From the holdings of the Department of Special Collections , Princeton University Library, Princeton, NJ

These documents are either in the public domain, or can only be used for educational and research purposes (Fair use) as per U.S. Copyright law (text below). By accessing this file, all users agree that their use falls in the public domain or within fair use as defined by the copyrightlaw. We do not charge any permission or usage fees for the publication of images of material inour collections, including those provided by Princeton University Library, via our website, catalog, or directly from staff.For more information regarding copyright, credit, and citation please review the information onthe Copyright, Credit and Citation Guidelines page of our website.
https://library.princeton.edu/special-collections/policies/copyright-credit-and-citation-guidelines. If you have any questions, including how to order higher-quality images from the collection, contact Special Collections Public Services via our Ask Us! Form. https://library.princeton.edu/special-collections/ask-us

---

Doctoral Dissertations, 2011-2026 Comparative Literature

2013

Strange Likeness: Modernist Description in James, Proust, and Woolf

Zhang, Dora

Princeton, NJ : Princeton University

---

http://arks.princeton.edu/ark:/88435/dsp01cn69m4272

U.S. Copyright law: The copyright law of the United States (Title 17, §108, United States Code) governs the making of photocopies or other reproductions of copyrighted material. Under certain conditions specified in the law, libraries and archives are authorized to furnish a photocopy or other reproduction. One of these specified conditions is that the photocopy or reproduction is not to be used for any purpose other than private study, scholarship, or research. If a user makes a request for, or later uses, a photocopy or reproduction for purposes in excess of fair use that user may be liable for copyright infringement. This institution reserves the right to refuse to accept a copying order if, in its judgment, fulfillment of the order would involve a violation of copyright law. https://www.copyright.gov/title17/title17.pdf

Strange Likeness:

Modernist Description in James, Proust, and Woolf

Dora Zhang

A DISSERTATION PRESENTED TO

THE FACULTY OF PRINCETON UNIVERSITY

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

RECOMMENDED FOR ACCEPTANCE

BY THE DEPARTMENT OF Comparative Literature

Adviser: Daniel Heller-Roazen

Committee: Ann Banfield, Peter Brooks, Maria DiBattista, Michael Wood

November 2013

© Copyright by Dora Zhang, 2013. All rights reserved.

Portions of Chapter One were presented at the American Comparative Literature Association Annual Meeting in 2012; portions of Chapter Two were presented at the Modernist Studies Association Conference in 2012. A revised version of the Coda has been accepted for publication in *New Literary History* and is forthcoming in 2014.

Abstract

This dissertation traces a transformation in the status and forms of literary description during the modernist period, when questions about what, how, and whether to describe emerged as urgent aesthetic and epistemological problems. As the first means of making an object available, *how* we describe something determines how it can be understood and interpreted. But the role description plays in assigning value and producing meaning is continually naturalized and effaced, and critics have usually overlooked its importance. *Strange Likeness* approaches this problematic philosophically and historically, tracing how descriptive modes change, interrogating what they seek to do, and uncovering the epistemological assumptions that they reveal.

Numerous modernist polemics predicated their theory of the "modern" novel on a rejection of the long descriptive set-pieces (typically depicting objects and rooms) that had become hallmarks of nineteenth century fiction. I show that description – understood as the impulse to observe and record the surfaces of things – formed a focal point for the critique of a naive positivism that assumed looking at the world was a reliable way of knowing it. At the same time, I also contend that despite these disavowals, modernist novels themselves evince *more* descriptions, not less. In shifting their attention to rendering what does not look like anything at all (e.g. atmospheres, relations, and sensations), writers demote the authority of visual evidence, but do not break with empiricist commitments.

Through focused chapters on Henry James, Marcel Proust, and Virginia Woolf, I trace the emergence of a new ideal of aesthetic attention and a rethinking of the very idea of "likeness." As the notion of describing becomes uncoupled from depicting, I argue that the modernist descriptive paradigm shifts from relying on a principle of correspondence to a principle of equivalence. The project concludes with a Coda that considers the limits of describing first person experience in

Woolf, Bertrand Russell, and William James. At once everywhere and nowhere in literature, description is a central site where fiction negotiates its relationship with reality, and the history of descriptive paradigms is an essential part of a broader history of changing understandings of knowledge and perception.

Table of Contents

Abstract *page* i

Acknowledgments iv

List of Abbreviations vii

Introduction: Describing Modernist Description 1

1. The Air of James 47

2. The Effects of Analogy in Proust 103

3. Woolf's Equivalent Images 159

Coda: Naming the Indescribable 213

Works Cited 243

Acknowledgments

Everyone told me acknowledgments were the best part of a dissertation to write. And right they are. I'm so glad to have the chance to express my gratitude to the many who have helped this project come into existence.

My first and greatest debt is to the members of my committee. Daniel Heller-Roazen has been a remarkable mentor from my first days at Princeton, and the precision of his thinking and the elegance of his prose will continue to be my model long after I leave it. His ever-incisive questions were instrumental in helping me to clarify and delimit the parameters of this dissertation, and his unflagging encouragement and support have meant a great deal. Having him as an interlocutor is one of the happiest fortuities of my intellectual career. Ann Banfield came into that career by chance and completely altered its trajectory. A seminar with her during my first semester of graduate school opened my eyes to a discipline (linguistics), a corpus (early analytic philosophy) and a kind of scholarship that excited me in the profoundest of ways. It's no exaggeration to say this dissertation would not have been possible without *The Phantom Table*. Michael Wood is inimitable, as everyone who knows him knows well. His insight, perspicacity, wit, and warmth have been invaluable and sustaining, and his writing is continually a lesson in how to read literature. I discovered Maria DiBattista somewhat belatedly in my graduate career, and thank god I did – she is an incredible fount of wisdom about all things modernist and many other things besides. Her work on Woolf and her sharp, penetrating, and judicious comments have shaped these pages in essential ways, while her kindness has also steadied their author at several key moments. My thoughts about James first took root in a seminar with Peter Brooks, who has been unfailingly generous since his arrival at Princeton several years ago. His thoughtful feedback has been tremendously helpful to this project and his own work has been absolutely crucial to my understanding of literary history.

Numerous others have helped in the writing of this dissertation. Foremost among these is Eileen Reeves, an honorary committee member who has read far more of my work than I should by any right have inflicted on her. Her humor and generosity have been lifesavers during my time in graduate school, and the dissertation workshop she graciously participated in was one of its high points. A methodological conversation about the history of science in the later stages of writing also turned out to be key. Conversations with Ann Smock in Berkeley, Princeton, and New York have all left an indelible mark, and exchanges with Charlie Altieri and Elizabeth Abel have affected my project in more ways than they could have anticipated. Steven Meyer brought to my attention several helpful references, and my thoughts about Proust and modernism were sharpened by conversations with Hannah Freed-Thall. At Princeton, I've also benefitted from the generosity of Sandie Bermann, Wendy Belcher, and Ben Baer in many matters professional and practical (which is not to suggest these were any less important or any less gratefully received). Finally, I'd like to acknowledge two earlier teachers at the University of Toronto, Rebecca Comay and Julian Patrick, who first showed me the pleasures – and the rigors – of critical thinking. In a number of ways, this project is the fruit of work that began in their seminars many years ago.

Intellectual labor involves an awful lot of solitary reading and writing, but throughout the years in which this dissertation has taken shape, I've been sustained and nourished above all by conversations – about all things intellectual, and just as crucially, all things not. If I render these interlocutors and friends into a flat list of names without saying anything specific about the ways in which each of them has helped my thinking (or helped me to stop), it's only in part because my dissertation concludes by arguing for the impossibility of any truly adequate description. The real reason is that if I begin, I fear I would never stop. So, in short, I'm very glad to know: David Atkin, Danny Braun, Alexis Cohen, Henry Cowles, David Egan, Nika Elder, Caroline Fowler, Matt Gloyd, Anna Katz, John Lansdowne, Nicolas Lefevre-Marton, Jeff Lawrence, David Marcus, Zakir Paul,

Alyssa Pelish, Rebecca Porte, Luis Rosa-Rodriguez, Shanelle Smith, Ron Wilson. To my parents, I owe more than I can acknowledge. This is for them.

List of Abbreviations

Henry James

AM: *The Ambassadors*
AC: *The Art of Criticism*
AF: *The Art of Fiction*
AN: *The Art of the Novel*
FP: *French Poets and Novelists*
GB: *The Golden Bowl*
LC: *Literary Criticism*
MK: *What Maisie Knew*
WD: *Wings of the Dove*

Marcel Proust

CP: *Correspondance*
RTP: *Á la recherché du temps perdu*

Virginia Woolf

CE: *The Essays of Virginia Woolf*
D: *The Diaries of Virginia Woolf*
JR: *Jacob's Room*
MB: *Moments of Being*
MD: *Mrs. Dalloway*
RF: *Roger Fry*
RO: *A Room of One's Own*
TL: *To the Lighthouse*
W: *The Waves*
Y: *The Years*

William James

PP: *Principles of Psychology*

Bertrand Russell

LK: *Logic and Knowledge*
PPH: *Problems of Philosophy*

Introduction

Describing Modernist Description

Under the entry for "Description" in a dictionary from the late nineteen century, we find this definition: "Description: there are always too many of them in novels."[1] The dictionary is that of *idées reçues* from *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, and its author, Gustave Flaubert, was himself widely hailed for the detail and precision of his own descriptions. Long a feature – sometimes even a distinct genre – of poetry, description rises to prominence in the European novel only in the nineteenth century, when elaborate depictions of landscapes, detailed renderings of houses, and thorough catalogues of objects in fully-furnished rooms become increasingly common set-pieces in realist fiction.[2] Flaubert's definition makes it clear both that description had become an essential hallmark of the novel, and that in its increasingly exhaustive inventories of the material world, it had outstayed its welcome not long after it had arrived.

