Moments of Being*, ed. by Jeanne Schulkind (San Diego, New York and London: Harvest, 1985), p. 119.

⁸ Vanessa Bell, Thoby Stephen and Virginia Woolf, *Hyde Park Gate News: The Stephen Family Newspaper*, ed. by Gill Lowe (London: Hesperus Press, 2005), p. 18.

⁹ Lyndall Gordon, *Virginia Woolf: A Writer’s Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), p. 116.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

surrounded by piles of Hogarth [Press] manuscripts'.¹¹ And at Rodmell, Sussex, the Woolfs' sitting room in Monk's House has been preserved to include an armchair upholstered in a reprint of a pattern designed by Vanessa Bell, arranged by the fire where it would have originally sat. This, the National Trust brochure asserts, was 'one of Virginia's favourite reading chairs'¹² and, when I visited the property, a guide showed me another armchair in Woolf's bedroom – wooden-armed, low, draped in a floral shawl – where she wrote when the winter chill drove her out of her writing lodge at the end of the garden (see figure 5).¹³



Figure 5: The armchair in Woolf's bedroom at Monk's House. Photograph taken by the author and reproduced courtesy of the National Trust.

Woolf's diaries attest the armchair as her most preferred environment of all, a site of sanctuary not to be interrupted by guests. 'Sunk deep in our chairs we were interrupted in our books by

¹¹ Harris, p. 80.

¹² In her book on Charleston and Monk's House, Nuala Hancock reveals this armchair to be a facsimile rather than the original. Nuala Hancock, *Charleston and Monk's House: The Intimate House Museums of Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), p. 155.

¹³ National Trust, *Virginia Woolf and Monk's House* (Swindon: Acorn Press, 2011), p. 9.

Walter Lamb’, reads one disgruntled entry (*D* 1, 137). Elsewhere, Woolf records keenly-felt regret at inviting people whose visits will lead to her ‘relinquishing [her] arm chair’ (*D* 2, 200). Duncan Grant’s ink-sketch *Virginia Stephen at Fitzroy Square* from around 1909, depicts Woolf in an armchair, book on her lap but eyes focused ahead, reading instead something beyond the frame of the picture.¹⁴ The 1912 Vanessa Bell painting *Virginia Woolf in an Armchair* also shows Woolf in the chair’s embrace (see figure 6), while an early sketch by Bell for a 1934/5 oil portrait, *Virginia Woolf at 52 Tavistock Square*, given to Virginia for Christmas in 1935 and now on display at Monk’s House, pictures Woolf again seated in her armchair reading, although the book in her lap was removed for the final version.¹⁵



Figure 6: *Virginia Woolf in an Armchair*, Vanessa Bell (c. 1912) © National Portrait Gallery, London.

Mental furniture

When Woolf has been unwell, writing in her chair symbolises triumph. It is a return to health, to the habitual: ‘But I am back again, after 2 months this very day, sitting in my chair after tea, writing; & I wrote Jacob this morning, & though my temperature is not normal, my habits are: & that is all I care for’ (*D* 2, 170). While Hermione Lee’s conception of reading in bed – set out in

¹⁴ Frances Spalding, *Virginia Woolf: Art, Life and Vision* (London: National Portrait Gallery, 2014), p. 65.

¹⁵ Pamela Todd, *Bloomsbury at Home* (London: Pavilion, 1999), pp. 154–5. Richard Shone, *The Art of Bloomsbury* (London: Tate Gallery, 1999), p. 224.

the essay of the same name where she posits the bed as a site of rebellious literary consumption and thinking – is theoretically vibrant and relevant, for Woolf bed would likely have connoted defeat by illness.¹⁶ By contrast, the armchair is a clear favourite in Woolf's mental catalogue of furniture, denoting security and safety – the metaphorically as well as literally 'solid', like the stoical armchair described in her 1919 story 'Sympathy': 'shabby but still solid enough, surviving us all' (*HH* 105). The armchair's symbolical load is charged by what Woolf most needed to be ordinary for her – reading and writing.¹⁷

In a diary entry of May 1933, armchairs haunt bouts of homesickness induced by travel in Italy: 'Now the draw of home, & freedom [...] – oh to sit in an arm chair; and read' (*D* 4, 160).¹⁸ It might appear parochial to prefer the 'freedom' of home to that offered by the adventure of travel abroad, but for both Woolf and her sister home was the site of a primarily artistic revolution. After the death of their father, they famously moved to Gordon Square in Bloomsbury, 'full of experiment and reform'.¹⁹ They were 'going to paint; to write; to have coffee after dinner instead of tea at nine o'clock'; '[e]verything was going to be new; everything was going to be different. Everything was on trial'.²⁰ The locus of the armchair can be thought of in a similarly radical capacity, where liberation is enabled by mental travel.

The armchair was not only Virginia's favoured personal habitat, it was also an environment in which she liked to imagine those she held dear. Writing to Hugh Walpole in August 1929, Woolf beseeches him to send her a photograph of him at home, explaining: 'I have a childish wish to consolidate my friends and embed them in their own tables and chairs, and imagine what kind of objects they see when they are alone' (*L* 4, 84). This chapter will explore how important just sitting and looking at objects is to Woolf's own world-view (and the process of any individual establishing an authentic world-view or philosophy) through consideration of

¹⁶ Hermione Lee, 'Reading in Bed', in *Body Parts: Essays on Life-writing* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2005), pp. 45-63.

¹⁷ Penny Sparke, in her book on twentieth-century furniture, observes that furniture, particularly that which we choose for our homes and grow up with 'expresses complex meanings'. She elaborates: 'The home is the most private of inhabited spaces – the focus for many of the psychological and social dramas we enact – and the pieces of furniture within it carry the full burden of that symbolical load'. Penny Sparke, *Furniture* (London: Bell & Hyman, 1986), p. 5.

¹⁸ Elsewhere, Woolf notes her irritation with her sister, Vanessa, who she felt implied that she couldn't 'enjoy café life in Paris' because she liked 'her own fireside & books' too much and 'spent a great deal upon comfort' (*D* 2, 159).

¹⁹ Woolf, *Moments of Being*, p. 185.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

stories such as ‘Solid Objects’, but this comment also crucially reveals the importance of furniture to Woolf’s imaginative faculty. She goes on to tell Walpole: ‘it is of the highest importance that I should be able to make you exist there, somehow, tangibly, visibly; recognisable to me, though not perhaps to yourself’ (L 4, 84). Woolf describes the ability to conjure people imaginatively in this way as her ‘cosmogony’ (L 4, 84), and it is one shaped by furniture. Correspondingly, when imagining John Keats during a visit to his Hampstead home, Woolf envisages him in a chair: ‘Here he sat on the chair in the window and listened without moving, and saw without starting, and turned the page without haste though his time was so short’.²¹ Here, as before, the chair is conjured as the site of reading, with reading a process that applies equally to the book as the wider world.

Friends would also be placed in the Woolfs’ armchairs as photographic subjects – and Leonard and Virginia would photograph each other similarly posed. Maggie Humm observes how the armchair functions as a constant in the Monk’s House Albums, with 58 per cent of them featuring friends in ‘comfy chairs’ or ‘padded armchairs’.²² As a result, argues Humm, the ‘comfy chair’ becomes a ‘very dominating “character” in each photograph’, with the repetition of furniture across the photographs establishing a ‘language of the matrixial [which] is a symbolization of the maternal childhood home’.²³ It is the armchair, before the picture album, which establishes these photographed subjects as valued and integral to the Woolfs’ private lives.

I will now move to discussion of the use of furniture in a more theoretical sense by considering the views of Gaston Bachelard, Lee and Freedgood, each of whose ideas are helpful in thinking through the significance of armchairs in Woolf’s work. To begin with Bachelard, in *The Poetics of Space* he states that ‘[w]hen we dream of the house we were born in, in the utmost depths of revery, we participate in this original warmth, in this well-tempered matter of the material paradise’.²⁴ Elsewhere in the same work, he observes that the inescapable resonance of the home in which each of us grew up lies largely in its function as ‘a resting-place for

²¹ Virginia Woolf, *The London Scene* (London: Daunt Books, 2013), p. 37.

²² Maggie Humm, ‘Virginia Woolf’s Photography and the Monk’s House Albums’, in *Virginia Woolf in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, ed. by Pamela L. Caughie (London and New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 219–246 (p. 238).

²³ Humm, p. 242.

²⁴ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. by Maria Jolas (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), p. 7.

daydreaming’ and further, that ‘often the resting place particularize[s] the daydream’.²⁵ Our original shell or shelter and its furnishings, Bachelard argues, not only provides comfort but is responsible for shielding individuals as they learn to flex their imaginative faculties by dreaming, and plays an important role in shaping those dreams. In other words, material domestic structures not only nurture artists but also inform their eventual outputs. I will argue here that the armchair was such an influence on Woolf’s modes of production and thinking, as well as her intentions for the ways in which her work was received. Commenting on *Night and Day*, the solid, realist novel produced alongside Woolf’s first experimental short fiction, Lee observes that ‘looking at houses and their solid objects is, in fact, an eloquent method of “thinking the matter out”, the “matter” of what use the traditional Victorian answers – the old mental furniture – can be for the next generation’.²⁶ In this chapter, I will argue that Woolf uses the armchair as a way of reconfiguring the ‘old mental furniture’ and mapping out new ways of perceiving and being for her common readers.

In her book on objects in Victorian fiction, Elaine Freedgood sets out ways of reading objects in terms of weak and strong metonymy. She describes the loose reading of objects as social signifiers – for example, in *Jane Eyre* the curtains in the Barton home categorise its residents as working class, while the ‘Negro head’ tobacco in *Great Expectations* confirms Magwitch’s self-identification as a slave – as involving reliance on their ‘weak metonymic function’.²⁷ Such weak metonymic readings place objects in subservience to fictional characters – they merely ‘suggest, or reinforce, something we already know about the subjects who use them’.²⁸ Against this context, Freedgood introduces the thesis which underpins her book, a type of reading which is based on strong metonymy, in which textual things are investigated in terms of their ‘objectness’ in an effort to ‘recover (or rather, imagine) the material qualities of fictional things’.²⁹ Freedgood’s strong metonymical reading involves reading textual objects as cultural artefacts which might tell us more than the author intends – for example, about the material cost

²⁵ Bachelard, p. 15.

²⁶ Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, p. 45.

²⁷ Freedgood, p. 2.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

of colonialism – so allowing the objects a resonance hitherto quashed by the tyranny of the subject. Here, I will propose a different way of reading objects, specifically Woolf's armchairs, by mining them for their philosophical value. Looking at Woolf's fictional armchairs, I intend, like Freedgood, to allow these pieces of furniture a voice not otherwise heard, but not one which will be interrogated from a cultural-historical perspective. Instead, I will examine what they can tell us about Woolf's thinking – her philosophy – in relation to ontology, epistemology and aesthetics, and also how they encourage and direct readers to think in similar ways.

To recapitulate: this chapter will consider the ways in which the physical armchair and its characteristics manifest in Woolf's short fiction to model and encourage new ways of reading the world. Establishing amateurism as a key challenge and counterpoint to the stultifying effects of the professionalism and tradition of which Woolf was deeply suspicious, it will show the ways in which amateurism also enables innovation and fresh perspectives. The chapter will also examine the ways in which the armchair enables a holistic vision by allowing those seated in it to perceive from a reverential and oblique perspective which raises up rather than diminishes alterity. From this position, the sedentary thinker might hope, like Emily Dickinson, to '[t]ell all the Truth but tell it slant', whether telling takes the form of reading or writing, and even if that truth remains – like the mark on the wall – uncertain and indistinct.³⁰ A philosophical reading of the armchair, then, recognises it as an object but specifically concentrates on the ways in which it shapes human thinking, the rendering of such thought in art and the ways such art can be read. Amateurism, oblique perspectives and democratising vision are those armchair values enshrined in Woolf's stories on which this chapter will focus, positing them as equally influential on Woolf and her aesthetic output as they were to those who read her.

The armchair critic and critical reading

On Wednesday 7 January 1931, having recently finished the first draft of *The Waves*, Woolf wrote with a sense of elation in her diary: 'The high wind can't blow, because I'm chopping & tacking all the time. And I've stored a few ideas for articles: one on Gosse – the critic as talker; the

³⁰ Emily Dickinson, *The Complete Poems* (Boston and London: Faber and Faber, 1987), p. 506.

armchair critic; one on Letters' (*D* 4, 4). In one article understood to have flowed from this plan, 'All About Books', Woolf explores a theme integral to her long-term beliefs and aesthetics, and one which made itself felt early in her thinking – that of amateurism.³¹ Written in a fireside chair, 'All About Books' is an essay disguised as a letter, playfully embodying the amateurism it champions by palpably getting the most basic things wrong. Disavowing its argument at its start by declaring that only exaggeration and inaccuracy is to follow, certainly not 'considered judgment' (*E* 5, 219), and attempting to deflate its conclusion with the phrase '[t]hat this is all great nonsense I am well aware' (*E* 5, 223), the essay nonetheless seeks to convince readers of the dynamic, diverse and necessary force of the unprofessional. The essay has not received much critical attention, as if scholars have accepted its humble, self-deprecating gloss and moved on.

The thesis of Woolf's piece is not immediately clear – it demands a careful eye and sensitivity to a tone which wavers between the satirical and directly serious as she defines and redefines her own conceptions of amateurism and expertise, while all the time purportedly talking only about reading. At the beginning of the piece, we are told that 'half the armchairs in England' come to emit a 'purr of content and anticipation' at the publication of a reverend's memoir (*E* 5, 219). The book Woolf discusses notably omits the revolutionary zeitgeist of its era, late eighteenth-century France, to provide a catalogue of morals and manners that is laced with a mild xenophobia. This is Woolf's portrait of the conventional interpretation of the compound adjective 'armchair', first in common usage in the late nineteenth century and defined by the *OED* as follows: 'Chiefly *depreciative*. Based or taking place in the home as opposed to the world or environment outside; amateur, non-professional; (hence) lacking or not involving practical or direct experience of a particular subject or activity. Also: comfortable, gentle, easy.'³² Examples of its derogative use include 'armchair critic', 'armchair politician', and 'armchair traveller'. Those emitting purrs of content from multitudinous armchairs draw their expertise from second-hand, partial and incomplete wisdoms. Their confidence is drawn from the emboldening well of ignorance which bad books feed, rather than engagement with the world they inhabit. If these

³¹ Anne Olivier Bell, in editor's note 4, postulates that "the armchair critic" [article] was probably that published as 'All About Books' in the *NS&N* [*New Statesman and Nation*], 28 February 1931 (*D* 4, 4).

³² *OED*, 'armchair', n. and adj., B. adj. (attrib.).

armchairs contain critics, they are critical only of diversity, alterity and conceptual difficulty.

Woolf's gaze soon finds a new target, 'the advancing and victorious hordes of youth' (*E* 5, 221) who are now writing their own books. Unlike those occupying the armchairs of middle England, the young are 'well equipped' (*E* 5, 222) – they have access to the specialist apparatus of the professional, to 'the libraries and laboratories; the observatories; the splendid equipment of costly and delicate instruments', to the fortunes with which 'more chairs' are funded: they are educated.³³ Woolf brilliantly encapsulates education as 'the arts of reading and writing [...] taught' (*E* 5, 222) – not excluding the sciences but conceiving of practical experiments as yet another mode of reading. Woolf argues that the academies make fatal omissions in their teachings: pupils come to '[take] service under their teachers instead of riding into battle alone' (*E* 5, 222). While once they came first to phenomenal knowledge, learning that 'the sun was in the sky and the bird on the branch', instead now they will first know 'the whole course of English literature from one end to another' (*E* 5, 222).³⁴ Woolf argues that such graduates are placid as writers, protected from the messiness of reality by an ability to unpick every mystery with logic. The essay builds to a lyrical cry from Woolf – 'where is the sound of the sea and the red of the rose; where is music, imagery, and a voice speaking from the heart?' (*E* 5, 223) – that, too bold, precedes an embarrassed apology. Notwithstanding the disavowal that follows, Woolf has successfully established this new breed of reader as being as disconnected from the world as those purring in their armchairs.

Each of these generations of reader disappoints Woolf, in failing to think independently and engage fully with the world beyond the page. They are passive readers, and in accepting to too large an extent what they are taught, they typify the conventional meaning of 'armchair'. In each reader Woolf finds a 'fatal defect; they do not lead, they follow' (*E* 5, 222). To read passively is to surrender one's individuality and agency where reading should be part of an active expression of being. 'Where', she asks, 'is the adventurous, the intolerant, the immensely foolish young man or woman who dares to be himself?' (*E* 5, 222).

³³ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 11.

³⁴ A similar pointed comparison is made in *A Room of One's Own*, where it is noted that libraries and laboratories now stand where 'where centuries ago the grasses waved and the swine rootled' (Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 128).

This adventurous, brave, and necessary type of individual which Woolf describes is also to be found reading in an armchair, only reading very differently – from page to world and back again. These individuals are amateurs in the truest sense, uncorrupted by taught ideologies or handed-down modes of seeing or being, able to '[t]hink of things in themselves'.³⁵ Woolf's first experimental stories reveal how her fiction sought to encourage a type of privately-nurtured amateurism that enabled capacious, elastic modes of perception and thought because it ignored preconception and relied on an active engagement with the material world both on and beyond the page.³⁶ As Woolf wrote in the second volume of *The Common Reader* in 1932: 'Doubtless great changes in psychology were needed and great changes in material comfort – arm-chairs and carpets and good roads – before it was possible for human beings to watch each other curiously or to communicate their thoughts easily' (CR 2, 59).³⁷ Watching curiously is perhaps the key activity the armchair enables and which is so crucial to the enterprises of thinking, reading and writing. Woolf's armchair critic is not a bombastic ignoramus, emboldened by safety; instead, she is a maverick, positioning values of domestic privacy, creativity, sensitivity and fresh, individual thought against the external machinery of bureaucracy and the hegemonic status quo it ruthlessly works to sustain. In short, she is an armchair critic capable of critical thought.

Woolf's conception of the potency of the armchair critic chimes with a later essay from 1940, 'Thoughts on Peace in An Air Raid', and not only because it is freighted with symbolic furniture. In this short but powerful piece, Woolf argues for 'private thinking' as the most valuable weapon in war, which she also refers to as 'tea-table thinking', an activity which must remain undaunted by its seeming powerlessness in the face of the accepted and doughty

³⁵ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 128.

³⁶ By 'first experimental stories', I mean those which broke with more traditional narrative structure to adopt a more self-reflexive mode, from the creation of 'The Mark on the Wall' in 1917 to 1921, when she published her only collection of short fiction, *Monday or Tuesday*. Of the stories on which this chapter focuses, only one was selected by Woolf for publication in that collection, perhaps strengthening the case for their consideration as 'armchair literature'. All evidence Woolf's developing experimental aesthetic which established her as an innovator and preceded the publication of her first modernist novel, *Jacob's Room*, in 1922. This group of stories is also picked out as distinct by Laura Marcus in her chapter on Woolf's short fiction, noting that this 'second group' of stories evidences 'the centrality of her short fiction [...] to her literary formation'. Laura Marcus, 'The Short Fiction', in *A Companion to Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Jessica Berman (Oxford: Wiley Blackwell, 2016), pp. 27-39 (p. 28).

³⁷ This quotation is from the essay 'Dorothy Osborne's "Letters"' and taken from the introductory paragraphs which discusses the history of English literature.

significance of ‘officer tables and conference tables’.³⁸ If, as Woolf says, ideas are the ‘only efficient air-raid shelter’ then the armchair and the space for thought it both creates and protects may be conceived of in similar terms.³⁹ After William Blake, Woolf espouses ‘[m]ental fight [as] thinking against the current, not with it’, and the armchair affords necessary space away from that current, so that the strength required to think against it can be built and drawn upon.⁴⁰ Victoria Rosner states that Woolf’s novels ‘offer portraits of women’s pleasure when they can claim their own private space’; here I argue that the stories in themselves offer up private spaces to be claimed and instruct readers on how to best use it.⁴¹ This space marks territory removed from what Heidegger saw as the entangled ‘busyness’ of tranquilised ‘inauthentic being’, which he aligned with ‘stagnation and inactivity’ (BT 171). The armchair offers a comfortable physical space, but not one which advocates mental stasis or torpor.

At the site of the armchair, so many strands of Woolf’s life and vision converge. The lofty values of freedom, creativity and democracy all inhere in this unassuming, domestic space. For Woolf armchairs were not only comfortable and useful pieces of furniture, protecting privacy and enabling the crucial activities of reading and writing, but also inspired and embodied her views on ontology and aesthetics. As mentioned above, these views revolve around the importance of fresh, innovative modes of seeing which harness democratic equanimity and humble modes of being as routes to capaciousness of perception and, ultimately, authentic being. I will now move on to the literature review before proceeding to consider stories as a type of armchair literature, then proceeding to textual analysis of those stories.

Literature review

Woolf has long been considered a raconteuse of interiority, and to some, such as Terry Eagleton,

³⁸ Virginia Woolf, *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (London: Hogarth Press, 1945), p. 155. Woolf similarly refers to her own ‘tea-table training’ in ‘A Sketch of the Past’ when explaining the modest, self-effacing style she adopted in her first critical articles. Woolf, *Moments of Being*, p. 150.

³⁹ Woolf, *The Death of the Moth*, p. 154.

⁴⁰ Woolf, *The Death of the Moth*, p. 155.

⁴¹ Victoria Rosner, ‘Virginia Woolf and Monk’s House’, in *The Edinburgh Companion to Virginia Woolf and the Arts*, ed. by Maggie Humm (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp. 181-194 (p. 187).

a narrator of uniquely privileged positions of reflection.⁴² The critical approach to Woolf that has, until recent times, dominated treatment of her work may be logically understood as a result of her use of stream-of-consciousness as narrative device, as demonstrated by Jean Guiget's influential 1960s work which posited Woolf a 'purely psychological' writer.⁴³ In examining the success of Woolf's early ambition to render in prose 'all the traces of the minds passage through the world', there has been a critical tendency to allow the mind to eclipse the world.⁴⁴ Before Guiget, in *Mimesis* (1946) Erich Auerbach also characterised Woolf's innovation in terms of a prioritising of interiority over exteriority, asserting that in her fiction 'exterior events have lost their hegemony'.⁴⁵ More recently, Alexandra Harris has specifically read the early experimental stories as evidence of 'Woolf mak[ing] her decisive shift from external facts to inner lives'.⁴⁶ Although it is clear that the aesthetic exploration of human consciousness is of key significance to Woolf, the enduring popularity of this line of enquiry might well have amused her, writing as she did of diaries: 'Ottoline [Morrell] keeps one by the way, devoted to her "inner life"; which made me reflect that I haven't an inner life' (*D* 1, 79).

Alex Zwerdling's *Virginia Woolf and the Real World* (1986) counterbalances this critical emphasis on the internal by convincingly articulating Woolf's embroilment with politics, feminism and war. Yet, despite recognising Woolf's 'interest in external reality – in the object as well as the subject' as an 'expression of her conviction that "the self" was to a great extent the product of forces over which it had no control', Zwerdling's focus in this work is social rather than phenomenological, and large-scale rather than domestic.⁴⁷ In another work published the same year, *The Singing of the Real World*, Mark Hussey examines Woolf's novels for what they can tell us about our 'lived experience of the world', recognising the mutual importance of both the

⁴² Eagleton notes that '[a]s an upper-class woman, Woolf was inevitably somewhat remote from the world of social and political practice; and some of her ideas of accident and design, or life and art, have more to do with this distance than may at first appear' (Terry Eagleton, *The English Novel: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), pp. 312-3). Eagleton does though go on to describe Woolf as what he sees as a 'rare animal'; a 'materialist modernist' (Eagleton, *The English Novel*, p. 330), revealing a more nuanced reading of Woolf's engagement than the initial quotation suggests.

⁴³ Jean Guiget, *Virginia Woolf and Her Works*, trans. by Jean Stewart (London: Hogarth Press, 1965), p. 253.

⁴⁴ Virginia Woolf, *A Passionate Apprentice: The Early Journals, 1897-1909*, ed. by Mitchell A. Leaska (San Diego, New York and London: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990), p. 393.

⁴⁵ Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, trans. by Willard Trask (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1974), p. 538.

⁴⁶ Harris, p. 61.

⁴⁷ Alex Zwerdling, *Virginia Woolf and the Real World* (California: University of California Press, 1986), p. 13.

external world and the act of reading to Woolf's art.⁴⁸ Hussey crucially asserts that 'moments of being' are 'recreated in the act of reading', suggesting the transformative potency of Woolf's fiction.⁴⁹ Hussey does not explore this capacity at length, but it is a concept that will drive this chapter.

More recently, a swelling academic interest in the quotidian has helped to properly situate Woolf's work within the more rooted context of the ordinary as opposed to the more traditional concentration on the intellectual rather than physical concerns of Woolf's fiction.

Comprehensive works such as Liesl Olson's *Modernism and the Ordinary* (2009) and Lorraine Sim's *Virginia Woolf: The Patterns of Ordinary Experience* (2010) deliberately engage with the habitual and the overlooked, with Sim making the case that 'as well as the object qua object and its representation, modernists were also interested in the complex interplays between the perceiving subject and the object world; the way minds constitute things and things in turn constitute minds.'⁵⁰ Sim also specifically notices the ways in which Woolf's early, experimental short fiction 'examines the diversity and richness of the quotidian and presents ordinary things as the overlooked sites of intellectual, personal and emotional significance'.⁵¹ Articles such as Louise Westling's 'Virginia Woolf and the Flesh of the World' (1999) have also helped to consolidate this critical shift towards a phenomenological or 'thingly' approach, considering the non-human elements of Woolf's fiction and its concern with the subject-object relationship by drawing on the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty in analysis of Woolf's final novel, *Between the Acts*.⁵² Bill Brown's examination of the story 'Solid Objects' in the chapter 'The Secret Life of Things (Virginia Woolf)', mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, explores this subject/object nexus specifically in relation to short fiction to conclude that 'the war precipitated a national fixation on materials that may have prompted Woolf to imagine some more challenging, exhilarating material fixations'.⁵³ The spirit of Brown's essay, with its invigorated focus on materiality as

⁴⁸ Hussey, p. xiv.

⁴⁹ Hussey, p. 81.

⁵⁰ Sim, p. 29.

⁵¹ Sim, p. 58.

⁵² Louise Westling, 'Virginia Woolf and the Flesh of the World', *New Literary History*, 30.2 (Autumn 1999), 855-875.

⁵³ Brown, *Other Things*, p. 77.

intrinsic to aesthetics, will infuse this chapter, with an additional focus on the issue of genre as well as the ways of reading Woolf's stories foster.

An unpublished 2004 doctoral thesis by Ariane L. Mildenberg, 'Marks, Buttons and Notes: Phenomenology and Creative Production in Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein and Wallace Stevens', and the subsequently published *Phenomenology and Beyond* (2010), co-edited by Mildenberg, also contributes to the field in recognising the key importance of phenomenological precepts to the aesthetic projects of major modernist artists.⁵⁴ In the article 'Heidegger in Woolf's Clothing' (2008), Heidi Storl also works to establish the essential relevance of a phenomenological approach to Woolf in noticing the broad affinities between Woolf's fiction and Heidegger's phenomenological exploration of 'being-in-the-world', although the scope of this short article precludes in-depth discussion of the fiction beyond brief consideration of the novel *To the Lighthouse*.⁵⁵

Heidegger's work will underpin my exploration of the concept of 'armchair phenomenology' in Woolf's short fiction. At the point of writing no extended study has been undertaken that considers Heidegger and Woolf in tandem, although the relevance of a comparative study is evidenced by explorations in wider ranging works⁵⁶ and in April 2017 Edinburgh University Press plans to publish a book by Emma Simone entitled *Virginia Woolf and Being-in-the-world: A Heideggerian Study*.⁵⁷ Heidegger, with his tenacious pursuit of an authentic

⁵⁴ Ariane L. Mildenberg, 'Marks, Buttons and Notes: Phenomenology and Creative Production in Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein and Wallace Stevens' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of York, 2004).

⁵⁵ Heidi Storl, 'Heidegger in Woolf's Clothing', *Philosophy and Literature*, 32:2 (October 2008), 303-314.

⁵⁶ Heidegger and Woolf are mentioned in Lisa L. Coleman's chapter 'Woolf and Feminist Theory: Woolf's Feminism Comes in Waves', in *Virginia Woolf in Context*, ed. by Bryony Randall and Jane Goldman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), as well as A. O. Frank, *The Philosophy of Virginia Woolf* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 2001). Mark Hussey also places Woolf 'in the company of such thinkers as Pascal, Kierkegaard, and Heidegger' (Hussey, p. xv), while Paul Ricoeur conceives of the character Mrs Dalloway as existing in a state of being-toward-death, directly referring to *Being and Time* in describing her 'love of life, of perishable beauty' (Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative, Volume 2*, trans. by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago and London: Chicago University Press, 1984), p. 110). Emma Simone's chapter on Woolf, moods and sensation explores 'the affinities that exist between Heidegger's understanding of *mood*, and Woolf's representation of sensation in terms of the ways in which each can be understood to reflect the subject's relationship with the world' (Emma Simone, 'Virginia Woolf – Moods, Sensation and the Everyday', in *Literature and Sensation*, ed. by Helen Groth, Stephen McLaren, Paul Sheehan and Anthony Uhlmann (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), pp. 78-89 (p. 78)). Conversely, Derek Ryan's essay 'Woolf and Contemporary Philosophy' does not consider Heidegger at all, instead focusing on quantum physics and particle and wave theory (Derek Ryan, 'Woolf and Contemporary Philosophy', in *Virginia Woolf in Context*, ed. by Jane Goldman and Bryony Randall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 362-375).

⁵⁷ The listing on the EUP website is available at: <<https://edinburghuniversitypress.com/book-virginia-woolf-and-being-in-the-world-hb.html>> [accessed 5 February 2017].

rendering of human thinking and being, his emphasis on the importance of dwelling and language and his suspicion of ontological 'facts', suits Woolf's writing and modes of thought far better than the more rationalist philosophers with whom she has been more consistently compared, such as those Cambridge Apostles that made up the Bloomsbury Group.⁵⁸ As Richard Shone observes of Woolf: 'The Cambridge rationalist mind was not to her taste'.⁵⁹

Ann Banfield's *The Phantom Table: Woolf, Fry, Russell and the Epistemology of Modernism* (2000) does in some way undertake such a rationalist project, applying the theories of Roger Fry and (particularly) Bertrand Russell to Woolf's literary aesthetic, placing her work carefully into philosophical contexts to explore her modes of phenomenological interrogation. In this comprehensive work, despite an occasional mismatch between the linearity of applied logic and the more contingent outlook articulated by Woolf's literature, Banfield examines the ways in which Woolf's literary rendering of the universe represents 'a monadology whose plurality of possible worlds includes private points of space and time, unoccupied by any subject', also arguing that her art grounds itself on a theory which 'begins with an analysis of the common-sense world'.⁶⁰ Banfield focuses on Woolf's literary output as articulating an 'unseen vision which reflects the abolition of the subject but not of its object'.⁶¹ Banfield's concentration on privacy, her broadly phenomenological approach and her use of furniture as both objects and paradigms are of clear relevance to this enquiry. However, I will argue that Woolf's short fiction is concerned with the mutual influence that runs between subject and object, demonstrating the story's strong reiterative focus on the reader, which dispels notions of the abolition of the subject. I will instead work on the basis that that privacy and anonymity are subject-bound conceptions, integral to the authentic modes of being that enable the receptivity necessary for armchair phenomenology. Victoria Rosner's *Modernism and the Architecture of Private Life* (2005)

⁵⁸ As Louise Westling has observed, Woolf refused the 'reductionist dualism of Western philosophy' and worked to 'expose the sterility of the kind of rational humanism that came down to us from Plato'. Westling, p. 855. Hussey has also remarked that the 'Moorean universe, endorsed by such as Russell and Keynes, is continually questioned by [Woolf's] novels' (Hussey, p. 99).

⁵⁹ Richard Shone, 'A General Account of the Bloomsbury Group', in *Keynes and the Bloomsbury Group*, ed. by Derek Crabtree and A. P. Thirlwell (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1980), pp. 23-48 (p. 23).

⁶⁰ Banfield, Ann, *The Phantom Table: Woolf, Fry, Russell and the Epistemology of Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), p. 1.

⁶¹ Banfield, p. 53.

which, like Banfield's work, concentrates on novels, also breaks important ground in establishing the importance of the private sphere to literary modernism. Like Banfield, Rosner focuses her imagination on the table, with an early chapter entitled 'Kitchen Table Modernism', also allotting a chapter to the study, which she portrays as a masculine environment dedicated to the pursuits of reading and writing. In this latter chapter, Rosner observes that in *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf argues that for female readers and writers a transition from the sitting room to the study is necessary, an argument somewhat undermined by examples of writers who wrote without studies: 'Austen wr[iting] in the family sitting room, Shakespeare among the clatter of theatrical production'.⁶² Conversely, I will argue here for the armchair as a space which encapsulates the values inherent to a room of one's own while remaining more easily attainable and accessible, with the concentrated bursts of privacy it affords also colluding with the brevity intrinsic to short fiction writing and reading.

In addition to everyday studies and phenomenology, discrete work has also been undertaken in relation to Woolf and domestic culture, with *The Edinburgh Companion to Virginia Woolf and the Arts* (2010) dedicating five essays to the domestic arts, although reading is not considered one of these. The art of reading is given more attention in *Virginia Woolf: Feminism and the Reader* where Anne E. Fernald seizes on feminism and reading as the two most informative influences on Woolf's art, arguing that her processes of 'revisionist reading constitutes the fundamental shaping force of her feminism'.⁶³ This chapter does not dispute the importance of this dual influence.

John Lurz's *The Death of the Book: Modernist Novels and the Time of Reading* (2016) considers Joyce, Proust and Woolf with a focus solely on the novel but bears key relevance to this thesis as a whole. Lurz's book is more concerned with reading and its relation to the material world than its title might suggest – in the chapter on *Ulysses*, he crucially posits that reading 'puts the body and mind into a relationship with an external object, a relationship that calls for the body to be

⁶² Victoria Rosner, *Modernism and the Architecture of Private Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), pp. 122-3.

⁶³ Anne E. Fernald, *Virginia Woolf: Feminism and the Reader* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 1.

open – or to open itself – to the world outside itself.⁶⁴ In conceiving of the self-reflexivity of modernist aesthetics as privileging the materiality of the text, and reading as a relationship with things apart from books, Lurz's study travels a similar path to this thesis, drawing on arguments which at times bear more poignant relevance to the short story form than the novel. For instance: 'If, in the end, the book transmits its sense of finitude to us, it is only by embodying the transience by which the material world, with all its subjects and objects, texts and processes, comes to life' is a statement which might be applied more easily to short stories, with their more frequent endings and emphasis on brevity.⁶⁵ Lurz notes the connection between the Omega, the Hogarth Press, and Woolf's writing which 'excavates [an] interest in the mediation of the object' hitherto 'overshadowed by linking the logical abstractions in Fry's thinking of the later 1920s to Woolf's novels' to conclude that her 'literary experiments develop out of a commitment to the physicality of objects exhibited by the Omega Workshop'.⁶⁶ In considering the short fiction which preceded *Jacob's Room* (and the other novel examined in *The Death of the Book*, *The Waves*), this chapter can be considered a prequel to Lurz's work, instead conceptualising the armchair as central to Woolf's preoccupation with the subject-object relation as first explored in short fiction.

Yet none of this recent and valuable work has focused extensively on Woolf's shorter fiction, and Douglas Mao's *Solid Objects: Modernism and the Test of Production*, despite borrowing its title from Woolf's story, only discusses the short fiction in an ancillary capacity.⁶⁷ Similarly, Banfield's capacious work discusses the short story 'The Lady in the Looking Glass: A Reflection' only to conclude that: 'Novel-writing becomes the imaginative construction and furnishing of private rooms' (my italics).⁶⁸ To date, perhaps surprisingly given the sheer weight of Woolfian scholarship in existence, the short fiction has sustained only few book-length studies. These are Dean R. Baldwin's *Virginia Woolf: A Study of the Short Fiction* (1989, part criticism, part

⁶⁴ John Lurz, *The Death of the Book: Modernist Novels and the Time of Reading* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2016), p. 74.

⁶⁵ Lurz, p. 20.

⁶⁶ Lurz, p. 110.

⁶⁷ Douglas Mao, *Solid Objects: Modernism and the Test of Production* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998).

⁶⁸ Banfield, p. 112.

critical anthology), Nena Skrbic's *Wild Outbursts of Freedom: Reading Virginia Woolf's Short Fiction* (2004), Christine Reynier's *Virginia Woolf's Ethics of the Short Story* (2009) and the comprehensive essay collection edited by Kathryn Benzel and Ruth Hoberman, *Trespassing Boundaries: Virginia Woolf's Short Fiction* (2004). Woolf is also discussed in Claire Drewery's 2011 work, *Modernist Short Fiction by Women: The Liminal in Katherine Mansfield, Dorothy Richardson, May Sinclair and Virginia Woolf*, as part of her thematic consideration of transience and liminality.

Of these works, Michelle Levy's essay from the collection *Trespassing Boundaries* stands out as particularly relevant to this thesis, concerned as it is with Woolf's exploration of the external world through short fiction. It argues that Woolf used 'the short fictional forms to achieve her most sustained exploration of the human relation to the external world, as she found the genre at once sufficiently capacious and circumscribed to accommodate the nonhuman presence in narrative'.⁶⁹ Levy perceptively concludes, referring to the 'Time Passes' section of *To the Lighthouse*, that the fact that 'Woolf employs short narratives in her novels to convey aspects of the nonhuman world substantiates the extent to which she relied on the [short fiction] genre to express the complicated relation between the human and nonhuman'.⁷⁰ In the same collection, Ruth Hoberman's essay 'Collecting, Shopping and Reading: Virginia Woolf's Stories About Objects' also specifically concerns itself with the material aspects of Woolf's short fiction to conclude that Woolf offers a reading experience akin to shopping, where common readers 'construct a text's meaning in an individual way'.⁷¹ Hoberman's argument that the reader was key to Woolf's experimental short fiction, because the stories 'brought the acts of writing, selling, and reading closer together', will also be evidenced by this thesis.⁷² By focusing on the processes of world-reading (or armchair phenomenology) examined and enabled by Woolf's domestic short fiction, I hope to draw together strands from this broad and vital base of research and pull in a new direction.

More recently, a chapter by Laura Marcus in the wide-ranging *A Companion to Virginia*

⁶⁹ Levy, p. 139.

⁷⁰ Levy, p.152.

⁷¹ Ruth Hoberman, 'Collecting, Shopping, and Reading: Virginia Woolf's Stories About Objects', in *Trespassing Boundaries: Virginia Woolf's Short Fiction* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 81-98 (p. 96).

⁷² Hoberman, p. 95.

Woolf (2016, edited by Jessica Berman), draws welcome attention to Woolf's short stories as part of wider interrogation of her work, arguing, as this chapter will also, that Woolf's short fiction as a whole 'was at the heart and not the periphery of her literary aesthetics and her world-view'.⁷³ The chapter places similar weight on 'The Mark on the Wall' as I will here in extended analysis of the 'thought adventures' which occur 'from [the narrator's] armchair'⁷⁴ and also notes the frequency with which stories are located in the vicinity of the fireplace, the natural home of the armchair.⁷⁵ In noticing Woolf's use of the ellipsis in 'The Mark on the Wall' and elsewhere as 'signal[ling] her attraction to narrative open-endedness and incompleteness', Marcus gestures to the work that goes on beyond the story's end, which this chapter will also explore.⁷⁶ The chapter also notes the way in which Woolf uses the term 'solid objects' for 'the short story as genre'.⁷⁷ If, as Marcus observes, the short stories 'often seem to be meditations on the importance of staying still and of depicting what is before you', this chapter flips this perspective from that of the artist to the reader, to focus on interpretation over illustration.⁷⁸ Finally, Marcus's conclusion that much of Woolf's short fiction is concerned with 'an understanding of "character" in its relation to both the human and the object worlds' is also key to the thesis of this chapter which considers the short fiction as impressing Woolf's views on the importance of readerly interrogation of both human and object worlds.⁷⁹

Before going on to analyse the stories themselves, I will next explore the broad affinities between Woolf's short stories and the Hogarth Press with a particular focus on amateurism, artistic freedom and flexibility.

Short fiction as armchair literature

'The Mark on the Wall', published in 1917 and often conceived of as Woolf's first experimental writing, was not only an important piece in terms of its innovation and aesthetics; it also made

⁷³ Marcus, 'The Short Fiction', p. 38.

⁷⁴ Marcus, 'The Short Fiction', p. 32.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Marcus, 'The Short Fiction', p. 31.

⁷⁷ Marcus, 'The Short Fiction', p. 34.

⁷⁸ Marcus, 'The Short Fiction', p. 33.

⁷⁹ Marcus, 'The Short Fiction', p. 38.

up one half of the Hogarth Press's inaugural publication. Recalling *Two Stories*, Leonard Woolf comments in his autobiography: 'I must say, looking at a copy of this curious publication today, that the printing is rather creditable for two persons who had taught themselves for a month in a drawing room'.⁸⁰ The publication is testament to the potential of the self-educated amateur – Quentin Bell records the fact that Virginia and Leonard were refused access to more formal education in the specialism because 'Schools of Printing would not take middle-aged amateurs'.⁸¹ If it is generally true that 'authors do not write books', as books are 'manufactured by scribes and other artisans, by mechanics and other engineers, and by printing presses and other machines', Leonard and Virginia undermined this expectation.⁸² Their self-taught and self-sufficient cultural cottage industry took care of everything bar the illustrations, which they commissioned. Leonard could not handle type due to the tremor in his hand, so Virginia would set the type, 'sometimes muddling her n's and h's'.⁸³ Unembarrassed by the possibility of public perception of the pair as unprofessional or non-specialist, the title page of *Two Stories* proudly announced their dual responsibilities, their marital relation and the domestic locus of their rather unbusinesslike business:

TWO STORIES
WRITTEN AND PRINTED
BY
VIRGINIA WOOLF
AND
L. S. WOOLF
HOGARTH PRESS
RICHMOND
1917⁸⁴

⁸⁰ Leonard Woolf, *Beginning Again: An autobiography of the years 1911 to 1918* (London: Hogarth Press, 1964), p. 235.

⁸¹ Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf: A Biography*, 2 vols (St Albans: Triad Paladin, 1976), 2, p. 38.

⁸² Roger Stoddard quoted by Chartier, p. 138.

⁸³ Spalding, p. 93.

⁸⁴ Woolf, *Beginning Again*, p. 235.

They even, Leonard recalls, had the ‘temerity’ to include within the publication four woodcuts by Dora Carrington.⁸⁵ Yet it was precisely the audacious autonomy of newcomers’ ambition which ensured the success of the Hogarth Press – starting with no capital, ten years later it had grown into a ‘successful commercial publishing business’.⁸⁶ The enterprise was a triumph of precocious amateurism as well as a committed refusal to fully surrender the private to the public, or integrity to profit.

As Marcus notes, the short story was important to Woolf during these early years of the Hogarth Press, ‘both in practical and literary terms’.⁸⁷ It is fitting that the Press’s first publication included Woolf’s first published story because in *Two Stories* the ‘work of the amateur printer and the experimental writer coalesce’ in an organic unity which allowed for substantial freedoms.⁸⁸ In a July 1917 letter to David Garnett, responding to his praise of ‘The Mark on the Wall’, Virginia explains how ‘very amusing [it is] to try with these short things, and the greatest mercy to be able to do what one likes – no editors, or publishers, and only people to read who more or less like that sort of thing’ (L 2, 167).⁸⁹ The armchair values of amateurism and liberty enshrined by the Hogarth Press were as intrinsic to the innovative short fiction that Woolf produced. Hunter has likewise perceived ‘a direct relationship’ between ‘the freedoms offered by the advent of the Hogarth Press, in 1917’ and ‘the emergence of [Woolf’s] experimental, interrogative short stories’.⁹⁰

Roger Fry once wrote to Woolf: ‘we can have no public art, only private ones, like writing and painting, and even painting is almost too public’, highlighting the necessity of a private aesthetic which only need satisfy itself.⁹¹ It is a statement which better fits Woolf’s short

⁸⁵ Ibid.

⁸⁶ Woolf, *Beginning Again*, p. 254. Leonard states that the Press remained always a ‘half-time occupation’ and that if it had been made a ‘full-time occupation’ it would have become a ‘bigger, fatter, and richer business’ (ibid.). However, it was purposefully kept modestly-sized: ‘for many years our object was, not to expand, but to keep it small’, explains Leonard (p. 255) – and big business professionalism was successfully resisted.

⁸⁷ Laura Marcus, *Virginia Woolf* (Tavistock: Northcote House, 2004), p. 18.

⁸⁸ Laura Marcus, ‘Virginia Woolf as Publisher and Editor: The Hogarth Press’, in *The Edinburgh Companion to Virginia Woolf and the Arts* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp. 263-279 (p. 274).

⁸⁹ Much later, in September 1925, this sense of liberation was still keenly felt, with Woolf recording continued excitement in her diary: ‘I’m the only woman in England free to write what I like. The others must be thinking of series’ and editors’ (D 3, 43).

⁹⁰ Adrian Hunter, ‘The Short Story and the Difficulty of Modernism’ in *Modernism, Postmodernism, and the Short Story in English*, ed. by Jorge Sacido (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2012), pp. 29-46 (p. 38).

⁹¹ Woolf, *Roger Fry*, p. 238.

fiction than her novel writing; she clearly conceived of her stories in terms of leisure rather than professional ‘work’. Leonard Woolf described her short fiction as something specifically undertaken when ‘she required to rest her mind’ from novel writing.⁹² As Woolf wrote in October 1930 in a letter to Ethel Smyth, not quite sure of the name of the only short fiction collection she published during her life-time: ‘These little pieces in Monday or (and) Tuesday were written by way of diversion; they were the treats I allowed myself when I had done my exercise in the conventional style’ (L 4, 231). We can observe a clear distinction in Woolf’s mind here between ‘work’ and ‘play’, with short fiction falling definitively into the latter category. Due to illness, when she was writing *Night and Day* (eventually finished in the autumn of 1918), her ‘writing was rationed in the same way that the butter was rationed’.⁹³ However, in Woolf’s summation, short fiction doesn’t seem to ‘count’ as writing, cunningly evading professional literary prescription.

In the essay ‘Reading in Bed’, Hermione Lee sketches a biography of women’s reading, using terminology of relevance to Woolf’s experimental short fiction. She conceives of women’s reading as ‘horizontal’ against the canonical vertical; as the title of her essay suggests, horizontal reading takes place away from designated arenas such as the library and the study and is instead undertaken as an illicit endeavour, in bed, after dark:

The history of reading contains within it a conflict which recurs over and over again, in different formulations, between what one might call vertical and horizontal reading: the first regulated, supervised, orderly, canonical and productive, the second unlicensed, private, leisurely, disreputable, promiscuous and anarchic.⁹⁴

The writing of Woolf’s short fiction (playful, domestic, unsupervised, unbridled, abandoned, disreputable) is an enterprise most easily aligned with the horizontal axis. Lee’s description of

⁹² Leonard Woolf, ‘Foreword’, in Woolf, *A Haunted House and Other Short Stories*, pp. 7-8 (p. 7).

⁹³ Harris, p. 59. Woolf considered her diary writings similarly, writing in January 1919 that she is allowed ‘[o]ne hour writing daily’ yet ‘this diary writing does not count as writing’ (D 1, 233).

⁹⁴ Lee, ‘Reading in Bed’, p. 46.

horizontal reading chimes with a comment Woolf made in discussion of short fiction with Roger Fry in October 1918: 'I'm not sure that a perverted plastic sense doesn't work itself out in words for me' (*L* 2, 285). Yet I would contest the view that Woolf's short fiction should only be conceived of in opposition to the 'productive' output of the professional writer – to do so would be to ignore or undermine the interventionist capacity of her armchair literature. Instead, it should perhaps be viewed as occupying an oblique axis – the product of a horizontal reader who has graduated from the bed to the armchair in readiness to meet the wider world.



Figure 7: The oblique angle of the armchair of Woolf's brother-in-law, Clive Bell, which sits in his study at Charleston. Photograph taken by the author and reproduced courtesy of the Charleston Trust.

That Woolf's armchair literature offered her a space free from the obligations and pressures of professional writing is clear. On hearing that her friend Ka Arnold-Foster disliked her story 'In the Orchard', Woolf responds with perverse glee:

At once I feel refreshed. I become anonymous, a person who writes for the love of it. She takes

away the motive of praise, & lets me feel that without any praise, I should be content to go on. [...] I feel as if I slipped off all my ball dresses & stood naked – which as I remember was a very pleasant thing to do. (*D* 2, 248)

Similarly, when *Monday or Tuesday* is unfavourably reviewed in *The Dial*, Woolf writes how this inspires a ‘little philosophy’ within her – as, arguably, her stories would in others – which ‘amounts to a sense of freedom’. ‘I write what I like writing & there’s an end to it’, she concludes (*D* 2, 166). In each example the realisation of freedom is rooted in the affirmation of her anonymity, her unprofessionalism, her involvement in a private art for its own sake, not fiscal reward or audience approval.⁹⁵ She is rejected from the public arena and placed firmly back in the sanctuary of the armchair, which is the source of her pleasure.

Woolf’s short fiction can be conceived of as exploiting amateurism for uniquely positive ends, by utilising its freeing positive traits (an absence of ego, prescription, critical scrutiny and professional standards) to write with unchecked fluidity and to encourage modes of thought and being that were uninhibited by the damaging effects of public convention or professionalism. Part of this amateur approach, suggested by the domestic environment of so many of Woolf’s stories, is an implicit acknowledgement that short fiction must fit around rather than eschew everyday life. While she did not produce explicit (professional) short story criticism, Woolf was often on the brink of theorising the ‘immense possibilities in the form’ (*D* 2, 14).⁹⁶ For example, in *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), she suggested that the novel would likely not be the most suitable vehicle for female writers of the future, postulating a vision of a new, ergonomic mode of literature:

⁹⁵ While the majority of Woolf’s short fiction was written without a particular readership in mind, some pieces such as ‘The Mark on the Wall’ and ‘Kew Gardens’ were created specifically to self-publish at the Hogarth Press. The audience they would meet was controlled by Woolf and largely already known to her, therefore only slightly extending the sphere of intimacy to which her short fiction was indigenous. When Woolf published her only collection of short fiction, *Monday or Tuesday*, over 500 copies were sold in the first year, and 70 copies a year during the next two years (J. H. Willis, *Leonard and Virginia Woolf as Publishers: The Hogarth Press, 1917-41* (Charlottesville and London: University Press of Virginia, 1992), p. 53).

⁹⁶ Those of Woolf’s essays which discuss Russian short fiction are the closest her criticism comes to genre specificity, for example, ‘The Russian Background’ (1919) and ‘The Russian Point of View’ (1923). Dean R. Baldwin partly attributes the critical neglect of her short stories to what he sees as Woolf’s seeming disinterest in short fiction as a critic, observing that she ‘devot[ed] very little of her analytical and critical energy to discussing the form’ (Dean R. Baldwin, *Virginia Woolf: A Study of the Short Fiction* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1989), p. 3).

The book has somehow to be adapted to the body, and at a venture one would say that women's books should be shorter, more concentrated, than those of men, and framed so that they do not need long hours of steady and uninterrupted work.⁹⁷

Here, Woolf proposes a salient literature that ergonomically fits around the daily life of both writer and reader, configuring it as a material object that needs to be designed around the needs of the body. It is armchair literature that Woolf describes here: quotidian literature that can be consumed and produced by the enthusiast whose day is largely taken up by other activities, deferentially fitting itself around the everyday world with which its contents would engage also.

Woolf's armchair literature was written for those she referred to in the essay 'How Should One Read a Book?' as 'people reading for the love of reading, slowly and unprofessionally', for armchair phenomenologists.⁹⁸ Its goal? 'To create individuals capable of what Woolf saw as literature's ultimate purpose: the ability to 'continue reading without the book before you'.⁹⁹ Her short fiction prepares the reader for an interrogative existence, where questioning takes the form of a 'knowing search for beings in their thatness and their whatness' (BT 4). Showing that 'the methodological meaning of phenomenological description is *interpretation*' (BT 35, italics as in the text), it prepares readers to read beyond the borders of the text, activating a resonating, irresolvable analytic mode. As we will see shortly in 'The Mark on the Wall', Woolf's short fiction seems intent on invoking 'the question of being' (BT 51) by examining what happens when the subject encounters an external alterity. Rather than functioning as a navel-gazing narration of subjective interiority, it faces incessantly outward.

Next, analysing the 'The Mark on the Wall', I explore the ways in which Woolf's fiction espouses an 'armchair aesthetic' which invokes a humble, receptive attitude before the unruly diversity of the world, while questioning the structures and assumptions which seek to order it. I

⁹⁷ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 90. Michelle Levy also draws on this quotation in her examination of Woolf's short fiction (Levy, pp. 151-2).

⁹⁸ Woolf, *The Common Reader*, 2, p. 270.

⁹⁹ Woolf, *The Common Reader*, 2, p. 267.

will set out in more detail the ways that both Woolf's story and the armchair in it model ways of reading the world that are carried away by readers after they have relinquished the protective sphere of the armchair.

'The Mark on the Wall': Armchair, page, world

'The Mark on the Wall' owes its adventurousness, its originality of thought rooted in intolerance of tradition, to a thoroughly armchair precocity.¹⁰⁰ It describes a phenomenological adventure of raw, uninhibited interpretation which speculates on the eponymous mark on the wall from the viewpoint of the armchair.¹⁰¹ The story plots the course of a receptive sedentary subject, grappling with the object world, as Woolf did herself when the piece was written, exploring the 'things at hand of everyday dealings' (BT 100). The story is all the proof one needs to evidence Lorraine Sim's assertion that Woolf 'encourages her readers to actively interrogate normative perspectives by looking at the world again', also demonstrating that 'such investigations can begin within the space of the domestic everyday'.¹⁰² The story gradually reveals how the space of the domestic everyday, as epitomised by the protective locus of the armchair, is the place where a basic but profound confrontation between individual and world can start to occur – this is not only reading but also phenomenology for beginners. What Roger Fry would describe in his 1920 work *Vision and Design* as a creative vision which 'demands the most complete detachment from any of the meanings and implications of appearances' is also evident here.¹⁰³ It is the 'clean' perception of the amateur, free of preconception, which enables radical viewpoints to be

¹⁰⁰ 'The Mark on the Wall' is referred to by critics variously as Woolf's first avant-garde or 'Woolfian' writing. Descriptions of the story include the following: 'her first experimental piece' (Jeanne Dubino, ed., *Virginia Woolf and the Literary Marketplace* (New York: Macmillan, 2010), p. 7); 'her first sustained experiment in literary form' (Michael Whitworth, 'Virginia Woolf and modernism' in *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Sue Roe and Susan Sellers (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 146-163 (p. 150)); and a 'template for Woolf's subsequent fiction' (Clare Hanson, *Virginia Woolf* (Macmillan: Basingstoke, 1994), p. 41).

¹⁰¹ Although Dora Carrington illustrated this story with a woodcut illustration of a woman sitting on the floor warming her hands by the fire next to a dog, this picture bears scant relevance to the text. See L. S. and Virginia Woolf, *Two Stories* (London: Hogarth Press, 1917), p. 19. The manuscript with text and woodcuts is available to view on the British Library website at: <http://www.bl.uk/collection-items/two-stories-written-and-printed-by-virginia-and-leonard-woolf> [accessed 24 July 2016]. Vanessa Bell contributed woodcuts to *Monday or Tuesday* and the first image that appears is of an armchair, although it accompanies the story 'A Haunted House'. See Virginia Woolf, *Monday or Tuesday* (London: Hogarth Press, 1921), p. 8. This text is also available to view on the British Library website at: <http://www.bl.uk/20th-century-literature/articles/the-hogarth-press> [accessed 24 July 2016].

¹⁰² Sim, p. 46.

¹⁰³ Roger Fry, *Vision and Design* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), p. 35.

established. 'The Mark on the Wall' is concerned with the process of reading the world, a process to which the self is intrinsic, because '[k]nowledge is not some mysterious leap from subject to object and back again'.¹⁰⁴

Much of Woolf's short fiction is about reading, wherever that might occur – on the page or beyond it. As such, it can be seen as a training aid – a meditation on reading that is equally instructive as descriptive, a reading lesson for beginners. It establishes the mode of enquiring being that is necessary to the armchair critic, who must be capable of reading and interrogating everything put before her. 'The Mark on the Wall' leads the reader through a process of reading that is so active that it borders on the act of creation, introducing a microcosm so diverse that it incorporates philosophy alongside tube trains, turnips, hand organs and coalscuttles. Harvena Richter has noted that in her fiction Woolf tends to 'make the act of reading approximate the [described] experience itself'.¹⁰⁵ If the 'experience' depicted in the story is that of reading itself, then 'The Mark on the Wall' offers an informative working-through of the interpretative experience to its armchair audience, involving them in an enactment of reading beyond text and towards the external world. This is what Barthes describes in his essay 'Writing Reading' as '*read[ing] while looking up from your book*', where the text stimulates the reader to think outside of it.¹⁰⁶ Reading becomes a wider investigatory process, what Heidegger would term 'a knowing search for beings in their thatness and their whatness' (BT 4), a process constituted of '[r]egarding, understanding and grasping, choosing, and gaining access to' (BT 6).

Before moving on to a detailed analysis of 'The Mark on the Wall', I would like to explain my decision to use Heidegger's broadly contemporaneous *Being and Time* (1927) as a touchstone in this chapter. In short, this influential work resonates richly with Woolf's aesthetic vision. Her experimental style, founded in 'The Mark on the Wall' ten years before Heidegger's publication, was essentially one that tasked itself with a holistic working out and rendering of the question of being (*Dasein*) and its meaning, always in a context of what Heidegger would term

¹⁰⁴ George Steiner, *Heidegger* (London: Fontana Press, 1989), p. 83.

¹⁰⁵ Harvena Richter, *Virginia Woolf: The Inward Voyage* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), p. x.

¹⁰⁶ Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, p. 29. Italics as in the text.

‘everydayness’ (BT 43) or what Woolf would call ‘an ordinary mind on an ordinary day’.¹⁰⁷ Deliberately drafting *Being and Time* in a ‘common, non-technical’ register, Heidegger was as concerned as Woolf with appealing to the common reader.¹⁰⁸ Like Woolf’s, Heidegger’s phenomenological method of enquiry relied not on ‘technical device’ but on ‘confrontation with the things themselves’ (BT 26). It relied on engagement, not training or ‘established discipline’ (BT 26) – in other words, it was a mode of enquiry more accessible from an armchair than an office chair, relying on non-professional virtues in a non-professional environment.¹⁰⁹ Moreover, Heidegger’s concern with the importance of *Wesen* (the ability “to sojourn”, “to belong to and in”, ‘that which is in its active being’) to being, and especially authentic being, complements Woolf’s conception of ‘moments of being’ and her exploration of these through the armchair, specifically designed to facilitate the activity of ‘dwelling’.¹¹⁰ Like Mrs. Crowe in Woolf’s ‘Portrait of a Londoner’ who ‘always sat there in an armchair by the fire’ because it was there that ‘she had her being’, the armchair is a place where we might also engage with the world on our own terms.¹¹¹

Constantly aware of and delighting in the diverse and complex effects of subjectivity, of humanness, Woolf nonetheless projected a vision of a world where the human did not dominate all else, imagining both pre- and post-human histories with serene delectation in her fictions.¹¹² She viewed the world, like Heidegger, phenomenologically – as a place made up of beings of various different types, which she observed with an equanimity which rendered hierarchy an irrelevance. Woolf’s ‘phenomenological approach’ relied, as did Heidegger’s, on ‘perception, cognition, reflection, and imagination’.¹¹³ This is an armchair aesthetic – hunkered low and

¹⁰⁷ Woolf, *The Common Reader*, 1, p. 149.

¹⁰⁸ Steiner, p. 14.

¹⁰⁹ Heidegger believed in the importance of the everyday environment as a route to the disclosedness of being: ‘The closest world of everyday Dasein is the *surrounding world* [...] We shall seek the worldliness of the surrounding world [...] by way of an ontological interpretation of those beings encountered within the *surroundings*’ (BT 66, italics as in the text).

¹¹⁰ Steiner, p. 51. See also ‘Being Dwelling Thinking’ in which Heidegger defines dwelling as an innately human activity which is always a ‘staying with things’. Martin Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, ed. by David Farrell Krell (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 347-363 (p. 353).

¹¹¹ Woolf, *The London Scene*, p. 67.

¹¹² Clare Hanson is just one critic who has described Woolf’s vivid imagining of the ‘possibilities of a post-individualist and post-humanist future’. Hanson, *Virginia Woolf*, p. 200.

¹¹³ Kathryn Benzel, ‘Verbal Painting in “Blue & Green” and “Monday or Tuesday”’ in *Trespassing Boundaries: Virginia Woolf’s Short Fiction*, ed. by Benzel and Hoberman, pp. 157-174 (p. 159).

humble before the world, the armchair phenomenologist does not view external phenomena as a series of resources moulded about individual need but instead as something to be reverently explored. If phenomenology is ‘the science of the being of beings – ontology’ (*BT* 35) via ‘the things themselves’ (*BT* 26), its very unrestricted, democratic accessibility as a route to knowledge is key. Heidegger’s philosophy is also that of the common reader, of the armchair critic. But first, let us attend to the things themselves, to the mark on the wall.

The view from the armchair

The story’s journey begins with a sighting of ‘a small round mark, black upon the white wall, about six or seven inches above the mantelpiece’ (*HH* 77), immediately linking textual reading to the act of phenomenological interpretation by invoking imagery of type on blank sheets, also mapping its site as specifically domestic.¹¹⁴ The mantelpiece is a recurring feature of Woolf’s domestic stories, functioning as a sort of horizon of vision for the armchair reader positioned close to the fireplace, often displaying objects that might capture the imagination once eyes stray from the page. The page on which the armchair phenomenologist will learn to read is the wall of their home, an appropriate place to begin as a membrane between the intimate (subjective) interior and impersonal (objective) exterior worlds. On this page, they will time-travel to compare histories of humans and objects and begin to get to grips with what it is to ‘be’ either, climbing through the tumult of a ‘vast upheaval of matter’ by using question marks as hooks, dismantling long-ossified tradition and administration as they go (*HH* 83). Seated deep and low in an armchair, the narrator is afforded an unusual sightline – one which is at once unassuming and capacious. She enjoys the scope of vision and external engagement afforded by a ‘free view on two sides’.¹¹⁵ The direction of view is key – the oblique sightline positions the narrator below

¹¹⁴ Later in the story, the mark is specifically referred to as punctuation: a ‘full stop to one’s disagreeable thoughts’ (*HH* 82). Marcus observes that ‘[t]he “mark” on the wall could be read as a punctuation mark, beginning and ending trains of thought’ (Marcus, ‘Virginia Woolf as Publisher and Editor: The Hogarth Press’, p. 271).

¹¹⁵ Walter Benjamin notes this scope of vision enabled by the oblique position thus: ‘In order to defend a piece of ground, I place myself expressly on the diagonal, because then I have a free view on two sides. It is for this reason that the bastions of a fortification are construed to form salient angles’ (Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 215). While I am not suggesting here that any sort of defence is involved here (the secure domestic space limits the need for this), the generous perceptual field is key to the work of short fiction in Woolf’s hands, and her phenomenological experimentation.

the matter for speculation and suggests the deferential, unobtrusive approach of the amateur to its elevated (yet unremote) subject. In making the subject reverential and the familiar peculiar through obliquity of perspective, Woolf induces a mode of sensitive receptivity in her readers that is the ideal primer for effective reading.



Figure 8: A low armchair typical of the era in which Woolf wrote her experimental short fiction, covered in 'Clouds' fabric, designed by Duncan Grant, pictured in the library at Charleston. Photograph taken by the author and reproduced courtesy of the Charleston Trust.

Prior to the story really taking flight, the protagonist stares into the fire from the pages of her book, and is overcome by an 'old fancy' of red knights, black rocks, flags and castles, before that whimsy is overtaken by observation of the mark on the wall. This interference from the external world inspires 'relief' as it breaks off this 'automatic fancy, made as a child perhaps' (*HH* 77), as if reverie founded upon unexamined habit precludes the engagement with the here and now necessary for productive thinking and observation. The notion of tales or traditions so well-known that 'words have been rubbed smooth of their meaning' (*HH* 40) runs through this piece

and acts as a continued source of narrative consternation as an obstacle to its wider ambition of ontological engagement.¹¹⁶ When the protagonist recalls this ‘fancy’, she does so looking at the fire through the smoke of her cigarette, perhaps in literalisation of the human tendency towards clouding mental habits. It is only once she has begun a productive relationship with the intricacy of the world in front of her that she is able to enjoy the unfettered cocoon of the armchair to ‘think quietly, calmly, spaciouly’ and ‘slip easily from one thing to another’ (*HH* 79) to enjoy the limber liberty of a world where ‘nothing is proved, nothing is known’ (*HH* 81), but where one bravely engages with it nonetheless. The narrator is free to imagine a ‘world without professors or specialists or house-keepers with the profiles of policemen, a world which one could slice with one’s thought as a fish slices the water with his fin’ (*HH* 81) – an accessible, libertarian, amateur domain in which nothing is closed off. In this world, the armchair phenomenologist can prevail over the specialist who has come to rely upon assumption, precedent and established interpretation, perhaps overly confident in their subject’s facticity and its ability to be known, instead invoking more instinctive and responsive modes of thought in the material present.

Woolf’s continued scepticism towards the professional is evidenced in the self-scrutiny of a diary entry of December 1928 in which she worries she has become ‘too professional, no longer the dreamy amateur’ (*D* 3, 210). As Jane Marcus observes of Woolf in the context of the literary criticism she produced:

Her notion of a ‘conspiracy’ between her ‘common reader’ and the writer against professors of literature and critics was not just a pretty rhetorical device, but a serious attack on professionalism, which she saw would be as dangerous to women as it had been to men.¹¹⁷

As this analysis of Woolf’s wider work shows, the genesis of this theory can be clearly traced to ‘The Mark on the Wall’.

In its narration, this story avoids the sense of congealed meaning refuted by its contents

¹¹⁶ The quotation itself is taken from the 1906 story ‘The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn’.

¹¹⁷ Jane Marcus, ‘Taking the Bull by the Udders’, in *Virginia Woolf and Bloomsbury: A Centenary Celebration*, ed. by Jane Marcus (Hampshire and London: Macmillan, 1987), pp. 146-169 (p. 157).

in eschewing the practised certainty implicit to the past tense. Although it is clear that the story itself is a remembrance, beginning '[p]erhaps it was the middle of January in the present year that I first looked up and saw the mark on the wall' (*HH* 77), qualifiers disrupt narrative certainty and, in the third paragraph, the past tense is abandoned altogether for the present. As Heidegger states, '[p]erception takes place as *addressing* and *discussing* something as something' (*BT* 61, italics as in the text) – the explorative process is an active one whose home is the present tense. Elsewhere, the narrator exclaims 'how dull this is – this historical fiction!' (*HH* 79) and there is a wider suspicion for conclusive, sweeping statements that are rendered opaque by distance – whether historical, physical or mental – with 'generalisations' described by the narrator as 'very worthless' (*HH* 80). Such generalisations recall the entrenched routines of 'Sunday afternoon walks, Sunday luncheons' where habit prevails above all else, such as the tradition of 'sitting all together in a room until a certain hour, although nobody liked it' (*HH* 80). The lone armchair reader is free to shirk the contrivances of a world in which there is 'a rule for everything' (*HH* 80). In that regulated (upper class, professional) world, materiality is even neutered by administration, with '[t]ablecloths of a different kind' not considered 'real tablecloths' (*HH* 80). The accepted and approved trumps freedom and individual choice: 'leading articles, cabinet ministers – a whole class of things indeed which as a child one thought the thing itself, the standard thing, the real thing, from which one could not depart save at the risk of nameless damnation' (*HH* 80). 'The Mark on the Wall' calls for the replacement of the irrelevantly conceptual with the concretely real: 'the real thing' for real things, enacting the maxim Heidegger uses to define the term 'phenomenology': 'To the things themselves!' (*BT* 26).

These categorisations and standards, reinforced in the text by the recurring symbol of Whitaker's Table of Precedency, only serve to hamper sight and thoughtful engagement with the real because they undermine specificity and individuality. In this story, the smugly capitalised Table comes to symbolise patriarchal, administrative power, what Woolf calls 'the masculine point of view which governs our lives, which sets the standard, which establishes Whitaker's Table of Precedency, which soon, one may hope, will be laughed into the dustbin where the phantoms go' (*HH* 80). Woolf also makes use of *Whitaker's Almanack* in *Three Guineas* (1938),

where she uses its data to evidence that those women who have entered the professions are dramatically underpaid as compared with their male counterparts, asking: ‘And does not Whitaker prove that half the work of educated men’s daughters is still unpaid-for work?’¹¹⁸ Rather than simply recording information which proves inequality exists, Whitaker is shown to perpetuate injustice by actively establishing norms and approving norms and precedents which go unchallenged and therefore actively resist change.