Surveying the fictional landscape in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, this "*idée reçue*" certainly finds no lack of proponents. Henry James chastises Balzac for his "choking dose[s] of brick and mortar," and admonishes Flaubert himself for the care he lavishes on "rendering" every detail of chimney pots and the shoulders of duchesses. Proust, taking the naturalism of the Goncourt brothers as his target (incorporating into the *Recherche* a dozen-page long pastiche of their *Journals* into the bargain), inveighs against "the literature that 'describes'…the realists and naturalists worshipping the offal of experience, prostrate before the epidermis."[3] Virginia Woolf, taking aim at Arnold Bennett's endless fascination with villas in "Mr Bennett and Mrs

[1] Gustave Flaubert, *Bouvard et Pécuchet*, 506.
[2] I leave aside the long history of description in poetry, which maintains close links to ekphrasis and was particularly dominant in Romanticism. For more see Janice Hewett Koelb, *The Poetics of Description: Imagined Places in European Literature*, and Chapter 10 of E. R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*. For arguments that description becomes prominent in the novel only in 19th century realism, see Georg Lukács, "Narrate or Describe"; Gérard Genette, *Frontières du récit*; Philippe Hamon, *Introduction à l'analyse du descriptif*; and Peter Brooks' *Realist Vision*.
[3] The summary is Samuel Beckett's. See Beckett, *Proust*, 73.

Brown," puts it most forcefully when she demands description's prompt eviction from literature: "'Stop! Stop!' and I regret to say that I threw that ugly, that clumsy, that incongruous tool out of the window." In all of their theories of the novel – for, importantly, these were all authors who theorized the novel as well as writing it – the descriptive instinct had transformed the novelist into an auctioneer, a real estate agent, an archivist, and a fact-checker. The house of fiction had become overstuffed with furniture, and although its inhabitants wore coats with buttons that were "sewn on as the Bond Street tailors would have it," these figures were too often coat-hangers, not "solid, living, flesh-and-blood" beings.

Although they differ in exemplars and foils, James, Proust and Woolf all understand description in its dominant form in nineteenth century fiction: the enumeration of physical attributes, primarily of material objects, functioning to depict the settings in which narrative action will take place, and as a marker of the "reality" of a fiction. Thus literary description was associated – usually pejoratively – with seventeenth century Dutch painting, landscapes, and still-lives: background became foreground, movement became stasis, and rendering details and surfaces acquired an interest in and of itself, no longer subordinated to a higher, narrative end. In the early twentieth century, two critics of different dispositions, Georg Lukács and Paul Valéry, both observed this phenomenon, although with different diagnoses of its cause and different recommendations for a remedy. The rise of description in the novel has been tied by many critics to the ascendancy of the bourgeoisie, with its attendant interest in accumulating goods and the increased visibility of objects in forms of cultural representation. It is no coincidence that middle-class domestic interiors were a central descriptive topos of nineteenth century fiction.

But in its concern with rendering the look of things whose measure of veracity depended on accordance with fact, the modernist line goes, the novel had been looking in all the wrong places for the "reality effect." In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, numerous aesthetic polemics

take the prominence of description – understood as visual reports of material goods – as the focal point for launching a critique of a naive positivist and vulgar materialist epistemology. The impulse to carefully observe and faithfully record the surfaces of things came under attack as obsolete, epitomizing the assumption that looking at the world was a reliable way of knowing it. Moreover, description is coded in modernist aesthetics as easy, democratic, intellectually inferior and requiring no particular skill. Rejecting it was thus also a way for fiction to signal its status as a "fine" or "high" art, and to appropriate for itself the cultural authority enjoyed by poetry.[4] So in "The Novel Démeublé" (1922), Willa Cather begins by announcing, "The novel, for a long while, has been over-furnished. The property-man has been so busy on its pages, the importance of material objects and their vivid presentation have been so stressed, that we take it for granted that whoever can observe, and can write the English language, can write a novel."[5] She goes on to add, "every writer who is an artist knows that his 'power of observation' and his 'power of description' form but a low part of his equipment."[6] In very similar terms, Valéry would castigate the prominence of description for leading to the diminution of the "intellectual" element in art in *Degas, danse, dessin* (1938).

Between roughly 1880 and 1930, the status of description undergoes a transformation in aesthetic discourse: it moves from being a means of displaying perceptual acuity (by observing every detail), writerly skill (by visualizing objects vividly), and a marker of reality or truth (if you go to that place, you will see exactly what I describe), to being the expression of epistemological naiveté (believing that surfaces can reveal essences) and misplaced emphasis (according primacy to the material world). But despite the polemical condemnations of its tedium, inauthenticity, and obsolescence, modernist novels themselves contain *more,* not less description. At the same time that its status suffers a precipitate decline in theories of the novel, actual modernist works evince a

[4] See Mark McGurl's *The Novel Art* for an account of the novel's establishment as a fine art.
[5] Willa Cather, *Willa Cather on Writing*, 35.
[6] Ibid., 36.

reconceptualization of the very idea what it means to describe something. In their rejections, authors such as James, Proust, and Woolf highlight the ways in which different descriptive modes determine how the world is made legible and intelligible. We have long been familiar with with the notions that different narrative modes determine and create meaning, and there is increasing recognition that the same is true for descriptive modes. Cynthia Wall has shown how the status and forms of literary description transformed over the course of the eighteen-century, and recent debates about "surface reading" have drawn attention to the significance of overlooked practices of description.

Modernism is filled with strictures that there is nothing that is not the "proper stuff of fiction." At the same time that the attempt to establish the novel as a high art was predicated on a certain principle of exclusion, there was also an insistence that nothing was too small or trivial for inclusion as a subject. Modernist authors sought to articulate fields of experience that, for them, had not been observed with sufficient attention, and to bring these within the domain of literary representation. This aesthetic program involved isolating phenomena from "the life of Monday or Tuesday," holding them up to the light, and setting them forth. Hence the turn to what is immaterial, abstract, sensory and experiential – things with no material attributes to enumerate. But modernist aesthetics calls for new attention not only to interior facts of consciousness (its well-known "inward turn") but also, I argue, to other phenomena that are empirical but not material, such as the atmosphere of a room. The demand is less that the novelist should notice *more* and more that she should notice *differently*, leading to the emergence of a post-positivist ideal of aesthetic attention.

But while writers demote the authority of visual evidence as they shift their attention to rendering what does not look like anything at all, they do not break with empiricist commitments, as modernism's inward turn has often been understood. Instead writers urge a more rigorous kind of empiricism, insisting that what is real should not be conflated with what is tangible. The interest in

immaterial things is not a turn away from the world, but undertaken in the service of greater fidelity to a greater range of experience. James, Proust, and Woolf were no less committed to the reality effect than Balzac or Flaubert, they just differed with respect to where it lay and how it was to be created.

The autonomous descriptive set-pieces that are prevalent in nineteenth century realism – especially at the beginning of a chapter or when a new character or setting is introduced – tend by and large to disappear in the modernist novel, as description and narration become increasingly integrated.[7] Such set-pieces, typically of landscapes, houses, rooms or physiognomies, operate in realist fiction as part of the *mise-en-scène,* and are usually subtended by ekphrastic assumptions even if they are not explicitly presented as such – that is, they aim to render in words the visual appearance of a scene or a tableau. Such kinds of descriptions tend to rely on enumeration and inventory, assuming a frame whose various parts must be given in turn, and are typically denoted by locatives like "to the left of," "behind," "above" etc. This order, sometimes naturalized by a conceit such as that of following a character's eyes as she looks around a room, was usually governed by conventional rules, e.g. foreground to background, left to right, head to toe, eyes outward to the rest of the face.[8]

But as Woolf observes in her idiosyncratic survey of literary history, "Phases of Fiction" (1929), beginning with James, the "visual sense" recedes from importance in fiction. Modernist descriptions can no longer be understood first of all as a visual report of the material world, governed by ekphrastic assumptions and underwritten by taxonomic principles. What it means to describe something is no longer identified with the idea of *depicting* it, indicating a break in the continuity between seeing and knowing, and a challenge to the assumption that knowledge begins

[7] Mieke Bal also makes this point in "Over-writing as Un-writing: Descriptions, World-Making and Novelistic Time."
[8] Ibid., 577.

from observation of the visible. In a different way, this break is also evident in the fascination during this period with technologies that seemed to promise a new kind of visuality, especially the X-ray.[9] In formal terms, the dominant characteristic of the modernist descriptive paradigm is not enumeration of predicates (*x* is y) but figuration through analogy (*x* is *like y*). Rhetorical tropes of metaphor and simile have a long history, and James, Proust, and Woolf sometimes hearken back explicitly to older traditions like the epic simile in their use of these forms. Their analogies tend to be abstract, relying on homologies of structure or relation or experiential similarities rather than visual resemblance. So, for instance, when in *The Golden Bowl*, Adam Verver's "neat colourless face" is said to *resemble* "a small decent room, clean-swept and unencumbered with furniture (GB, 161)," this is a different mode of describing than the physiognomic portraits of a Dickens or a Balzac.

One simple reason for the prominence of analogical forms is that we turn to analogies when there are no material qualities to enumerate, for instance, in the feeling of searching through one's memory for something on the tip of one's tongue. As emerges most clearly with Woolf, there is something about the experiential qualities of sensations and feelings that modernism seeks to make linguistically available which cannot be described *except* by analogy. Unable to be characterized head-on, the "qualitative feels" of an experience can be outlined only, as it were, through a parallel approach. As my discussion of William James in Chapter Three shows, such analogical strategies of likening also appear in non-literary phenomenologies of experience, and a number of contemporary works in cognitive science, psychology, and philosophy of mind have argued that the process of analogy-making is a fundamental feature of cognition.[10] I want to suggest that in the modernist

[9] I discuss this more in Chapter 2. The inverse could also be said – there is a fascination with making the invisible visible, although the resulting images were often not "realistic." For a provocative account of the X-ray, cinema, and avisuality, see Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Atomic Light: Shadow Optics*. On photographs that were not conceived as copies but images of the imperceptible, see Josh Ellenbogen, *Reasoned and Unreasoned Images: the Photography of Bertillon, Galton, and Marey*.

[10] See for instance Kenneth J. Holyoak and Paul Thagard, *Mental Leaps: Analogy in Creative Thought*, and Douglas Hofstader and Emmanuel Sander, *Surfaces and Essences: Analogy as the Fuel and Fire of Thinking*.

paradigm the activity of describing does not respond to the question "how does it *look*?" but rather to the question, "what is it *like*?"