Woolf writes in the same long essay that femaleness seems ‘according to Whitaker, possessed of a curious leaden quality, liable to keep any name to which it is fastened circling in the lower spheres’.¹¹⁹ The role of the amateur is offered in this context as a radical alternative to those who would otherwise seek to inveigle a professional structure that is incurably patriarchal and so impenetrable. The world of prescribed order embodied by *Whitaker’s Almanack* is what Heidegger would refer to as ‘averageness’ or ‘publicness’, a dictatorial force concerned with the ‘flatten[ing] down’ of ‘everything that is original [...] as something long since known’ (BT 123). The armchair phenomenologist is counterpoised against this dulling administrative force which seeks to professionalise and quash non-normative or oblique perspectives. Heidegger believed that this public force ‘initially controls every way in which the world and Dasein are interpreted’ and succeeds not because of ‘an eminent and primary relation of being to “things”’ but because it refuses to ‘get to “the heart of the matter,”’ because it is insensitive to every difference of level or genuineness’ (BT 123-4). The original, and therefore anarchic, force of the armchair phenomenologist works against the homogenising force of Whitaker’s Table which seeks to present thought as something already taken care of, relegating interpretation to the realms of the unnecessary and recategorising the present as a stolid continuation of the past. Woolf shows that deadening generalisation can only be avoided by replacing the abstract with an engaged grasp of the specifically material. E. M. Forster described her experimental stories (specifically ‘The Mark on the Wall’ and ‘Kew Gardens’) as embodying an ‘inspired breathlessness’ which can yet ‘never express [...] the structure of society’.¹²⁰ If these short pieces cannot contain the whole structure

¹¹⁸ Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas* (London: Penguin, 1977), p. 95.

¹¹⁹ Woolf, *Three Guineas*, p. 95.

¹²⁰ Forster, ‘The Early Novels of Virginia Woolf’ in *Abinger Harvest*, pp. 119-129 (p. 123).

of society, this suits their purpose well, which is not to sustain but to undermine and destabilise such structures – it is readers instead who are bolstered and propped up by the framework of their respective armchairs.¹²¹

Against taxonomy

One of the subplots in ‘The Mark on the Wall’ features an amateur archaeologist, a retired colonel who crosses counties to compare arrowheads with other enthusiasts, in a line of enquiry that proposes engagement with the material world which yet fails. As the colonel dies, his ‘last conscious thoughts are not of wife or child’, but ‘of the camp and that arrowhead there, which is now in the case at the local museum’ (HH 81). The colonel’s implied wrong-footedness in his object relations seems to lie not only in his myopic fixation (at the expense of the world’s myriad other jostling things, including humankind) but also in his eventual wish to conquer the object, to pin down its provenance with taxonomy, to possess it with a type of knowledge that is at risk of missing holistic sense and meaning. Despite at first feeling ‘agreeably philosophic’ in ‘accumulating evidence on both sides of the question’ (HH 81), he eventually abandons uncomfortable ambivalence to take a staunch position, choosing to believe in the existence of the camp over the tomb. In so doing, he abandons amateurism in favour of a singular professionalised view which orders and so neutralises ‘the vast upheaval of matter’ (HH 83) represented here by the randomly selected physical remains of history that have been randomly selected by time. His downfall is literalised as he has a stroke while preparing a paper to read to a local society. His certainty of position is in stark contrast to the amateur viewpoint, articulated by the story’s narrator who catalogues a number of items in the local museum to conclude that this proves ‘I really don’t know what’ because ‘nothing is proved, nothing is known’ (HH 81). Early on in the text, the narrator states: ‘once a thing’s done, no one ever knows how it happened’ (HH 78) and this irreverent dismissal of the capability of historical interpretation again asserts the primacy of the present tense and the irrelevance of taxonomy. The historian’s belief in one

¹²¹ In another essay from the *Abinger Harvest* collection, E. M. Forster describes the ‘propping quality in books’ which is a very armchair ‘by-product’ of ‘their power to give pleasure’ (Forster, *Abinger Harvest*, pp. 86-87).

version of possible events over another works against an understanding of ‘the rapidity of life, the perpetual waste and repair; all so casual, all so haphazard’ (*HH* 78) by seeking a fixity of logic and meaning where it likely does not dwell.¹²² As ‘there is not one reflection but almost an infinite number’ (*HH* 79), so there are an infinite number of arrowheads; as Heidegger put it, knowledge that seeks to fix ‘tears understanding away from projecting authentic possibilities, and drags it into the tranquillized supposition of possessing or attaining everything’ (*BT* 172). In this way, a narrowly historicist approach is imperialist, with objects and their related biographies possessed and neutralised by singular hegemonic interpretation.

Woolf suggests that objects should not be shoehorned into an anthropocentric history – that they largely preceded human history and will likely succeed it. Gaining ‘phenomenological access’ to the other beings in the world, Heidegger states (and he asserts and reasserts that ‘beings’ might equally consist of subject or object), consists of accepting beings ‘as they are encountered of their own accord’ (*BT* 67, italics as in the text).¹²³ As Bill Brown writes in his analysis of another of Woolf’s stories with thingly concerns (which this chapter will finally consider) – ‘Solid Objects’ – these texts display an insistence on ‘dislodging objects from a history of their proximity to subjects’, ‘liberating artefacts from their status as determinate signs, from rendering a life of things that is irreducible to the history of human subjects’.¹²⁴ ‘The Mark on the Wall’ ‘give[s] voice to a *less specifically human* kind of materiality’, what Jane Bennett would many years later term ‘thing-power’.¹²⁵ In so doing, Woolf demonstrates that ‘attentiveness to (nonhuman) things and their powers can have a laudable effect on humans’.¹²⁶ In accepting the object as other without seeking to dominate it, the armchair phenomenologist enters a ‘kind of readerly physical attunement’ which paves the way for an authentic democracy of matter,

¹²² Heidegger would call this a type of ‘inauthentic historicity’ (*BT* 372) that is ‘driven about by its own “affairs”’ (*BT* 370) rather than seeking to address the full ‘connectedness’ of being (*BT* 371).

¹²³ Heidegger speaks of ‘addressing beings as “things”’ (*BT* 67). He dislikes even using the terms ‘subject’ and ‘object’, which he views as reductive, so that a statement such as ‘the interpretation of knowledge, still prevalent today, as a “relation between subject and object” [...] contains as much “truth” as it does vacuity’ must be followed with a chastising footnote: ‘Certainly not! So little that putting them together in order to reject this is already fatal’ (*BT* 60). In the absence of other more suitable terminology, however, I will use the same terms here.

¹²⁴ Bill Brown, *Other Things*, p. 66.

¹²⁵ Jane Bennett, ‘The Force of Things: Steps Towards an Ecology of Matter’, *Political Theory*, 32:3 (June 2004), 347–372 (p. 348).

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*

whether animal, mineral or vegetable.¹²⁷

Instead of seeking to pinion the object (a tricky manoeuvre anyway, if seated), the armchair phenomenologist conversely lets her ‘thoughts swarm upon a new object, lifting it a little way, as ants carry a blade of straw’ (*HH* 77), choosing veneration over domination. Elsewhere, the narrator speaks of ‘worshipping the chest of drawers, worshipping solidity, worshipping reality, worshipping the impersonal world which is proof of some existence other than ours’ (*HH* 82).¹²⁸ There is a rebalancing of the accepted subject-object hierarchy in progress in ‘The Mark on the Wall’ – a revolutionising of an ideology so entrenched it goes without mention in Whitaker’s table – as well as thoughtful recognition and validation of the autonomous power of the object world.¹²⁹ Eagleton, in a rare moment of sympathy with Woolf, notes that she, like D. H. Lawrence, has ‘an extraordinary receptivity to objects, a capacity to open herself up to their unique modes of being without foisting grand designs upon them’.¹³⁰ It is precisely this receptive, engaged yet deferential attitude which the armchair phenomenology of ‘The Mark on the Wall’ seeks to encourage.

This is in contrast with other stories, such as ‘Nurse Lugton’s Curtain’, ‘In the Orchard’ and ‘The Lady in the Looking Glass: A Reflection’, which document instead a failed armchair phenomenology. In the first two stories, the protagonists fall asleep in their chairs while the external world comes to riotous life about them, perhaps suggesting that the enthusiasm of engagement required by armchair aesthetics is lacking. In the ‘The Lady in the Looking Glass: A Reflection’, all objects come to be read as (false) signifiers of the human occupant of the house, with the observer-narrator treating the protagonist, Isabella, rather like the colonel did the arrowhead – using her mind too aggressively and over-bearingly like a ‘tool’ to decipher her subject, in order to hegemonically ‘fasten her down there’ (*HH* 217).¹³¹ This is until the

¹²⁷ Lurz, p. 2.

¹²⁸ This fragment is resurrected in *The Waves* (1931), in which Rhoda fixes on the materiality of the chest of drawers as a method of resisting numinous sleep: ‘Look, there is the chest of drawers. Let me pull myself out of these waters’ (Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (London: Granada, 1983), p. 19).

¹²⁹ This is a key feature of another of Woolf’s object-oriented stories, ‘Solid Objects’ (1920).

¹³⁰ Eagleton, *The English Novel*, p. 315.

¹³¹ Written in 1929, ‘The Lady in the Looking Glass: A Reflection’ recalls Woolf’s famous 1924 essay ‘Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown’, in which she criticises the Edwardian writers for laying an unbalanced and ‘enormous stress upon the fabric of things’ and depicting ‘a house in the hope that we may be able to deduce the human beings who live there’ (Virginia Woolf, *Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown* (London: Hogarth Press, 1924), pp.18-19). Woolf’s story,

realisation that Isabella only resembles her room in so far as it is inaccessible; like it she is ‘full of locked drawers, stuffed with letters’ that cannot be read (*HH* 219). The narrator’s initial anti-phenomenological, dogmatic approach relies on a relentless taxonomy, which is finally revealed to be futile – both ‘impious and absurd’ (*HH* 219).

‘The Mark on the Wall’ also reveals notions of ownership (either conceptual or material) as ridiculous as part of its wider project of redistribution. The narrator of the story declares: ‘how very little control of our possessions we have’, while ‘opals and emeralds’ are imagined to ‘lie about the roots of turnips’ (*HH* 78). This works to undermine the coloniser/colonised dynamic that has historically determined human attitudes to things (and people). The couple who lived in the house before the narrator (‘very interesting people’, we are told) moved because ‘they wanted to change their style of furniture’ (*HH* 77), suggesting an alert and pliant sensitivity to the external environment also echoed by the narrator in her imaginative (subjective) engagement with (objective) surroundings. Each shows a desire to mould the subjective around the external, rather than maintain the traditional subjugation of the object world. If experiencing the ‘rapidity of life’ is comparable to ‘being blown through the Tube at fifty miles an hour’ (*HH* 78) then the notions of stability and security associated with ownership become risible. If we are to wake up from a nightmare to ‘worship’ the otherworldliness of the object world, it is because things revered for their alterity rather than their submission or as an extension of the ubiquitous ‘I’. Again, the humility of the low-seated armchair reader prevails.

Reading beyond the page

As the armchair phenomenologist engages with external matter, ‘striking down to the roots of things’ (*HH* 92), what Heidegger would term the ‘they-self’ of public life also comes to appear trivial. The armchair, which only allows room for the individual, is diametrically opposed to the ‘they’ and its ideologies, with the armchair critic wary of ‘[a]bsorbing oneself in the they [which] signifies that one is dominated by the public way of interpreting’ (*BT* 213). Heidegger defines the

conversely, reveals the observed Isabella at its conclusion as being ‘perfectly empty’ (*HH* 219), revealing this method of extrapolating the human from the material as limited.

‘they-self’ as the ‘true dictatorship’, describing ‘being-with-one-another’ as creating ‘*averageness*’ (BT 123, italics as in the text). This type of ‘publicness’, Heidegger argues, ‘obscures everything, and then claims that what has thus been covered over is what is familiar and accessible to everyone’ (BT 123-4). This description resonates powerfully with Woolf’s vision of the oppressive patriarchy of Whitaker’s table. Resistance to this type of inauthentic behaviour is evidenced in Woolf’s story in the practised daydream of public life in which the narrator invents stories which ‘indirectly reflect [...] credit’ upon herself, the awareness of which incites her to ‘stretch [her] hand out for a book in self-protection’ (HH 79), identifying engagement with both solid materiality and literature as routes to authentic living. Going on to consider more literal reflections, the narrator observes how mirrors reflect only ‘that shell of a person which is seen by other people’ – this recalls the notion of emptiness of habitual, public life, where only surfaces are perceived. ‘[W]hat an airless, shallow, bald, prominent world it becomes!’ (HH 79), the narrator sums up.

‘I feel a satisfying sense of reality,’ she goes on to sigh as a result of her material musing, ‘which turns the two Archbishops and the Lord High Chancellor to the shadows of shades’ (HH 82); the oblique, armchair perspective has turned the reverence usually accorded to public bureaucrats on its head. This feat is made possible despite the fact that just paragraphs earlier the narrator has planted the rhetorical question ‘who will ever be able to lift a finger against Whitaker’s Table of Precedency?’ The table’s overturn is enabled by material engagement; by focusing on the titular mark, the narrator is empowered, she ‘feels [she] has grasped a plank in the sea’ (HH 82), as if meaning were a solid construct more likely found in actual rather than virtual tables. What appears to be a closed, rhetorical question (the only type of question Whitaker’s table might allow) is remarkably answered within the space of a few sentences. The Table’s contents are laughed out of the room, with the assistance of some solid objects and an armchair from which to contemplate them, where the ‘solidity of objects dissolves the solidity of subjects’.¹³²

Yet not everyone will desire their armchair to become a site of revolution. Towards the

¹³² Schwenger, p. 83.

end of the story, the narrator advises sardonically: ‘if you can’t be comforted’, if you cannot accept the passive irresponsibility Whitaker’s table can confer upon you, if you *insist* on thinking for yourself, ‘if you must shatter this hour of peace, think of the mark on the wall’ (*HH* 82). The ‘peace’ referred to here, as proffered by the consolation of Whitaker’s table is, though, a false one. Woolf suggests the quiet of a mind that is not composed but sedated, a mind immune to interference from trifles such as marks on walls, implying that it is a richer type of reward that is to be offered by mentally seizing the material fabric of the world, which offers the potential connection with ‘something definite, something real’ (*HH* 82). By these means, the narrator gains access to a different kind of peace rooted in liberty, a mental quiet enabled by the amateur’s freeing domestic privacy, where it is possible to ‘think quietly, calmly, spaciouly, never to be interrupted, never to have to rise from [her] chair, to slip easily from one thing to another, without any sense of hostility, or obstacle’ (*HH* 79), to exploit her questioning mode without disruption and engage with the external world with all its disordered diversity. The armchair facilitates this engagement, and it is only when the privacy it aims to safeguard is shattered by a third party talking of generalised public constructions such as war, God and newspapers that the text’s secular communion with multiplicitous materiality must end. The revealing of the mark on the wall as a snail – its classification – also puts a full stop to our protagonist’s thinking, replacing the proliferating question marks that precede it and demonstrating the reductive nature of professional taxonomy. Rather than functioning as a grand ‘reveal’ at the end of the story, the categorisation of the mark as snail serves to close down rather than open up meaning.

With its circular plot, beginning and returning to the mark on the wall, the story implies that the only type of phenomenologist is the armchair kind – amateur, a beginner, ending up where she first started, prohibited the teleology of a more professional, ordered progression. Far from defining the ‘armchair’ as lacking practical or direct experience, through her story Woolf redefines the term to suggest that practical, direct experience can and indeed should occur from the site of the armchair. She even suggests that Shakespeare was perhaps just another armchair phenomenologist: ‘A man who sat himself solidly in an arm-chair, and looked into the fire, so – A shower of ideas fell perpetually from some very high Heaven down through his mind’ (*HH*

79). 'The Mark on the Wall' shows that the armchair allows its occupant 'an intoxicating sense of illegitimate freedom – if freedom exists' (*HH* 80). The type of freedom it offers is the freedom of uncertainty that comes with the confidence to ask endlessly resonating questions.

'The Mark on the Wall' is such a rich piece that it would be possible to spend many more pages unpacking its panoramics, but there is more to consider elsewhere. What I hope I have drawn attention to in this reading of Woolf's first literary experiment is her conception of the armchair a site of immense potential, the reach of which is only exceeded by that of its amateur occupants, its common readers. Enshrining those values inherent to private, creative domesticity, the armchair sits in direct opposition to and works against the professional, public sphere, which neutralises individuality and critical appraisal of the already-thought-through, encouraging conventionality, acceptance and '*averageness*' (*BT* 123, italics as in the text). The armchair allows individuals freedom and space to look obliquely at the world, favouring a multiplicity of possibilities over the singular, rigid certainty of professional conclusion. It allows autonomy without anthropocentricity, accepting only that which is immediately presented and on its own terms.

All this enables a capacious armchair aesthetic – an original, individual, amateur 'creative power' with contingent rather than vested interests, working against administration and hegemony in whatever form, insistent on determining new perspectives and interrogating both world and self.¹³³ It is, moreover, a mode of thinking that can be taken elsewhere, into the outside world. As the narrator of 'The Mark on the Wall' reminds us in the story's closing paragraphs: 'I can think sitting still *as well as* standing up' (*HH* 81, my italics). In 'A Room of One's Own', Woolf believes that in a hundred years opportunities will come:

if we have the habit of freedom and the courage to write exactly what we think; if we escape a little from the common sitting-room and see human beings not always in their relation to each other but in relation to reality.¹³⁴

¹³³ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 100.

¹³⁴ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, pp. 131-2.

The armchair is both a primer for and springboard into the wider world.

By creating a private, protected space for her readers, conjuring armchairs in which they could properly connect with her stories and therefore the world around them, Woolf set the scene for her reading experiments to occur. By planting her reader firmly in the armchair, even for a brief intensity of minutes, Woolf forces a halt to the ‘frenetic inertia’ of routine, busy life, pauses the public world, and allows the reader to confront the everyday on its own terms.¹³⁵ The armchair protects the physical and mental space required by readers to work at the questions put to them by both the text and the world at large. I will now go on to discuss a later story, ‘Sympathy’, to consider the story as an embodiment of Heidegger’s ‘being-toward-death’ and to explore the effect this has on the reading process.

‘Sympathy’ – armchairs, stories & ‘being-toward-death’

If, as Hermione Lee states, in Woolf’s short fiction ‘silence, darkness, death, pull against social conventions’, this is perhaps most palpably apparent in the 1919 story ‘Sympathy’, written just after the First World War.¹³⁶ The story’s beginning is narrated from the perspective of a sedentary individual reading a newspaper obituary, facing the empty armchair in which Humphry Hammond, the presumed deceased, recently sat. Henry is remembered talking in the armchair – ‘he said that “furniture” was what he liked’ (HH 102) – a comment that is repeated and probed throughout the piece, further strengthening his connection with the armchair. The figure of the vacated armchair bookends the story, stubbornly persisting despite Humphry’s death, a symbol Woolf would return to in *Jacob’s Room* (1922).¹³⁷ As unaffected by his death as the armchair, birds are imagined to sing outside the dead man’s window, brazenly, with ‘no concession to death; no tears no sentiment’ (HH 102).

Yet it is the endurance of objects, rather than nature, that is brought into sharp relief by

¹³⁵ Steiner, p. 96.

¹³⁶ Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, p. 375.

¹³⁷ Early in the novel, a description of the titular room ends with this line: ‘One fibre in the wicker arm-chair creaks, though no one sits there’ (Virginia Woolf, *Jacob’s Room* (London: Grafton, 1976), pp. 42 and 189). The same phrase is repeated on its final page.

this exploration of mortality. Elizabeth Bowen wrote to Woolf during the Second World War after her flat at 52 Tavistock Square had been completely destroyed in a raid to ask: 'When your flat went did that mean all the things in it too?' She went on: 'All my life I have said, "Whatever happens there will always be tables and chairs"' (MT 216-7).¹³⁸ Fittingly, it was only a chair that survived the bombing of the Woolfs' London flat, and 'Sympathy' is a tribute to such material resistance.¹³⁹ In the story's penultimate paragraph, the narrator reflects:

There is the yellow arm chair in which he sat, shabby but still solid enough, surviving us all; and the mantelpiece strewn with glass and silver, but he is as ephemeral as the dusty light which stripes the wall and carpet. So will the sun shine on the glass and silver the day I die. (HH 105)

This story is once more all about reading and interpretation; its 'twist' is that it is actually Humphry Hammond's father who has died, but the narrator reads the external world far more astutely than she does the obituary in the light of its wider resonance. In this story, the narrator gains a macroscopic perspective of the world, instigated by death, and is returned to the microcosm of the self via an 'anxiety [which] individualizes' (BT 184). The empty armchair invokes narratorial anxiety about mortality as well as a reading of the external world in which objects seem to have the upper hand – the title of the story seems more than anything to refer to a compassion towards the object world. Levy notes how 'as the narrator of "Sympathy" thinks about the dead man's armchair, the endurance of the world of objects offers consolation', but it seems more accurate to say that this endurance promotes anxiety, from which a form of resolution (rather than consolation) may follow.¹⁴⁰

A similar moment occurs in the 1925 story, 'A Summing Up', in which Sasha, positioned outside this time in a deckchair in Mrs Dalloway's back garden, internally 'applaud[ing] the

¹³⁸ In her 1938 novel, *The Death of the Heart*, Bowen also has Matchett declare: 'Not much gets past the things in a room, I daresay, and chairs and tables don't go to the grave so soon' (Elizabeth Bowen, *The Death of the Heart* (London: Penguin, 1984), p. 81).

¹³⁹ As Woolf wrote to her niece, Angelica Bell on 26 October 1940: 'As for 52 Tavistock, - well, where I used to dandle you on my knee, there's God's sky: and nothing left but one wicker chair and a piece of drugget' (L 6, 442).

¹⁴⁰ Levy, p. 142.

society of humanity from which she was excluded’, sits ‘steeped in her admiration for the people of the house’, relishing the scenery before her (*HH* 203). That is until she looks over a wall to spot a ‘bucket or perhaps a boot’ (*HH* 204), which disrupts and defuses her exalted party spirit. Despite additional guests drawing their chairs up to hers, she cannot resume her involvement in the public life of the gathering:

There they sat again, looking at the same house, the same tree, the same barrel; only having looked over the wall and had a glimpse of the bucket, or rather of London going its way unconcernedly, Sasha could no longer spray over the world that cloud of gold. Bertram talked and the somebodies – for the life of her she could not remember if they were called Wallace or Freeman – answered, and all their words passed through a thin haze of gold and fell into prosaic daylight. (*HH* 204)

Sasha is an armchair phenomenologist moved outside to the deckchair – she is depicted as both questioning and ‘humble’ (*HH* 204). After she sees the bucket, and conceives of its insensate contingency, as well as the tireless progress of decay to which even the object world is prone, evidenced by its rusted state, she becomes relegated from the ‘theyness’ of the party back to her own ‘oneness’. In so doing, she harnesses an armchair aesthetic even in company, drawing on the mental space which the chair facilitates what Heidegger would come to refer to as the ‘*clearing* of Dasein in which something like sight first becomes possible’ (*BT* 164, italics as in the text), allowing an encounter with the world to occur, circumspection and, ultimately, disclosure of being. The armchair phenomenologist, positioned at a distance from what Heidegger termed the ‘*they-self*’ of public life, is ideally placed to gain access to ‘the *authentic self*, that is, the self which has explicitly grasped itself’ (*BT* 125, italics as in the text). Whereas in public life ‘Dasein is *dispersed* in the they and must first find itself’, those employing an armchair aesthetic are returned to themselves, sufficiently liberated to ‘discover [...] the world and bring [...] it near’ (*BT* 125, italics as in the text).



Figure 9: Photograph of Katherine Mansfield looking out at the world from a deckchair by Ottoline Morrell, 1916-17. © National Portrait Gallery, London.

As a consequence of Sasha's disengagement from the dispersed being of public life, she comes to perceive the party as trivial and inauthentic, its chatter an irrelevance – she comes to feel, like the narrator of 'The String Quartet' (1920), that the 'tongue is but a clapper' (*HH* 134). Instead, Sasha focuses on the contingency of the tree in front of her and experiences her own 'moment of being':

Now the tree, denuded of its gilt and majesty, seemed to supply her with an answer; became a field tree – the only one in a marsh. She had often seen it; seen the red-flushed clouds between its branches or the moon split up, darting irregular flashes of silver. But what answer? Well that the soul – for she was conscious of a movement in her of some creature beating its way about her and trying to escape which momentarily she called the soul – is by its nature unmated, a widow bird; a bird perched aloof on that tree. (*HH* 204)¹⁴¹

¹⁴¹ This moment is one of many in Woolf's work that prefigures Sartre's *Nausea* (1938), and also recalls two of her three seminal childhood 'moments of being' as relayed in 'A Sketch of the Past' – one in which she conceives of a

Here the tree is ‘denuded’ in its perception, as is the world viewed by the narrator of ‘Sympathy’, now standing and positioned by the window:

Death has done it; death lies behind leaves and houses and the smoke wavering up, composing them into something still in its tranquillity before it has taken on any of the disguises of life. So, from an express train, I have looked upon hills and fields and seen the man with the scythe look up from the hedge as we pass, and lovers lying in the long grass stare at me without disguise as I stared at them without disguise. (HH 104)

This clear-sighted acuity might also be read as flowing from a site of composed privacy, the quiet of a mind that is not egotistically performing but humbly observing. The narrator’s partaking in a state of what Heidegger would term ‘being-toward-death’ results in the ability to first see and then *be* authentically, allowing the individual to ‘*be itself in passionate, anxious freedom toward death, which is free of the illusions of the they, factual, and certain of itself*’ (BT 255, emphasis as in original). This keen awareness of death and decay can also be viewed as amateur – positioned against the administration of the public world which works simultaneously to ritualise and banalise death, as embodied by the obituary in *The Times*.¹⁴² This public world names death but simultaneously evades it, taking part in a ‘*constant tranquillization about death*’ in which it is possible to believe that death ‘strikes the they’ but never the self (BT 243, italics as in the text).¹⁴³ An awareness of mortality, reinforced by the armchair which will outlast its occupant, invokes a humbling vulnerability. At once reduced by awareness to tiny parts of an almost inconceivably huge and diverse network which stretches simultaneously backward and forward, also stripped of comforting, blinkering *parti pris*, these armchair selves are also undeniable, potent and full of

flower in its wholeness, roots and all, and another in which a tree becomes so embroiled with an idea of death, her horror of Mr Valpy’s suicide, that she cannot pass it (see *Moments of Being*, p. 71).

¹⁴² Heidegger describes the engineered taboo of death thus: ‘Even “thinking about death” is regarded publicly as cowardly fear, a sign of insecurity on the part of Dasein and a gloomy flight from the world. *The they does not permit the courage to have anxiety about death*’ (BT 244, italics as in the text).

¹⁴³ Heidegger’s ‘tranquillization’ is to be seen in a different light to the ‘tranquillity’ referred to by Woolf’s story in the citation above, comparable to sedation, consensual only in terms of inauthentic concession.

being, clairvoyant.¹⁴⁴ This awareness of death enables a thoroughly amateur and stripped-back mode of perception, untaught, unfettered, uncorrupted – to the point where, at the end of ‘Sympathy’, the post arrives and the letters are perceived of by the narrator as ‘little white squares with black wriggling marks on them’ (*HH* 105), so distanced has she become from the habitual.

Woolf’s experimental stories are replete with anxiety and insecurity, showing us what happens when angst transforms the ‘tranquilized self-assurance’ of ‘Being-at-home’, so that the self is no longer absorbed in the world and ‘[e]veryday familiarity collapses’ (*BT* 182) while ‘Being-in enters into the existential “mode” of the “not-at-home”’ (*BT* 183). The ‘extravagant intensity of perception’ (*L* 4, 231) which enabled Woolf to write these stories from her sick bed, in her own state of *being-toward-death*, is key to the oblique viewpoint they articulate. It is this distance that divorces the subject from embroilment in the everyday and initiates the *unheimlich*, a process alluded to in the piece ‘Monday or Tuesday’ with the phrase ‘home or not home’ (*HH* 131).¹⁴⁵ In her essay ‘Phases of Fiction’, Woolf praises the novels of James and Proust for freeing the reader ‘to take delight [...] in things in themselves’, because ‘we see the strangeness of them only when habit has ceased to immerse us in them’.¹⁴⁶ This is the same privilege enjoyed by the narrator of ‘The Mark on the Wall’, who is able to leap from Roman pottery to arrowheads to book-binding tools to remark upon ‘the rapidity of life, the perpetual waste and repair; all so casual, so haphazard’ and to amazedly exclaim: ‘[t]he wonder is that I’ve any clothes on my back, that I sit surrounded by solid furniture at this moment’ (*HH* 78). It is what illuminates the glass and silver on the mantelpiece as inheritors of a future inaccessible to the narrator of ‘Sympathy’.

One aim of these armchair stories then is to make the reader feel at home in not feeling at home, by transforming habitual perception so that it is disrupted, so that things can be seen anew. The *unheimlich* instigates repossession of the self, triggering ‘those key moments in which

¹⁴⁴ An early story, ‘The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn’ (1906), features a Dame Elsbeth Aske who, too stiff to leave the comfort of her chair or knit or stitch within it, ‘sat with clasped hands by the fire all day long’ and ‘would tell you stories [...] till the air seemed to move and murmur’ (*HH* 62). Elsbeth is clairvoyant (from the French, ‘clearsighted’) and this early story also hints towards the capacious vision allowed from the perspective of the armchair.

¹⁴⁵ As Freud elucidates in his 1919 essay ‘The Uncanny’: ‘The German word ‘*unheimlich*’ is obviously the opposite of ‘*heimlich*’ [homely], ‘*heimisch*’ [‘native’] – the opposite of what is familiar’ (Sigmund Freud, *Art and Literature*, trans. by James Strachey (London: Penguin, 1990), p. 341).

¹⁴⁶ Virginia Woolf, *Granite and Rainbow: Essays by Virginia Woolf* (London: Hogarth Press, 1958), p. 122.

Angst brings *Dasein* face to face with its terrible freedom to be or not to be, to dwell in inauthenticity or strive for self-possession'.¹⁴⁷ The locus of the armchair should not then be conceived of solely as a site of comfort and relaxation, instead the experience of it might be more comparable to 'com[ing] to the surface in the dentist's arm chair' (*E* 4, 317), with the reader allowed sufficient distance from the everyday to be aware of its haphazard nature and their arbitrary relation to it. This is an awareness of 'the world into which we are thrown, without personal choice' which 'was there before us and will be there after us', what Heidegger would term 'thrownness'.¹⁴⁸ Woolf's short fiction induces a state of 'attunement' which '*discloses Dasein in its thrownness*' (*BT* 132-3, italics as in the text). If the armchair is a vehicle by which we can consider and relate to the world, it is one which simultaneously insists on reminding us of the incidental and contingent nature of that relationship.

There is something inherent to the structure of the short story form that also induces a similar mode of perception in its reader, never allowing them to get too comfortable in their seats. Tessa Hadley has observed that 'because a story is short, you can always feel the end coming, sooner rather than later', which 'makes for a more self-conscious immersion' and an awareness of 'the edges of the fiction, and of how it's made'.¹⁴⁹ The unblinkered awareness enabled by short fiction – where one never quite escapes material existence and is refused the luxury of cosy escapism because termination is always imminent – parallels and encourages the process of *being-toward-death*. It is as if these stories function as primers for the most fundamental questions of being. No matter how compelling the story, the reader is always aware of the armchair in which they are sitting, slightly uncomfortably.

In her review entitled 'The Memoirs of Sarah Bernhardt', Woolf describes the distraction afforded the reader of her fiction:

¹⁴⁷ Steiner, p. 97.

¹⁴⁸ Steiner, p. 85.

¹⁴⁹ Tessa Hadley, 'Tessa Hadley's Top 10 Short Stories', *The Guardian* (11 September 2013)

<<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/sep/11/tessa-hadley-top-10-short-stories>> [accessed 13/9/13].

But where after all does dream end, and where does life begin? For when the buoyant armchair grounds itself at the end of the chapter with a gentle shock that wakes you and the clouds spin round you and disappear, does not the solid room which is suddenly presented with all its furniture expectant appear too large and gaunt to be submerged again by the thin stream of interest which is all that is left you after your prodigal expense?¹⁵⁰

This clear dichotomy of the imagined and the real is not something allowed the reader of Woolf's experimental fiction, where endings are always in view and anxiously anticipated. In the short story especially, the 'world in front [...] and the world "inside" [...] are not merely adjacent but overlapping'.¹⁵¹ In 'Sympathy', the armchair haunts the text, symbolising the demise of Humphry Hammond and working to reinforce his absence. In Woolf's experimental stories more widely, it operates as a dogged presence which can never be forgotten by its reader. This is yet a positive force – by reminding them of both enduring materiality and their impending mortality, the armchair brings readers access to their own *potentiality-of-being* and those 'wild outbursts of freedom' (L 4, 231) that Woolf also experienced while writing her short fiction. The notion of amateur potentiality is key to Heidegger's conception of *being-toward-death* as a route to authentic being. The angst invoked by the awareness of mortality is what enables potential and is opposed to the tranquilised assurance of the professional point of view: '[i]n anxiety, Dasein finds itself *faced* with the nothingness of the possible impossibility of its existence. Anxiety is anxious *about* the potentiality-of-being of the being thus determined, and thus discloses the most extreme possibility' (BT 254, italics as in the text). As a result of this possibility, brought about by the amateur's awareness of their own vulnerability, the narrator's imaginative reach stretches far, unlimited by time or geography:

The sun stripes a million years into the future; a broad yellow path; passing an infinite distance beyond this house and town; passing so far that nothing but the sea remains, stretching flat with

¹⁵⁰ Virginia Woolf, *Books and Portraits*, (London: Triad Grafton, 1979), p. 207.

¹⁵¹ Peter Mendelsund, *What We See When We Read* (London: Vintage, 2014), p. 58.

its infinity of creases beneath the sunlight. (*HH* 105)

From the armchair, the mind can travel vast distances, without losing sight of what is just in front of it.

‘Solid Objects’: the democracy of matter

David Bradshaw has noted how, just as the imagined readers in Woolf’s stories are ‘captivated by things which lack identity, definition, or apparent significance’, so are her literal readers ‘drawn into the more fugitive recesses of the everyday, offered new angles on the ordinary, and brought face to face with the marginal and the marginalized, the obscure and the overlooked’.¹⁵² ‘Solid Objects’, begun in 1918 and published in *The Athenaeum* in 1920, provides ample evidence for this assertion, documenting an individual’s relationship with everyday objects in which the overlooked assumes renewed influence and meaning. Like ‘The Mark on the Wall’, it is a story concerned with interrogating normative conceptions and redistributing the balance of power through altered reading practices.

Brown has observed that the majority of critics who have paid attention to the story have conceived of it as a ‘cautionary tale warning against aesthetic absorption at the expense of the practical, the ethical, the political’.¹⁵³ It is difficult not to read the story as didactic in some respect; it reads like a curious modern fable. Far more plotted than Woolf’s other experimental pieces, it tells an arc of a plot in which the protagonist, John, abandons a political career for the obsessive collection of fragmented ‘things’ – bits of metal, shards of glass – and loses a friend in the process. Rather like Mansfield’s ‘A Suburban Fairytale’ (1919), the story holds itself up as a morality tale while remaining unclear about its ultimate message. I will here read the story in terms of armchair aesthetics, considering ways of seeing and notions of amateurism in relation to the story’s pronounced material interests, and the potential it sets out for both things and ideas. Rather than simply a warning against aesthetic absorption, I suggest that the story should be read

¹⁵² David Bradshaw, ‘Introduction: The Proper Stuff for Fiction’, in *The Mark on the Wall and Other Short Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), pp. xi–xxxi (p. xii).

¹⁵³ Brown, *Other Things*, p. 56.

as plotting the consequences of a failed aesthetics rooted in a domineering and myopic professionalism while simultaneously suggesting a more successful, comprehensive model of armchair aesthetics to its readers, which relies on a democratising perception of the world.

In *A Room of One's Own* Woolf advises writers of the future to 'see human beings not always in their relation to each other but in relation to reality; and the sky too; and the trees or whatever it may be in themselves'.¹⁵⁴ Woolf was an exponent of her own advice – in her short fiction she allows 'nonhuman forms of life and objects to share the same stage with human characters' and, in so doing, expresses a 'vision of life in which the human presence no longer dominates but is simply part of a larger whole'.¹⁵⁵ This is particularly obvious in 'Solid Objects', whose opening paragraph sets up a series of inter-objective relations which signal the concerns of the story to come:

The only thing that moved upon the vast semicircle of the beach was one small black spot. As it came nearer to the ribs and spine of the stranded pilchard boat, it became apparent from a certain tenuity in its blackness that this spot possessed four legs; and moment by moment it became more unmistakable that it was composed of the persons of two young men. Even thus in outline against the sand there was an unmistakable vitality in them; an indescribable vigour in the approach and withdrawal of the bodies, slight though it was, which proclaimed some violent argument issuing from the tiny mouths of the little round heads. (*HH* 96)

We witness a spot that expands into human forms, made distinctive by its 'tenuity' rather than its solidity, with distance enabling 'violent argument' to be conceived of with due proportion, as the product of 'tiny mouths' and 'little round heads'. Anthropocentrism is flouted at every turn in this story; a shipwreck possesses a far more asserted and distinctive form than a human and later a lump of glass held to the light will 'blot[...] out the body' of a human companion with its looming 'irregular mass' (*HH* 97).

¹⁵⁴ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, pp. 131-2.

¹⁵⁵ Levy, p. 146.

As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, Hanson has asserted that the short story's intrinsic qualities comprise 'disjunction, inconclusiveness, obliquity', all of which are associated with its 'ideological marginality'.¹⁵⁶ She has also described the short story as a form preferred by writers with 'squint vision'.¹⁵⁷ This is precisely the mode of vision employed in 'Solid Objects' (as elsewhere in Woolf's short fiction) where a shard of glass ordinarily conceived of as refuse might be considered worthy of imagined histories (its provenance is speculated upon as either a bottle, a tumbler or window-pane) and values (as a gem worn by a princess, or a jewel ejected from a treasure-chest, capable of both 'pleas[ing]' and 'puzzl[ing]', *HH* 97). It is the perceptual freshness of squint vision which enabled Woolf to write 'Blue & Green' – twin, painterly microtexts which describe the colour and form of a lamp viewed upon a mantelpiece, a vivacity of hue and plastic that evokes visions of parakeets, flowers, frogs and sea monsters (*HH* 136). Likely written during the same year as 'Solid Objects', the two pieces are linked by the image of the 'ribs' of a wrecked boat, an image itself suggestive of the transference of attention at a level usually reserved for subjects to objects. The armchair aesthetic similarly seeks to allow objects to assert their own presence – a process accompanied by a diminishment of subjective omnipotence and a humble positioning literalised by the narrator's low sitting pose. Ordinary objects take on a new and recalibrated significance in light of the awareness that '[a]t bottom, the ordinary is not ordinary; it is extraordinary'.¹⁵⁸

In 'Solid Objects', John takes reverence for objects to new extremes as he replaces his metaphorical, human constituents for literal ones; we are told he either neglected his political duties, or discharged them or that, perhaps, 'his constituents when they visited him were unfavourably impressed by the appearance of his mantelpiece' (*HH* 99). Free from the distraction of the inter-subjective public life, John is able to indulge his fascination for the object world at whim. He becomes free to commune with the material world, to stare up at his

¹⁵⁶ Hanson, *Re-reading the Short Story*, p. 6.

¹⁵⁷ Hanson, *Re-reading the Short Story*, p. 5.

¹⁵⁸ Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, p. 179. This correlates with Viktor Shklovsky's view of the function of art being to 'make objects "unfamiliar"', a function especially evidenced by Woolf's short fiction (Shklovsky, p. 16). Laura Marcus explores the similar modes of thought shared by Woolf and Shklovsky in her 2015 Virginia Woolf Society of Great Britain lecture 'Virginia Woolf and the Art of the Novel'. See also Laura Marcus, *Virginia Woolf and the Art of the Novel* (Oxford: Virginia Woolf Society of Great Britain, 2015).

mantelpiece to contemplate the lump of glass that has come to resemble ‘a creature from another world – freakish and fantastic as a harlequin [...] pirouetting through space, winking light like a fitful star’ (*HH* 99). As Rishona Zimring observes, commenting on Woolf’s story in an article on enchanted objects in Mansfield’s work: ‘in retreating to domestic interiors where art flourishes in the act of perceiving the ordinary anew, we become, like John, the inhabitants of a space of meditative absorption that returns us to the world transformed by new knowledge and insights’.¹⁵⁹ Zimring appositely describes the process of reading Woolf’s armchair stories, in terms of both its reflective and transmuting properties.

Usually placed for convenience at hand-height, the objects that normally exist invisibly within an everyday domestic life are brought more fully into the line of sight by the reader’s sitting pose. Seen from this angle, ‘the chairs, the cabinets’ might now blossom to ‘liv[e] their nocturnal life before one’s eyes’ (*HH* 216). The armchair brings the subject into direct confrontation with the thing, and also affords a space and privacy that enables an awareness of the self as one part of many that make up the external world. It is this materially-enabled and -affected atmosphere that Woolf’s short fiction seeks to take advantage of, relaying and pre-empting those encounters brought about by the experience of an ‘everyday existence haunted by matter’.¹⁶⁰

At first the lump of glass serves as ‘an excellent paperweight’, though not one which becomes invisible with use, as it also functions as a ‘natural stopping place for [John’s] eyes when they wandered from his book’ (*HH* 98).¹⁶¹ John’s keen world-reading prevents him from taking any object for granted. The glass though soon loses its functionality; there are no more letters to hold down and it is implied that John stops (literal) textual reading too. The only text John reads is that of his mantelpiece, asking himself how ‘the china so vivid and alert, and the glass so mute

¹⁵⁹ Rishona Zimring, ‘Mansfield’s Charm: The Enchantment of Domestic “Bliss”’, *Katherine Mansfield Studies*, 4 (2004), 33-50 (p. 41).

¹⁶⁰ Emmanuel Levinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. by Richard A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1987), p. 58.

¹⁶¹ As Roger Fry observed in ‘An Essay in Aesthetics’ (1909), ‘almost all the things that are useful in any way put on more or less [a] cap of invisibility’ (Fry, *Vision and Design*, p. 18) – a point Heidegger would also make in ‘The Origin of the Work of Art’. Heidegger’s essay was written many years later, drafted between 1935 and 1937, in which he observed: ‘The more handy a piece of equipment is, the more inconspicuous it remains’ (Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, p. 190).

and contemplative [...] came to exist in the same world, let alone to stand upon the same strip of marble in the same room' (HH 99) – a wonderment not shared by visitors to his rooms. Leaning back in his chair during his friend's final visit, John watches Charles 'lift the stones on the mantelpiece a dozen times and put them down emphatically to mark what he was saying about the conduct of the Government, without once noticing their existence' (HH 100). While Charles fails to appreciate the beauty and otherness in John's collection of objects, John equally fails to sufficiently notice his friend. This armchair phenomenology does not encompass human attention, as it does in 'The Mark on the Wall'; it is lacking capaciousness of vision.

Rather than being simply haunted by matter, John comes to haunt matter. His attitude to the solid objects becomes ambivalent; he is not simply reverent but seeks to dominate materiality, 'determined' not only to observe but to 'possess' (HH 99) in a way that resonates with the behaviour of the archaeologist in 'The Mark on the Wall'. Like the colonel, John also attempts to professionalise his hobby:

He devoted himself more and more resolutely to the search. I[f] he had not been consumed by *ambition* and convinced that one day some newly-discovered rubbish heap would reward him, the disappointments he had suffered, let alone the fatigue and derision, would have made him give up the pursuit. Provided with a bag and a long stick fitted with an adaptable hook, he *ransacked* all deposits of the earth; raked beneath matted tangles of scrub; searched all alleys and spaces between walls where he had *learned to expect* to find objects of this kind thrown away. As his *standard became higher* and his *taste more severe* the disappointments were innumerable, but always some gleam of hope, some piece of china or glass curiously marked or broken, lured him on. Day after day passed. He was no longer young. His career – *that is his political career* – was a thing of the past. (HH 100, my italics)

John is not only 'consumed by ambition', but also equipped with professional technologies. He is subject to his own refined 'standard[s]' and is prone to supposition and presumption; he has 'learned to expect'. The professionalisation of John's amateur hobby is most clearly alluded to by

Woolf when she refers to it as a career.

In its critique of a dogmatic professionalism the story also alludes to imperialism in its description of the fanatical John ‘ransack[ing] all deposits of the earth’ (*HH* 100) to meet his needs, having fashioned his own brutal tool, or weapon, of a stick with hook that perhaps satirises the more sophisticated technologies that enabled imperialism’s success. A similar line of thought can be detected in ‘The Evening Party’ in which guests speak of ‘the destiny of the negro who is at this moment toiling beneath the lash to procure rubber for some of our friends engaged in agreeable conversation here’ (*HH* 92). Imperialism is a key historical context to these early stories as one root cause of the outbreak of the First World War. Anna Snaith has established the importance of the Hogarth Press as a ‘key disseminator of anti-colonial thought’¹⁶² and, as in the example cited above, Woolf’s stories display a fascination for thinking back through the biography of the object to include the ethical costs of material production.¹⁶³

Bill Brown asks pertinently of ‘Solid Objects’: ‘Is this a regrettable withdrawal from politics or the recognition that politics needs to begin elsewhere, with some experience of the profound otherness that lies within the everyday?’¹⁶⁴ If any reformation of the imperial order were to occur, it would only happen through armchair revisionism – a renegotiation of the subject-object relationship, whereby otherness is not something to be domineered or subjugated but where instead ‘subjects and objects, people and things, are reciprocally comprised, no longer reduced to pure fungibility and functionality’.¹⁶⁵ The phenomenological approach ensures that *everything* is viewed as an object – for all ‘[b]eings within the world are things – natural things and things “having value”’ (*BT* 63) – creating an ‘inter-objective sphere’ in which ‘the subject *merges* with the object’ as the ‘object *emerges* as subject’.¹⁶⁶ A rebalancing of the subject-object

¹⁶² Anna Snaith, ‘The Hogarth Press and Networks of Anti-Colonialism’ in *Leonard and Virginia Woolf: The Hogarth Press and the Networks of Modernism*, ed. by Helen Southworth (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), pp. 103-27 (p. 103).

¹⁶³ Along similar lines, Sergei Tretiakov wrote of the need to ‘reorient[...] the reception practices of readers [...] toward a literature structured according to the method of the “biography of the object”, which took into account the human costs and concerns (Sergei Tretiakov, ‘The Biography of the Object’, *October*, 118 (Fall, 2006), 57-62 (p. 62)).

¹⁶⁴ Brown, *Other Things*, p. 64.

¹⁶⁵ Simon Mussell, ‘Object Oriented Marxism?’, *Mute* (28 August 2013)

<<http://www.metamute.org/editorial/articles/object-oriented-marxism>> [accessed 7 December 2016].

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

relationship offers the potential to introduce a wider thingly collectivity which resists the competition for possession whose ultimate expression is violence, the same violence depicted as petty and absurd in the opening of paragraphs of 'Solid Objects'. If the story is to be conceived of as a cautionary tale, this is the only tentative moral I would apply to it.¹⁶⁷

However, Woolf would wish her story not to be read conclusively, and closed down by diagnosis like the mark on the wall. In 'The Russian Background' (1919), Woolf posited that 'inconclusive stories are legitimate' because 'they provide a resting point for the mind – a solid object casting its shade of reflection and speculation' (*E* 3, 84).¹⁶⁸ Here, Woolf draws on the same pool of imagery that Eagleton would use when condemning the aloofness of the modernist artwork (the 'impenetrable modernist artefact' that is 'autonomous, self-regarding [...] in all its isolated splendour'), but to a very different purpose.¹⁶⁹ Instead of construing the solid object or story's resistance to readerly closure and perspectival certitude as discouragingly inscrutable, Woolf views this resistance as stimulating ontological engagement. Like the 'remarkable object' John is determined to possess in 'Solid Objects', where 'the more he pushed, the further it receded' (*HH* 99), these 'stories call for interpretation even as they resist it'.¹⁷⁰ The modernist short story's ambiguity, what Woolf called in 'The Russian Point of View' (1923) its 'note of interrogation', demanded engagement from its readers, a grappling with the materiality it presents.¹⁷¹ The experimental (resistant) short story, then, essentially calls for a phenomenological reading. It makes of its reader an inquirer, intent on 'regarding, understanding and grasping, choosing, and gaining access to' (*BT* 6).¹⁷² If the modernist short story is an object,

¹⁶⁷ Many critics have noted the link between 'Solid Objects' and Woolf's relationship with Mark Gertler – see, for example, Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, p. 375. The following comment in 'A Sketch of the Past' does resonate with the idea of the story warning against a devaluing of beings: 'Last night Mark Gertler dined here and denounced the vulgarity, the inferiority of what he called "literature"; compared with the integrity of painting. "For it always deals with Mr and Mrs Brown," – he said – with the personal, the trivial, that is; a criticism which has its sting and its chill, like the May sky' (Woolf, *Moments of Being*, p. 85).

¹⁶⁸ As noted in the literature review, Laura Marcus has observed the way in which, through this comment, Woolf 'deployed this term ["solid objects"] for the short story as genre' (Marcus, 'The Short Fiction', p. 34). Woolf aside, Arthur W. Frank draws a similar comparison between stories and solid objects, writing 'stories not only work with objects; stories take the form of objects, which are known as materialized stories' (Frank, p. 43).

¹⁶⁹ Terry Eagleton, 'Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism', p. 67.

¹⁷⁰ Frank, p. 86.

¹⁷¹ Woolf, *The Common Reader*, 1, p. 176.

¹⁷² The full sentence reads: 'Regarding, understanding and grasping, choosing and gaining access to, are constitutive attitudes of inquiry and are thus themselves modes of being of a particular being, of *the* being we inquirers ourselves in each case are'.

it is one that leads us to other, external objects. It is what Heidegger would call ‘ready-to-hand’ (*zuhanden*) – meaningful only as part of a network or ‘system of relations’ (BT 87) including readers and the wider external world. John regards his solid objects as Eagleton would the modernist artefact, in silo; in so doing, he too misreads them. In refusing the multivalent armchair perspective for the singular, exclusive and professional view, he fails to see the wider democracy of worldly networks which exist, and his own position in connection to them.

This interrogative mode encouraged and exemplified by modernist short fiction was picked up on by Mansfield in correspondence with Woolf. Reacting to a letter of Chekhov’s published in *The Athenaeum*, she wrote: ‘what the writer does is not so much to *solve* the question but to *put* the question. There must be the question put. That seems to me a very nice dividing line between the true & the false writer’ (CL 2, 230). Without mentioning the reader, Mansfield delineates their key role, positing the modern(ist) short story not as a closed circuit of communication (as per Eagleton’s impenetrable artefact), but an open, yielding one, calling for response. The question put urges another to answer it, even if ‘[e]ach answer remains in force as an answer only as long as it is rooted in questioning’.¹⁷³ These interrogative short stories depend on the reader to a contractual extent and, as such, exemplify the enmeshed, inter-objective relationships with which they are concerned. By modelling and encouraging a democratising conviviality of vision, these stories incite the enquiring subject to connect with the external world by carefully extending questions towards it from their armchair.

¹⁷³ Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, p. 195.

Concluding remarks: armchair phenomenology

Woolf's diaries attest again and again to her appreciation of an all-encompassing 'reality' that can only be fully grasped by the lone individual.¹⁷⁴ In a diary entry of 30 September 1926, Woolf remarks on the 'mystical side of [...] solitude', postulating that it is 'not oneself but something in the universe that one's left with' (*D* 3, 113). Over ten years later, she would theorise these deeply-felt moments of almost inscrutable yet meaningful perception in 'A Sketch of the Past', where she wrote of how her 'shock-receiving capacity' was what made her a writer.¹⁷⁵ There is a sense that, in her short fiction, Woolf offers this same gift to the reader – as if by placing the reader in an armchair, Woolf wishes to precipitate factors conducive to 'receiving' the shock of reality.

In 'A Sketch of the Past', she uses the terms 'being' and 'non-being' as 'private shorthand' to describe her lifelong conception of two broad modes of existence – one active and rewarding, the other automatic and unsatisfying. In the essay, Woolf states that each day contains a far greater proportion of 'non-being' and that a good day is 'above the average in "being"'.¹⁷⁶ Woolf describes such a day, Tuesday 18 April 1939, as being made up of writing, walking, reading – engagement with the world by one mechanism or another. The walk is memorable ('the willows [...] all plummy and soft green and purple against the blue'), while other parts of the day, such as mealtime conversation, fade and evade description, 'embedded in a kind of nondescript cotton wool'.¹⁷⁷ These parts remain unmemorable because a 'great part of every day is not lived consciously', instead one 'walks, eats, sees things, deals with what has to be done; the broken vacuum cleaner [...], washing; cooking dinner; book-binding' without awareness, interest or appreciation of one's place within the wider network of the world, which has metamorphosed into an indistinct fog with independent components obscured.¹⁷⁸

Woolf's depiction of these contrasting states bears clear and striking resemblance to

¹⁷⁴ Mansfield similarly wrote of a 'sensitiveness [that] has never anything to do with present people but is nearly always connected with "things"' (*Notebooks* 2, 203).

¹⁷⁵ Woolf, *Moments of Being*, p. 70.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Ibid. Heidegger describes this phenomenon as follows: 'Life is immanent and hazy, it always and again encloses itself in a fog' (*BT* xviii).

Heidegger's interpretation of *Dasein*, in which modes of being veer between 'inauthenticity and authenticity': 'fallenness' (busy, thoughtless, irresponsible, publicly-entangled, tranquilised everydayness) versus 'that encounter with the ontological'¹⁷⁹ which is only accessible to an individual in a state of receptive 'readerly physical attunement' – a state we have seen is encouraged by Woolf's experimental stories.¹⁸⁰ Later in the essay, Woolf posits her own conception of this dichotomy, and especially the fleetingly capacious vision she encounters in authentic moments of being (or 'shocks'), as informing the entirety of her literary production:

I reach what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we – I mean all human beings – are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. *Hamlet* or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself. And I see this when I have a shock.¹⁸¹

The whole world conceived of as a work of art is a universe in which each constituent part is conferred value; it is a holistic, democratic and phenomenological conception of the world in which an awareness of being is made possible only through engagement with materiality of 'this vast mass that we call the world'. From this flows understanding, but not one which can be easily explained or neatly theorised.

What Woolf experiences through the 'shocks' that underpin her art is not omniscience or a sense of having successfully taxonomised, it is simply a rich sense of discovery and a consciousness of meaning, which parallels Heidegger's vision of authentic, curious being: 'Being-true as discovering' (BT 211). In this poignant passage, Woolf posits literature as an articulation of the '*unified* phenomenological view' (BT 175, italics as in the text), of *Dasein* 'grasping its own

¹⁷⁹ Steiner, p. 97.

¹⁸⁰ Lurz, p. 2.

¹⁸¹ Woolf, *Moments of Being*, p. 72.

wholeness and the meaningfulness which is indivisible from integrity'.¹⁸² In perceiving being as an amorphous network of connections, Woolf reaches the only type of understanding Heidegger saw as worthwhile – that concerning 'the whole of being-in-the-world' (BT 147), where the 'phenomenal *manifoldness* of the constitution of the structural whole' (BT 175, italics as in the text) becomes apparent to its reader. The holistic grasp for meaning, through things, returns one to the self because *Dasein* can never escape the self; it is yet another part of that 'vast upheaval of matter' (HH 83) with which the relentless enquiry of Woolf's stories is concerned, where we 'come back to ourselves from things *without ever abandoning* our stay among things'.¹⁸³ This is what is meant by the statement: '*Ontology is possible only as phenomenology*' (BT 33, italics as in the text). This is what is meant by the powerful phrase 'we are the thing itself'. This is what underpinned Woolf's aesthetic vision, and it was enabled by an armchair phenomenology that was first grasped and honed in her amateur short fiction experiments, where reading the world is the first step in any venture which might improve it. Reading is about recognising and rebalancing the relationship between the self and world, with the reading encounter enabling experience of a more democratic vision and therefore an increasingly authentic mode of being-in-the-world.

¹⁸² Steiner, p. 99.

¹⁸³ Heidegger, *Basic Writings*, p. 359 (italics as in the text).

Chapter 3: Hats, Gloves and Elizabeth Bowen

‘Had I not been a writer I should probably have struck out in designing and making belts, jewellery, handbags, lampshades or something of that sort – my aim being that these should catch people’s fancy, create a little fashion of their own.’

Elizabeth Bowen, letter to Graham Greene (1948, *MT* 226)

‘The short story is a form of exclusion and implication; its technical workings mirror its ideological bias, its tendency toward the expression of that which is marginal or ex-centric to society.’

Clare Hanson, *The Gender of Modernism* (1990)¹

Roland Barthes referred to the ‘perceived triviality’ of fashion when explaining the lack of attention paid to it as a subject of sociological enquiry.² As mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, Woolf similarly observed that ‘[s]peaking crudely, football and sport are “important”, the worship of fashion, the buying of clothes “trivial”’.³ The plethora of vestimentary detail contained within Bowen’s fiction (and particularly her stories) is undeniable – if the Futurists championed ‘clothes that [...] banished frivolous detail’, Bowen’s variety of modernism does the opposite.⁴

In this chapter I will treat with due seriousness perhaps the most trivial of all items in the sartorial catalogue: the accessory. Designed to complement an outfit or garment, the accessory’s history is one of subordination, destined to contribute only ‘as an adjunct or in a minor way’, to function in a ‘subsidiary’, ‘auxiliary’ or ‘supplementary’ capacity.⁵ This chapter will place the accessory centre-stage, considering it a trope which models a particular type of reading, that which I will term ‘eccentric reading’, one which relies on paying keen attention to marginal detail and what Bowen termed in the essay ‘Dress’ (1937), the ‘apparently frivolous’ (*CI* 112). Bowen

¹ Clare Hanson ‘Katherine Mansfield’, in *The Gender of Modernism*, ed. by Bonnie Kime Scott (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1990), pp. 298-308 (p. 300).

² Roland Barthes, *The Language of Fashion*, ed. by Andy Stafford and Michael Carter, trans. by Michael Carter (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), p. 20.

³ Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, pp. 85-6.

⁴ Emily Braun, ‘Futurist Fashion: Three Manifestoes’, *Art Journal*, 54:1, Clothing as Subject (Spring, 1995), 34-41 (p. 34).

⁵ *OED*, ‘accessory’, n. and adj., 2.B. adj.

once wrote animatedly to her lover, Charles Ritchie, of how she considered a brown dress a ‘good set-off’ for her ‘beloved turquoise beads’, in reversal of the usual preference to accessorise around the main piece.⁶ This chapter will dress itself similarly, considering the accessory before all else, as an expression of Bowen’s self-reflexive veneration for the marginal and the bizarre which demanded complementary modes of reading.

Accessories, stories and the dangerous supplement

Demonstrating its customary appraisal, in the essay ‘From Gemstones to Jewellery’ (1961), Barthes refers to the accessory using the colloquialism ‘*next-to-nothing*’.⁷ Parallels between the short story genre and the accessory are easily drawn; as noted by Clare Hanson in the epigraph to this chapter, the short story is not only ideologically biased towards the marginal but its canonical displacement mirrors its priorities. As explored in the introduction to this thesis, descriptions of the story as a ‘sample’⁸ or a ‘chip [...] from a novelist’s workbench’⁹ and propositions such as ‘[t]he novel is a whole text, the short story is not’¹⁰ are typical of attitudes to the genre and collude with a vision of short fiction as an accessory, marginal format which supplements the novel. Those few of Bowen’s stories which appeared in magazines such as *Vogue* and *Tatler*, can similarly be conceived of as supplementing the magazine’s main work – fashion and lifestyle articles.¹¹ The short story’s terrain, like that of the accessory, is eccentric, on the margins – next to nothing, next to something. Furthermore, a story’s boundaries are always within the reader’s sight, lending a natural emphasis to its periphery or frame.

In ‘The Truth in Painting’ (1978), a work which dedicates many pages to discussion of shoes in Van Gogh’s paintings while critiquing Heidegger, Derrida theorises in terms of *ergon* and *parergon*, positing the work of art as ‘*ergon*’ (from the Latin for ‘work’) and its frame, or

⁶ Elizabeth Bowen and Charles Ritchie, *Love’s Civil War*, ed. by Victoria Glendinning (London: Pocket Books, 2010), p. 403.

⁷ Barthes, *The Language of Fashion*, p. 85.

⁸ Pratt, p. 102.

⁹ Kingsley Amis, *Collected Short Stories* (London: Hutchinson, 1980), p. 10.

¹⁰ Pratt, p. 103.

¹¹ For example, ‘Emergency in the Gothic Wing’ was published in *Tatler*, while ‘The Claimant’ was published in *Vogue*, see Elizabeth Bowen, *The Bazaar and Other Stories*, ed. by Allan Hepburn (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), p. 360. Hereafter referred to as *B* with further references given after quotations in the text.

accompanying accessories as ‘parergon’ (that which is ‘beside-the-work’). He uses the example of the clothing on statues as having ‘the function of a *parergon* and an ornament’, describing it as something which is ‘not internal or intrinsic’ to the ‘total representation of the object’ but which instead ‘belongs to it only in an extrinsic way (*nur äusserlich*) as a surplus, an addition, an adjunct (*als Zuthat*), a supplement’ (TP 57).

Derrida complicates the established Kantian dichotomy which separates the (superior) ergon from the (inferior) parergon by exploring the co-dependence of ergon and parergon, particularly noting the reliance of the ergal on the parergal, whose purpose he describes as ‘inscrib[ing] something which comes as an extra, *exterior* to the proper field’ (TP 56). What Derrida sees as the ‘transcendent exteriority’ of the parergon is not, however, removed from the ergon in either a material or conceptual sense; it ‘comes to play, abut onto, brush against, rub, press against the limit itself and intervene in the inside’ yet ‘only to the extent that the inside is lacking’ (TP 56). The symbiotic relationship between ergon and parergon portrayed by Derrida bestows new powers upon the auxiliary, it is ‘*both beside the work (para + ergon) and part of the work*’, which reframes the peripheral or eccentric as both relevant (influential) yet subversive (independent).¹² In this chapter, I will use Derrida’s framework to argue that Bowen’s work should be conceived of in terms of a persistent emphasis on the parergal (in form and contents) which works to displace the central positioning of the ergon and traditional assumptions that ‘[a]esthetic judgment *must* properly bear upon intrinsic beauty, not on finery and surrounds’ (TP 63). This chapter will treat the peripheral detail in Bowen’s work, as exemplified by the accessory in hats and gloves, not as evidence of distracted writerly muddle but as philosophical expression of an anarchic, contingent world-view which encourages readers to rely on inverse and disrupted systems of logic.¹³

In an article with the explicatory title ‘The Business of Circumference: Circularity and Dangerous Female Power in the Work of Emily Dickinson’, Lissa Holloway-Attaway sets out the importance of sphericity to Dickinson’s poetry, where ‘resistance to linearity allows her to

¹² Nicholas Royle, *Jacques Derrida* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003), p. 15. Italics as in the text.

¹³ As Hermione Lee notes, we should ‘read “style” as an essential part of what [Bowen] has to say about civilisation and society’. Hermione Lee, *Elizabeth Bowen* (London: Vintage, 1999), p. 3.

de-structure the hierarchical, biased, and binary codes of the patriarchal formula for success',¹⁴ including 'linear truths'.¹⁵ Holloway-Attaway's conception of the circular dovetails with arguments put forward in this chapter that link peripherality with subversive modes of perception. This idea of the peripheral as embodying a threat or challenge is key to Derrida's concept of supplementarity, as set out in the '... *That Dangerous Supplement* ...' chapter of *Of Grammatology* (1967).¹⁶ While Bowen's published personal memoirs are limited, they still manage to record a number of incidents in which accessories disrupt, subvert and supersede the main event. In the closing paragraphs of an essay which describes the frustrations of childhood, Bowen outlines a number of situations in which she failed to dress 'suitably'. Each of these instances involve betrayal by accessories which refuse to suit the occasion, seemingly revelling in their impropriety:

So, trial-and-error it was, for me. Outcome: errors. The rose-pink parasol with which I all but poked out somebody's eye at a cricket match; the picture hat in which I attended a country lunch-party – only to be taken out ratting by my host; the ornamental muslin, with blue bows, in which I turned up at a grown-up beach picnic – *that* I disposed of by slipping off a rock into the sea. The splash was big, though the sea was shallow. The crisis obliterated my frock.¹⁷

The accessory is involved in acts of both desperate activity and aloof passivity, alternately violent and frivolous, but always stubbornly unsuitable for the occasion presented, a continual disappointment to the teenager whose primary concern is transparent assimilation. The accessory resolutely stands at the periphery, refusing to be coaxed into an approved circle of acceptability, an accessory to a crime, if you will.¹⁸ Both indicating and enabling the outlawed, accessories

¹⁴ Lissa Holloway-Attaway, 'The Business of Circumference: Circularity and Dangerous Female Power in the Work of Emily Dickinson', *The Emily Dickinson Journal*, 5.2 (Fall 1996), 183-189 (pp. 183-4).

¹⁵ Holloway-Attaway, p. 185.

¹⁶ Jacques Derrida, '... *That Dangerous Supplement* ...' in *Of Grammatology*, trans. by Gayatri Spivak (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), pp. 141-164. Hereafter referred to as *OG* with further references given after quotations in the text.

¹⁷ Elizabeth Bowen, 'On Not Rising to the Occasion' in *Listening In: Broadcasts, Speeches, and Interviews by Elizabeth Bowen*, ed. by Allan Hepburn (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), pp. 107-111 (pp. 110-1). Hereafter referred to as *LI* with further references given after quotations in the text.

¹⁸ This is an idea which will be explored in the final section of this chapter.

allow for both literal and metaphorical eccentricity, situated at the margins of the body and perhaps also the margins of society.

Bowen's fiction bursts at the seams with unconventional yet expressive accessories. Fittingly, her professional life overlapped with the world of fashion at various points. As well as writing for lifestyle magazines, she also wrote an introduction for Eva Ritcher's *The ABC of Millinery* (1950), in which she declared millinery 'an art'.¹⁹ She wrote review articles like 'Dress' (1937) in which she disavowed from the outset connotations of the simplistic, irrelevant or superficial, stating: 'Dress has never been at all a straightforward business: so much subterranean interest and complex feeling attaches to it', explaining its intriguing popularity as a topic as due to the fact that, like Derrida's supplement, 'it is dangerous' with 'a flowery head but deep roots in the passions' (CI 111). When Bowen writes of fashion, it is clear that she conceives of it not as a removed 'dictator' but as a 'would-be ally of the identity', an agent of plural 'possibilities' rather than 'musts'.²⁰ In an article for *Vogue* entitled 'How to Be Yourself – But Not Eccentric' (1956) Bowen asks: 'Slight risks of oddness – *do* they matter so much? Even those who smile at them, they may well delight' (PPT 415). Despite its title which suggests conformity, in this piece, rather than warning against eccentricity, Bowen seems to be championing her own particular version of it. Instead of '[a]ggressive, offensive' (PPT 415), ham-fisted oddness, Bowen argues in the essay for a more quietly self-assured mode of eccentricity which aligns itself with authentic individuality.

The accessory functions as a useful mechanism for exploring both Bowen's aesthetic practice and its reception. While highly regarded during her lifetime,²¹ today Bowen is considered

¹⁹ Elizabeth Bowen, 'Introduction', in Eva Ritcher, *The ABC of Millinery* (London: Skeffington and Son, 1950), pp. 13-16 (p. 13).

²⁰ Elizabeth Bowen, 'How to Be Yourself – But Not Eccentric' in *People, Places, Things*, ed. by Allan Hepburn (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), pp. 410-416 (p. 415). Hereafter referred to as PPT with further references given after quotations in the text.

²¹ Writing in the early twenty-first century, Maud Ellmann neatly summarises her reception as follows: 'In the 1940s Bowen was regarded as rival to Virginia Woolf, but by the 1980s she was virtually forgotten especially in academic circles where her works were sidelined, rarely featuring in syllabi of modern literature. Outside academia, her books have remained in print, but their popularity has only helped to ensure their exclusion from English Departments, where they tend to be dismissed as middlebrow' (Maud Ellmann, 'Elizabeth Bowen: The Missing Corner' in *Feminism, Aesthetics and Subjectivity: Women and Culture in Early Twentieth Century British Literature*, ed. by Manuel Barbeiro (Santiago de Compostela: University Press of Santiago de Compostela, 2001), pp. 65-98 (pp. 65-6)). Ellmann makes the point that it is ironic that it is feminist scholarship that has created the conditions for the resurrection of Bowen as a 'serious' writer, given that it was a cause she believed to have achieved its aims by 1936.

a canonical outlier, unfashionable due to what Susan Osborn terms the ‘conspicuous and unruly excesses’ of her texts’ style and contents.²² While some critics have considered Bowen’s queerness (and ‘queer’ is a word which beats through her work) an obstacle and a pity,²³ here, I would like to build on the research of scholars such as Osborn by engaging with it as a formal, aesthetic decision to privilege the eccentric. Alison Lurie notes in discussion of the accessory that ‘[a]s in speech, it is harder to communicate well in a highly decorated style’.²⁴ This is equally applicable to writing, and it is important to recognise the difficulty implicit to the style which Bowen chose. She believed style to be complicit with the artist’s world-view; after Flaubert, she conceived of style as ‘an actual way of seeing things’ – the ‘whole sight, view and conception’.²⁵ As such, we should treat her decorative style as a deliberate choice, one which adds its own significance to literal meaning and expressive of Bowen’s world-view. So, a sentence like the following from the end of the early story ‘The Contessina’ (1926) needs to be read in terms of the dizzying material detail (of parasols, shoes, hats and flounces) which has preceded it: ‘The level sunshine crept along the air and brimmed with gold the little dints of mirth and pleasure in the Contessina’s cheeks, and drew a curve of gold along the brim of her hat’.²⁶ The repetition of the word ‘brim’ not only alludes to the temporariness of sensual joy which is likely at any moment to overflow (as played out by the confused sexual encounter which occurs on the previous page and ends in the spilling of tears), but perhaps more enthusiastically gestures to the gilded realm of the marginal: infinitely rich, attractive, baffling and tantalisingly dangerous. The repeated reference to ‘brim’ not only alludes to the peripheral but enacts circularity by returning to its starting point and resisting linear propulsion. Like the character of the Contessina herself, as Derrida surmised: ‘The supplement is maddening’ (OG 154). It is also incredibly alluring, demanding to be read while resisting conventional analysis.