What-It-Is-Likeness

What is meant by "likeness"? The word means first of all a representation, a copy, a model, a semblance. It is another name for a portrait or a photograph, and in the nineteenth century, photographers were known as "likeness men." Indeed, this is how literary description has typically been conceived, as a "word-portrait," a verbal depiction of an image or an appearance. But I also want to suggest a broader sense of the term, one evoked by the contemporary philosopher Thomas Nagel's idea that an organism may be considered to have conscious experience if "there is something it is like" to be that organism.[11] Nagel, concerned with explaining a problem of consciousness, puts the emphasis on the existential verb: a bat has conscious experience if there is something it is like to *be* a bat. My concerns here call a different emphasis: literature is not concerned with explaining what conscious experience *is*, but it is preeminently concerned with describing what conscious experiences are *like*. In modernism, with its attention to subjective phenomena and its skepticism towards the possibility of objective knowledge, the question of likeness concerns in particular what more recent philosophers have called "qualia." As Daniel Dennett notes, qualia is an unfamiliar term for what could not be more familiar to us: the particular way that a patch of yellow wall in a painting appears to me, or the feeling of happiness that may wash over you on a bright June day. Dennett puts it most simply when he defines qualia as simply "the way things seem to us"; or in David Chalmers's term, they are the "qualitative feels" of experience.[12]

The disappearance of the omniscient narrator and the increased focalization characteristic of modernist fiction lead to a new emphasis on rendering first-person experience (though not necessarily in the grammatical form of the first person). It is not that previous novelists had never

[11] Thomas Nagel, "What Is it Like to Be a Bat?"
[12] Daniel Dennett, "Quining Qualia." David Chalmers, citation. They are actually opposed in their views on qualia.

before been interested in such experiences, of course, but in modernism there is unprecedented attention to describing them with detail and precision, with vindicating them as worthy of novelistic representation and, moreover, as the signal means of creating verisimilitude, of making a fiction *real*.[13] This emphasis is what earns D. H. Lawrence's famed sneer at Joyce, Proust and Dorothy Richardson's characters, forever wondering "Did I feel a twinge in my little toe, or didn't I?"[14] So much is well-known, part of our received idea of modernism. But the point is not limited to the content of description alone. As we see in Chapter 1 with James, even when it comes to conventional topoi like domestic interiors, a room is not described by a detailed inventory of the objects in it, as would be case in Balzac, but rather in terms of the phenomenological experience of being inside it (what I call its atmosphere). In addition to the shift in the subject matter of description, there is a shift of emphasis in the *features* of these that are given attention. Rooms, landscapes (or cityscapes, more often than not), physiognomies, and material objects by no means disappear from modernist fiction, but what is privileged about them, what is significant about them, and the criteria for rendering them, alters.

An experiential likeness is not sufficiently conveyed by a descriptive report of the visible world. This is not to say that James, Proust, and Woolf are uninterested in visual phenomena, or that material objects have no place in their works. Recent scholarship has overturned the understanding of modernism as an inward-looking movement, unconcerned with the world around it, and I am not advocating a return to such an account by emphasizing descriptions of the immaterial and invisible. The redirection of attention towards such phenomena on the part of many authors, attended by a rejection of description, is part of broader changes in models of perception and standards of knowledge. As numerous critics have pointed out, the nineteenth century was an intensely visual age, witnessing the establishment of the great museums of Europe, the enormous popularity of world's

[13] In terms of describing sensory experience, Hardy in particular could be singled out as a predecessor.
[14] D. H. Lawrence, *Selected Literary Criticism*, 114.

fairs and exhibition on both sides of the Atlantic, the invention of photography and the proliferation of images, including ones of faraway places.[15] At the same time, the rise of new human sciences such as physiognomy, phrenology, and criminal anthropology all assumed that internal moral traits were legible on the surfaces of the body. These are all developments that can be linked to the detailed visual reports characteristic of realist fiction.[16]

But with developments in physics beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century, notably James Clerk Maxwell's field theory, there was an increasing sense that the ultimate constituents of reality were nothing like the world perceived by the eye, and scholars have argued for the widespread demotion of the epistemic authority of visual knowledge during the modernist period.[17] As matter that appeared to be solid and substantial was revealed to be waves of energy in motion, visual data was ever less reliable as a means of knowing an increasingly unfamiliar world.[18] So the astrophysicist James Jeans titled his enormously popular book (reprinted fifteen times between 1930 and 1938) explaining quantum physics to a general audience *The Mysterious Universe.* "Mais du jour où l'enceinte des éléments apparemment rigides et inertes a été violée – où l'atome s'est ouvert montrant l'énergie interne – l'explication physique a été atteinte," commented Paul Valéry, "Le monde de l'experience *directe* n'a plus de modèles à nous offrir."[19] At the same time that visible appearances seemed less and less reliable as a means of knowledge, the material world had never seemed less solid. As Bertrand Russell wrote in 1921, physicists, especially Einstein and other proponents of relativity, "have been making 'matter' less and less material. Their world consists of

[15] In England alone between 1861 and 1867, between 300 to 400 million cartes de visite were sold each year. Nancy Armstrong, *Fiction in the Age of Photography*, 126.
[16] See Armstrong, *Fiction in the Age of Photography*; Bill Brown, *The Sense of Things*; Peter Brooks, *Realist Vision*.
[17] See Theodore M. Porter, "The Death of the Object: *Fin de siècle* Philosophy of Physics," in *Modernist Impulses in the Human Sciences 1870–1930*. Porter discusses various stances towards "descriptionism" during this period, that is, whether physics simply described the natural world or was capable of providing causal explanations. For a broad argument about the turn away from the visual, see Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes*.
[18] See Gillian Beer, "Wave Theory and the Rise of Literary Modernism." See also Richard Sheppard, "The Problematics of European Modernism" in *Theorizing Modernism: Essays in Critical Theory*.
[19] Paul Valéry, cited in Crow, *Paul Valéry: Consciousness and Nature*, 162.

'events,' from which 'matter' is derived by a logical construction. Whoever reads, for example Professor Eddington's *Space, Time and Gravitation* will see that an old-fashioned materialism can receive no support from modern physics."[20]

While the nineteenth century saw the rise of an empiricist concern with particulars and a positivist emphasis on deriving knowledge from careful attention to surface forms (think of the morphological paradigm of botany), the intellectual climate of late nineteenth and early twentieth century modernism is characterized by a widespread suspicion of surface appearance (if not widespread agreement about what lay beyond them). *The Mysterious Universe*, for instance, opens tellingly with a page-long epigraph from Plato's allegory of the cave. In the life sciences, the observational and descriptive methods of natural history increasingly gave way to an experimental ideal, leading to what historians of biology have called a "revolt from morphology."[21] And in philosophy and in poetics, as Sanford Schwartz has argued, stark oppositions between surface and depth, appearance and reality, conceptual abstraction and immediate experience are evident in varied thinkers, including Nietzsche, Bergson, William James, and F. H. Bradley, as well as T. E. Hulme, T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound.[22]

The strain of modernism in which I am grouping James, Proust, and Woolf retains the commitment to beginning from experience and hewing closely to it, to *recording* reality rather than *inventing* it. In contrast, the urge to invent or to create reality (whether by plumbing the depths of the unconscious by looking to machines) is evident in the Surrealists and Futurists on the one hand, and on the other hand in what Charles Altieri has called a Nietzschean strain of modernism represented by Yeats, Joyce, Pound, and Mina Loy, who saw the artist's version of the will-to-power as imposing

[20] Bertrand Russell, *An Analysis of Mind*, 5.
[21] See Garland Allen, *Life Science in the Twentieth Century*.
[22] Sanford Schwartz, *The Matrix of Modernism*. See also Michael Levenson, *A Genealogy of Modernism*.

values strong enough to become later accepted as facts.[23] For James, Proust, and Woolf (who have sometimes been grouped under the label "literary impressionism") the task of the novelist was to be *more* faithful to reality, not less.[24] But the material world seemed no longer to be what was most *real*. This does not mean solid objects had no place in these works, or that they are not enmeshed in and expressive of the processes of commodification and reification characteristic of industrialized capitalist modernity, as much recent modernist scholarship has been concerned with exposing. The recent focus on material culture and the new interest in things has opposed itself to older accounts that understood modernism as an introspective movement that privileged the autonomous individual self by ignoring social and material conditions. As a result, in the current critical climate focusing on the turn to describing thoughts instead of things seems old-fashioned, if not reactionary. But recent materialist accounts have often reinscribed a familiar matter/mind duality while reversing its valuations. Something like atmosphere poses a challenge to these binaries by being at once empirical *and* immaterial, and sensory experience that is registered somatically mediates the border of inside and outside, maintaining tensions instead of resolving them. I want to suggest that James, Proust, and Woolf's engagement with empirical reality is robust enough that it need not be underwritten by any one term in the varied binaries at work – surface/reality, matter/mind, subject/object – at the expense of the other. Moreover, I want to take seriously the programmatic statements in modernist aesthetic theories that posit these stark dichotomies in order to see what is at stake in them, while also attending to the actual descriptive textures of the novels, which exhibit a more complex interplay between these terms.

---

[23] Charles Altieri, "Modernist Poetry's Encounter with Epistemic Models of Value," 335–6.

[24] Ford Maddox Ford and Joseph Conrad are the other major figures here. Focusing on Ford's programmatic statements on impressionism in prose, Michael Levenson writes, "Impressionism is a realism. Ford made this point early and with increasing insistence. The root axiom was simple – 'the general effect of a novel must be the general effect that life makes on mankind'." Ford praises Pound and the Imagists who recognize that "the supreme literary goal is 'the rendering of the material facts of life, without commentary and in exact language...' (*Genealogy of Modernism*, 108)." Levenson argues that the emphasis on recording the world as it is (jettisoning any idea of spiritual transcendence) quickly comes to mean recording the world as *I* perceive it (116). See also Jesse Matz, *Literary Impressionism and Modernist Aesthetics*.

By uncoupling description from depicting or picturing, I do not mean to deny the importance of the visual element in literature, but rather to suggest the distinctiveness of its different modes. "Image," "symbol," "impression," and "vortex" are all familiar key terms of modernist poetics, which sought to incarnate abstract ideas, emotional complexes, and phenomenal appearances in non-mimetic images.[25] The importance of different modes of image-making in novelistic description, however, has received much less critical attention, and what I want to highlight is that the images conjured up by descriptions in modernist novels tend not to be tableau-like visualizations of how an object looks. For one thing, appearances, it is continually emphasized, are constantly shifting, whether due to the effects of time or shifts in perspective. This is perhaps nowhere clearer than in Proust, who continually thematizes the failure to fix his characters' faces descriptively. At the same time, the shift of focus to describing what doesn't look like anything at all calls for modes of figuration that rely on a relational analogies rather than visual resemblances. Modernist aesthetics calls for images that are corresponding or equivalent, rather than representational or mimetic.