²² Susan Osborn, ‘Introduction’, in *Elizabeth Bowen: New Critical Perspectives*, ed. by Susan Osborn (Cork: Cork University Press, 2009), pp. 1-12 (p. 5).

²³ Critical reception to Bowen’s work will be explored in the literature review which follows this introductory section.

²⁴ Alison Lurie, *The Language of Clothes: The Definitive Guide to People-Watching Through the Ages* (London: Hamlyn Paperbacks, 1983), p. 11.

²⁵ Elizabeth Bowen, ‘The Technique of the Novel’ in *The Weight of a World of Feeling: Reviews and Essays by Elizabeth Bowen*, ed. by Allan Hepburn (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2017), pp. 14-24 (p. 22).

²⁶ Elizabeth Bowen, *Collected Stories* (London: Vintage, 1999), p. 153. Hereafter referred to as *CS* with further references given after quotations in the text.

Detail, women, war

In a BBC Home Service radio interview of October 1941 titled 'Do Women Think Like Men?', Bowen asserted: 'If men think of women as likely to introduce irrelevant and personal details we should certainly think of men [...] as likely to make an argument unreal by being too abstract' (LI 287-8). This conversation also bears on Bowen's aesthetic practice. As will be explored in the literature review which follows, Bowen was frequently criticised for the excessive inclusion of 'irrelevant' (or 'apparently frivolous', to use Bowen's phrase) details in her fiction. Naomi Schor, in her work *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine*, explains the traditional prejudice towards the ornamental as stemming from its 'traditional connotations of effeminacy and decadence' as well as its connection to the 'everyday', which means that 'detail is doubly gendered as female'.²⁷ Like Mansfield's dedication to the snack in the short story form, Bowen's commitment to eccentric detail in her stories might also be conceived of as doubly subversive and, although the author herself would have balked at the idea, implicitly feminist.²⁸

Imperatively, Schor posits detail as anarchic, writing of 'the peril posed by succumbing to the invasion of the barbaric or feminine upstart detail'.²⁹ The idea of detail as anti-elitist also patterns her analysis of the work of Adolf Loos and Jean Baudrillard, with Schor arguing that 'what they hold against the formal detail is that it disfigures the ideal object by or while putting it within reach of the masses' with detail making the luxury of decadence universally affordable, in a way that Bowen's fiction would too.³⁰ In conceiving of a dedication to detail in art as deliberately subversive, Schor's work richly complements that of Derrida. The ideas of each thinker will frame the thesis of this chapter, in its argument for parergal detail as a destabilising force which also encourages eccentric reading practices.

Before going on to consider the forms such practices might take, I would like to set Bowen's fascination with the edges of life, the eccentric, the off-kilter and the parergal within the

²⁷ Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine* (New York and London: Methuen, 1987), p. 4.

²⁸ In 1961, Bowen pronounced 'I am not, and never shall be, a feminist' (quoted in Bryant Jordan, p. xvi). Bowen's conservative personal views, inherited from her aristocratic lineage, repeatedly mismatch the art she produced.

²⁹ Schor, p. 21.

³⁰ Schor, p. 57.

wider context of war. Bowen, born six months before the turn of the twentieth-century, lived through two world wars and grew familiar with an everyday existence that was transformed and ‘mechanized by the controls of wartime’ (CI 49). Particularly during the Second World War, the availability of everyday amenities such as clothing was considerably affected, with items such as gloves, shoes and stockings rationed³¹ and accessories such as hats becoming subject to luxury purchase tax.³² Women working in the services during the war were banned from carrying handbags as well as wearing jewellery or accessories ‘to enhance their uniforms’,³³ and in May 1945 *Vogue* bemoaned the need for better quality accessories, asserting that ‘no aspect of fashion has suffered more under restrictions and shortages’.³⁴ Decoration, at its peak in the 1930s when ‘[l]arge pieces of costume jewellery were used to enhance plumed hats and gauntlet gloves’,³⁵ was severely restricted by the 1942 Making of Civilian Clothing (Restrictions) Orders, which prevented ornamentation such as braiding or embroidery being added to garments such as skirts, or the extravagance of pleating or pockets.³⁶ *Vogue* observed how the restrictions and a limited workforce ‘prohibit[ed] most kinds of dress ornamentation and restrict[ed] the use of details’.³⁷ Where accessories did exist, they were forced into the realm of the functional, with luminous buttons and pinned-on flowers designed to prevent blackout accidents.³⁸

Developments such as these threatened diversity, frivolity and the parergal, values staunchly defended by Bowen and her work. She believed fervently in the ‘priceless attribute’ with which each of us is born: the ability to ‘leave our own individual marks on life’ (PPT 413). ‘Small as these may be,’ Bowen asserted, ‘they are never trifling: they count’ (PPT 413). She saw the damaging effects of the domestic wartime experience as intrinsically bound up with the diminishment of choice that enabled self-expression:

³¹ See Elizabeth Ewing, *History of 20th Century Fashion* (London: Batsford, 2008), p. 144.

³² Julie Summers, *Fashion on the Ration* (London: Profile Books, 2015), p. 74.

³³ Summers, p. 119.

³⁴ Quoted in Summers, p. 170.

³⁵ Summers, p. 13.

³⁶ Kate McLoughlin, ‘Glamour Goes to War: Lee Miller’s Writings for British *Vogue*, 1939-45’, *Journal of War and Culture Studies*, 3.3 (December 2010), 335-47 (p. 337-8).

³⁷ Quoted in Summers, p. 166.

³⁸ Summers, p. 62.

Planning pleasures, choosing and buying things, wondering and wandering, dressing yourself up, and so on. All that stopped. You used to know what you were like from the things you liked, and chose. Now there was not what you liked, and you could not choose. (CI 49)

If the things that you liked did not exist in material form, however, they could instead be found in fiction. As Bowen attested in her introduction to the U.S. publication of *The Demon Lover* collection during wartime:

Everyone [...] read more: and what was sought in books – old books, new books – was the communicative touch of personal life. To survive, not only physically but spiritually, was essential. People whose homes had been blown up went to infinite lengths to assemble little bits of themselves – broken ornaments, odd shoes, torn scraps of the curtains that had hung in a room – from the wreckage. [...] You cannot depersonalize persons. (CI 50)

Reading was part of this process of self-assemblage which the war necessitated, with creative reading functioning as a type of imaginative accessorising, embellishing and choosing – a building up in antithesis to the ‘violent destruction of solid things’ (MT 95) brought by war, an example of ‘personal life [...] put[ting] up its own resistance to the annihilation that was threatening it’ (MT 97).

Short fiction, Bowen believed, was the ‘ideal *prose* medium for wartime creative writing’.³⁹ It well suited times of ‘limited paper supply and disrupted schedules’ and fitted sympathetically around a central state of national emergency.⁴⁰ This parergal function was far-reaching – if a spiritual emptiness was experienced during wartime, Bowen’s stories did their work to counteract it, introducing pleasurable, communicative, only ‘apparently frivolous’ peripheral detail from which a whole might be assembled. The reading and writing of short fiction in wartime is always a peripheral activity, circulating around monolithic international concerns and organised

³⁹ Bryant Jordan, p. 129.

⁴⁰ Bryant Jordan, p. 130.

destruction – an ergon which might easily be conceived of as a lack to which parerga respond in a supplementary capacity. Such reading and writing are also acts of resistance, drawing on an eccentric force which works to situate engagement and activity away from a central lacuna of depersonalised violence, towards a periphery of creativity, receptivity, ambiguity and diversity, encouraging writing and reading but defying final writings and readings.⁴¹

In Bowen's novel *The Little Girls* (1964), Dinah speaks of her wish to curate artefacts that evidence personal idiosyncrasy, describing as '[e]xpressive objects' the things which people 'have obsessions about: keep on wearing or using, or fuss when they lose, or can't go to sleep without'.⁴² Dinah concludes that 'a person's only a *person* when they have some really raging peculiarity'.⁴³ In Bowen's world, the power of personal expression rests not with the ergal individual but with the parergal, eccentric objects that pattern human lives. Perhaps even more human than those objects, though, is the writing and reading that they engender – an eccentric poetics that shows what is human about being. Absurd, brave and queer, Bowen's stories work to show us what existential truths might be glimpsed if we make time to take the scenic route to meaning, using an eccentric approach and reading creatively around the margins, that 'invisible "fringe" of meaning'.⁴⁴

I would like to end this section by briefly considering the Second World War story 'Ivy Grippled the Steps' (1945), a story in which the main protagonist, Lilian Nicholson, asserts that '[e]ven savages really prefer wearing hats or coats' and that '[o]nce people wear hats and coats and can turn on electric light, they would no more want to be silly than you or I do' (CS 784). In this context, 'being silly' refers to the 'preposterous fiction of war'; in the story as a whole, conversely, frivolity and abstruseness is the norm.⁴⁵ Lilian is described as 'never logical with

⁴¹ In her preface to U.S. edition of *The Demon Lover* collection (1939), Bowen asked: 'I wonder whether in a sense all wartime writing is not resistance writing?' (CI 50).

⁴² Elizabeth Bowen, *The Little Girls* (London: Vintage, 1999), p. 15.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Davis, p. 4. Davis alludes to Henri Bergson here, with the full sentence reading: 'To the literary thinker there is always what Bergson called the invisible "fringe" of meaning, where fringe signifies all that which darkly surrounded the evolution of a distinct idea, as its origin and potential'. While Bowen's work is more likely to hold a lacuna at its centre than a distinct idea, the concept of the fecund fringe is still relevant to consideration of her fiction.

⁴⁵ Woolf called the First World War a 'preposterous masculine fiction' in a letter of 23 January 1916 to Margaret Llewelyn Davies (D 2, 76). The stories of all three of the writers researched here could be considered ripostes to this – preposterous female fictions, perhaps.

regard to her friends' (CS 793), never 'heard giving an order' in her household (CS 780). She is glamorous, issuing a 'glittering, charming uncertainty' (CS 767) and embodying the 'lavishness' of the town where she resides – a 'town without function' (CS 778). This seaside town without function, Southstone, is threatened by war, but peripheral to it. France can be viewed from its beaches – a geographical periphery on the brink of war, Southstone is characterised by circularity, frivolity and supplementarity, a place where parasols defiantly 'passed and repassed in a rhythm of leisure' (CS 777). Leisure, lack of obvious purpose and the 'apparently frivolous' nature of the accessory are enshrined as positive virtues in this richly opaque, eccentric text, in which Mrs Nicholson stars, radiating whimsicality in a town whose decorative architecture is 'ostentatious, fiddling' (CS 778), reflecting a 'magical artificiality' (CS 781). Here, the playful excess of the peripheral stands against restrictive order of any kind and fascinates its young visitor, Gavin, sent to stay with Lilian with whom he becomes equally entranced. In this story, the frivolous acquires a new prominence and depth of meaning, evidencing Bowen's belief that in wartime 'details leaped out with significance'.⁴⁶ Fittingly, one of its enduring images is a hat draped in seaweed. Gavin reacts against the 'relegations' of the timetable his dour minder enforces upon him by 'drap[ing] seaweed streamers around her hat' (CS 781). This is the logic of the periphery reinforced – a message whose absurdity refuses direct transliteration yet is bold and meaningful. In the face of hegemony or war, this story seems to suggest, let us create preposterous fictions of our own – even if they do call us mad as hatters.

Eccentric reading

As Maud Ellmann records, Bowen's upbringing was unusual: 'Dottiest of all, Florence [Bowen's mother] prevented her daughter from learning how to read until the age of seven, on the grounds that Bowens overworked their brains, leaving them vulnerable to hereditary instability'.⁴⁷ Reading was contraband in Bowen's early years and considered an activity likely to provoke mental breakdown. It is unsurprising that when Bowen did learn to read, it would become an

⁴⁶ Elizabeth Bowen, *Bowen's Court and Seven Winters* (London: Virago, 1984), p. 454.

⁴⁷ Maud Ellmann, *Elizabeth Bowen: The Shadow Across the Page* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2003), p. 27.

eccentric enterprise, replete with the ambivalence of danger and joy that comes with infringement – an act which ‘transgress[es] a prohibition’ (OG 165). As an adult, she recalled: ‘Books introduced me to, and magnified, desire and danger’ (MT 51). Reading carried with it the full dangerousness of the supplement.

As intimated by Bowen’s commentary on wartime reading, she viewed reading as a process of accessorising, one which was two-way; as she wrote in the essay ‘Out of a Book’ (1946): ‘the process of reading is reciprocal’ (MT 51). In that essay, Bowen firstly conceives of her childhood reading as ‘making [her]self’, as if she were incomplete during those first seven years in which reading was banned, asserting her belief that if it were possible to ‘read [her] way back, analytically’ through the first books she read, then ‘the clues to everything would be found’ (MT 51).⁴⁸ In the essay’s introductory sentences, she blames her poor memory on reading, which has led to her having in her ‘make-up layers of synthetic experience’ (MT 48) which cannot be easily separated from facts.⁴⁹ Reading supplements the restriction and banality of childhood experience: with Bowen explaining in near-Derridean prose: ‘Nothing but the story can meet the untried nature’s need and capacity for the whole’ (MT 49).

Reading is here depicted as a thoroughly parergal activity, supplementing a readerly deficiency, yet the reciprocity this relationship demands also sees the ergon (reader) giving back, with Bowen seeing the book as ‘no more than a formula, to be furnished out with images out of the reader’s mind’ (MT 51). This ‘formula’ the reader dresses up, with their contribution to the text involving both ‘extension’ and ‘multiplication’ (MT 52). Having accessorised the book, contributed to its fabrication, Bowen argues, the child reader then applies this creative way of seeing to the wider world. Bowen attributes the wide reverence for the childhood experience not to innocence but to story-telling (or, more specifically, story-receiving). It is the story, argues Bowen, that is responsible for the ‘vividness’ which colours our early memories; it was, writes Bowen, ‘the story that apparelled everything in celestial light’ (MT 51). We supplement stories

⁴⁸ It is worth noting that the analytical mode of reading is not one espoused by her own fiction.

⁴⁹ In his book *Reading and the Reader*, Philip Davis similarly describes a colleague to whom ‘[b]ooks became a second, added memory’ (Davis, p. 73).

and stories, in turn, supplement our lives.⁵⁰ Stories are about ‘forging an identity as much as revealing it’, dressing us and the world we see in the process.⁵¹

In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida describes a ‘system of a writing and of a reading’ itself as something which is ‘ordered around its own blind spot’ (OG 164), as if the processes of writing and reading circulate about a central lacuna. Bowen’s eccentric texts, with their detail lavishly piled at the periphery, can be viewed as an emphasising of this concept, leaving a central gap which it invites the reader to fill. The reader steps into the story as a hand slips into a glove. As already mentioned, this chapter’s analysis of ‘the important literary function of the reader’ (PPT 316) will examine the eccentric reading practices which Bowen’s stories encourage. The *OED* defines the word ‘eccentricity’ as denoting not only that which is ‘remote from the centre’, but also a deliberate diversion from usual practice: ‘deviating from usual methods, odd, whimsical’.⁵² These dual attributes of peripherality and peculiarity will characterise my interpretation of the reading methods which Bowen’s texts model, as will creativity (an attribute often associated with eccentricity) with Bowen demanding that her readers also behave like artists and meet her expectation for readers to be ‘as (reasonably) imaginative as [her]self’.⁵³ I aim to show how the reader becomes an accessory to the practice of making meaning, led always to the outside of her texts, the site of peripheral detail where a unique and distanced viewpoint can be established – the site of the parergal which ‘touches and cooperates within the operation’ but always ‘from a certain outside’ (TP 54). This chapter will examine how, in privileging the marginal, Bowen leaves gaps at the centre of her chimerical stories which demand to be filled using personally-formulated detail, a method we will see is also modelled by characters in some of her stories. Showing how Bowen establishes the peripheral as a site of idiosyncrasy and creativity which directs unconventional reading practices and gives voice to the marginal, I will explore the ways in which she encourages readers to look towards the parergal before the ergal, conceiving of

⁵⁰ In his rich book on the history of reading, Alberto Manguel describes a friend of his who would literally treat books read in public as accessories: ‘She would not travel with Romain Rolland because she thought it made her look too pretentious, or with Agatha Christie because it made her look too vulgar’. Albert Camus was appropriate for a short journey, however, and Graham Greene for travelling by ship or plane (Manguel, p. 214).

⁵¹ Manguel, p. 235.

⁵² *OED*, ‘eccentric’, adj. and n., 3.b.; 6.b.

⁵³ Elizabeth Bowen, ‘Preface’ in *A Day in the Dark* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1965), pp. 7-9 (p. 9).

eccentricity as a positive and revolutionary force.

In the act of reading, individuals are most immediately reliant upon their heads and their hands and here I will accordingly focus on hats and gloves in exploring how these accessories direct particular ways of reading. Looking first at hats, I will explore the emergence of a parergal logic which works against teleology to encourage an emphasis on the eccentric (both peripheral detail and what is strange) and creative modes of reading which are circular rather than linear. I will then look at gloves in Bowen's fiction, both as clues which encourage 'good' (eccentric) reading – with accessories leading the reader to the story's edges where they will not decode forensic truths, but may arrive at their own poetic or philosophical 'truths' – and criminal accessories which suppress and punish 'bad' (conventional) reading.

Literature review

In her revised edition of her biography of Bowen, published in 1999, Hermione Lee observes that Bowen has never been considered as a serious literary modernist alongside Woolf and Mansfield.⁵⁴ She also states that, if she were given time to write the book again, she would spend more time ('without having to make excuses for it') on '*things* in Bowen: clothes, furniture, décor'.⁵⁵ This chapter aims to bridge these still existing gaps by positioning Bowen alongside her fellow modernist literary innovators in the context of the material and specifically sartorial.

A sartorial focus has burgeoned in modernist studies over recent years, as evidenced by R. S. Koppen's *Virginia Woolf: Fashion and Literary Modernity* (2009)⁵⁶ and a chapter on fashion in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernist Culture* (2015).⁵⁷ Celia Marshik's *At the Mercy of Their Clothes: Modernism, the Middlebrow, and British Garment Culture* (2016) considers Bowen in its examination of the ways in which 'British writers figure material's capacity to carry history, to carry the self, and even to make that self' and the idea of reading as an activity which enables individuality will be

⁵⁴ Lee, *Elizabeth Bowen*, p. 2.

⁵⁵ Lee, *Elizabeth Bowen*, p. 4. Italics as in the text.

⁵⁶ R. S. Koppen, *Virginia Woolf: Fashion and Literary Modernity* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009).

⁵⁷ Ilya Parkins, 'Fashion' in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernist Culture*, ed. by Celia Marshik (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 81-95.

key to this thesis.⁵⁸ Articles such as those by Janet Wilson on the significance of the veil as a trope which informed Mansfield's modernist aesthetic (2014)⁵⁹ and Mark Gaipa on accessories in Woolf's story 'Mrs Dalloway in Bond Street' also evidence the relevance of the accessory to the modernist short story. Gaipa argues that Woolf 'deliver[s] Clarissa's character to us in the novel by stripping her of the gloves she wore in the story and dispensing with most of the material trappings in her life' and 'replaces these things with other characters' opinions and judgments' to 'bring[...] the supplemental logic of the accessory to the center of Clarissa's being'.⁶⁰ In suggesting that Woolf adopts a 'supplemental logic' in suggesting that Clarissa Dalloway needs other people's opinions to render her whole, Gaipa alludes to Derrida who goes unmentioned elsewhere in the article.⁶¹ His suggestion of a type of supplemental reading which relies on an observer's contribution to meaning, the bringing of a personal viewpoint as a type of accessorising, is fruitful but not fully explored in the space of the short piece.⁶²

Jessica Burstein's *Cold Modernism* (2012) also relies on fashion in its exegesis of a modernism conceived of 'in terms of a valorization of exteriority'⁶³ in which 'the status of the human has no especial purchase', meaning that the 'human form is on par with seemingly dissimilar entities in the world – clothing, cars, and curtains, for example', a view which complements the democratising effects of modernist short fiction.⁶⁴ She discusses Coco Chanel and the little black dress and Mina Loy's designs including that of the 'blotter bracelet' in which '[o]rnammentation is [...] troped as utility', a trope which only permeates Bowen's work in as far as she conceives of frivolity as a necessity.⁶⁵ In the edited collection *Accessorizing the Body*, Franca

⁵⁸ Celia Marshik, *At the Mercy of Their Clothes: Modernism, the Middlebrow, and British Garment Culture* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2017), p. 40.

⁵⁹ Wilson, pp. 203-225.

⁶⁰ Mark Gaipa, 'Accessorizing Clarissa: How Virginia Woolf changes the clothes and the character of her lady of fashion' in *Modernist Cultures*, 4:1-2 (2009), 24-47 (p. 41).

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Further, to contend that Clarissa only has meaning if she has other people to frame her is not quite to bring the supplemental logic of the accessory to the 'center of [her] being' (ibid.). Rather, it is to cast her as the *ergon* whose meaning or framing relies on secondary *parerga*, stopping short of conceiving of the *parergal* as a revolutionary force. Instead, the idea relies more on Kant's traditional interpretation of the frame as a supporting function, albeit it one which can 'augment the pleasure of taste' (*TP* 64), throwing into relief the main work on which we should properly focus.

⁶³ Jessica Burstein, *Cold Modernism: Literature, Fashion, Art* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012), p. 12.

⁶⁴ Burstein, p. 13.

⁶⁵ Burstein, p. 192.

Zoccoli also explores the importance of accessories to modernist aesthetics by considering the Futurists whose creations were most often 'bright and eccentric' and had a 'markedly subversive function and ideological basis'.⁶⁶ This subversive conception of the accessory will also underpin this chapter, to the extent that it disrupts and at times takes over from the established order.

In her introduction to the same work, entitled 'Accessorizing the Modern(ist) Body', Cristina Giorcelli mentions Derrida's conception of the parergon to promote the indispensability of the accessory – pointing to the absence within the ergon which the parergon works to supply.⁶⁷ Jessica Gildersleeve also considers Derrida's notion of the supplement, and applies it to Bowen, in her 2014 work *Elizabeth Bowen and the Writing of Trauma: The Ethics of Survival*. This book looks specifically at the treatment of memory in Bowen's fiction, concentrating on the novels, and Gildersleeve argues in a chapter dedicated to the supplement that *The Last September* is 'structured by supplementarity – by addition, inscription, construction, invasion', examining notions of lack and what comes in to fill those spaces, though without reference to accessories or modes of reading.⁶⁸ Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle do not explicitly mention Derrida in their radical and important 1994 work, *Elizabeth Bowen and the Dissolution of the Novel: Still Lives*, although Derridean modes of thinking suffuse it. A footnote to the chapter entitled 'Sheer Kink' which mentions that 'the significance of gloves in Bowen's fiction would merit far more extended discussion' is answered in part by the final section of this chapter.⁶⁹ In Nicholas Royle's later, singly-authored study *Jacques Derrida* (2003) the two authors are explicitly compared, with discussion of *différance* and the shopping list that appears in Bowen's *Death of the Heart* sustaining a four-page commentary.⁷⁰

Derrida has though so far been almost ignored by general short story theory, surprisingly so given his involvement in debate about Poe's story 'The Purloined Letter'.⁷¹ Nonetheless, when

⁶⁶ Franca Zoccoli, 'Futurist Accessories' in *Accessorizing the Body*, ed. by Giorcelli, Cristina and Paula Rabinowitz (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), pp. 54-81, (p. 59).

⁶⁷ Cristina Giorcelli, 'Accessorizing the Modern(ist) Body' in *Accessorizing the Body*, pp. 1-6.

⁶⁸ Jessica Gildersleeve, *Elizabeth Bowen and the Writing of Trauma: The Ethics of Survival* (Amsterdam and New York: Editions Rodopi, 2014), p. 33.

⁶⁹ Andrew Bennett and Nicholas Royle, *Elizabeth Bowen and the Dissolution of the Novel: Still Lives* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1995), p. 167.

⁷⁰ Royle, pp. 80-83.

⁷¹ Jacques Derrida, 'The Purveyor of Truth', trans. by Willis Domingo, James Hulbert, Moshe Ron and M. –R. L., *Yale French Studies*, 96 (1999), 124-197.

Hunter challenges Mary Louise Pratt's framing of the short story as the novel's poor relation, he critiques a 'principle of non-contamination of the novel by the short story' by drawing on Derrida's theory of the supplement to argue that the notion of the novel as a 'self-sufficient totality' is false.⁷²

To return to critical work which specifically focuses on Bowen, Elizabeth Inglesby, after Lee, has recognised the importance of things in Bowen's fiction. Her 2007 article "'Expressive Objects': Elizabeth Bowen's Narrative Materializes" focuses on the agency and animism of objects in Bowen's novels to conclude that 'Bowen actively resisted abstraction by binding her own metaphysical convictions to particular places and things'.⁷³ Despite its equally suggestive title, Jacqueline Rose's article 'Bizarre Objects: Mary Butts and Elizabeth Bowen' focuses more on Bowen's treatment of perception and history (specifically in the novel *The Heat of the Day*) over more phenomenological concerns, although it does contain elucidating commentary on the way in which 'anything becomes possible [...] as soon as you believe that objects have a life of their own', noting how in Bowen '[o]bjects, which are normally the furniture or stuff of dreams, can get up and start walking around the room' in Bowen's work, surmising that one could call such a process 'psychotic' or simply 'take it as another way of seeing things'.⁷⁴ Eccentric reading is just such a process.

Ellmann places a similar importance on Bowen's 'hallucinatory treatment of objects, particularly furniture and telephones',⁷⁵ recognising 'something elegiac' in Bowen's 'treatment of objects and appurtenances' and her 'verbal caressing of the stuff of life'.⁷⁶ In her comprehensive work *Elizabeth Bowen: The Shadow Across the Page* (2003), Ellmann notes that '[t]hings, in Bowen, offer none of the expected comforts of solidity; they stand, like Freudian fetishes, as monuments to lack and loss', with objects taking on a supplementary status, going on to state that '[n]othing

⁷² Hunter, *The Cambridge Companion to the Short Story in English*, pp. 62-3.

⁷³ Elizabeth Inglesby, "'Expressive Objects': Elizabeth Bowen's Narrative Materializes" *Modern Fiction Studies*, 53.2 (Summer 2007), 306-333 (p. 327).

⁷⁴ Jacqueline Rose, 'Bizarre Objects: Hallucination and Modernism – Mary Butts and Elizabeth Bowen', in *On Not Being Able to Sleep* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2003), pp. 89-102 (p. 98). Bowen did believe objects to have a life of their own, in an essay entitled 'Advice to a Young Writer' she advised 'No inanimate object *is* inanimate'. Bowen, *The Weight of a World of Feeling*, p. 4.

⁷⁵ Ellmann, *The Shadow Across the Page*, p. xi.

⁷⁶ Ellmann, *The Shadow Across the Page*, p. 8.

[...] bears down on her imagined world with a weight more oppressive than materiality'.⁷⁷

Ellmann also observes the 'arresting oddness' of Bowen's literary style whose 'reflexivity and material intrusiveness' aligns it with the modernist tradition while noting that critical recognition of it as such has rarely occurred.⁷⁸ This dual recognition of *things in* Bowen's prose and the *thingliness of* Bowen's prose, as well as the intrinsic oddity of each, will be key to my examination of her privileging of the eccentric.

This more recent interest in and celebration of the material in Bowen balances criticisms of her style which are almost always related to its indefatigable presence, with early detractors remarking upon Bowen's abundance of 'distracting detail', her 'decorative elaboration' as well as her 'pointless verbal excess'.⁷⁹ Anthony Burgess, reviewing the novel *The Little Girls* (a work overwhelmingly concerned with the talismanic power of things), denigrated it for an inherent emptiness, arguing that '[b]ehind the whirlwind of phenomena, there doesn't seem to be much of a thing-in-itself'.⁸⁰ Perhaps Burgess's mistake was in seeking to look 'behind' the phenomena at all, to work on the presumption that the 'meaning of an episode was [...] inside like a kernel' rather than residing on the surface.⁸¹ As Susan Osborn saliently observes, Bowen's prose can 'sometimes draws the reader's attention away from the "inside" of the sentences, the place where the meaning is supposed to lie, and holds it instead on the surface' – where decorative and accessory detail rests.⁸² The 'problem' spoken of here by Bowen's critics relates to the 'stuff' of her fiction, an amalgamation of content and style. While the psychoanalyst Adam Phillips has observed that clutter 'tantalizes us as readers of it', this effect has not resonated widely in readers of Bowen, many of whom have been warded off by the crowded materiality of her texts rather

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ellmann, *The Shadow Across the Page*, p. x.

⁷⁹ Jocelyn Brooke and William Heath as quoted in Osborn's introduction to *Elizabeth Bowen: New Critical Perspectives*, pp. 1-12 (p. 2). The first two comments belong to Brooke; the final description is Heath's.

⁸⁰ Quoted in Lee, *Elizabeth Bowen*, p. 223.

⁸¹ Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (London: Penguin, 1973), p. 8. To quote more fully, the narrator of Conrad's novella observes of the character Marlow: 'to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine'.

⁸² Osborn, "'How to measure this unaccountable darkness between the trees": the strange relation of style and meaning in *The Last September*', in *Elizabeth Bowen: New Critical Perspectives*, pp. 34-60 (p. 46).

than engaged by it.⁸³ Critical hostility seems to have been fuelled not only by philological but also philosophical concerns, with Bowen's prose too unsettlingly contingent, capable of not only describing but invoking an ontological insecurity. As Neil Corcoran puts it, Bowen's writing provokes 'an anxiety that the mere writer herself may not remain in control of the riot' and, as a result, 'one may certainly be unnerved, as a reader, by some of her styles and forms'.⁸⁴ Readers can feel side-lined by a writer whose concerns they suspect are not their own, whose pleasure in language and the detail of the external world is felt to be excessive because it is not understood, and perhaps cannot be understood in a rationalist sense. If you can't read Bowen's eccentric prose in an eccentric way, it is tempting to label her peculiar and move on.

After Ellmann, Osborn reinvigorated the issue of Bowen's peculiar style in a 2004 article 'Reconsidering Elizabeth Bowen' and the 2009 collection she edited, *Elizabeth Bowen: New Critical Perspectives*. Osborn is not explicitly concerned with objects in Bowen's prose, but crucially recognises the clutter of her prose as causing complication for her readers. She links critical hostility to Bowen's work to this characteristic, explaining that it is Bowen's 'corruption of the boundary between the essential and the contingent and/or the "pointless", the familiar and the strange' which causes critical consternation and disrupts the realist conventions which her prose otherwise sets up.⁸⁵ Osborn's recognition of the contingency or materiality of Bowen's prose and her association of this with an absurdist tendency in her work is relevant to the concerns of this thesis. Importantly, Osborn also detects in Bowen's textual resistance to interpretation a certain impropriety which has distinguished her critical appraisal from the accepted difficulty of, say, Beckett or Joyce – the complexity of her work is more readily explained not as an indicator of profundity but as evidence of her 'tendency to complicate her management of the things that she should be managing'.⁸⁶ Elsewhere, Osborn describes this neatly in terms of etiquette, describing Bowen's 'blatant disregard for the accepted norms of intellectual decorum, grammatical and

⁸³ Adam Phillips, *Promises, Promises* (London: Faber and Faber, 2000), p. 60. Phillips also notes that, rather like Bowen's critics, 'Psychoanalytic theory [...] has an aversion to clutter', 'it promotes the intelligibility of system; it repudiates chaos' (pp. 59-60).

⁸⁴ Neil Corcoran, *Elizabeth Bowen: The Enforced Return* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 3.

⁸⁵ Osborn, 'Introduction', in *Elizabeth Bowen: New Critical Perspectives*, pp. 1-12 (p. 2).

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

syntactical coherence and technical competence', implying that Bowen has been punished critically for not following literary fashions carefully enough.⁸⁷ Osborn's awareness that Bowen's 'categorical excesses' ask for 'ways of reading and modes of interpretation in which the works' resistance is felt to be both empowering and impoverishing' encapsulates the ambivalence of reading Bowen which this chapter will probe.⁸⁸ Exploring Bowen's stories through a focus on accessories enables me to build on Osborn's work, using hats and gloves as a model by which to consider reading, style, communication, meaning, contingency, absurdity and difficulty simultaneously. It allows me to shed new light on Bowen's literary unfashionableness during the process, as well as her philosophical concern with existential disorder which, as Osborn has shown, is more easily dismissed as undeliberate untidiness.

Bowen's formal eccentricity is also explored in a chapter by Shannon Wells-Lassagne in the book *In and Out: Eccentricity in Britain* (2012). Wells-Lassagne focuses on *The Last September* to conclude crucially that in Bowen's work 'it is the margin, the periphery, the background and the detail which may allow for meaning and true communication, however, temporary', also recognising the ironic parallels between Bowen's marginal literary focus, her own (literary) marginalisation and the stylistic strangeness of her prose.⁸⁹ The chapter predominantly focuses on social convention (defiance of etiquette) and character placement (marginal and liminal), rather than eccentricity as a formal literary device, yet its recognition of the marginal and the ornamental as significant and as a site offering fecund possibilities for communication dovetails with the concerns of this work.

renée c. hoogland has also focused on the concept of eccentricity in Bowen, entitling the concluding chapter of her 1994 work *Elizabeth Bowen: A Reputation in Writing*, 'From Marginality to Ex-centricity'. hoogland takes gender as her key concern, framed by feminist and lesbian theory, and argues for Bowen's 'complex inside/outside position with regard to the prevailing

⁸⁷ Osborn, *Elizabeth Bowen: New Critical Perspectives*, p. 39.

⁸⁸ Osborn, *Elizabeth Bowen: New Critical Perspectives*, p. 7.

⁸⁹ Shannon Wells-Lassagne, 'Elizabeth Bowen, writing in and of the margins', in *In and Out: Eccentricity in Britain*, ed. by Sophie Aymes-Stokes and Laurent Mellet (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), pp. 186-7.

artistic and intellectual tendencies of her times'.⁹⁰ Although Derrida is not relied on in a substantive way, Bowen is conceived of as a specifically parergal writer whose work focuses on 'boundaries between inner and outer space', 'exemplifying an ex-centricity' and introducing postmodern elements to the text.⁹¹ Importantly, hoogland sees Bowen's novels as so intrinsically ambivalent that they generate 'a sense of instability and crisis', producing 'disturbing effects that [...] may unsettle even the "professional" reading subject'.⁹² This chapter will also conceive of Bowen's idiosyncratic style as a formal mechanism of marginal expression, although its focus will be neither sexual nor psychoanalytical.