Literary description has traditionally been a site of close connection between word and image, and although I will largely leave this question aside, modernist descriptive techniques could also be understood in light of contemporaneous movements of abstraction in the visual arts – the post-Impressionist, Cubist and Expressionist paintings that also tried to capture "the exact curve of a feeling or a thing" without depicting it representationally.[26] The idea of description as a verbal portrait of an image traces its roots to the classical tradition of ekphrasis. But art historians have noted that the point of ekphrastic exercises as originally conceived was to demonstrate the rhetorical power of language rather than to provide an accurate verbal representation of the observed object,

[25] See Levenson, *The Genealogy of Modernism*, Chapter 7.
[26] On post-Impressionism and Woolf, see Ann Banfield, *The Phantom Table*; see also Linda Dalrymple Henderson, *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art*.

and it was often quite detached from the observation of any actual works of art.[27] As Michael Baxandall points out, what an ekphrastic passage really describes is in fact not how an image *looks*, which language is ill equipped to do for a simultaneous visual field. Rather, what ekphrasis records is our *thinking* about an image: what aspects we notice, how we categorize and understand certain features, the connections that we make between the different parts, all of which are evident in the ways in which we describe the image.[28] Description, in other words, records the implicit decisions, assumptions, and ways of ordering that determine how an object is given to us, or, rather, how we constitute it.

Giving the Given

Description is the "major activity of all writers," Mieke Bal observes, and in Cynthia Wall's list of its capacious functions, "Description in one way or another makes something visible, sets it forth, extracts it from its surroundings, and jabs a finger meaningfully at it; it makes the invisible present, brings the unthought of into awareness, gathers circumstances into meanings."[29] And yet, although critics have been attentive to the ways that meaning is determined through narrative elements such as chronology, voice, and shifts in point of view, the significance of the basic operations of description have continually been overlooked. Naturalized as a result of its ubiquity, it remains perhaps the last windowpane of fiction whose transparency continues to be taken for granted. As a practice, description tends to be preceded by the qualifier "mere," and its role in assigning value to the facts that it ostensibly "transcribes" is continually effaced. So Philippe Hamon writes that description is regarded as a kind of "methodological zero degree," the unmarked member in some oppositional pair, repeatedly passed over in favor of procedures that seem more active or

[27] Alex Potts, "Disparities Between Part and Whole in Description of Works of Art," in *Regimes of Description: in the Archives of the Eighteen Century*, eds. John Bender and Michael Marrinan, 137.
[28] Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention*.
[29] Mieke Bal, "Over-Writing as Un-writing: Descriptions, World-Making and Novelistic Time," 571; Cynthia Wall, *The Prose of Things: Transformations of Description in the Eighteenth Century*, 13.

meaning-laden, e.g. interpretation, narration, or performance.[30]

The project of this dissertation is to trace a shift in literary descriptive paradigms in order to give an account of a historical aesthetics that is also imbricated in a historical epistemology. As the first means of making an object available, how we describe something determines the interpretive frameworks that are subsequently licensed. We could call describing a way of constituting the data, that is, the facts that we take to be simply "given" and only subsequently in need of interpretation. Of course, to posit a separation between description and interpretation is in some ways always a false dichotomy, since one is inextricable from the other. Nevertheless, while they are inseparable nor are they identical. As a method, describing is cast in a number of discourses – in the sciences as well as in the arts – as a passive recording of facts or observations, but what modernist fiction shows in its controversies over what, how, and whether to describe is that there is nothing given about the giving itself.

Michel Foucault makes this last point clear in *Les mots et les choses*. Natural history was able to emerge in the mid seventeenth century, Foucault suggests, only because of a shift in the conception of history itself. Previously,

> To write the history of a plant or an animal was as much a matter of describing its elements or organs as of describing the resemblances that could be found in it, the virtues that it was thought to possess, the legends and stories with which it had been involved, its place in heraldry, the medicaments that were concocted from its substance, the foods it ate, what the ancients recorded of it, and what travelers might have said of it. The history of a living being was that being itself, within the whole semantic network that connected it to the world. The division, so evident to us, between what we see, what others have observed and handed down, and what others imagine or naively believe, the great tripartition, apparently so simple and so immediate, into *Observation*, *Document*, and *Fable*, did not exist.[31]

By the time of Johnston's *Natural History of Quadrupeds* in 1657, "the whole of animal semantics has

[30] Hamon, *Introduction à l'analyse du descriptif*, 7.
[31] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 129.

disappeared, like a dead and useless limb."[32] Those features were no longer the important aspects of an organism that determined how it was understood, and thus, no longer in need of description. By contrast, in the descriptive order proposed for natural history by Linnaeus, every chapter dealing with a given animal followed a set plan, "name, theory, kind, species, attributes, use, and, to conclude *Litteraria*."[33] Each visibly distinct part of a plant or an animal is describable. Foucault's remarks make clear that a whole host of assumptions determine the very idea of what it means to describe: assumptions about what is worthy of attention, what is relevant and irrelevant, what the salient features are by which objects should be identified and categorized, in short, what is able to emerge into visibility, the space in which it is possible to see things and to describe them.[34]

By the end of the nineteenth century, Nietzsche's perspectival philosophy and various kinds of conventionalism among scientists and philosophers of science presented serious challenges to the notion that there was any way to access or the explain things "as they are."[35] The schism between what *is* and what is *perceived* was also iterated in varying ways in aesthetics. In Oscar Wilde's philosophical dialogue, *The Decay of Lying* (1891), Vivian, the spokesperson for aesthetics, insists in Baudelairean fashion that it is nature that imitates art, not vice versa, suggesting that this happens through the ways in which art trains our perceptions.

---

[32] Ibid.
[33] Ibid., 130.
[34] Ibid., 131. "Observation, from the seventeenth century onward, is a perceptible knowledge furnished with a series of systematically negative conditions, Hearsay is excluded, that goes without saying; but so are taste and smell, because their lack of certainty and their variability render impossible any analysis into distinct elements that could be universally acceptable. The sense of touch is very narrowly limited to the designation of a few fairly evident distinctions (such as that between smooth and rough); which leaves sight with an almost exclusive privlege, being the sense by which we perceive extent and establish proof, and, in consequence, the means to an anlysis *partes extra partes* acceptable to everyone (132-3)." Moreover, not everything that presents itself to vision is useful, and Foucault argues that each visible distinct part of a plant or animal is describable only insofar as four series of values are applicable to it, which determine what naturalists call an organism's *structure* (134).
[35] See Ian Hacking, *Representing and Intervening*, for a discussion of the conventionalism advocated by physicist Pierre Duhem; Nicola Luckhurst discusses the mathematician Poincaré in a similar light in *Science and Structure in À la recherche du temps perdu*; Linday Dalrymple Henderson argues in *The Fourth Dimension* that it is the invention of non-Euclidean geometry rather than relativity that is decisive for the understanding that reality is perspectival in aesthetic modernism. See also the chapter on "structural objectivity" in Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison, *Objectivity*.

> *Cyril*. Nature follows the landscape painter then, and takes her effects from him?
>
> *Vivian*. Certainly. Where, if not from the Impressionists, do we get those wonderful brown fogs that come creeping down our streets, blurring the gas-lamps and changing the houses into monstrous shadows? To whom, if not to them and their master [Whistler], do we owe the lovely silver mists that brood over our river, and turn to faint forms of fading grace curved bridge and swaying barge?

Even meteorology, it would seem, is at the behest of art.

> The extraordinary change that has taken place in the climate of London during the last ten years is entirely due to this particular school of Art…Nature is no great mother who has borne us. She is our creation. It is in our brain that she quickens to life. Things are because we see them, and what we see, and how we see it, depends on the Arts that have influenced us. To look at a thing is very different from seeing a thing…At present, people see fogs, not because there are fogs but because poets and painters have taught them the mysterious loveliness of such effects. There may have been fogs for centuries in London. I dare say there were. But no one saw them, so we do not know anything about them.[36]

Vivian's descriptions of brown fogs and silver mists in the earlier parts of the passage are somewhat purple, but the point is sincere. By showing us what to attend to, Art shows us something we had not previously seen, not because it hadn't been there before, but because we didn't know to look. Fog is particularly apt as an illustrative example here, for it is not only a screen that makes visibility difficult, it is itself an invisible element – air – rendered newly visible to the eye by its density. In fact, the climate of London *does* change during the nineteenth century, as industrialization creates new conditions of smoke, smog, and pollution (in Dickens, the city's sordid economic conditions are intimately linked to its insalubrious air).[37] But it is also true that this change owes something to the fact that the eye has been trained to perceive something that had previously escaped its notice.

As Susan Stewart argues in her account of the transition from allegory to a new realism in the eighteenth century novel, such changes are not arbitrary. With the development of the genre of realism, in its "mapping of sign upon sign, world upon world, reality upon reality, the criterion of

[36] Oscar Wilde, *Intentions*, 40-41.
[37] See George Yeats, "Dirty Air: *Little Dorrit*'s Atmosphere." For more on the changing valences of the ethereal as well as actual changes to the quality of the air as well as the development of gaslight, see Steven Connor, *The Matter of Air*.

exactness emerges as a value. And exactness, always a matter for a concealed slippage between media, is moved from the abstract, the true-for-all-times-and-places of allegory, to the material, the looking-just-like, that sleight of hand which is the basis for this new realism." Furthermore, "Exactness is a mirror, not of the world, but of the ideology of the world. And what is described exactly in the realistic novel is 'personal space,' the space of property, and the social relations that take place within that space."[38] Hence the primacy of bourgeois interiors in nineteenth century fiction, which had to be comprehensively furnished in order to buttress the reality-claim of fiction, or to create what Roland Barthes calls "*l'effet de réel*." Narrative is ideological, Stewart points out, "both in its 'unsaid' quality and in the fact that its descriptive power lies in its ability to make visible, to shape the way we perceive the landscape of action, and hence to shape the way we perceive our relation to that landscape."[39] The importance of descriptive modes for how the world is made visible cannot be overstated. "It is not lived experience which literature describes, but the conventions for organizing and interpreting that experience, conventions which are modified and informed by each instance of the genre."[40]

My project takes up one particularly fraught moment in the history of literary description, following the ways in which James, Proust, and Woolf each critique the impulse to describe in their theories of the novel while also reconceiving its practice in their literary works. The account that follows is not progressive, although the authors are arranged chronologically. Rather, I trace the distinct but related ways in which each engages with the problem of what is described and what it *means* to describe, which intersects and diverges at varying points. The "family resemblances" among this group, to use Wittgenstein's phrase, lie not in there being one thread common to all the members, but in "a complicated network of similarities" in things large and small, "overlapping and

[38] Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, 4-5.
[39] Ibid., 25.
[40] Ibid., 25-6.

criss-crossing."[41] They constitute one strain among others in modernism, both because of shared stylistic features and because of commonalities in their philosophies of fiction. The disciplinary conventions of carving up the literary field according to national tradition means that the connections and congruencies among this trio have received less attention than one might think, despite the canonical status of all three. I have made no effort at an influence study here, but it is significant that not only are they preoccupied with and responding to a common set of problems, in the case of Woolf, she is also reading and responding to both James and Proust. Instead, my aim has been to place these authors - along with varying philosophical figures – side by side in order to allow certain shared themes and commitments to emerge.

Another figure who might have found a place in the present study but for considerations of length is Willa Cather, who is vocal in her critique of description in her essay, "The Novel Démeublé," and who tries to refurnish the novel in works such as *The Professor's House.* A different, parallel account of modernist description could also have been traced through another set of authors, for instance, between Gertrude Stein, André Breton, Djuna Barnes, and Samuel Beckett. They too raise the question of what it means to describe, but do not hold commitments to naturalistic representation of ordinary experience that James, Proust, and Woolf all maintain. In *Fiction in the Age of Photography*, Nancy Armstrong concludes her study with a discussion of the ways in which Joyce, Lawrence, and Forster premise their fiction on a claim to authenticity that lies beyond the visible, figured in their cases as pornographic or sexually transgressive. This understanding of the unseen could also be another avenue of inquiry for the problem of modernist description.

In invoking the term modernism, my intention is not to draw a strict demarcation between it and "realism" in order to oppose one to the other. I am not claiming absolute priority of technique

[41] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §66.

or suggesting that descriptions in nineteenth century novels were never attentive to anything besides bricks and mortar. No doubt it would be possible to find passages in earlier authors that fit my characterization of modernist description.[42] But this would not be the *dominant* paradigm, and it would not refute the distinctiveness of the principal objects and methods of description in modernism, even if it is not the first time such descriptions occur in the history of literature. If each of my chapters begins by constructing an opposition between some version of realism and modernism, it is for two reasons: first, because contrasts always serve to highlight the distinctiveness of an object, and second, because I begin from the authors' own theories of the novel, which are usually elaborated in reaction to their predecessors or in some cases their contemporaries. Why did description come under so much attack in late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries? What is its function in literary texts? How was description understood and what was at stake in rejecting it? What happens to its status and its forms? These are the questions that motivate my study.

In my discussions of James, Proust, and Woolf, I have been concerned with uncovering their poetics across their corpus – their compositional principles and the underlying epistemological assumptions and consequences of these – rather than providing sustained interpretations of any single work. To this end, these authors' critical writings have been equally important. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw a proliferation of theories of the novel by its preeminent practitioners.[43] James's "The Art of Fiction" (1888) responds to an essay of the same name by Walter Besant published four years earlier, and while agreeing with little in that treatise, he is unreserved in his praise for Besant's campaign to establish fiction *as* a fine art, on par with older and more culturally authoritative forms like painting and music. James, Proust and Woolf's theories of fiction should certainly not be taken uncritically as instruction manuals for reading their own

[42] Hardy is well-known for the sensuality of his language, and Dickens sometimes employed the kind of focalization of perspective in describing a scene that characterizes James.
[43] See Jeff Wallace, "Modernists on the Art of Fiction," *Cambridge Companion to the Modernist Novel.*

work, but these critical works are essential in understanding the changes in how the novel was conceived. That description formed a focal point for the critiques of their predecessors is an essential and under-recognized aspect of a familiar narrative about modernist experimentation, and highlighting these debates allows a new understanding of the movement to emerge.

It is difficult to talk about description without talking about it referentially, that is, without talking about *what* is described. This dissertation might have been a thematic study that focused on the representation of a particular subject, for instance, the depiction of domestic interiors, material objects, or physiognomies in the novel.[44] This is not that. Different topoi – rooms, faces, landscapes, sensations, relations – enter the spotlight at different points in the following chapters, and they determine the argument in essential ways (the *how* of description is inseparable from the *what*), but they are not in themselves the principal focus of inquiry. They have usually been chosen because they are historically privileged sites where the shift in descriptive modes is most evident, such as domestic interiors, or because they constitute a subject of newly intense descriptive attention, such as bodily sensations. Throughout, I am concerned not only with the role and function of description in the modernist novel, but also with the philosophical implications of different modes of describing, with the underlying epistemological commitments they reveal, and the implicit values that they assign.

Defining Description

The most basic question raised by this project is not easy to answer: what, exactly, is a description? By way of beginning to respond, we might consult another dictionary, not that of *idées*

[44] For a study of domestic interiors, see Julia Prewitt Brown, *The Bourgeois Interior: How the Middle Class Imagines Itself in Literature and Film*. Numerous critics have argued that description's prominence in the nineteenth century is crucially linked to that period's intensified interest in material objects. See for instance Peter Brooks, *Realist Vision*, and Cynthia Wall, *The Prose of Things*. Scholars have noted the ways in which modernist texts are interested in material goods and the ways in which it participates in the production and consumption of commodities. See for instance Douglas Mao, *Solid Objects: Modernism and the Test of Production* and Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: the Object Matter of American Literature*.

reçues this time but the great eighteenth century *Encyclopédie*, the project satirized by Flaubert. Description in its *belles lettres* sense, the theologian and *encyclopédiste* Edme-François Mallet tells us, is a "definition imparfait et peu exacte" good enough for the grammarian, but lacking the rigor required by the philosopher.[45] Whereas definition gives the essences of things, responding to the question *quid est*, a description always remains provisional, enumerating accidental attributes that are capable of providing a sense of an object, but never able to define it essentially. It is, however, a favorite figure of orators and poets, serving the function of making things seem present, and capable of giving great pleasure.[46] By the time we get to Flaubert's dictionary of *idées reçues* in the later half of the nineteenth century, it would seem description no longer finds favor even in the realm of *belles lettres*.

If description is a provisionary way of talking about something, it seems that critics have had difficulty talking about *it* in anything other than provisional terms. In 1902, the linguist Charles Bally, a student of Saussure's who coined the term "style indirect libre," wrote, "There are expressions that we call picturesque, without being able to say exactly what picturesque is…These expressions are difficult to analyze. We often call them 'descriptive'…we do not know what definition to give of them."[47] Over half a century later, the article "description" in A. J. Greimas and J. Courtès' 1979 *Sémiotique, Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage* states, "Should be considered as a provisional denomination of an object that remains to be defined."[48] It is hard to know whether this definition is meant to apply to description or to the entry itself.

A definition of specifically literary description is also beset by difficulties. Unlike a trope, Hamon comments, "description does not 'deviate' from a proper sense to a figurative one, a primary to a secondary meaning; it does not change normal order into artistic disorder, and it does not work

[45] Edme-François Mallet with addition by Louis de Jaucourt, "Description (belles lettres)," *Encyclopédie ou dictionnaire raisonnée des sciences, des arts, et des métiers*, 4: 878.
[46] Ibid., 4: 879.
[47] Charles Bally, *Traité stylistique*, 1:183-4.
[48] Greimas and Courtès, *Sémiotique, Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage*.

on the signified, the signifier or the affective at the expense of the intellectual."[49] Description is not easily classifiable as a distinct rhetorical figure, unlike, for instance, prosopopoeia; nor does it always involve a clear shift in semantic order as in metaphor or metonymy, even as it often comprises these. Description also seems to resist structural analyses, such as the ones fundamental to narratology and other types of formalisms that have dominated much of twentieth century literary criticism.[50] These have found plot much more amenable to its methods, evident in the relative ease with which the framework of a plot can be translated in comparison to a passage of description. "Translatable (Balzac in Russian), transposable (Balzac in film), summarizable (Balzac in *digest*), a narrative structure is always more or less independent in its deep structure from its semiotic manifestation and its modes of stylistic investments."[51] Even summarized, description resists more than the story the procedures of rewriting, in part because it is, Hamon suggests, itself a process of rewriting.[52]

All of these pale before a more fundamental obstacle facing any study of description: the difficulty of circumscribing its extension, which ranges so widely in scope. A just response to the question "what is a description?" would be a second question: "what *isn't* a description?" The standard way in which description has been discussed in twentieth century criticism is in opposition to narration. Every narrative, Gérard Genette writes, comprises two kinds of representations which are closely mingled and varying in proportion. There are, on the one hand, representations of actions and events, which are those of narration in the strict sense, and on the other hand, representations of "objects or characters that are the result of what we now call *description*."[53] Since it is concerned with actions or events, narration stresses the temporal, dramatic aspect of the narrative; while

[49] Philippe Hamon, *Introduction à l'analyse du descriptif*, 9.
[50] Hamon speculates that this resistance is as if "la notion de *structure* était fondamentalement antinomique de celle de *liste*, forme simple à laquelle tend souvent l'énoncé descriptif (*Introduction*, 7)."
[51] Ibid., 43.
[52] Ibid., 43-4. For Hamon this procedure involves putting into equivalence a denomination and an expansion. Thus, he identifies description as requiring not a syntactic competence, as is demanded by a plot, in which elements are put into relation to one another, but rather a lexical competence.
[53] Genette, "Frontiers of Narrative," 133.

description, "because it lingers on objects and beings considered in their simultaneity, and because it considers the processes themselves as spectacles, seems to suspend the course of time and to contribute to spreading the narrative in space."[54] These correspond to two antithetical attitudes about the world and to existence, one more active and the other more contemplative.