A small but rich amount of research has been conducted in relation to Bowen and the sartorial. Lucy Carlyle's unpublished doctoral thesis, 'Styling the Self: Frock Consciousness and the aesthetics of the body in the work of Elizabeth Bowen and Rosamund Lehmann' (2007), looks at clothing to appositely conceive of Bowen's work in terms of a 'deep surface' where "meaning" is less than itself and "surface" is more', but with a focus on representations of femininity.⁹³ This privileging of the surface as a site of meaning (however opaque) will also be key to this chapter, but with a focus on accessories and the short fiction which lies beyond the focus of Carlyle's engaging thesis.

Vike Plock's 2012 article 'Sartorial Connections: Fashion, Clothes, and Character in Elizabeth Bowen's *To the North*' notes that the novel 'like its author, over-accessorizes' and goes on to ask pertinently: 'What, then, can be the point of this slightly inelegant and ungainly accumulation of sartorial references?'⁹⁴ Plock emphasises the 'assembling powers' of clothing which 'moves beyond critical paradigms that pessimistically envision *pace* Marx, estrangement and personal isolation as the logical consequence of capitalist modernity'.⁹⁵ The article aligns Bowen with 'classical realism'⁹⁶ due to her dedicated representation of objects (via what is

⁹⁰ renée c. hoogland, *Elizabeth Bowen: A Reputation in Writing* (New York and London: New York University Press, 1994), p. 297.

⁹¹ hoogland, p. 298.

⁹² hoogland, p. 299.

⁹³ Lucy Carlyle, 'Styling the Self: Frock Consciousness and the aesthetics of the body in the work of Elizabeth Bowen and Rosamund Lehmann' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Oxford, 2007), p. 173.

⁹⁴ Vike Martina Plock, 'Sartorial Connections: Fashion, Clothes, and Character in Elizabeth Bowen's *To the North*', *Modernism/modernity*, 19.2 (April 2012), 287-302 (p. 290).

⁹⁵ Plock, p. 296.

⁹⁶ Plock, p. 288.

perhaps an overly simplified reading of ‘Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown’) and positions her against Woolf, whom it is claimed had a ‘dislike for representing objects in fiction’, prioritising instead the subjective experience, an argument the previous chapter rebuffs.⁹⁷ In spite of this, Plock’s article breaks new ground and introduces some vital ideas that this chapter will build upon, the first being that the presentation of accessories in Bowen’s fiction is both abundant and significant. The second is that their significance relates to their demand to be read; Plock states that ‘Bowen allows us to read her protagonists through their accessories’.⁹⁸ Thirdly, Plock argues that it is ‘clothes, not literary characters, [that] are responsible for driving Bowen’s plot’ – this belief correlates with the argument made in the closing parts of this chapter that gloves come to intervene in and control Bowen’s stories.⁹⁹ Finally, the article closes with a statement that introduces a concept of double-edged strangeness (both literary and sartorial) that is not otherwise explored: ‘[i]n her writing, as much as in matters of personal appearance, Bowen delighted in the idiosyncrasy of style’.¹⁰⁰ This chapter will consider fashion accessories as communicative, interventionist and eccentric, using these ideas as a jumping-off point for more extended analysis that will reconsider marginal style in Bowen’s work for its ramifications upon the reading process.

Finally, Lis Christensen’s *Elizabeth Bowen: The Later Fiction* (2001) focuses primarily on the critically-neglected later novels, yet during its course makes observations which are pertinent to this thesis. Christensen recognises the later novels’ systematic reliance on objects as well as Bowen’s ‘fascination with language’ which ‘leave[s] her open to the accusation of frivolity or mere showing off’.¹⁰¹ Like Ellmann, Osborn and Plock, Christensen conceives of Bowen’s literary style in terms of its materiality, acknowledging that charges of ‘overwriting and mannerism’ are invited by the fact that the ‘stylistic devices she employs are laboured and repetitive to the point of parody’ with ‘her use of dress, hairstyle and jewelry as characterisers’

⁹⁷ Plock, p. 298. As Burststein does also in her work *Cold Modernism*, Plock casts Woolf as an anthropocentric writer who privileges subjective interiority above all else – yet even if this were the case it is difficult to see why this would be antithetical to Bowen’s use of objects to ‘connect individuals in complex ways with the outside world’, a view which also seems to rely on a privileging of the human (Plock, p. 299).

⁹⁸ Plock, p. 298.

⁹⁹ Plock, p. 297.

¹⁰⁰ Plock, p. 299.

¹⁰¹ Lis Christensen, *Elizabeth Bowen: The Later Fiction* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculanum Press, 2001), p. 104.

‘over-the-top’ and ‘intertextual references at times almost condescendingly explicit’.¹⁰² This chapter will similarly engage with this question of textual excess, asking how this proliferation of textual clues functions and asking what, if anything, it points to.

While the work mentioned here has established important ground and also confirms my focus as one of scholarly relevance, it all diverges at some point from my own concerns and serves to point towards areas of enquiry that still require further exploration. No research has yet specifically considered the bearing of the accessory on the modernist short story as a marginal form with marginal priorities, nor has it conceived of Bowen’s literary practice through consideration of the accessory as parergon. The next section will commence this work by considering hats in Bowen’s work as demonstrating the emergence of a parergal process of interpretation which favours the a-rational and circular over linear logic.

Hats

There is something inherently subversive about the hat. If one is asked to mentally conjure an object associated with witchcraft or wizardry, the pointed hat will likely spring to mind. Hats are doffed to acquaintances as a mark of respect, as if the hat acts as a barrier to meaningful communion – to remove it is to establish relations in terms of intimacy.¹⁰³ To ‘hang one’s hat’ is to be at home, to wear it, ostensibly, is to be not quite at home: it denotes the extrinsic. Strangers wear hats – perhaps, even, hats have the capacity to make people strange. As Lurie observed in the 1980s, even campaigns by *Vogue* and *Esquire* ‘have not been able to save the hat’; it had resisted the embrace of general fashion and was instead only worn by the elderly, in bad weather or at weddings, or as a marker of ‘individual eccentricity’.¹⁰⁴

The eccentric, the uncomfortable, the fantastic and the irrational elements of Bowen’s stories all converge within the parameters of the hat, with an invigorated and beatific emphasis

¹⁰² Christensen, p. 32.

¹⁰³ Desmond Morris interprets the practice of hat removal in greeting as terms of (a) practicality – because brims were often wide and hats decorated with paraphernalia such as plumage, they had to be removed so that those interacting could see each other’s faces and (b) submissive posturing, which reduces personal stature to avoid intimidation. See Torbjörn Lundmark, *Tales of Hi and Bye: Greeting and Parting Rituals Around the World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), pp. 79-80.

¹⁰⁴ Lurie, p. 12.

on the eccentric, the forgotten and the unstable persisting throughout. Bowen's oddest characters wear hats. In 'Charity' it is announced of the eponymous protagonist: 'the strangeness perhaps lay in Charity', with the next sentence beginning in an almost explicatory fashion: 'She wore a flowery hat from under which her nose came out at an unexpected angle' (CS 204). In 'The Evil That Men Do –' the protagonist decides against a hat last worn in London on the basis that it has become unfitting, odd: 'I don't feel I could go down the High Street in this hat. There must be something queer about it' (CS 82). Turning again to Bowen's novel *The Little Girls*, an aunt is alarmingly introduced wearing a 'largish black straw hat which, by the sticky look of it, had been lately touched up with hat-dye, known to be poison, and had upon it what could only be magpie's wings'.¹⁰⁵ The effect of the hat is curiously 'of both hat's and wearer's having been chemically reconstituted, and, of that's having so acted on *her* as to send her out robbing a charnel hedge'. The wings 'were not a sporty hat-ornament, but sheer dead-bird' and, it is explained, 'living, even, a magpie is of ill omen'.¹⁰⁶ Dicey, the niece, 'shrink[s] back' from the hat, wary of movement which seems to 'stir up poison fumes' into a 'nimbus' from which the aunt's voice issues.¹⁰⁷ Terrifying, ominous, literally noxious, the hat is an emblem of the sinister. Bowen herself was observed at a party wearing if not grotesque then decidedly unusual headwear, with Hugh Walpole remembering her wearing 'a hat like an inverted coal scuttle'.¹⁰⁸ Charles Ritchie also describes Bowen in a diary entry of 4 September 1942, in different but equally striking headwear: 'Spent most of the day with E. She was wearing her black witch's hat, a black dress with white necklace and looked strange and elegant'.¹⁰⁹

English phraseology associated with the hat reiterates this general sense of dangerous unfamiliarity but amplifies it, linking it to the chaotic (to be 'in a hat' or 'to make a hat of' something is either to be in a mess or to have messed something up), and the unlikely ('my hat!' is a surprised scoff, while to promise to 'eat one's hat' is a cynical expression of disbelief).¹¹⁰ To

¹⁰⁵ Bowen, *The Little Girls*, p. 88.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Bowen, *The Little Girls*, p. 89.

¹⁰⁸ Quoted in Patricia Craig, *Elizabeth Bowen* (London: Penguin, 1986), p. 89. Craig quotes Hugh Walpole's description of Bowen following a meeting in 1938.

¹⁰⁹ Bowen and Ritchie, p. 34.

¹¹⁰ *OED*, 'hat', n., P15.a, b; P18; P10.

‘talk through one’s hat’ is to make wild statements without evidence, to talk nonsense, while to ‘throw up one’s hat’ is a physical rather than verbal gesture – is an exuberant articulation of joy.¹¹¹ Themes of disorder, the improbable or absurd, nonsense and wild abandon characterise these expressions. Again, extremity and eccentricity prevail. In 1952, Bowen observed that ‘short stories of our day’ deal with ‘cases of oddness or deviation, of solitude, crisis, forlorn hope or, at least eccentricity’ (*PPT* 319). Such is the realm of the hat.

Derrida conceived of the *parergon* as representing ‘the exceptional, the strange, the extraordinary’ (*TP* 58), stating that it indicates what the *ergon* ‘*must not become*’ (*TP* 54), representing not only the eccentric but also an explicit threat to central order. These intrinsic associations of eccentricity and irrationality might go some way to explaining the popularity of the hat in surrealist art – René Magritte’s bowler hats; the elaborate headwear in Max Ernst’s *L’Ascaride de sable* (1920) in which hats arranged on sand resemble shells or jellyfish, painted while he worked in his father-in-law’s hat-blocking business;¹¹² the ‘shoe hat’ designed by Salvador Dalí for Elsa Schiaparelli.¹¹³ The hat, as an entity which both touches and frames the head, is perhaps, of all the accessories, most apt for exploring the Derridean concept of the *parergon*.

In ‘The Truth in Painting’ Derrida writes:

The *parergon* inscribes something which comes as an extra, *exterior* to the proper field [...] but whose transcendent exteriority comes to play, abut onto, brush against, rub, press against the limit itself and intervene in the inside only to the extent that the inside is lacking. (*TP* 56)

Here the mingling of interiority and exteriority is emphasised, a mutually-transforming exchange rather grubbily demonstrated in stories such as ‘The Storm’ (1926), in which tourists go bare-

¹¹¹ OED, ‘hat’, n., P17; P7.

¹¹² The visual novel *Une Semaine de Bonté* (1934) also features a diverse array of headwear. See Elza Adamowicz, *Surrealist Collage in Text and Image: Dissecting the Exquisite Corpse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 77.

¹¹³ This was a ‘black hat in the form of a shoe with a Shocking velvet heel standing up like a small column’. Elsa Schiaparelli, *Shocking Life: The Autobiography of Elsa Schiaparelli* (London: V&A Publications, 2007), p. 90. The shoe hat embodied the ‘preposterous’ literalised – a concept which will be key to the exploration of Bowen’s eccentric reading.

headed in the heat ‘having taken off their hats that the perspiration might not injure the linings’ (CS 199), and ‘Dead Mabelle’ (1929), in which William, the forlorn protagonist, observes the ‘greasy rim round the inside of his hat where he’d sweated’ as evidence of ‘how one impressed oneself on the material’ (CS 312).



Figure 10: David Cecil, Vivienne Eliot and Elizabeth Bowen by Ottoline Morrell (1931), with Bowen’s face eclipsed by her hat – a triumph of the parergon over the ergon? Image reproduced courtesy of National Portrait Gallery, London (NPG Ax143431).

In this relation, it is the head which functions as the ergon – Valentine Cunningham points out that hats ‘animate the literary consciousness with particular force’ precisely because they have the potential to be ‘expressive of the human’ as ‘closest to the alleged centre of the human person [...] – namely the *prosopon*, the face, the *persona*’.¹¹⁴ In this way, the hat can be read as a translator of personality or consciousness. Bowen similarly described fashion as ‘not an order but a response’, a material manifestation of the subconscious:

¹¹⁴ Valentine Cunningham, ‘If the Cap Fits: Figuring the Space of the Human’ in *The Anthropological Turn in Literary Studies*, ed. by Jürgen Schläeger (Tübingen: G Narr, 1996), p. 47.

A new fashion is something we have precipitated, unconsciously. It is the fruit of fancies, tendencies, wishes, reactions to events that are our own, but that we do not recognize when we see them expressed in hats, dresses, ‘accessories.’ [...] It is the general part of us – foggy and unrealized – that is powerful, that precipitates events, and with events, fashions. In a new season’s hat or the new cut of a dress we have our unrealized tendencies served up cold. We may think we will or will not follow fashion, but fashion has been closely following us. We are first gently interpreted, then travestied... (CI, 114)

Here, the *ergon*, murky and inarticulate, needs the *parergon* to interpret it – to first read and then write it (with reverse logic typically in play). If hats are expressive of the persona or that which sits inside the skull, the human brain, then they are closely aligned with the practice of meaning-making which is common to reading as well as writing. As Philip Davis observes, in the act of reading, readers come to ‘place for themselves, intuitions and half-recognitions that may still remain shadowy, inexplicit, or under-appreciated’.¹¹⁵ To read hats is to read brains *before they speak* and also to read *more than they can say*. If ‘the more inarticulate someone is verbally, the more important are the statements made by his or her clothes’, the more eccentric Bowen’s prose gets, the more we might rely on the hat to aid our reading of it.¹¹⁶ In these bizarre and often supernatural stories, in which Bowen might be reasonably judged to be ‘talking through her hat’, it is the hat itself which is best placed to help us read through our puzzlement. This section will consider what it means to read hats, and the types of eccentric thinking they might precipitate.

Angry ghosts and fairy godmothers: ‘Pink May’ and ‘Fairies at the Christening’

In ‘Pink May’ (1945), the story’s narrator believes she is haunted by a ghost which disapproves equally of her extra-marital affairs as her style of dress: her ‘hats were more than she [the ghost] was able to bear’ (CS 808) and the hats are consequently found damaged by apparently spectral

¹¹⁵ Davis, p. 73.

¹¹⁶ Lurie, p. 22.

activity. As a result of their nocturnal battering, the protagonist observes her boyfriend ‘eyeing [her] hats unkindly’ (*CS* 809). To him she confesses that she believes she has a ghost in her room, which seems to compound his suspicions of her increasingly odd behaviour as caused by mental ill health. The narrator explains the way in which she goes on to ‘los[e] [her] head’ (*CS* 809) as a result of the persistent haunting – as if the damage caused to the hats also extends to her brain – and discloses news of her love affairs to her husband, so also forcing an end to that relationship. Resisting the rational, pathological route of explaining the haunting by way of her own insanity, the story ends more openly with the protagonist’s declaration that it must have been a ghost which catalysed her downfall because, simply, ‘[l]eft to oneself, one doesn’t ruin one’s life!’ (*CS* 810). An absence of logical explanation for the damaged hats directs an eccentric reading of the situation – linear logic would make the protagonist culpable and locate the problem within the ergal: her brain. Circular logic, however, allows for haunting, avoiding the subject in its explanation and sticking to eccentric, ambiguous edges in constructing its reading. While this is not the most revelatory example of Bowen’s eccentric readings, it does demonstrate the almost complete suspension of disbelief which she believed interpretation should involve, where we must think like mad hatters, reading our way to the periphery.¹¹⁷

Themes of lunacy and the supernatural also characterise the unpublished story ‘Fairies at the Christening’¹¹⁸ in which names are pulled from a hat by a married couple to decide a child’s godparents, because the child’s mother has been promising to make godmothers of friends all her life. The ‘whole story’ of the mother’s well-intentioned but false promises is revealed to her husband – the hat is introduced to marshal her myriad pacts into some more manageable future – essentially to make the ‘whole story’ readable, linear (*B* 276).¹¹⁹ However, as we might expect, the process of pulling names from the hat – acknowledged by the parents as an operation both ‘mad’ and ‘irreverent’ (*B* 278) – throws up some surprises or, rather, some further twists emanate

¹¹⁷ Bowen’s contempt for the story’s narrator is expressed in her preface to ‘The Demon Lover’ collection, in which she is described as a ‘worthless little speaker’ who made ‘the war a moratorium for her married conscience’ (*CI* 51).

¹¹⁸ There is no known date of writing for this story – it is undated, as explained by Allan Hepburn in his editorial note (*B* 369).

¹¹⁹ The idea of the hat as enabling story writing is reinforced by specific mention of the ‘writing-pad’ on which the potential godmothers’ names are written (*B* 278).

from the ‘twists of paper’ on which the names are written (*B* 279). While the first two names belong to people the mother, Angela, is prepared to locate and invite – the third belongs to someone of whom she has ‘lost sight [...] absolutely and completely’, someone beyond the scope of her peripheral vision whom she is no longer prepared to contemplate or read (*B* 279). Angela becomes adamant that her child only needs two godmothers and the third unsuitable name is dispensed with, as a result of her anxiety about the ways in which ‘Life does queer things to people’ and memories of fairy tales in which godmothers ‘spin spells’ (*B* 279). The unusual conjunction of ‘spin’ and ‘spells’ here might prompt the reader to recall what is more usually spun – yarns – and the importance of the reader’s contribution to the story. Angela’s refusal to engage with the eccentric reading directed by the hat is indicative of a privileging of linearity over the preposterous which is unlikely to be successful in the fictional world of Bowen’s stories, and is evidence of her absolving her responsibility as a reader.

In response, despite having no rational way of knowing that it was occurring, the third godmother arrives at the christening without invitation, heading straight to the front of the church. The description of her arrival is worth quoting at length:

It was here that the Unknown joined them. The wrong-looking little figure – beret pulled down over wisps of brittle blonde hair; “loud,” shabby tartan overcoat; preposterous scarlet bootees, mock-fur gauntlets – edged its way into the forefront of the group round the font, and there stood firm. Impossible to account for, utterly impossible to displace by stares, frowns, murmurs or courteous nudges, this cuckoo among the godparents held her ground. (*B* 283)

The word ‘preposterous’, used in description of the unsuitable godmother, is key with its etymology denoting an inverted position or order – that which is which is usually placed last being placed first.¹²⁰ This is of wider relevance to Bowen’s writing, and the reading it directs, as well as the overriding message of this story. The front-loaded sentence in which the word appears is of a type for which Bowen was often criticised, with its flurry of descriptors obscuring

¹²⁰ *OED*, ‘preposterous’, adj., 1.a.

the immediate meaning of the sentence. She explained this in interview as follows:

Sometimes when I get my sentences in inverted order, which has often been pointed out, sometimes with severe criticism, which is entirely justified, it's because I try to put the words in a sentence in the way that they would have struck the beholding eye.¹²¹

The deliberately abrasive adjective 'wrong-looking' might equally apply to Bowen's sentences as well as the way she directs us to read them – if we read preposterously, look at them wrongly, perform the act of wrong-looking by accepting the inverse order she presents, we might better understand how to enjoy her fiction. We see first; we might understand later, although this is not guaranteed. Looking out from under our hats is more important than cogitating beneath them, risking the introduction of a linear logic which takes us further away from perception.

Identified always by her 'bad little thrust-down beret' and marked by 'the air of belonging elsewhere' (B 286), the third godmother is decidedly outré, marked out by her eccentric accessories, a pariah yet one which no one can rid themselves of. Like the parergon, she is eccentric from yet integral to the proceedings – as Derrida put it, the parergon 'does not fall to one side, it touches and cooperates within the operation, from a certain outside' (TP 54). She demonstrates the parergon's access 'to mystery, to miracles' (TP 56), embodying what Bowen called in the introduction she wrote for Eva Ritcher's *The ABC of Millinery* (1950) the hat's capacity to appear to us as 'a sort of enchanted mystery'.¹²² Impossible to read, remaining cryptically and with parergal ambivalence 'everywhere, nowhere' (B 287), she yet remains part of the story originally decided by the hat and eventually works to influence her god-daughter's future reading habits. The letter which this 'thin lady in the old-fashioned hat' (B 286) leaves for the child urges her to live a 'life in which there can always be some place for inconvenient people', asking her to make her parents tell the story of 'how [her] name came out of a hat' and to remember that 'there is always magic in the world' (B 290). She urges the child to locate

¹²¹ Bowen, *The Weight of a World of Feeling*, p. 28.

¹²² Bowen, 'Introduction', in Ritcher, *The ABC of Millinery*, p. 13.

meaning and mystery in the fringes of the world, to audaciously engage with its difficulty rather than ignore it, and to celebrate the marginal, that which exceeds her natural circumference. She asks her to put first that which is usually last, also reminding her how she came to make an entrance into this story – by being conjured out of a hat, reminding that hats do not always issue twists of paper, sometimes they might also issue twists of fate and a twisted kind of wisdom. In ‘The Little Girl’s Room’ (1934), when we are told that Geraldine’s step-grandmother has ‘white hair [which] fitted her like a cap’, we should not be surprised to read next that her ‘dark prominent eyes looked out at any margin of world beyond the domain of her own massive fancy without prejudice’ (CS 477), suggesting a sagacity and acceptance of eccentric ambivalence which is embodied by the hat.

This story demonstrates, as do the other accessory-centric stories which will follow, what Christensen describes as the ‘existential dimension’ of Bowen’s fiction, in which ‘perennial questions are not far to seek: how can we best live our lives to the full, how can we best relate to one another?’¹²³ Christensen argues that ‘[a]s readers we are alerted to such questions, and encouraged to seek our own answers, by the increasingly flamboyant surface texture of Bowen’s fiction’.¹²⁴ Accessories are indicators of such questions being raised – a hat tipped to the reader to let them know active engagement is about to be required of them. If eccentric reading does not yield neat solutions to problems, it might offer numinous truths reached by a circular route.

‘Ann Lee’s’ – eccentric logic

‘Ann Lee’s’ (1924) is a story whose plot recounts a visit to the hat-shop named in its title, a purchase and departure. The shop is located in ‘one of the dimmer and more silent streets of south-west London’, ‘so far’ from Sloane Square (CS 103) and accessible only by walking ‘endlessly through [...] miserable back streets’ (CS 105) to the peripheries of Chelsea. In the window, two hats are always on display: ‘one on a stand, the other lying on a cushion; and a black curtain with a violet border hung behind’ (CS 103). From the outset, both the shop’s

¹²³ Christensen, p. 12.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

location and the curtain's pronounced edging – of violet, a colour at the left-field extreme of the visible spectrum of light with cultural associations of eccentricity and extravagance – indicate an emphasis on the eccentric. The opening paragraphs set the scene for a demonstration of the auxiliary detail's ability to bring, in Schor's words, 'the periphery to the center, the accessory to the principal, the foreground to the background'.¹²⁵ We are about to enter a hat shop in which the usual order of logic is reversed, made preposterous. When reviewing E. M. Forster's work in the article 'A Passage to E. M. Forster' (1969), Bowen used Forster's analysis of 'The Ancient Mariner' to describe what his work achieved for her as a reader: 'We have entered a universe that only answers to its own laws, supports itself, internally coheres, and has a new standard of truth' (PPT 283).¹²⁶ To apply the description once more, the universe of Ann Lee's hat-shop similarly operates to its own standard of truth.

Visiting on recommendation of Miss Ames who years ago bought a hat which still draws remark, Mrs Logan enters the shop in which not a hat can be seen, for the purpose of getting more in return for the 'ridiculous fuss' her husband made about bills: 'considering what she had to put up with every quarterday she [decided she] might have something more to show for it in the way of hats' (CS 103). Yet what is first noticed about shop-owner Ann Lee when she makes her dilatory appearance is her 'discreet indifference to custom' (CS 104). A shop empty of wares, an aloof salesperson and a customer who responds to fiscal scarcity by spending more extravagantly are all factors which work only within an obverse realm of logic. The shop itself even resembles a circus sideshow, where 'mirrors opposite one another [...] quadrupled the figure of each lady' (CS 110).

The realms of fantasy and the surreal were not foreign to Bowen's thinking. She entitled her unfinished autobiography, *Pictures and Conversations* (1975), after wording that appears in the first paragraph of Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*.¹²⁷ The phrase itself relates squarely to reading: "'and what is the use of a book" thought Alice "without pictures or

¹²⁵ Schor, p. 20.

¹²⁶ The essay Bowen quotes is 'Anonymity: an enquiry', which was published by Forster in *The Calendar of Modern Letters* in November 1925 and in book format by the Hogarth Press in the same year.

¹²⁷ See MT 296.

conversation?”¹²⁸ In another of Bowen’s stories, ‘The Cat Jumps’ (1934), where a satirically-drawn, overly ‘modern’, analytical and rational couple move into a house previously owned by a murderer who it is revealed stowed his victim’s heart in a hat box, a guest, Muriel, is disapproved of for her antithetical bed-time reading. Rather than accepting the recommended reading of psychologist Krafft-Ebing, she chooses instead *Alice in Wonderland*. It is concluded that: ‘She was not [...] the sort of girl to have asked at all’ (CS 400). These references to *Alice* reflect not only Bowen’s interest in both the eccentric in fiction and eccentric reading practices, but also hint towards the likely literary ancestor of Ann Lee, the mad hatter. The mad hatter as trope alludes to the effects of mercury poisoning experienced by hat-makers as a result of using mercurous nitrate in the production of felt hats; it is a term used generically to refer to ‘a highly eccentric or crazy character’.¹²⁹ In Derrida’s view, the supplement similarly embodies a ‘kind of crazy logic’, ‘neither outside nor inside, and/or both inside and outside at the same time’ – it ‘forms part without being part, it belongs without belonging’.¹³⁰ The hatter thus makes a home easily in the short story form which Bowen conceived of as ‘allow[ing] for what is crazy about humanity’ (MT 130).

As purveyor of accessories or parerga, Ann Lee does not, however, supplicate herself to the customer whom capitalism would deem ergal – quite the opposite. The story depicts a striking reversal of ergon and parergon as the pair of customers are treated as peripheral and inconsequential by Ann Lee, feeling as if it is they that had been ‘sent round on approval’ (CS 104). They are viewed by an intrusive male visitor to the shop as accessories to the practice of shop-keeping; he stares contemplatively at Miss Ames ‘as though wondering why Ann Lee should have chosen to invest her shop with a customer of just *that* pattern’ (CS 110). The inexplicable allure of the shop, despite its location and apparent emptiness, further represents the triumph of the parergon over the ergon, inducing its customers, having purchased beyond their means, to ‘long [...] suddenly [...] to linger’ (CS 112). Ann Lee ‘never ha[s] many hats’ in stock, yet of the humble choice on offer, Mrs Logan buys three, all of which, somehow, fit her

¹²⁸ Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 9.

¹²⁹ *OED*, ‘mad’, adj., S3. ‘mad hatter’.

¹³⁰ Royle, p. 49.

perfectly (CS 105). Her friend, Miss Ames, ‘couldn’t help feeling’ that ‘if Ann Lee had wished, Lulu would have had that other hat, and then another and another’ (CS 112), perhaps a couple for each of her reflected selves. When the first two hats are finally brought out to view, they have been worth their wait: they are ‘the hats one dreamed about’, a phrase which is modified thus: ‘even in a dream one had never directly beheld them; they glimmered rather *on the margin of one’s dreams*’ (CS 106, my italics). Supra-oneiric, Ann Lee’s creations are ‘imponderable’ (CS 107), existing beyond thought and imagination, beyond direct mental grasp yet available to be glimpsed at the peripheries of the fictional, to be read eccentrically.

Derrida argues for the ultimate potency of the evasive, resistant logic of the supplement, stating that all ‘operations engaged and the criteria proposed by the analytic of the beautiful depend on [...] parergonality’ (TP 73). He contends that ‘if all the value oppositions which dominate the philosophy of art (before and since Kant) depend on it in their pertinence, their rigor, their purity, their propriety’, then this demonstrates the ‘logic of the *parergon* which is more powerful than that of the analytic’ (TP 73). In ‘Ann Lee’s’, both the shop and its wares act as a worked example of the logic of the parergon overpowering the analytic of the subject – ‘Letty, her hair all ruffled up with trying-on, stood with a hat in either hand, her mouth half-open, looking at the man not quite intelligently’ (CS 108). The subject stutters, moans and falls short of the parergon’s imponderable exquisiteness: “‘Oh, *damn* my face!’ groaned Miss Ames into the mirror, pressing her hands to her cheeks, looking out at herself crimsonly from beneath the trembling shadow of an osprey’ (CS 106). Charles Baudelaire described fashion as a ‘symptom of the taste for the ideal that floats on the surface in the human brain’, and it is against this ideal standard that Miss Ames’ face falls short.¹³¹ Rather like Bowen choosing a dress to best set off her favourite turquoise beads, the hats at Ann Lee’s are chosen on their own strengths rather than their supplementary capability to match or accentuate an outfit or a face; they are prioritised before the ‘main work’.¹³² They fail to meet the ‘traditional determination’ of the parergon, which

¹³¹ Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life*, trans. by P. E. Charvet (London: Penguin, 2010), p. 45.

¹³² It is precisely this preposterous mode of dressing that Stéphane Mallarmé encourages while posturing as the extravagant Marguerite du Ponty in an article dated 20 September 1874 in *La Dernière Mode*: ‘To our two autumn hats, the Berger and the Valois, I shall add a very attractive model with a round calotte and an immense brim, also round or with one side turned up. The hat is of felt; the underside of the brim, if round, is decorated with a garland

is ‘not that it stands out but that it disappears, buries itself, effaces itself, melts away’ (TP 61).

Rather than melt away, the parergon brazenly persists, demanding to be read.

The fact that the hats mean *something* is undeniable – that meaning remains indirectly articulated does not denigrate its value because to evaluate meaning on the basis of its intelligibility would be to prioritise the ergon over the parergon, to privilege the rational over the eccentric. The notion of identity expressed in things but not in words punctuates this story; for example, ‘[the black hat] was so much *her*, to have left it behind would have been such a pity, Ann Lee couldn’t help thinking’ (CS 112). It is as if millinery takes to extremes what Hunter posits as the short story’s great strength – ‘the art of saying less but meaning more’.¹³³ That which the hat ‘says’ in a literal sense is nil, what it ‘means’ is plentiful. It shares what Bowen saw as the short story’s advantage over the novel, the ‘virtue [...] of being non-explanatory’ (LI 157). As Roland Barthes wrote of fashion more widely, it ‘does not suppress meaning [but] points to it with its finger’.¹³⁴ Like the ‘*expressive green*’ (CS 103, italics as in the text) of the headwear which Miss Ames bought from Ann Lee years ago, hats signify without enabling translation. Perhaps as a result, speaking of hats, Miss Ames feels ‘half-conscious of a solecism’ (CS 105), but is not worried by it – she is drawn magnetically to hats but could not tell you why, reads them voraciously but cannot easily sum up their meaning. In another (undated) story, self-reflexively entitled ‘Story Scene’, one character views another, newly dressed, and we are told that ‘something humble in him [...] made him try not to break her mystery down’ (B 242). This humble privileging of the ‘what’ over the ‘why’ is the type of reading that Bowen’s stories encourage, fostering an anti-rationalist approach which coaches readers in the acceptance of mystery and otherness as a helpful strategy for dealing with absurdity.

Precisely because of their inexplicability, hats magnetically encourage the act of reading – engagement with parergonality. Mrs Logan stands ‘turning the blue hat round and round in her

of flowers, and if turned up at one side, with a twist of material pinned by a wing to a velvet bow. *From the hat I move on to the rest of the costume*’ (P. N. Furbank and A. M. Cain, *Mallarmé on Fashion: A Translation of the Fashion Magazine La Dernière Mode with Commentary* (New York, Oxford: Berg, 2004), p.52 (my italics)). The voluptuous, lop-sided brim places a particular emphasis on the peripheral.

¹³³ Hunter, *The Cambridge Companion to the Short Story in English*, p. 2.

¹³⁴ Roland Barthes, *The Fashion System*, trans. by Matthew Ward and Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), p. 303.

hands', as if bewitched by its perimeter, 'looking down at it with tranced and avid eyes' (*CS* 110). Bennett and Royle note the frequency with which objects in Bowen's novels exercise an 'eerie power', encouraging a 'tranced state, a state in which the subject is taken outside herself'.¹³⁵ It is from this alienated positioning that the subject can begin an eccentric reading, from the borders of the self. These objects not only 'represent the idiosyncrasies which constitute our identities' but, to some extent, 'they *are* those identities', with the accessory directly supplementing a personal lacuna and aligning with Bowen's view of the process of reading as a process of accessorising.¹³⁶ Accessories direct us to read peripheral objects from a peripheral positioning, a reading that is doubly eccentric. If reading is 'indissociable from a hypnotic fascination of objects', 'being entranced – both entered and transported, taken out of oneself', then it is an activity during which the participant exists at their own liminal edges, sitting on the periphery, both inside and outside.¹³⁷ The reader is then also 'an accessory that one is obliged to welcome on the border, on board' (*TP* 54), with reading a parergal, framing enterprise.

It makes sense that the hat's frame, the brim, the parergon's parergon, serves as a mesmeric object of attention in 'Ann Lee's': "'It's a lovely little hat", plead[s] Letty, stroking the brim reverently' (*CS* 109); in the same story, Mrs Logan refrains from purchasing a brimless turban. Another word for brim is 'brink', a word whose modern usage perhaps better conjures the idea of being on the margins, the edge, the 'very verge' of revelation or change.¹³⁸ The brim's significance lies in its parergal positioning which gives access to yet simultaneously brackets off or restricts sight, allowing insight, yet directing focus. Derrida describes Rousseau's concept of the supplement, which he also refers to as a 'blind spot', as 'the not-seen that opens and limits visibility' (*OG* 163). In 'Moses' (1923), the hat brim operates similarly, intervening in and directing a couple's sightseeing on honeymoon:

The hot steps curved up, their whiteness blistering his eyes. They curved up and up till Mr. Thomson sweated at the thought of them; till his kindly brim came down upon them, cut them

¹³⁵ Bennett and Royle, p. 132.

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Bennett and Royle, p. 133.