What piece of text doesn't contain some descriptive element, Genette asks. "The house is white, with a slate roof and green shutters," involves no element of narration, whereas a sentence like, "The man went over to the table and picked up a knife," although apparently straightforwardly narrative, nevertheless contains something descriptive. The three substantives in that sentence, "however little qualified, can be regarded as descriptive by the very fact that they designate animate or inanimate beings; even a verb can be more or less descriptive, in the precision that it gives to the spectacle of the action (one has only to compare 'grabbed a knife,' for example, with 'picked up a knife'), and consequently no verb is quite exempt from descriptive resonance."[55] Indeed, as Bertrand Russell argues, there are exceedingly few words in language that are not descriptive.

Anyone who attempts to map the terrain of description, then, seems to risk the plight of the cartographers in Borges' 1946 story, "On Exactitude in Science," doomed to create a map that coincides mile for mile with the ground it represents. So a survey of descriptive language would seem to be simply a survey of language itself, and a history of literary description nothing less than just the history of literature. The project of delimiting the bounds of novelistic description has been taken up mostly by narratologists, who have sought to develop global theories for systematic analyses of the role of description within the structure of a narrative work, as well as taxonomies of different descriptive types. Although I have found the work of narrative theorists useful, my aim is not, like Mieke Bal, to "generate a description-bound narratology of the novel."[56] I have taken a

[54] Ibid., 136.
[55] Ibid., 134.
[56] Bal's project to "description-bound narratology of the novel" is to show that description is "at the core of the

largely common-sense approach to the question of what counts as a description. As Genette also observes, while there is virtually nothing in narrative that does not contain some descriptive element, we also have little trouble distinguishing the differences between "The house is white, with a slate roof and green shutters," and "The man went over to the table and picked up a knife." My project aims to highlight the effects of different kinds of description and to inquire into the transformation in its status and its forms at a specific historical moment, rather than to find general criteria for delimiting description from narration or to provide a systematic account of its function in narrative. Although I do discuss the interaction between these elements, the opposition between narration and description – not coincidentally made by critics with nineteenth century realism as their corpus – is less analytically useful when it comes to modernist fiction, which maintains no strict separation between the two.

The diversity of descriptive functions is made clear by Wittgenstein in the *Philosophical Investigations*, and it's worth turning to his remarks, which have been so influential in other discussions of description that I will turn to momentarily, notably in philosophy of history and philosophy of science. In a discussion of how we talk about sensations, Wittgenstein writes, "Isn't the beginning the sensation - which I describe? - Perhaps this word 'describe' tricks us here. I say 'I describe my state of mind' and 'I describe my room'. You need to call to mind the differences between the language-games."[57] The concept of "language-games" is introduced in order to emphasize the different functions that language can serve. We tend to think that "language always functions in one way, always serves the same purpose: to convey thoughts - which may be about houses, pains, good and evil, or anything else you please."[58] If we think of the differences, however,

---

novelistic genre," and generative of narrative rather than opposed to it ("Over-Writing as "Un-Writing," 571). Perhaps the most compelling portion of her argument is her citation of Proust's Albertine" as embodying a "metanarrative reflection on the status of character as "descriptively-generated pictures."

[57] Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, §290.

[58] Ibid., §304.

between "giving orders, and obeying them"; "describing the appearance of an object, or giving its measurements"; "reporting an event"; "speculating about the event"; "forming and testing a hypothesis"; "guessing riddles"; "making a joke; telling it" to name just a few, it will be evident how differently language functions in each of these activities. In a similar way, Wittgenstein adds that maps, equations, musical notation, graphs, diagrams, and blueprints can all be said to be, in one way or another, descriptions.

> What we call 'descriptions' are instruments for particular uses. Think of a machine-drawing, a cross-section, an elevation with measurements, which an engineer has before him. Thinking of a description as a word-picture of the facts [Wortbild der Tatsachen] has something misleading about it: one tends to think only such pictures as hang on our walls: which seem simply to portray how a thing looks, what it is like. (These pictures are as it were idle).[59]

The insight that different types of descriptions *do* different things – at once obvious and illuminating – applies equally to literature, a *Lebensform* like any other use of language. The question of what descriptions do in novels is one that I have tried to pursue in varying ways. "The traditional literary expectation," Cynthia Wall writes in her study of eighteenth century fiction, "is that description *presents* something, that its primary function is to make us *see*."[60] She points out that this is an expectation we retrospectively project, which eighteenth century novels did not adhere to. Similarly, descriptions in modernist novels are doing something different than visualizing the backgrounds and settings of narrative actions, or the physical appearance of characters. In Chapter Three, for instance, I try to show that Woolf's descriptions aim to make us *feel*, that they are not observational but empathetic. The description of being scrutinized as like having a fly crawling over one's face aims to provoke an equivalent sensation, to make the reader imagine that feeling herself. What are the ways in which modernist description set things forth? What and how does it try to make us see? If descriptions are not only word-pictures of facts hanging idly on the wall, what else does it do?

[59] Ibid., §291.
[60] Wall, *The Prose of Things*, 12.

Describing and Explaining

The practice of describing has also been naturalized as a practice of literary criticism, which conceives of itself as a hermeneutic discipline.[61] Unlike asking what it means to interpret something, it almost seems to make no sense to ask what it means to describe something. Description cannot be isolated from interpretation, to be sure, but the former also mediates the latter.[62] This idea is contained in Clifford Geertz's famous call for "thick description" in cultural anthropology, a term that he borrows from the ordinary language philosopher Gilbert Ryle. Ryle imagines a scenario where two boys contract their right eyelid – to a camera, this would appear identical, and yet there is a vast difference between a twitch and a wink. But it's not the case that one boy did two things, contracted his eyelid and winked, whereas the other boy only did one thing, contracted his eyelids. "Contracting your eyelids on purpose when there exists a public code in which so doing counts as a conspiratorial signal *is* winking," Geertz comments.[63] And suppose further there were a third boy who contracts his eyelids not in order to wink or as a twitch but as a parody of someone else's laughable attempt to wink. Ryle distinguishes between "the 'thin description' of what the rehearser (parodist, winker, twitcher…) is doing ('rapidly contracting his right eyelids') and the 'thick description' of what he is doing ('practicing a burlesque of a friend faking a wink to deceive an innocent into thinking a conspiracy is in motion')."[64] Between the two, Geertz writes, lies the object of ethnography. "As interworked systems of construable signs…culture is not a power, something to which social events, behaviors, institutions, or processes can be causally attributed; it is a context,

[61] See Heather Love, "Close But Not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn," for a brief sketch of both the tradition of hermeneutics and the unlucky fate of description in the history of literary criticism. Love advocates a form of "thin" description (exemplified by Erving Goffman's microsociology) rather than Geertz's thick one as a model for new practices of reading that avoid humanist assumptions.
[62] Michael Baxandall argues that although 'description' and 'explanation' interpenetrate each other, "this should not distract us from the fact that description is the mediating object of explanation." Michael Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention*, 1.
[63] Geertz, "Thick Description," 6.
[64] Ibid., 7.

something within which they can be intelligible – that is, thickly – described."[65]

Geertz highlights the ways in which understanding requires context, and advocates describing "thickly" as a way to achieve a fuller understanding of social behavior. The idea that how we describe things determines how we understand them was also central in midcentury debates in philosophy of action and intention, influenced by the work of Wittgenstein.[66] It was also an important issue in midcentury debate in philosophy of history and philosophy of science around what kinds of explanations the human sciences are capable of providing. So in Arthur Danto's discussion about whether historical phenomena can be explained by appeal to general laws, he makes "an obvious and trivial point" that, he suggests, is as important as it is easy to overlook. "Phenomena *as such* are not explained. It is only phenomena as *covered by a description* which are capable of explanation, and then, when we speak of explaining them, it must always be with reference to *that* description. So an explanation of a phenomenon must, in the nature of the case, be relativized to a description of that phenomenon."[67] Strictly speaking, I can "no more explain or ask for an explanation of the Civil War than I can explain, or ask for an explanation of the piece of paper in the typewriter. Who would know what to make of the demand: explain that piece of paper! - unless a description were, so to speak, in the air, as for example, the piece of paper is white, or is here, or is blemished with jam spots?"

Expressions like "the Civil War" or "the piece of paper in the typewriter" are simple

---

[65] Ibid., 14.

[66] See, for instance, G. E. M. Anscombe's *Intention*. Anscombe was Wittgenstein's student and translator.

[67] Arthur Danto, *Narration and Knowledge* 218. He is concerned particularly with whether historical explanations can legitimately appeal to general laws, along the model explanations in the natural sciences. Danto's argument is that "there are *explananda* which logically presuppose general laws, and explananda which do not. Accordingly, whether or not there are to be general laws in the explanans depends upon our original description of the event for which explanation is sought." Furthermore, "if the original explanandum is not one which organically presupposes a general law, it can be replaced with one which does, and vice versa, so that the question of general laws is in some important sense connected with the question of how phenomena and events are to be *described* (218)." Danto has elsewhere acknowledged the influence of Wittgenstein's work on perception, not only his own philosophy, but the development of philosophy of science in the latter half of the twentieth century. Particularly salient here is the Wittgenstein's notion of "seeing-as" in the second half of the *Philosophical Investigations*, famously illustrated by the image of the duck-rabbit.