¹³⁸ *OED*, 'brink', n., 5.a.

off. Behind him, [...] [t]he fountain splattered, feathery and faint. (B 35-6)

Saved from the overwhelming centrality of the steps by his hat brim, Mr Thomson's attention is redirected to the ornamental fountain behind him (likely the Baroque-style *Fontana della Barcaccia* in Rome in the form of a half-sunk, decorated boat). Soon after, the brim continues to allow meaningful engagement on a more local scale, as his wife 'stoop[s] to peer under the brim of his hat' (B 37). The brim encourages a focus on the smaller-scale detail that might otherwise be obscured by the grandiose, conspicuous and centralised. As does the armchair in Woolf, the brim in Bowen encourages new perspectives, as in the story 'Shoes: An International Episode' (1929) in which the 'one of the local hats of thin, limp, peach-coloured straw' encourages onlookers to 'side-glance [...] under the drooping brim' (CS 267), to appropriate 'squint vision', look at things eccentrically.¹³⁹ Like the onlooker, the reader is required to make more concentrated effort, to either 'regard [...] with intensity through the long fringes of her hat-brim' (CS 65) or, like Miss Ames, to look down at a hat intently with 'tranced and avid eyes' (CS 110). The brim directs an intense and meditative mode of reading which deals calmly with obstruction.

The parergal activity of writing and reading relies on an ergal emptiness, it 'is called in by the hollowing of a certain lacunary quality within the work' (TP 128). The notion of a central lacuna as key to all writing and reading is exaggerated in eccentric texts such as Bowen's, where decorative detail abounds to create a fertile periphery of engagement which leaves room at the centre. This space can be used by the active reader or ignored, with the reader falling into it as a result. The hat, viewed upside-down from above, is an almost literal demonstration of this, with a brim surrounding a cavity. The brim is the site of inscription and interpretation, one which must be negotiated with a readerly awareness of the parergal yield of meaning.



¹³⁹ Hanson, *Re-reading the Short Story*, p. 5.

Before moving on to consider gloves, I would like to briefly turn to the Second World War story 'Mysterious Kôr' (1944), which makes for a useful segue into the creative reading that will be key to analysis of Bowen's gloves. This story, like so many of Bowen's, has gaps which need to either be filled by the reader or ignored at their peril. One blogger, an English undergraduate, justifies her decision to award the story a modest rating of two stars by describing it as 'so darn confusing', explaining that she read the story 'about ten times and still came no closer to what Bowen was trying to tell us' and eventually left it 'feeling exasperated and dumb'.¹⁴⁰ 'Mysterious Kôr' is, appropriately enough for its title, a story all about the mystery of reading. The story is set at night during the blackout, a process rendered useless (or frivolous) by a full moon: 'Full moonlight drenched the city and searched it' (CS 821) announces the first sentence. The opening line not only directs us to themes of circularity (with the full moon) and interpretation (with the notion of searching) but also recalls that comment of Bowen's on childhood reading, of 'the story that apparelled everything in celestial light' (MT 51). Its title refers to a line of a poem by Andrew Lang, 'She' (in turn about the novel of the same name by Rider Haggard) which is discussed by the character Pepita and her soldier boyfriend, Arthur, within the story, so signalling a poetic, fictive mood which infuses the story as thoroughly as the moonlight, where imagination prevails as well as a dream logic. Arthur's profession is symbolised by his regulation tin-hat, its rigidity perhaps denoting his fixed linearity as a reader – it is Pepita who is depicted as the creative reader, declaring at one point: 'What it [the poem] tries to say doesn't matter: I see what it makes me see' (CS 823), suggesting a conception of literature as a springboard rather than a map. Pepita and Arthur walk about London during the moonlit blackout, with Pepita telling stories about what they see, as if it is Kôr rather than London whose streets they tread. Traffic lights are accordingly 'explained' as: 'Inexhaustible gases; they bored through to them and lit them as they came up; by changing colour they show they changing of minutes; in Kôr there is no sort of other time' (CS 824), relying on a logic which is nimble,

¹⁴⁰ Kirsty Hanson, 'Mysterious Kor by Elizabeth Bowen', *The Bibliophile Girl* (22 November 2016) <<http://www.thebibliophilegirluk.com/2016/11/mysterious-kor-by-elizabeth-bowen/>> [accessed 25 January 2017].

creative and eccentric.

Later, speaking to her flatmate about what had kept her and Arthur out so late, Pepita explains their discussion in ludic terms: 'So we began to play – we were off in Kôr'. The flatmate's response – 'Core of what?' (CS 833) – reveals her misunderstanding, a rational reading which simultaneously centralises this eccentric and peripheral world. The final sentences of the story leave Pepita half-awake, half-dreaming, perhaps Bowen's ideal parergal readerly state, conceiving of Arthur, and by association his tin-hat, as 'the password but not the answer', granting access to a thoroughly eccentric and creative realm: 'it was to Kôr's finality that she turned' (CS 823).¹⁴¹ Pepita exemplifies the type of creative reading which Bowen's fiction encourages, inviting suspension of logic, the embrace of frivolity and the circularity of a world fully realised, however eccentric. Reading takes place at the brim between the object and subject, where 'the text we write in ourselves as we read' is eccentrically forged.¹⁴²

Having considered hats as embodying eccentricity and directing reading which relies on eccentric and circular logic, I would now like to consider gloves in Bowen's stories. The next section will concentrate on the reader's creative relation to the practice of fiction-making, showing how Bowen uses gloves as clues to lead her readers to her texts' fertile edges. Against these examples of 'good', eccentric reading, it will also go on to explore how gloves were at times employed as criminal accessories by Bowen to punish readers falling short of her expectations.

Gloves

The writer Eudora Welty photographed Bowen when visiting her in Ireland in the 1950s. Welty's subject sits on an ornately carved stone bench, eyes lowered in thought or modesty, wearing a pearl necklace, scarf and bold, white leather gloves extending beyond the wrist, one hand reposed on the lap, the other exploratory, fingers splayed to reach the stone bank of seat beneath her. Christensen describes Bowen's wearing of gloves in this photograph as 'characteristic',

¹⁴¹ This finality might be read in terms of a 'circular closure', which Derrida states 'does not close anything' (TP 33).

¹⁴² Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, p. 30.

referring to her ‘weakness’ for them.¹⁴³ Bowen’s U.S. publishers, Alfred and Blanche Knopf, indulged this proclivity when they chose to make Bowen a present of a pair of gloves.¹⁴⁴ In Welty’s photograph, the gloves are both obtrusive and arresting, calling attention to Bowen’s hands before her face – they demand to be read first. Like the fiction their wearer produced, the gloves work to emphasise the eccentric before all else.

Bowen’s penchant for gloves may have been rooted in nostalgia – she was encouraged to don them as a child to avoid freckles – Patricia Craig notes the Bowen tendency to accumulate freckles in her biography, casually mentioning the family propensity toward mental ill health alongside it: her mother ‘saw to it that her daughter [...] wore gloves as a precaution against freckles (a Bowen defect, along with the tendency to queer the brain)’.¹⁴⁵ In the essay ‘The Idea of France’ (1944), Bowen recalls her mother repeating mantras such as ‘[a] Frenchwoman never goes out without her gloves’ and ‘[a] Frenchwoman dresses simply, but is impeccable as to her shoes and gloves’ (*PPT* 63). The civilising power of gloves is alluded to wittily in *The Little Girls*, in which Dicey is to go around and apologise to people whose shed she tried to blow up, ‘properly, wearing gloves’,¹⁴⁶ as if the decorum of her attire might somehow undo this intended violence.¹⁴⁷ This scene from Bowen’s novel also demonstrates the fiction-making capacity of gloves. In Victorian England, those signing legal documents, swearing oaths or getting married removed their gloves as proof of the authenticity of their commitment – gloves were seen as having the power to deceive, to tell stories.¹⁴⁸ Accordingly, reading in gloves carries with it something of the act of story-telling.

Bowen worked for the Ministry of Information during the Second World War, sending classified reports to London about Eire, observing in one such report that it was a curious commonplace for Roman Catholics in Ireland to view the bombing of England as ‘punishment

¹⁴³ Christensen, p. 23.

¹⁴⁴ Richard Oram, ‘New book sheds some light on “The House of Knopf”’, *Cultural Compass*, Harry Ransom Center Blog, University of Texas, Austin
<http://blog.hrc.utexas.edu/2010/07/01/new-book-sheds-some-light-on-the-house-of-knopf/> [accessed 5 July 2016]. By contrast, Albert Camus was given a trench coat.

¹⁴⁵ Craig, p. 23.

¹⁴⁶ Bowen, *The Little Girls*, p. 80.

¹⁴⁷ Lurie observes that in the 1940s and 1950s, ‘a woman was not properly dressed unless she wore gloves’. Lurie, p. 10.

¹⁴⁸ Ariel Beaujot, *Victorian Fashion Accessories* (London and New York: Berg, 2012), p. 34.

[...] for her materialism'.¹⁴⁹ If the Blitz was a didactic message from a vengeful deity, it was a forceful one – and war certainly impeded material production. Restricted access to gloves through both world wars also coincided with social shifts which meant it was no longer necessary for women to protect themselves from 'roughening' contact with the world.¹⁵⁰ The diminishing popularity of gloves throughout the twentieth-century can then be explained not only by economic circumstance but also the process of 'a femininity [which was] reinscribing itself as active and participatory'.¹⁵¹ If for these reasons the century, as Vincent puts it, 'gradually rendered the glove symbolically redundant', why was it a symbol to which Bowen was so intent on giving life?¹⁵² Perhaps the appeal was precisely its redundancy, as without ordained social purpose, gloves are especially eccentric, frivolous, unnecessary and parergal.¹⁵³ Or perhaps it was their power to signify, through a combination of style and gesture – a power linked through the hand to the acts of both writing and reading. As Bennett and Royle ask in a revealing footnote to their work on Bowen's novels: 'where, with a Bowen text, does the significance of gloves cease?'¹⁵⁴ They go on to argue that Bowen's work calls 'for something like a critical theory of writing-in-gloves or gloved authorship'.¹⁵⁵ While Bennett and Royle focus on the process of writing in their call for a new critical theory figured by gloves, here I will instead consider what the glove can illuminate about the process of reading Bowen, which demands complicity with her eccentricity. I will show how gloves in Bowen's writing not only drive plots in unusual directions but also function as clues which are not easily deciphered, encouraging a type of creative, eccentric, 'gloved' reading which might yield poetic or philosophical disclosures. The final section will show how gloves also function as criminal accessories which ruthlessly punish 'bad' (unimaginative, conventional, ungloved) reading in Bowen's stories.

¹⁴⁹ Quoted in Robert Fisk, *In Time of War: Ireland, Ulster and the Price of Neutrality 1939-45* (London: Paladin, 1985), p. 430.

¹⁵⁰ Susan J. Vincent, 'Gloves in the Early Twentieth Century: An Accessory After the Fact', *Journal of Design History*, 25.2, 190-205 (p. 199).

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

¹⁵² Vincent, p. 201.

¹⁵³ This is demonstrated by their transformation in the 1920s from what had been a 'restrained accessory', a necessary part of social coding, to a 'flamboyant sartorial gesture' (Vincent, p. 200).

¹⁵⁴ Bennett and Royle, p. 167.

¹⁵⁵ Bennett and Royle, pp. 167-8.

Clues

Lucy Carlyle, speaking specifically of Bowen, states that she uses gloves in her fiction as a ‘means of creating unease’¹⁵⁶ and also notes ‘echoes of detective fiction’ in their textual placement.¹⁵⁷

Bowen was a detective fiction enthusiast¹⁵⁸ and the most obvious touchstone for the process of reading objects as clues in the genre can be found in Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes stories, published in *The Strand Magazine* from 1891. Holmes is a master of reading the parergal; his dictum is that ‘there is nothing so important as trifles’.¹⁵⁹ In the story ‘A Case of Identity’ (1891), Holmes’s reading of a glove, after his partner Watson makes a partial job of it, runs as follows:

her right glove was torn at the forefinger, but you did not apparently see that both glove and finger were stained with violet ink. She had written in a hurry, and dipped her pen too deep. It must have been this morning, or the mark would not remain clear upon the finger.¹⁶⁰

Reading the glove pins the act of writing down – in the Sherlock Holmes narrative, accessories are clues which reveal all in a material sense, providing an accomplished enough reader takes them on. Philip Davis’s work on the evolution of reading argues for a conception of readers as trackers who “‘hunt” for clues’,¹⁶¹ and this research would situate Holmes as an example of accelerated evolution: a sophisticated super-reader, with nuanced interpretation skills working towards a ‘full decoding of things we think we already know or understand’.¹⁶² In such circumstances, as demonstrated by the excerpt above, ‘the narrative itself is extinguished in that most perfect of endings: the kind where there is nothing left for us to worry about’.¹⁶³

¹⁵⁶ Carlyle, p. 120.

¹⁵⁷ Carlyle, p. 121.

¹⁵⁸ In the essay ‘Out of a Book’, Bowen argues that ‘[t]he only above-board grown-up children’s stories are detective stories’ (*MT* 50).

¹⁵⁹ Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes* (London: Penguin, 1981), p. 134.

¹⁶⁰ Conan Doyle, p. 44.

¹⁶¹ Davis, p. 125. While Davis does not, Carlo Ginzburg refers specifically to Holmes’s deciphering methods in his essay on the emergence of clue-reading as an epistemological model towards the end of the nineteenth-century. See Carlo Ginzburg, ‘Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm’, in *Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm*, trans. by John and Anne C. Tedeschi (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), pp. 96-214 (pp. 97-8).

¹⁶² Freedgood, p. 151

¹⁶³ Ibid.

Bowen's stories, however, offer no such perfect endings. Schor argues that to read detail is to 'however, tacitly, invest the detail with a truth-bearing function' and it is this luring promise which also attaches to accessories in Bowen's fiction.¹⁶⁴ In an essay entitled 'Panorama du roman' (1944), an article giving an overview of the English novel for a French audience, Bowen defended the detective novel genre and explained its popularity by suggesting that it 'corresponded to a tormented desire for a solution' (*LI* 144). While detective fiction might appease such desires, Bowen's short stories are more likely to frustrate them – while she believed that 'every novel is a detective novel' with 'every sentence' 'bear[ing] directly or indirectly on the theme',¹⁶⁵ she saw the short story otherwise, with its strength resting in the fact that it is 'non-explanatory' (*LI* 157). In her stories, Bowen makes use of visual clues, but they are not decipherable with ordinary logic. Such clues might lead readers away to the story's edges where they may get stranded, or they may instead choose to furnish the story's lacuna with personal solutions – not universal truths, but eccentric insights which fit the individual reader like a glove.

Gloves as clues in Bowen's stories are often difficult to place. They might even be invisible, as in 'The Storm' (1926), where '[t]he wind caught the Villa full in the face, one stinging challenge like the slash of a gauntlet' (*CS* 200). Where they appear worn, they are most often being put on or removed, signalling a state of liminality, a world of arrivals and departures, the parergal state of being '[n]either simply outside nor simply inside' (*TP* 54), one also embodied by the act of reading, where one is half oneself and half inside the mind of someone else. The story 'The Last Night in the Old Home' (1934) opens with the discovery of a pair of gloves in a wardrobe, as a family are packing up to leave their home. The contents of the house are being readied for auction and woven throughout this tale of melancholic preparation is a fruitless theoretical hunt for the owners of the 'fine suède gloves for narrow hands, worn at the fingertips, doing up at the wrist with small pearl buttons' (*CS* 408). The gloves remain clues in a mystery that cannot be solved. Annabelle, bearer of the gloves, frustratedly asks 'whose gloves *can* these be? No one seems to care' (*CS* 410). The vague, unhelpful (and un-Sherlockian) reply is

¹⁶⁴ Schor, p. 7.

¹⁶⁵ Charles Ritchie, *The Siren Years* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1974), p. 155.

that they must have belonged to a guest. The gloves carry throughout the story as a clue which leads only to lack of resolution. They sustain the momentum of the story, and ask to be read, yet the only prize for their reader is a lesson in acceptance of the inexplicable. They are red herrings which lead the reader to look for meaning in eccentric detail, but do not supply it themselves.

In a letter to V. S. Pritchett of 1948, Bowen asked: 'Isn't the average thinker simply trying to trace out some pattern around himself? Or, to come on, detect, uncover a master-pattern in which he has his place?' (*MT* 224). Clues in Bowen's stories tantalisingly appeal to this instinct while resisting it, bringing naïve readerly expectations up short. Bowen had her own expectations for her readers – in an introduction to a reissue of *Ann Lee's and Other Stories*, she described her stories as 'questions asked' with 'many end[ing] with a shrug, a query, or, to the reader, a sort of over-to-you'.¹⁶⁶ Bowen's stories are like empty gloves waiting for readers to animate them, the inside of the glove corresponding to a textual 'niche' waiting to be filled by the reader's 'secret personal meaning'.¹⁶⁷ If red herrings refuse to supply meaning in and of themselves, then it must be made elsewhere – within the space of the over-to-you.

Coming home? Gloves and creative reading

Bennett and Royle describe reading as presented and enacted in Bowen's novels as a type of "rereading", as the necessary reconstruction of what never happened [...] as dissolving knots, gloves, ties, knitting'.¹⁶⁸ This is precisely the type of reading that occurs in one of Bowen's most powerful early stories, 'Coming Home' (1923), in which gloves direct a creative reading, being read and re-read fictively as ghostly symbols of a presumed-dead mother, whose last moments are reconstructed throughout the text in a state of building panic. Reading becomes a creative building up of what may have happened, a process of storytelling which enriches the reader's return to the (less endangered) present moment. If gloves are symbols of arrival and departure in this story, they also signify readerly arrivals and departures from teleology and rational logic, with the emphasis here on the fictive capacity of gloves – those which could not be used to sign

¹⁶⁶ Hoogland, p. 9.

¹⁶⁷ Davis, p. 130.

¹⁶⁸ Bennett and Royle, p. 85.

binding legal contracts as their meaning is not stable.

The wider context of reading is set up from the first paragraphs, in which a young girl, Rosalind, plans her triumphal return home after school on a day on which her essay has been read aloud and widely praised. The alchemic technology of reading is described as follows: 'For an infinity of time the room had held nothing but the rising and falling of Miss Winifred's beautiful voice doing the service of Rosalind's brain' (CS 94) – reading is acting out the thoughts of another, the reader's hand in the author's glove. Given the celebratory context, the absence of Rosalind's mother on her return home provokes anger which abruptly transforms to anxiety. Her absence is signified by missing gloves: 'The pair of grey gloves were gone from the bowl of visiting-cards. Darlingest [Rosalind's mother] had spent the morning doing those deathly primroses, and then taken up her grey gloves and gone out [...] It was unforgivable' (CS 95). From this point, Rosalind leaves behind 'the logic of reason' and embraces what Barthes calls the 'logic of the symbol' – the symbolic potential of gloves as linked to arrival and departure takes over the narrative which spirals quickly, irrationally, eccentrically, to envisage the mother's death.¹⁶⁹ Within the space of two paragraphs outrage transforms to fear, due to the realisation that '[p]eople who went out sometimes never came back again' (CS 96). This musing continues and rises in pitch: 'Well, she had drawn on those grey gloves and gone wandering along the roads, vague and beautiful, because she was lonely, and then?' (CS 96). Rosalind's response to this question is an image of her mother's dead hands enclosed in gloves, with nothing else visualised: '[s]he saw the grey-gloved hands spread out in the dust' (CS 98). It is also gloves which bring an end to the anxiety that has built – Rosalind's production of a 'whining noise at the back of her throat like a puppy' (CS 97) is quieted by '[t]he grey gloves [...] back upon the table' (CS 99). This story is orchestrated, puppeteered even, by gloves that appear, dissolve and reappear. Gloves simultaneously represent both introductions and departures, embodying the ambivalence of the parergal, '[n]either simply outside nor simply inside' (TP 54).

Gloves here are linked to the creative act, to reading which is also a form of story-telling, not only through their affiliation with the fictive or covered-up but also through the hand which

¹⁶⁹ Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, pp. 30-1.

Benjamin saw as so crucial to the act of ‘genuine [oral] story-telling’, in which ‘the hand plays a part which supports what is expressed in a hundred ways with its gestures’ (*I* 107). When the gloves disappear from the material reality of the story, it is as if they move to Rosalind as reader, who gets to work constructing, story-telling, filling in unexplained gaps with eccentric logic. Extra-diegetic, the mother’s gloves nevertheless figure a reading of her absence in the child’s imagination – reading that is also writing, a filling in of gaps with a story which asserts its presence while dwelling on the meaning of absence.¹⁷⁰ This is what Barthes calls a logic of reading which is ‘not deductive but associative’, invoking a ‘supplement of meaning for which neither dictionary nor grammar can account’.¹⁷¹ Story supplements the lacuna unexplained by fact, constructing meaning through a creative, parergal reading. If, as in a play, reading is ‘casting, set decoration, direction, makeup’, it is also accessorising.¹⁷²

The idea of a reality supplemented by fiction is addressed elsewhere in the piece, in which the parergal becomes associated with eccentric truth. I will quote from it at length to preserve its culminating effect:

A person might be part of you, almost part of your body, and yet once you went away from them they might utterly cease to be. That sea of horror ebbing and flowing round the edges of the world, whose tides are charted in the newspapers, might sweep out a long wave over them and they would be gone. There was no security. Safety and happiness were a game that grown-up people played with children to keep them from understanding, possibly to keep themselves from thinking. But they did think, that was what made grown-up people – queer. (*CS* 97)

This is a philosophical disclosure of sorts, precipitated by the gloves which catalysed the initial act of creative reading. The phrase ‘almost part of your body’ recalls the close-fitting nature of

¹⁷⁰ The story can be read in the light of Wolfgang Iser’s assertion that in literary works ‘the reader “receives” it [the message] by composing it’ (Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), p. 21).

¹⁷¹ Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, p. 31.

¹⁷² Mendelsund, p. 216.

the glove, which can yet be removed in an instant, with relationships framed in terms of supplementarity. Rosalind locates the dangerous reality of the world at its periphery, where the tide ebbs and flows, alternately land then water, or as Derrida might put it, border then boarder: 'Like an accessory that one is obliged to welcome on the border, on board [*au bord, à bord*]' (TP 54). The perilousness of the peripheral sea of horror enacts the dangerousness of the supplement that Derrida explores in *Of Grammatology*, and which is experienced by Rosalind through her eccentric reading of her mother's absence through the gloves. Rosalind perceives a false version of the world located and perpetuated at its central core, safely inland, fostering a delusional security which is enisled and threatened by an eccentric veracity that is infinitely disruptive and dangerous.¹⁷³ Where newspapers tell us how to read the world, there is no lacuna allowing space for creative reading. In spite of this, Rosalind succeeds in reading eccentrically – her dangerous, unsettlingly creative act of reading relies on the fictive capacity of gloves, and also leads to enlightenment and understanding which carries meaning in the 'real world'. Her vision is not simply an outburst of irrational anxiety, it is a glimpse of truth gained through a process of sensitive, imaginative thinking-through, an existential discovery, arrived at via a non-linear route: by reading eccentrically.

The final, stuttering sentence of Bowen's paragraph above is peculiar and evidences Bowen's desire to occasionally 'hammer the words [...] from their very strangeness and discordance on to the consciousness of the reader'.¹⁷⁴ In her essay 'Advice to a Young Writer', she explains that the writer will use 'harsh, discordant words' to 'convey something disturbing or harsh'; '[w]e will turn our sentences upside down', she asserts.¹⁷⁵ Disturbing situations call for preposterous prose, Bowen implies. The sentence 'But they did think, that was what made grown-up people – queer' can be read in different ways, the glove worn as intended, with the sentence petering out prior to resolution, and also turned inside out or repositioned into a distorted pose. If the punctuation is changed, we get: 'But they did think: that was what made

¹⁷³ This centralised, adult world resembles Heidegger's they-self, while the dangerous periphery suggests the possibility of authentic being, replete with the anxiety that is part of it.

¹⁷⁴ Bowen, *The Weight of a World of Feeling*, p. 22.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

grown-up people queer'. In this version, engaging thoughtfully with reality – world-reading rather than world-projecting – is cast as queer, eccentric. The periphery is a fertile hinterland, where thinking and reading might occur. In arriving at peripheral truths through creative reading, Rosalind demonstrates the potential of eccentric reading, however an unsettling experience it might be, after which she too can enact the story's title and experience 'coming home', slightly changed, with a newly distanced perspective.

She also shows, as Barthes would put it, that there is 'no objective or subjective truth of reading, but only a *ludic* truth', which requires a parergal, readerly accessorising, a playful dressing up, of wearing other's clothes, trying on new perspectives and gestures.¹⁷⁶ Rosalind is referred to by her mother as a 'little *Clown*' (CS 99, italics as in the text), and the impractical gloves that are part of the clown's costume might signify such a creative, ludic reading. In this story, Bowen emphasises the 'reading imagination [a]s a fundamentally mystical experience – irreducible by logic', where 'visions are like revelations' which 'hail from transcendental sources'; rather like the accessory, they are 'not *of* us – they are visited *upon* us'.¹⁷⁷ Rosalind's eccentric reading of her mother's absence takes her on a journey from a central lacuna (symbolised by the missing gloves) which she fills, enabling her to move to a peripheral realm of grief from which she gains a perspective of the world denied most children – that which encompasses an awareness of contrived security (the false, safe, centric view of the world) and pain (the danger which lurks at the periphery). In so doing, Rosalind goes through a process of what Derrida calls 'critical reading': an 'attempt to do justice to this "exorbitance", to "*produce*" the 'effects of this strange logic'.¹⁷⁸ By embracing the dangerousness of the supplement, Rosalind gains access to the rich yield of eccentric reading.

'Dead Mabelle' – reading the periphery

As in 'Coming Home', both reading and mortality are intrinsic to 'Dead Mabelle', which plots the course of a bank worker's introduction to and infatuation with the cinema and one of its

¹⁷⁶ Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, p. 31.

¹⁷⁷ Mendelsund, p. 350.

¹⁷⁸ Royle, p. 57.

stars, who dies midway through the story. William Strickland, the main protagonist, is introduced to us as an eccentric reader: ‘intelligent, solitary, self-educated, self-suspicious’, we are told, ‘he had read, without system, enough to trouble him endlessly’ (CS 303). He reads ‘text-books picked up at random, popular translations, fortnightly publications (scientific and so on) complete in so many parts, potted history and philosophy – philosophy all the time’ (CS 303). This unsystematic reading leads to ontological questioning: ‘What am I – but *am* I? If I am, what else is? If I’m not, is anything else?’ (CS 303, italics as in the text), he asks himself on walks alone or awake at night. William, who tends to read the world ‘askance round the side of his glasses’ (CS 303) is immediately framed by Bowen in the opening paragraphs as an ideal reader – peripheral, probing, of a philosophical, ruminative inclination, prone to reading voraciously yet eccentrically, ‘at random’. The opening paragraphs set the story’s theme of reading which demonstrates what Bowen called the ‘overlapping and haunting of life by fiction’ (MT 48).

William’s first experience of the cinema is powerful but beyond the reach of direct reason. After viewing his first film he reflects, ‘[i]t had all been very abstract, he recognized it in some hinterland of his brain’ (CS 304), suggesting that his viewing has involved a type of a-rational comprehension or reading. The star with whom he is enamoured, Mabelle Pacey, is described later in the story as ‘beyond the compass of one’s mind’ (CS 310), again suggesting a field of meaning that is eccentric. An emphasis on the edges of life, and that which exists slightly beyond the boundary, persists throughout the story and is epitomised by the portrayal of Mabelle who is recognised for her beauty, but delineated in terms of the accessories she wears rather than her physical features. She is described as ‘looking sideways’ on the cover of *Picturegoer*, like William, eccentrically, towards the periphery, ‘surprised and ironical, elegantly choked by a hunting stock, hair ruffled up as though she had just pulled a hat off, hand holding bunched-up gauntlets propped on a hip’ (CS 305). After her tragic death, these accessories endure: she is conjured as a spectral vision by William thus: ‘Mabelle stood there, leaning a shoulder against the lintel, smiling and swinging a gauntlet’ (CS 308). When William reads the newspapers which relay details of her demise, he finds it difficult – ‘he couldn’t read well, the lines bulged and dipped’ (CS 307) – as if the situation calls for another, more creative type of reading. It is accessories,

rather than the media circus, that continue to direct the ways in which Mabelle should be read. Lines of print are no longer linear to William: the lines bend, become irregular, untoward, peculiar. The gloves are a mechanism by which Mabelle haunts William, both in films and also outside of them, embodying the parergal logic of the inside-outside. She epitomises the logic of the supplement – superficiality, adornment, peripherality – and this story recounts William’s attempts to read her as supplement, grappling with her placement beyond the compass of his mind which demands a type of a-rational, eccentric reading.

After watching yet another of Mabelle’s films after her death, William reflects:

In another month or so, when her horror faded and her vogue had died, her films would be recalled – boiled down, they said. He had heard old films were used for patent leather; that which was Mabelle would be a shoe, a bag, a belt round some woman’s middle. These sloughed off, what of her? “You’re here,” he said, and put out a hand in the darkness. (CS 311)

This passage speaks directly of Mabelle’s afterlife as an accessory. Further, in questioning what is left without the parergal – a query raised by many of Bowen’s stories – it engages in an ontological reading of Mabelle, with William bringing his philosophic nature to bear through eccentric reading. ‘Slough’ as a noun means, alternately, clothing, husk and outer skin, referring to the peripheral, the outermost layer.¹⁷⁹ Without these husks, what is left of Mabelle? Perhaps nothing, the text seems to answer, perhaps she can only be sustained through the supplementarity of reading, with a creative reader aiding in her animation. One further accessory that can be made, and at least trimmed, with patent leather is excluded from William’s list: the glove, but referred to instead by his actions, which again recall the animated hand of Benjamin’s storyteller. When William answers his question ‘what then will be left of her?’ by ‘put[ting] a hand out into the darkness’ (CS 311), it is as if he is seeking her gauntlet-gloved hand to greet it in the gloom of the auditorium. This gesture can be read as a commitment to the creative, fiction-making capacity of gloves, implying that Mabelle’s capacity for continued presence lies in

¹⁷⁹ *OED*, ‘slough’, n. 2.

William's hands, in his reading of her and her films, via a parergal haunting.

Fittingly, minutes later, outside the cinema, it is either Mabelle's gauntlets that intervene and/or William's creative reading; he watches 'ghostly chrysanthemums drained of their pinks and yellows' until 'one stem with its burden detached itself and swayed forward, dipped through the lamplight and vanished', hearing the stem snap (CS 311). William's haunting by gloves directs a charged eccentric reading, an 'interpretation that transforms what it interprets' with Mabelle's presence activated in the process.¹⁸⁰ As Derrida observes, '[t]he supplement will always be [...] acting through the hands of others' (OG 147). Such gaps of logic left open in Bowen's texts can only be filled by a creative reader capable of the gloved authorship of personal meaning. If 'traces of the storyteller cling to the story the way the handprints of the potter cling to the clay vessel' (I 91), creative readers such as William also leave indelible marks on the story, albeit without fingerprints.

'A Love Story' – eccentric meaning

'A Love Story' (1939), like the next story considered, 'The Girl with the Stoop' (1941), is set by the sea, an apt setting for the consideration of peripheries and an environment conducive to the meteorological ambivalence of mist (half-air, half-water), an atmosphere which complements these stories' resistance to processes of direct, linear readings. Each story demonstrates 'that which is left behind and forgotten yet that which binds and generates narrative', with gloves curiously directing the plot, despite having no obvious function or place within it.¹⁸¹

Like the two previous pieces, 'A Love Story' also begins in a readerly setting. Interrupting her husband's writing, Polly stops reading to speculate that she has left her 'pussy gloves' in their car, linking gloves with the acts of writing and reading by association. She hugs her husband, Clifford, who 'unfasten[s]' her 'arms with as little emotion as a woman undoing a boa', before returning to her chair where she 'thumbed her book, held her breath and thought of her pussy gloves' (CS 557). Despite this visualisation, Polly is not cast as a creative reader – Bowen

¹⁸⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), p. 63.

¹⁸¹ Bennett and Royle, p. 168.

describes her as ‘read[ing] like someone told to pose with a book’ (CS 557), pages later referring to her ‘passive, moronic unseeingness’ (CS 559). Moreover, in effort to waylay Clifford who is intent on fetching the gloves, she states: ‘I wouldn’t want gloves indoors’ (CS 557), suggesting a propensity to rational logic at odds with eccentric reading. This ‘blindness’ of Polly’s is infectious – we are told ‘Clifford saw nothing either’ when with her (CS 559). However, moments before he leaves to fetch the gloves (which of course Polly does not want, suggesting his actions as motivated by an eccentric logic) there are intimations that Clifford is beginning to learn to see. He looks at his ‘hands with their hanging bunches of fingers’ (CS 560), alienated enough to view his own body as if from a periphery and experiencing the ‘strange reality of the hand’ which might allow for its involvement in eccentric reading practices.¹⁸²

Clifford exits to fetch the gloves, retrieves them from within the car and sits inside, putting ‘the wrist-length, fluffy gloves in one pocket’ (CS 563). The gloves appear to have a curious effect on both Clifford and the story: once in the car, Clifford ‘switched the lights off, folded his arms, slid forward and sat in the dark deflated – completely deflated, a dying pig that has died’ (CS 563). Clifford is described as a dying pig that has yet *already died*, embodying an eccentric, irrational ‘logic of haunting’ in which the spectre, with complete disregard for linear teleology, ‘*begins by coming back*’.¹⁸³ Bowen’s prose is inverse, perverse, repetitious, absurd, yet meaningful. Why is Clifford like a pig, let alone a dying pig that has died, locked in a circular process of annihilation? Little help is offered by the surrounding text; the reader’s hand might flail. This is a typical conundrum which readers of Bowen readers are asked to meet – a completely idiosyncratic phrase which will hang in the mind long after its more conventional neighbours have disappeared from memory. The phrase is itself another open glove which can only be animated, made sense of as a gesture, by an eccentric reader’s hand.

Clifford, appearing to consider Hamlet’s question – ‘[i]n the dark, his body recorded, not for the first time, yet another shock of the recurrent idea’ (CS 563) – is parergal himself, briefly enacting ‘the opposition between presence and non-presence, actuality and inactuality, life and

¹⁸² Bennett and Royle, p. 168.

¹⁸³ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, pp. 10, 11.

non-life'.¹⁸⁴ The meaning he seems to retrieve from his pocket in exchange for the glove is awareness of his own deflated absence, his lack, which he begins to accessorise, to read creatively. Next, he 'plunged his hand slowly into another of his pockets, touched the pennies, thumbed the two half-crowns' (CS 563), effectively gloving his own hand, and finding treasure as a result. We are told he is a 'kept' man, and the coins seem to symbolise this fiscal dependence, even permeating photographs in which Polly and Clifford's 'profiles overlap' 'like heads on a coin' (CS 557). Clifford's reading of these objects in the half-light is associative, circular – it leads him to what lies beyond the coins' peripheries, himself, and to a self-evaluation not in terms of fiscal worth but degrees of freedom. Rather than limiting his reading to the coin, Clifford strays beyond its peripheries to contemplate himself, to consider how he might otherwise accessorise his life with the meaning of detail. Weighing his life's value like the coins in his hand, Clifford begins to engage in a type of eccentric reading, through which he might furnish the lacuna of his empty life.

The plot of the story unfurls around Clifford as he sits in the car – a Mrs Massey and her daughter mistakenly believe he is waiting to give them a lift home and get in. Clifford obliges this fiction, and flouts the rational, by doing just as they expect. Mrs Massey appears to have lost her younger lover, a soldier, to the war. Sitting in an armchair by the fire in Mrs Massey's home, Clifford explains how he got there:

'And where had you been going?'