"referring expressions," and in order to be subject to explanations, they must first be "fitted into sentences" and "covered by descriptions."[68] If we have explained a phenomenon as it is covered by a particular description, Danto goes on, it is always possible to find a different explanation of that same phenomenon under which the first explanation would not hold. "If there are indefinitely many possible descriptions of a phenomenon, there may be indefinitely many possible different explanations of that phenomenon, and there may be, indeed, be descriptions of that phenomenon under which it cannot be explained at all."[69] When we find a redescription of a phenomenon that allows for a compelling explanation, he adds in a somewhat Jamesian sentence, "It amounts almost to a transformation in perception, the objects, as it were, in the visual field remaining constant, but now seen in a whole new set of relationships. We have a genuine *sense* of having been illuminated."[70]

Let me make this clearer by turning to a scene from *The Ambassadors*, where Strether's quest to "find the names for things" is also a quest to find a description – or a redescription – of the facts that fit. Being able to describe a situation in a way that adequately covers it, and which others recognize as such, might serve as a definition for understanding. Fiction is not, like philosophy, concerned with the question of truth-values, nor does it seek to explain its subjects in terms of general laws as in the natural sciences, but Danto's remarks illuminate the ways in which the novel alerts us to the crucial mediation of description.[71]

James' novels have often been read as allegories (sometimes cautionary tales) of interpretation, and in *The Ambassadors*, the immediate phenomenon under consideration is the nature of Chad Newsome's relations with Mme de Vionnet, which stands under competing moral

---

[68] Ibid.
[69] Ibid., 218.
[70] Ibid., 221.
[71] Bertrand Russell, whose epistemology I discuss later in greater detail, shows the inferences we make not only in statements that we would ordinarily think of as descriptive, such as when we call someone "the perfect hostess" or "a magnificent woman," but also in the simplest of characterizations of our perceptual data. When we move from saying "I see this" to "I see a table," we have already made a set of descriptive commitments that determine how we subsequently understand the object or the experience.

worldviews. The intractable conflict between the Woollett and Parisian interpretations of Chad begins with each side's descriptions of the events, which do not allow for compatible interpretative frameworks. These then dictate contradictory courses of action from which the narrative drama results. Strether is brought to a realization of the nature of this conflict when Sarah Pocock comes to Paris to assess the situation, as Woollett suspect him of having failed in his ambassadorial charge. Initially apprehensive about her arrival, he is later glad, assuming that once she sees Chad, she will see the marked transformation and improvement that Strether has found in the young man. What happens, of course, is quite the opposite. Strether fails to take into account the crucial importance of perspective, and their confrontation at the end of her stay in Paris thus consists of a battle over the assertion of each side's description of the events. Sarah Pocock accuses him of "sacrific[ing] mothers and sisters to [Mme de Vionnet] without a blush," to which Strether rejoins, "I don't think there's anything I've done in any such calculated way as you describe." He tries to make her "see" by characterizing their initial undertaking as having resulted "from our queer ignorance, our queer ignorance, our queer misconceptions and confusions – from which, since then, an inexorable tide of light seems to have floated us into our perhaps still queerer knowledge (AM, 343)." She, however, refuses to be moved. "'I leave you to flatter yourself,' she returned, 'that what you speak of is what *you've* beautifully done. When a thing has been already described in such a lovely way –!' But she caught herself up, and her comment on his description rang sufficiently loud. 'Do you consider her even an apology for a decent woman (AM, 343)?" In response, Strether thinks, "It was so much – so much; and she treated it, poor lady, as so little (AM, 343)."

These two incompatible ways of "covering" the phenomenon in question lead to the different kinds of interpretations possible. Not only *why* it has happened, but the very fact of *what* has happened is in dispute. The different ways in which they construe the phenomenon, the different ways in which it is given for each of them, results in the intractability of their different

interpretations. Hence the opened-ended ambiguity James is so famous for, without clear judgment. Sarah Pocock refuses Strether's description of Chad's situation, first of all, as that of a "transformation." The issue is not simply that there are competing interpretations at stake, or that James' stories are allegories of the ultimate impossibility of deciding on one. In addition, the description of the event determines in a fundamental way what *kinds* of interpretations are available. Of course, interpretive commitments are already implicated in any description we give of something, and in many cases we can describe something one way or another only *after* we've already made an interpretation of it. For us to say, for instance, that Sarah is blind to Chad's "transformation" means we have already accepted Strether's description of what has happened to Chad. And Strether's key description of the relations between Chad and Mme. de Vionnet as a "virtuous attachment," suggested to him first by Little Bilham, shows he has already read the situation. It is only by describing their liaison in this way that all the other interpretive consequences for Strether follow, including, crucially, where he believes Chad's duties to lie. For James, the consequences of different descriptions of a situation are always moral, but the issue is not limited to questions of moral duty or of historical explanation. Describing is the first step in making sense, one that is always value-laden.

A Brief History of an Undeserved Misfortune

Ekphrasis is just one of the names in classical rhetoric for what we now call description. Scholars agree that in Antiquity and the Middle Ages, description is principally part of the epideictic genre, which praises certain individuals, places or times of the year.[72] This type of oratory was a ceremonial discourse, the third in addition to the political and legal discourses, intended not to persuade the audience, like the other two, but rather to excite its admiration. It was only in this type of oratory, not carried out for the sake of another end, that extended descriptions acquired some

[72] Hamon, *Introduction*, 10. Michel Beaujour, "Some Paradoxes of Description," 29-30. E. R. Curtius notes that in the Middle Ages, descriptions could be considered as a subdivision of "catalogue" and that *scribere*, etymologically, refers to the notion of list (of soldiers). See E. R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages.*

sort of aesthetic autonomy. Indeed, Roland Barthes locates in the epideictic genre itself the "germ – whatever the ritual rules of its use: eulogy or obituary – the very idea of an aesthetic end of language."[73] In this tradition, extended, detailed descriptions are decorative, an ornament of discourse, appearing "as a recreational pause in the narrative, carrying out a purely esthetic role, like that of sculpture in a classical building."[74]

By the sixteenth century, the word was used to designate reports on certain important cities, principle monuments and antiques in a certain area for architects, tourists, observers or business people.[75] Throughout the seventeenth century, description remains secondary to economic ends (guides), military ends (geographic description of fields and sites for battles), history ("antiques"), and encyclopedic matters. Whether a practice aimed at concrete, practical activities (pedagogical, military, taking inventory of stock etc.); a kind of re-writing between different mediums (a legend or a key); or work in the realm of the verifiable (testimony in legal discourse, travelers' records), description was in any case not, Hamon states, "dans le vraisemblable d'une fiction; c'est donc ne pas faire literature."[76] Although Barthes finds the germ of aesthetic language in epideictic discourse, it would appear that from early on there is also something non-literary, something suspicious, about description. In rhetorical treatises from the sixteenth century through the late eighteenth centuries, Cynthia Wall writes, description in was "generally considered an afterthought at best, an obstacle or weakness or danger at worst. And worst tended to win out over best."[77] It is only in the nineteenth century, critics concur, that description enters properly into the realm of *belles lettres*, quickly becoming a prominent feature of the realist novel.

Its rise to prominence, however, did not diminish the critical hostility it faced (so one

[73] Barthes, "The Reality Effect," 143.
[74] Genette, "Frontiers of Narrative," 135.
[75] Hamon, *Introduction à l'analyse du descriptif*, 11.
[76] Ibid., 12.
[77] Wall, *The Prose of Things*, 5.

commentator calls the history of description "that of a continuous and seemingly undeserved misfortune"[78]). Beginning in the seventeenth century, in Wall's account, "as description became more unified and more distinct from narration, the understanding of it as determined by its objects shifts to one that perceives description as *itself* an object, moreover, an obstacle."[79] Discussions of description as an ornament or an accessory mark the vocabulary of criticisms of description – they were set-pieces that were detachable from the body of the work, useful in their way, but liable to pose difficulties. Lacking any intrinsic principle of organization – in the way that the order of narration is always governed by temporal chronology, even if only to break it – a description has no clear point of completion or closure. It is not only arbitrary in its order (where do you begin describing a room? How do you proceed?) but also liable to proliferate endlessly (where do you stop?). So Hamon calls its sign "the infinite 'etc'." Any description must always be a partial one; it is never possible to describe everything about anything. And this inability to close the parenthesis that opened by a description has drawn the suspicions of those who wish to preserve the necessity, integrity and unity of the text.

In the early twentieth century, the hostility towards description became more entrenched, arising "in response to the elaborate, lengthy nineteenth-century layouts of objects and persons delineated in detail *and within* a detailed, connected setting."[80] Perhaps the critic most responsible for its denigration in the twentieth century is Georg Lukács, whose 1936 essay "Narrate or Describe" entrenched the opposition between these two concepts in an unequivocal hierarchy. Lukács's distinction would be reinforced by Gerard Genette in his influential works of narratology, although Genette maintains that the "frontier" between narration and description is an "internal" one. It might seem that description is more indispensable than narration since it is much easier to describe

[78] Beaujour, "Some Paradoxes of Description," 43.
[79] Wall, *The Prose of Things*, 25.
[80] Ibid.

without narrating than vice versa, but in fact we never actually find it existing in an independent state in texts. While pointing out that description has been neglected by critics, Genette nevertheless consigns it to its "natural" status as "*ancilla narrationis*, the ever-necessary, ever-submissive, never-emancipated slave." Since the opposition of description to narration is the framework in which the subject has typically been treated, it is worth rehearsing the terms of this framework here.

For Lukács, narration and description constitute the principal modes of fiction appropriate to two forms of society under two periods of capitalism. One is realism, represented by Balzac and Tolstoy, which preserves the "significant and vital aspects of social practice," found in epic art, where "the wheel of events," characters and their actions, are the decisive elements.[81] After 1848, however, realism gives way to naturalism, whose exemplars are Zola and Flaubert. The characteristic mode of naturalism is description. Although Balzac is responsible for elevating description to prominence, his descriptive practices were determined by "the need to adapt fiction to provide an adequate representation of new social phenomena," since the relationship of the individual to his class was now more complicated. "The precise description of the filth, smells, meals and service in the Vauquier Pension is essential to render Rastignac's particular kind of adventurism comprehensible and real."[82] With Flaubert and Zola, in contrast, the emphasis moves from action to observation, and description is practiced for its own sake. For Lukács, this is reflective of the changing role of the writer in society from the beginning to the end of the nineteenth century, from active participant to passive observer.