'Nowhere; I was looking for my wife's gloves.' He pulled the pussy gloves out of his pocket and showed them, to show he spoke the truth. Looking intently at the pussy gloves, Mrs Massey's eyes for the first time filled with tears. The access of some new feeling, a feeling with no context, resculptured her face. In the musty dark of her drawing-room, the dark around the dull fire, her new face looked alabaster and pure. The outline of her mist-clotted fair hair shook, as though shaken by the unconscious silent force of her tears.

'Aren't they small!' she said. 'Is your wife quite a little thing? Are you two very happy,

¹⁸⁴ Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, p. 13.

then?’

‘Very.’

‘Take her gloves back safe... How English you are.’ (CS 569)

As in ‘Coming Home’ (with its ‘sea of horror ebbing and flowing round the edges of the world’) and ‘Dead Mabelle’ (the film-star’s ‘essence’ expressed through surfaces and accessories), the eccentric again comes to be aligned with a sort of ‘truth’ as Clifford pulls the gloves from his pocket and asks them to be read over his verbal testament, ‘invest[ing] the detail with a truth-bearing function’.¹⁸⁵ Their function as proof is immaterial though – they do not show that Clifford speaks ‘the truth’, as evidenced by his lie about the happiness of his relationship.¹⁸⁶ Instead, their relation with truth or meaning is revealed by their transformational effect on Mrs Massey, emotionally and physically. She also appears, like Clifford before in the car, to undergo some temporal disorder as she kisses him before he leaves, as if he were her own lover, an eccentric, transformational reading of him which is seemingly catalysed by the gloves.

Here, gloves direct the plot in unusual ways, engineering quite random behaviour, with Clifford going ‘nowhere’ to look for gloves nobody wants, to end up somewhere else, helping a bereaved stranger to grieve. The readings they encourage are not frivolous but quite sober and profound – like the parergon they are divergent, yet of serious relevance. The eccentric epiphanies of the dead pig, the tears and the kiss are raw and emotional, divorced from reason and logic. Here, gloves allow access to the personal eccentricities of breakdown, mourning and loving – these are the affective truths to which they allow access. The final paragraphs of the story contain the sentence: ‘In love there is no right and wrong, only the wish’ (CS 569). So for eccentric reading – there is no right or wrong reading, only the creative wish which might lead to revelation.

‘The Girl with the Stoop’ – fortune telling and passive reading

¹⁸⁵ Schor, p. 7.

¹⁸⁶ Although a sensitive reader might detect an accuracy in Clifford’s earlier admission that he is going ‘[n]owhere’.

‘The Girl with the Stoop’ (1941) is another story in which a glove (this time fictional) pulls the strands of plot together. Geoff is sent on behalf of his wheelchair-using cousin, Francis, to ask a stranger, Tibbie, to tea. She has been unknowingly watched prior to this encounter from a nearby hotel, observed as she went about her business: ‘[u]ngloved hands plunged shyly in her mackintosh pockets, Tibbie, unbending her stoop a little, threw up the look of a dreamer at the sun-lounge windows, those great steamy vistas of plate-glass’ (*CS* 630). Despite Tibbie’s dreamy demeanour which might signify a talent for eccentric reading, it is her lack of gloves which is a better indicator of her reading style, as the story reveals.

Geoff, on behalf of his cousin, comes to ‘pick her up’ – like a glove – in a café:

He said: ‘Have you dropped a glove?’ and she, knowing she wore none, said: ‘Have you found one?’ diffidently raising her lashes. ‘Well, not this morning,’ Geoff said, with his most disarming smile. ‘But the fact is, I’ve got a message for you.’ ‘Oh – who from?’ ‘Someone you don’t know yet – unless you know him by sight [...]’ (*CS* 632)

What can and cannot be known by sight is a recurring theme within this story, which describes the ensuing stymied relationship between Tibbie and Francis, one which is figured by absence and presence, writing and reading, messages conveyed successfully and those that founder. Tibbie’s hands are commented upon throughout the story in terms of the presence or absence of gloves as if her ability to read eccentrically hangs in the balance. She goes to meet Francis as requested, in ‘gloves [...] and her prettiest hat’ (*CS* 632) and when she is asked to remove her gloves so that it at least appears ‘as though [she] would stay’ (*CS* 633), she reveals the engagement ring which indicates the unlikelihood of Francis’s infatuation being reciprocated. The gloves had previously enabled Francis to read the fiction of her romantic availability, which is cut short by their removal.

In conversation, Tibbie speaks of having had her palm read three times, always with the same outcome – that she is to ‘cross the sea and live in a sunny clime’ (*CS* 634). At this point, it is indicated decisively that she is not a creative reader – rather than read eccentrically, she

removes her gloves for reading and pays someone else to do it for her. Furthermore, anything which is read three times to the same outcome perhaps ought to cause concern, not satisfaction such as Tibbie derives. Tibbie's lack of gloves comes to indicate not that she is staying but that she will not: 'She was wearing no gloves again, so when she spread her hands on her lap, palms upward, she could frown thoughtfully at the lines on them' (CS 635). Here Bowen's refusal to use the word 'read' is striking, indicating Tibbie's capacity only to look passively, shying away from the active engagement that reading in gloves requires. Despite her thoughtful frowning, Tibbie is unable to arrive at an alternative version of her own future; she is unable to read herself. In the essay 'How to Be Yourself – But Not Eccentric', Bowen delivered the following call to arms: 'Born to our individualities, as to destinies, we have in us the power to fulfil them – small or great, the means lie everywhere to our hands' (PPT 416). This story implies that gloved hands might be better equipped to seize such powers to bravely read and shape futures around the unique aspects of individual personality.

Towards the story's climax, Francis protests: 'It's *my* life-line that's in your hand' (CS 637). Tibbie's decision to reject Francis and proceed with her marriage in India to a man she has only played tennis with is preceded by another hand gesture: 'she only raised her hands, which were trembling ever so slightly, and looked again at what had been written there'; she concludes: 'I can't change what's all settled' (CS 637). Similarly, Bowen uses the word 'looked' in place of the more natural 'read' – Tibbie does not read if we understand reading as an independent, interventionist process. Eccentric reading also allows for inscription, amendment, fantasising, future-shaping – it means no story is fixed, it can always diverge. Gloved reading allows for arrivals and departures, parergal ambivalence and creativity. As it is, Tibbie, out of gloves, is a puppet in a story written by someone else, walking away 'as though wires moved her' (CS 637). In refusing to read eccentrically, accepting ambiguity and possibility, she refuses authorship of her own life.

'The Demon Lover' and 'Hand in Glove' - reading crimes and punishment

Royle observes that 'the logic of the supplement dictates (in a perhaps rather eerie sense of

“dictation”) that the writer is always susceptible to being taken by surprise’.¹⁸⁷ This final close reading of Bowen suggests that the reader is equally susceptible. In this final section, I would like to consider two stories from which creative readership is absent and comes to be punished by gloves which write the ends of the respective readers’ stories, with gloves becoming accessories not to reading but criminal acts. As Bryant Jordan observes of ‘The Demon Lover’ (1941) and other stories of its era, the text ‘force[s] the reader to question the distinctions between reality and fantasy, which wartime blurred’.¹⁸⁸ While only ‘The Demon Lover’, considered next, is set within the wider context of war, each of the stories exploit the seepage between reality and fiction, with gloves rewriting the everyday as a site of fantastical possibility.

The ‘Demon Lover’ begins twenty-five years after Mrs Drover has bid her soldier fiancé farewell. As she recalls their parting, it is an absence of gloves which is revealed to have facilitated the physical pain of their farewell in 1916:

she verified his presence for these few moments longer by putting out a hand, which he each time pressed, without very much kindness, and painfully, on to one of the breast buttons of his uniform. That cut of the button on the palm of her hand was, principally what she was to carry away. (*CS* 745)

Mrs Drover’s quest for verification here suggests an analytical approach which may render her ill-equipped to deal with what will follow. The story begins in wartime London, with Mrs Drover returning to her closed-up house to collect some possessions. In the abandoned street, an ‘unfamiliar queerness has silted up’ (*CS* 743) as if in preparation for eccentric happenings. We are told that Mrs Drover is ‘more perplexed than she knew by everything that she saw’ on entering the house (*CS* 743), a confusion that extends to an unstamped letter waiting for her on the hallway table, which announces that she will be expected at the hour arranged. The letter ‘was not a circular’ (*CS* 744), and Mrs Drover fittingly approaches it in a strictly linear way – she

¹⁸⁷ Royle, p. 57.

¹⁸⁸ Bryant Jordan, p. 132.

cannot explain its delivery rationally and so she ignores it, pushing it outside her personal system of logic: 'On the supernatural side of the letter's entrance, she was not permitting her mind to dwell' (CS 747). Mrs Drover's physical movements are 'circumscribed' and so are her mental movements, which shy away from the eccentric and the ambivalent.

The circular shapes (the wheel left by the parting, the button, the hat-brim from under which Mrs Drover's globular eyes 'started out', CS 745) which pattern this story are evidence of its commitment to the peripheral and are repeated in the gruesome climax of this story, in which Mrs Drover's lover keeps his promise to celebrate their anniversary, despite being dead. This time the circular is embodied by Mrs Drover's screaming mouth, and the cuffs of her gloves which pound at the partition:

Mrs Drover's mouth hung open for some seconds before she could issue her first scream. After that she continued to scream freely and to beat with her gloved hands on the glass all round as the taxi, accelerating without mercy, made off with her into the hinterland of deserted streets. (CS 749)

Once more, the geography is appositely ambivalent, with a backdrop of deserted streets in a capital city, while the story's protagonists are both absent (Mrs Drover in mind, her ex-lover in body) and present. Mrs Drover's screams are unrestrained but unheard and there is undeniable absurdism in what Hermione Lee refers to as the 'pointless formality' of that phrase 'scream freely'.¹⁸⁹ The ending is eccentric to its very peripheries.

Iris Murdoch, sharing a cab with Bowen after the war, found that Bowen's knocking on the glass partition to communicate with the driver conjured the 'atmosphere and the terror' of 'The Demon Lover' – Murdoch 'said nothing of what she felt to Bowen, but held for a while in silence her gloved hand'.¹⁹⁰ The gloved hands on the glass clearly haunted Murdoch after the story's end, suggesting some discordance about the image which led to its retention in her mind.

¹⁸⁹ Lee, *Elizabeth Bowen*, p. 155.

¹⁹⁰ Glendinning, p. 114.

In Bowen's story, curiously, prior to beating silently on the partition in gloved hands, Mrs Drover is also able to lean forward and 'scratch at the glass panel that divided the driver's head from her own' (CS 749). This is a textual problem which calls for eccentric reading. How would this be possible in gloves? Was perhaps Mrs Drover wearing a pair of gloves from Elsa Schiaparelli's Winter 1937/8 collection which boasted metal talons at their fingertips?



Figure 11: Maison Schiaparelli evening gloves (circa 1936). Black suede with false nails in gold metal and white silk lining. Image reproduced courtesy of Galliera, Musée de la Mode de la Ville de Paris. © Galliera / Roger-Viollet.

Even within the realms of parergal logic this seems unlikely; Mrs Drover is described as a 'prosaic woman' (CS 743) in the opening paragraphs of the story, an observation which fits with her inability to read eccentrically.¹⁹¹ There is no rational explanation for this contradiction – to fill the gap, one needs to turn to a logic of haunting. If the gloves are haunted, complicit in their owner's kidnapping to a spectral hinterland, then it is possible they are free to embrace their full

¹⁹¹ Bowen, however, may well have been aware as a contributor to magazines such as *Harper's Bazaar* and *Vogue*.

parergonality, '[n]either simply outside nor simply inside' (TP 54), nor is Mrs Drover simply inside them. They are again 'an accessory that [she] is obliged to welcome on the border, on board' (TP 54); she becomes a host for a sort of spectral parasite.

Yet this parasite was also a polite guest, one which announced itself with a letter before its arrival, yet, reluctant to read with gloves, Mrs Drover finds herself written by them. In her introduction to *A Day in the Dark*, a selection of short fiction handpicked from previously published collections (including 'The Demon Lover' and the story considered next, 'Hand in Glove'), Bowen wrote of the way in which many of the stories 'continue to terminate with a query'.¹⁹² Asking 'Can I defend this?', she responded: 'I can at least explain it by saying that I expect the reader to be as (reasonably) imaginative as myself'.¹⁹³ In 'The Demon Lover', the unimaginative reader, Mrs Drover, is dramatically punished for falling short of these not insubstantial expectations.

The late story 'Hand in Glove' (1952) has the flavour of a cautionary tale whose lesson might well be never to underestimate the dangerous supplement, with its titular reference to complicity perhaps alluding to the relationship between authorial intention and the gloves which obligingly write the story's climax. Elysia is aunt and carer to her orphaned nieces, Ethel and Elsie, who allow her to chaperone them until the point at which she becomes too idiosyncratic – 'her peculiarities became too marked' (CS 863) – thereafter she is relegated to her bedroom and sometimes locked in there. Although the girls attend parties and make 'lampshades, crêpe flowers and picturesque hats' (CS 864), it is the ailing aunt who is most closely aligned with frivolity and eccentricity, her nieces explaining her disappearance from society fittingly with the excuse that she is 'just a *trifle* unwell' (CS 864, my italics). The nieces' talent for decoration seems less linked to an affinity for supplementarity and more to their need to put 'everything to some use' (CS 863), 'allowing nothing to go to waste' (CS 864). As such, their activities can be read as a process of eliminating excess rather than engaging with it.

Ransacking their aunt's attic-stowed bridal trousseau (under-used as her husband

¹⁹² Bowen, 'Preface' in *A Day in the Dark*, p. 8. The parergal, oxymoronic phrasing of 'continue to terminate' is typically Bowenescque here.

¹⁹³ Bowen, *A Day in the Dark*, p. 9.

committed suicide during the honeymoon, from which she returned with ‘seven large trunks crammed with finery’, *CS* 863), the sisters remain short of evening gloves and one trunk remains locked, contraband. The need to access the hidden gloves becomes more pressing as their ‘gaities bore hard on their existing gloves’ (*CS* 865); as a result, their attention focuses more directly on the imagined gloves in the attic. The sisters are also made aware by third party gossip that their old gloves, stinking of the benzine used to clean them, are repelling potential paramours. It is as if these repellent gloves attempt to encourage the sisters down a more eccentric path, one which diverges from the traditional plot of early marriage and housekeeping which they envisage for themselves. The sisters are not quick to read any such gesture, however; they are in love with fairytales which they do not examine critically or apply creatively. The pacifying stories they tell themselves involving princes and balls are dressed-up ideologies which demand the opposite of eccentric reading. They silence their aunt’s attempts at story-telling, from which they might gain insights, describing her utterances disdainfully as ‘fabrications’ (*CS* 867) and refusing to engage creatively with them. The sisters pillage their aunt’s trousseau with regularity, subordinating the parergon to their conventional reading – yet her aunt’s gloves evade them and remain locked away in one unbroached trunk.

Leaving her aunt’s room one afternoon, Ethel stops to study ‘a photograph in a tarnished, elaborate silver frame’ (*CS* 867). Ignoring the parergal frame, despite its arresting intricacy, she privileges the ergal to comment on the beauty of her late uncle who is depicted in the photograph. In turn, this encounter steels her determination to win her own husband – ‘her eyes could be seen to calculate’ (*CS* 867), to cynically and rationally decipher and plan. As a result, she decides to engage with her aunt, not on her own terms, but as a means to an end, so misconstruing the eccentric as functional rather than frivolous. Their talks continue, but lack reciprocal communication, with the aunt asking repeatedly for a doctor but being denied one. Shortly after, on the night of a ball, Elsie suspects their aunt dead, but is persuaded not to verify her suspicion because this would sabotage their evening out. Rather than eccentric reading, this willful blindness denotes a refusal to read at all.

Having stolen her aunt’s keys, determined to the point of obsession – ‘she *must* have

gloves. Gloves, gloves...’ (*CS* 871) – Ethel enters the attic, which is haunted by ominous gestures she does not read: ‘[s]hadows not only multiplied in the corners but seemed to finger their way up the sloping roof’ (*CS* 871). Her aunt’s remaining trousseau luggage ‘gaped and yawned’ (*CS* 871), suggesting the offering up of space for the act of reading. But Ethel is incapable of interpretation that is ‘synonymous with imagination’; instead reading is for her to ‘decode’ in line with strictly selfish, ergal need.¹⁹⁴ Unlike Pepita, Rosalind and William, she is unable to ‘piec[e] together the fragments’, ‘adding something of her own’ to the ‘texts at hand’.¹⁹⁵ It becomes clear that she has entered an eccentric realm: a veil she grasps at resists her pull, and ‘[w]hat was odder was, that the spotless finger-tip of a white kid glove appeared for a moment, as though exploring its way out, then withdrew’ (*CS* 871). Approaching then retreating, the kid glove is both inside the trunk and out, parergally ambivalent, both assertive and humble. It is symbolic of the sensitivity of which Ethel is incapable, too intent as she is on reading everything as supporting detail in a script which places her centre-stage.

As Ethel gazes at the trunk, its ‘entire lid [...] seemed to bulge upward, heave and strain’ so that the initials upon it ‘rippled’ (*CS* 872), recalling William’s experience reading the newspapers whose text begins to mutate before his eyes. It is as though the text metamorphoses in a final desperate act at encouraging eccentric reading. Entranced by the gloves, yet failing to read the dangerousness of the supplement, Ethel cannot leave, ‘breathless with lust and joy’ before ‘layer upon layer [...] of elbow-length, magnolia-pure white gloves’ (*CS* 872). This eccentric realm is multi-layered, disorientating; the ‘supplement supplements’, ‘add[ing] only to replace’ (*OG* 145). It is a realm to which Ethel is not suited and one she is prevented from entering. ‘Lord Fred’, thinks Ethel, ‘now you’re within my grasp’ (*CS* 872), yet very little is within her grasp, and this unimaginative thought of forcing an increasingly unwilling suitor into her hackneyed fairy story is her last. Frustrated by the defective reader in front of it, the glove makes ‘its leap at her throat’ (*CS* 872). ‘It was a marvel that anything so dainty should be so strong’, the next paragraph reflects nonchalantly: ‘[s]o great, so convulsive was the swell of the force that,

¹⁹⁴ Schor, p. 123.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid.

during the strangling of Ethel, the seams of the glove split' (CS 872).

Here, the glove confirms its marginal status, through its haunting and by committing an unlawful act (if legislation can be thought to apply to haunted gloves – either way they are 'beyond' the law). It also demands to be taken seriously. By intervening in the plot so persuasively, with such robust strength, the glove writes that which Ethel's body must read. Bizarre, frivolous and dangerous, the haunted glove forcibly advances the case for eccentric reading, enacting Bowen's need to stress the important literary function of the reader, by again eradicating an unsuccessful one. In a letter of 28 August 1956 to the BBC, Bowen wrote of her desire to leave the text of a talk she had written 'open at the edges, for readers to get thinking and bring in their own ideas'.¹⁹⁶ The glove burst open at the seams is an apposite symbol of Bowen's literary model, emphasising the unfixed margin, which also beckons an entrance.

¹⁹⁶ BBC Written Archives RCONT 2, Elizabeth Bowen, Scriptwriter file 2. The citation is reproduced here courtesy of the BBC.

Concluding remarks: eccentric reading

A character in Bowen's story 'Flavia' (1931) describes her fascination with clothing as her 'absurd preoccupation' (*B* 69). I hope in this chapter to have shown not only Bowen's predilection for dressing, and particularly accessorising, in her fiction, but also how this was intrinsically bound up with a preoccupation with the act of reading as a creative, eccentric enterprise. In her unfinished autobiography, Bowen reflected upon her early literary career and summed herself up as a 'visual writer, with no taste for analysis' meaning that stories 'suited [her] better' (*MT* 296). It was this capacity to capture the image without explaining it, to catalyse the process of signifying without a subsequent decoding of it, which Bowen made use of in her short fiction, a parergal emphasis which left generous space for her readers. '[S]aying less but meaning more',¹⁹⁷ short fiction uniquely allowed Bowen to model and share with others the eccentric, accessorising process of reading that she first experienced in childhood, which extended beyond the page and changed the way she read the world.

This creative way of seeing that Bowen's stories engender has been this chapter's key concern, as directed by the prominence of eccentric, material detail in her stories. Bowen was well aware of the modernist short story's ability to rely on 'the telling use of the object both for its own sake and as an image' (*CI* 38), which she exploited with almost dizzying regularity. That phrase 'for its own sake' expresses well the robust contingency of things in Bowen's fiction, as well as the doughty insubordination of the supplement. Like Mansfield and Woolf before her, yet arguably with increased frequency and intensity, Bowen attributed power to the non-human not only to invoke an eerie climate in her fiction, but also an existential, absurdist mindset in which order cannot reign. To use a phrase Philip Davis employs to describe of the act of reading more generally, this chapter argues that '[i]n thinking about human life', Bowen's work 'offers as much excess, untidied material as it can by [...] re-creating the very objects of thought'.¹⁹⁸ Bowen offers far more excess and untidied material detail than most writers, with the plethora of accessories adorning her work naturally affecting the ways in which it can be read, insisting on

¹⁹⁷ Hunter, *The Cambridge Companion to the Short Story in English*, p. 2.

¹⁹⁸ Davis, p. 4.

revised interpretative strategies which rely on an eccentric reading of detail and creative application of logic. Bowen's championing of the parergal in her stories matched her championing of the short story as form. Her short stories did not only 'allow [...] for what is crazy about humanity' (*MT* 130), they actively encouraged it, in the process emboldening readers to utilise their own eccentricities in actively contributing to stories which are 'not all there' through a creative reading.

This chapter has shown that the busy surface detail in Bowen's stories, exemplified by the recurrent representation of clothing and particularly accessories, is employed for a specific purpose, demonstrating an aesthetic commitment to the marginal. While Bowen wrote of Mansfield's technique of 'moving into the story, from its visual periphery to its heart, recognizing the "why" as she penetrates', I have argued here that Bowen's stories maintain a peripheral positioning throughout, not moving into a core but tracing eccentric circles around it.¹⁹⁹ Rather than move to a central core of meaning, Bowen was 'determined to build' her stories 'up from the outside, detail by detail' (*CS* 293). This emphasis on the peripheral has destabilising effects upon her literature and shapes the ways in which it can be read. Rather than considering her stories thin of significant content and plumped out by superfluous detail at the level of style, her eccentric detail should be considered a literary mechanism which celebrates the marginal and traces a pattern of reading which is not linear but circular, always emphasising the peripheral and working against the teleological, rational and centric. Through this deliberate dedication to parergal detail, Bowen left the ergal centres of her stories open for her readers to occupy. Eccentric readers do not only accessorise Bowen's stories through the practice of meaning-making, they also slip into those texts to wear and animate the accessories they contain. Such is the interdependent, ambivalent relationship between ergon and parergon which Bowen's stories vigorously embody.

In filling her stories with accessories, Bowen makes full use of the fact that '[l]iterary language summons the presence of what it refers to' – she petitions the eccentric and demands it

¹⁹⁹ Bowen, 'Introduction', in Mansfield, *Stories*, p. x.

be read appropriately.²⁰⁰ In her biography of the author, Victoria Glendinning describes the way in which Bowen ‘retained [...] a penchant for over-dressing’ throughout her life, describing the way in which she would persist in wearing clip-on earrings even when they had infected her earlobes.²⁰¹ This is a fitting (and suitably bizarre) testament to Bowen’s stubborn, a-rational commitment to parergal detail, and the eccentric author who, in turn, demanded eccentric readers, or none at all.

²⁰⁰ Davis, p. 100.

²⁰¹ Glendinning, p. 48.

Conclusion: Stories and their Objects – Reading and Being

Reviewing a collection of stories by Osbert Sitwell written for the *Tatler* in 1941, Elizabeth Bowen makes a number of pertinent observations about the short story of relevance to this thesis. First, she notes that a number of fiction admirers harbour a ‘lively prejudice against short stories’ and links this to the human need for escapism, for the ‘solid value’ of a ‘book one can lose oneself in’.¹ Against this, Bowen surmises, short stories can come to feel like ‘nothing but a series of dead ends, of snappings out of it, of dirty turns played on the reader who had just been comfortably settling down’.² Her practical advice to the reader with a natural antipathy toward the short story is based on an understanding that reading short means going slowly – ‘don’t bolt the whole collection in one sitting’, Bowen urges, allow each story to ‘dissolve on the palate’.³ She asks readers to understand the intense compression of the form, that stories are ‘designed to have a delay-action effect on your imagination’.⁴ Once this is understood, argues Bowen, you ‘will find that [the story] will amuse you even while you are not actually reading’, alluding to the work which carries on after the story has ended and stressing that the process of reading is not finite.⁵

Here Bowen grasps a number of strands which have run through the thinking of this thesis. She describes the way in which short stories preclude us from getting comfortable in our chairs – a notion examined here via Woolf’s short stories, with their looming endings capable of invoking an unsettling experience of ‘being-towards-death’ and the reader returned too soon to their immediate surroundings, somewhat transformed by the reading process. Bowen also alludes to the engagement with the moment which the short story demands, the way in which it asks to be tasted, appreciated, relished and ultimately incorporated by the reader, as investigated here in consideration of Mansfield’s snack stories. While Bowen does not directly mention accessories, her final point about the work stories do after they have been read complements her own idea of

¹ Bowen, *The Weight of a World of Feeling*, p. 133.

² Bowen, *The Weight of a World of Feeling*, p. 134.

³ Bowen, *The Weight of a World of Feeling*, p. 135.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

reading as supplementary to human character, *parerga* which linger to influence, complete and disrupt the *erga* after the point of use. This thesis has sought to press this point far more strongly – to show how stories do not simply amuse readers after they have been read, but bear influence on how readers live their lives.

This thesis has shown how modernist short fiction evidenced a shift from the didactic, macroscopic and abridged character of Victorian stories to the deliberately smaller-scale, phenomenological and experiential, and explored the effects of this on reading practices. It has examined the ways in which these modernist stories capitalised on the temporal currency of the moment, enabling closer readerly engagement with the story and the objects of direct experience they offer up, as well as the revelation that can flow from reading material up close. It has shown how the counterforce to the modernist story's episodic form, which reflected the fleeting nature of human experience and comprehension, was its longer-term effect on its readers beyond its closing sentences. The authors studied here show understanding that reading affects the human mind materially, like a snack which fuels the body and helps it grow, with stories capable of 'modify[ing] existing mental pathways' and effecting lasting change.⁶

This thesis has explored the particular ways in which the stories of Mansfield, Woolf and Bowen have succeeded in changing minds. By instigating perceptual changes which catalyse thoughtful reflection in the reader, they each manage to extend the 'moment of resonance or realization' instigated by the act of reading 'into a tacit way of thinking and feeling, of imagining and doing, in the world'.⁷ With Mansfield, this was by means of an incorporative experience of the world, an attaining of insight through alimentary engagement with the pungent materiality of existence. Like Woolf and Bowen, Mansfield saw reading as both a necessity and a luxury, offering not vicarious but actual experience and gateways to experience beyond the book. For Woolf, reading led to a type of seeing and being which depended on a revolutionary denuding of perception, the bringing of an armchair perspective to bear on a world falsely ordered by human ideology and hierarchy. Bowen's stories similarly encouraged new ways of seeing, in which the

⁶ Davis, p. 23.

⁷ Davis, p. 45.

eccentric reader becomes tolerant of the nonsensical or absurd, privileging peripheral detail and reading creatively to arrive at an individual understanding of the text and that which sits beyond its margins. These engaged modes of reading and being are directly linked to the craft of short fiction, entwined with what Benjamin described as the ‘art of storytelling’ – ‘to keep a story free from explanation as one reproduces it’ (I 89). This leaves space for the reader, to come in and ‘interpret things the way [s]he understands them’ (I 89). The interpretation of things has been the overarching concern of this thesis.

Future directions

Through an exploration of the contingent thingliness of the everyday, I have not only shown the importance of the quotidian to the modernist short story but have argued for a reconceptualisation of the short story *as* thing – snack, armchair and accessory. This suggests an alignment of content with form which not only indicates a measure of aesthetic success not always attributed to short fiction but also a wider interconnection between short fiction and more canonical literary modernisms. Through my examination of objects in stories and stories as objects, I have aimed to show the ways in which these works are not just ‘*about* something’ but are instead ‘that something itself’.⁸ This thesis has shown how this close connection between form and content affects the consumption of the work itself, invoking a phenomenology of reading. Today neuroscientists argue that reading relies on an ‘evolved cortical capacity for the visual identification of objects’, suggesting that a link between objects and reading that is innate.⁹ The phenomenological reading that these modernist stories encourage not only brings to the fore this ancient link between objects and reading, but uses it as a means of exploring the ways in which humans perceived and made sense of the early twentieth-century world, whose full complexity was unveiling, right down to the jostling atoms of which it was made up. The foundations this thesis has laid in its examination of phenomenological reading – the relation between humans and things which the process of reading embodies – might open pathways to

⁸ Beckett, ‘Dante...Bruno. Vico...Joyce’, p. 451.

⁹ Davis, p. 124.

medical humanities research on the body parts that support and enable reading (brains, eyes, hands, mouths, spines), which would further illuminate this process. As Barthes observes, ‘to read is to make our *body* work’.¹⁰

Writing of the novel, Peter Mendelsund argues that it is in its ‘phenomenology, the way in which a piece of fiction treats perception (sight, say), that a reader finds a writer’s true philosophy’.¹¹ A further postulation this thesis makes is that it is the way in which a work of literature demands to be read that directs the philosophy it discloses. Another aim of this research has been to reappraise the short story as a vehicle for philosophical understanding and to show how the act of reading inculcates new ways of thinking, or ways of reading the world. It has aimed to demonstrate how the short story is well placed to influence everyday human lives and everyday processes of thought.

This notion of the short story as a philosophical form suggests a direction of travel for further research. Mansfield’s stories demonstrate not only a Benjaminian awareness of *Jetztzeit* but also a variation of epicureanism which came, after her lifetime, to be articulated by Beauvoir in her commentary on the difficulties inherent to grasping freedom.¹² Woolf’s engagement with matter and being-in-the-world not only prefigures the early philosophy of Heidegger but resonates with phenomenology more widely, such as that set out in the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, particularly in *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), which would provide an elucidating framework for further work on the ways of reading her short fiction encourages. Bowen’s work shares affinities not only with the anarchic deconstructionism of Derrida but also existentialism and particularly absurdism, which complements her practice of eccentric reading where individuals bear responsibility for making meaning as they see fit.¹³ There is ground here for work on the short story as embodying the schools of thought set out by these branches of philosophy, often prior to their formal articulation by twentieth-century philosophers. This work

¹⁰ Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, p. 31. Italics as in the text.

¹¹ Mendelsund, p. 270.

¹² Some of Mansfield’s stories, particularly those in which women are complicit in their own oppression by accepting ideology over ontological freedom, can be viewed as early articulations of arguments put forward in Beauvoir’s *The Ethics of Ambiguity* (1947) and *The Second Sex* (1949) about personal responsibility in the face of oppression.

¹³ Bowen’s stories can be seen as enacting the conundrum set out in Albert Camus’s *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942), offering the consolation of a non-escapist art which confronts and celebrates absurdity.

would help, for example, to excavate an idea of French existential philosophy as a descendent of literary modernism. These are all potential directions for new research which would build on work begun in this thesis, made possible by the ways of living which the reading of these stories direct.

Last thoughts

In her biography of Woolf, Hermione Lee describes the influence of Charleston – and the vibrant seepage between art and quotidian life which it enshrined – on Virginia's ways of thinking about literature and life. One of the questions Lee sees Woolf asking herself was: 'Could everything – paintings, furnishings, chair-covers, clothes, forms of social life, domestic arrangements, ways of producing as well as reading and writing books – have a coherent value and represent an attitude to life (even without having very much money to spend?)'¹⁴ This is one of the questions which this thesis has sought to answer with an emphatic 'yes'. It has aimed to show how the stories of each of these authors all share coherent values, with each representing attitudes to life which extol understanding, appreciation of alterity, individuality and liberty and model ways of reading that embody these attributes.

Another question which this thesis has sought to probe is how the diminutive short fiction form is capable of such surprising influence. Several answers have presented themselves in response. One hypothesis relates to the ergonomics of the form – stories fit generously around the lives of readers and writers, reflecting those lives and the things of which they are made, establishing a close-fitting relationship which allows an increased influence on the way we as readers live those lives. Another is the increased frequency of their endings, which allow stories not only to dwell with ease on mortality and manifest an audaciously-grasped vitality but to imbue the everyday with increased force and meaning. If it is argued that the 'final pages of books are not full of spectacle, but rather, more *pregnant with significance*', this implies a capacity for intensified resonance which is inherent to the short story form, simply because it has a larger

¹⁴ Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, p. 371.

proportion of such charged terminating paragraphs.¹⁵ The activity of interruption built in to the short form also allows the reader to more frequently 'leave oneself in order to look at oneself', travelling short distances to arrive again back in the vicinity of the self to make the most of reading's transformative effects.¹⁶ Benjamin saw the storyteller as 'the figure in which the righteous man encounters himself' (*I* 107) – this thesis amends his statement to argue that it is in the story that the righteous reader encounters herself. As noted in the first chapter, Benjamin also saw the affective potential of the story as due to the way in which it 'preserves and concentrates its strength and is capable of releasing it even after a long time', like seeds preserved in the chambers of a pyramid (*I* 90). If stories are seeds, they need the fertile minds of readers in which to grow.

Hermione Lee made the following observation of Woolf: 'Reading, quite as much as writing, is her life's pleasure and her life's work'.¹⁷ This description is equally applicable to Mansfield and Bowen. The prodigious importance they each accorded the act of reading is evidenced by the belief in the transformative effects of literature which their stories not only demonstrate but self-reflexively examine. I would like to end where this thesis (and arguably the modernist short story itself) began, with Mansfield. In conversation with A. R. Orage, she explained that it is the artist's attitude to the world which is communicated through their work: 'An artist communicates not his vision of the world, but the attitude which results in his vision; not his dream, but his dream-state; and as his attitude is passive, negative, or indifferent, so he reinforces in his readers the corresponding state of mind'.¹⁸ Mansfield states that most writers are phlegmatically indifferent to what they see, seeking only to replicate, and by consequence induce a type of reading which is both 'passive' and 'spectatorial'.¹⁹ She concludes her argument by stating: 'What I am trying to say is that a new attitude to life on the part of writers would first see life different and then make it different.'²⁰ The vital, engaged and participatory attitudes which

¹⁵ Mendelsund, p. 93.

¹⁶ Davis, p. 122.

¹⁷ Lee, *Virginia Woolf*, p. 402.

¹⁸ Orage, p. 39.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

infused the perceptions of the world set out respectively by Bowen, Mansfield and Woolf in their short fiction achieved precisely this. They first saw life differently, then the reading of their stories made it different.

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