The transformation is also true of the characters featured as protagonists. Comparing two scenes of horse races, Tolstoy *narrates* the race from the standpoint of a participant, whereas Zola *describes* it from the standpoint of an observer. Zola may be virtuosic in his exactitude of detail, but in

[81] This is the phrase of Otto Ludwig, a German novelist and dramatist whom Lukács cites. See Georg Lukács, "Narrate or Describe," 126. We could evoke, in contrast, Woolf's "wheel of sensations."
[82] Ibid., 117.

the end he only "provides a small monograph on the modern turf." Descriptions become "mere filler," easily eliminable, and lead to a loss of interest in plot and story, resulting in monotony and tedium.[83] In contrast, the race in *Anna Karenina* represents the crisis in a great drama. "The race is thus no mere tableau but rather a series of intensely dramatic scenes which provide a turning point in the plot."[84] For Lukács as for neoclassical rhetoricians, description must always have its end outside itself. That it should acquire autonomy and become an end in itself – a kind of "l'art pour l'art" debate captured in miniature within the form of the novel itself – is symptomatic of reification. Thus he warns of "the danger of details becoming important in themselves" – the whole is threatened when its parts begins to take on a significance not derived from their place in the whole. The increasing autonomy of description, which made it susceptible to being extracted from the work as a whole, also solidified description's status as a *foreign* element. Strategies thus developed for integrating it into the narrative, such as "motivating" the description through the perception of a character, for instance, Emma looks out the window and Rouen is described.[85] This sense of aesthetic foreignness was compounded by the fact that descriptions for naturalist writers like Zola often featured technical terminology to signal expertise or authenticity, and thus comprised a vocabulary that was imported from other fields that were not always accessible to the average reader. "This striving after maximum objective 'accuracy'" results in a literature for specialists, for litterateurs who have a connoisseur's appreciation of the painstaking assimilation of such technical knowledge and jargon."[86]

A further sin of description is to introduce an element of arbitrariness or contingency into

[83] Ibid., 110. Whereas "the great novels of the past combined the representation of significant human beings with entertainment and suspense…modern art has substituted monotony and tedium ("Narrate or Describe," 125)." The fear of being boring was expressed by a number of nineteenth century novelists themselves, including Flaubert.
[84] Ibid., 110-1.
[85] Ruth Ronen writes in "Description, Narrative, and Representation." that theorists of description throughout history have always been concerned primarily with its integration into the text.
[86] Lukács, "Narrate or Describe," 136.

the text. Lukács is by no means alone in leveling this charge. For eighteenth century rhetoricians, descriptions threatened the internal unity and necessity of the text because they could potentially be skipped over without consequence, something that would be impossible for any part of the narrative, each of which derives its sense from its place within a whole. Without the natural principle of epic selection, randomness also ensues in the composition of the text.[87] There are any number of qualities about a given object that could be described – how to select which ones? And how to know when to stop? Unless subordinated to a higher end, description has no internal principle of completion. Moreover, objects lose any intrinsic connection to human figures. "Writers strive to describe details as completely, plasticly and picturesquely as possible; in this attempt they achieve an extraordinary artistic competence. But the description of things no longer has anything to do with the lives of characters."[88]

Lukác's critique of arbitrariness, which is for him symptomatic of a failure to recognize the organic unity of society, is echoed by a critic of a very different stripe. Paul Valéry finds a "remarkable parallel" between the rise of description in literature and the rise of landscape painting in the visual arts, both, for him, intellectually inferior forms. Like Lukács, Valéry finds no objection to landscape as long as it is "simply a country background for some incident or other," as it was at its inception as a movement.[89] In Poussin and Claude the landscape is magnificently ordered and built up. "Then *exactitude* takes its turn. Powerful *landscapists* appear, and at first they keep up the preoccupation with composition in their works, selecting, eliminating, adjusting; but gradually they

[87] It may not be evident to the reader at first why a detail is significant, but the full range of meaning will always become clear at the end. Lukács cites as a sign of Tolstoy's epic mastery his description of the self-sacrifice of the father of the hero's fiancée for his daughter, whose significance, not immediately apparent to the reader, can be understood only later, when the same tender father acts as the brutal commander at an execution. Thus instead of depicting the old officer as a dehumanized 'produce' of czarism, we understand "how the czarist regime transforms people decent and self-sacrificing in their private lives into passive and even eager instruments of its brutality. It is clear that all the nuances of the events at the ball could be revealed only in retrospect from the gauntlet scene. The 'contemporary' observer, who could not view the ball from this perspective or retrospectively at all, would have had to see and describe other, insignificant and superficial details ("Narrate or Describe," 129).
[88] Ibid., 132.
[89] Valéry, "Degas, Dance, Drawing," 74.

are involved in a close-up struggle with *nature as it is*."[90] Slowly, background becomes no longer the accessory to the action, "Then the visual impression took over: *Matter* and *Light* became predominant."[91] Slavishly trying to capture what the eye sees, such painting misunderstands the nature of that sight. Being too devoted to capturing nature "as it is" eliminates the process of selection and combination that Valéry considers the essential art of "composition."[92] The result is a mistaken preoccupation with *copying* what is visible on the surface instead of *creating* shape, structure, and form. Whereas for a Marxist critic like Lukács the principle of selection is determined by social unity, the principle of selection for Valéry is determined by an idea of pure aesthetic form, but both have a similar critique of description.

> A description consists of phrases that can generally be put down in any order; I can describe this room in a series of statements whose sequence is almost of no importance. The eye can wander at will. What could be *truer*, more natural than this go-as-you-please, since…*truth itself is accident*?...
> But if this latitude, and the habit of facility which goes with it, becomes the dominating factor, it gradually dissuades writers from employing their ability for abstraction, just as it reduces to nothing the slightest necessity for concentration on the reader's part, in order to *win him over* with *immediate effects*, rhetorical *shock tactics*…
> This particular creative method, which is legitimate in principle – and which has given birth to many fine works – leads, like the misuse of landscape, to a *diminution of the intellectual element in art*.[93]

Underlying all of these criticisms is the assumption that describing simply transcribes the surface. The correlate of passive observation rather than active participation, recording instead of creating, it does not comment on its subject or offer any insight. So the exemplary instrument of description is, for Valéry as for others, the camera. Capturing merely what it sees, the photograph has no ability to go behind, beneath, or beyond appearances, and accordingly, no means of conceptual abstraction, no way of creating form.

---

[90] Ibid.
[91] Ibid., 75.
[92] Valéry is, of course, echoing Baudelaire's insistence on *imaginative* composition as the true mode of the visual arts, rather than an attempt to reproduce the world as it is, whose operations are summed up for him by photography, which was for him not art.
[93] Paul Valéry, "Degas, Dance, Drawing," 76. Emphases in original.

What we find in varying ways in modernist description, I suggest, is the attempt to fashion a kind of description that is not reliant on a notion of representational picturing. We could call this a shift from a model of description based on correspondence and resemblance to one based on adequation and equivalence. Stylistically, this is marked by a shift from descriptions that tend to enumerate predicates to ones that tend to liken by analogy. The increasing focalization of narrative perspective during modernism is essential here, as well as the growing insistence that perception is determined by the subject as well as the object. In an essay on still life, objects, and perception, Mark Doty writes, "Description is an inexact, loving art, and a reflexive one; when we describe the world we come closer to saying what we are."[94] Of course, any description reveals at least as much about the describer as the described. But in modernism, literary description begins to assume this function more explicitly. If the descriptive paradigm of realism tries – with ever greater accuracy and detail – to match a verbal portrait to the image of an object, the modernist descriptive paradigm shifts its emphasis to recording what cannot be seen by the eye, whether it's what is sensed in the air or what is felt on the skin. The dichotomies drawn not only by Lukács and Valéry but also often by modernists themselves are belied by the descriptive textures of their own works, which aim not to conjure up how something *looks*, but to say what it is *like*. Much rests on what is meant by this "like," and the ensuing chapters might be understood as the attempt to elaborate an account of how modernists were reconceiving the idea of likeness.

Declines and Transformations

Twentieth century critics have largely followed Lukács in privileging narration over description, continually passing over the latter. The studies that do exist on this subject have tended to focus primarily on the nineteenth century realist novel, with the exceptions of Cynthia Wall and

[94] Mark Doty, *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon, 6.*

Joanna Stalnaker's work on the eighteenth century, in England and France respectively.[95] But if description in the novel has suffered from critical neglect in general, it has received virtually no attention in relation to modernism. No doubt this is due in part to the self-conscious rejection of description by a number of modernist writers, who identify it polemically as an outmoded novelist practice. To my knowledge, Mieke Bal's essay, "Over-Writing as Un-writing: Descriptions, World-Making and Novelistic Time" remains the sole exception.[96] In it she notes that the absence of modernism in discussions of description is all the more striking since modernists "both deploy and de-naturalize description. Whereas Cervantes' antihero is declared 'mad' for seeing what is not there – for seeing an army in a cloud of dust produced by a herd of sheep – and Zola and company boasted the referential existence of their described objects, modernism, with its dual philosophy of subjectivity and chance, is well placed to demonstrate an altogether different status for description."[97]

Among the critical studies on the topic, Wall's treatment of eighteenth century description is the most salient prehistory to the account I give here. Her question is: "What happened over the eighteenth century to the status of description that transformed Defoe's unvisualized cityscapes and Pope's epitheted spaces into the excruciatingly elaborate landscapes of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and the familiarly upholstered Victorian novel?"[98] Although there are plenty of things in the early modern novel, she argues that "they tend to function emblematically and in isolation, more pointed out than described." To the post-nineteenth-century reader, these things in the eighteenth century novel seem "disconcerting, contextless, isolated in otherwise empty space, not part of *properly*

[95] Wall, *The Prose of Things*; Joanna Stalnaker, *The unfinished Enlightenment: Description in the Age of the Encyclopedia*. Roland Barthes offers an account of description in Flaubert that illustrates a new principle of verisimilitude in the 19th century. Philippe Hamon has treated description more generally and abstractly, although his theory develops primarily in the context of nineteenth century French realism, with Zola and Verne as key case studies.
[96] Bal, "Over-Writing as Un-writing."
[97] Ibid., 576.
[98] Wall, *The Prose of Things*, 1.

furnished homes with Dickensian detail and Jamesian significance."[99] By the end of the eighteenth century, however, "Radcliffe and then Scott present us with a fully visualized *setting* in which events will occur. We are given the visual world; we no longer extrapolate it. Radcliffe is (in)famous for her extensive landscape descriptions; but she also invests domestic detail with the kind of psychological significance that we expect from nineteenth-century novels."[100] Wall links the changes in eighteenth century descriptive practices and rhetoric about description to four larger cultural changes:

> Experientially, to the technologically new ways of seeing and appreciating objects in the ordinary world through the popular prostheses of microscope, telescope, and empirical analysis; economically, to the expansion of consumer culture in the increasing presence and awareness of *things* on the market, in the house, in daily life; epistemologically, to the changing attitudes toward the general and the particular, the universal and the individual; and, narratively, to the perception and representation of domestic space.[101]

Some of these issues I take up directly in my project. Others, including those concerning new technologies of vision, are ones I hope to examine further as my project continues to develop, about which I will say a little more below. About its fate in the twentieth century, Wall writes, "description's second decline and revival is someone else's story."[102] It is in many respects the story I am concerned with here, asking the next question in this series: what happened to the status of description after the "familiarly upholstered Victorian novel" with its minutely-detailed villas and fully-furnished rooms, as the calls sound in the early twentieth century for a novel "démeublé"? Description's "second decline" in modernism, as I hope to show, is in fact another transformation.

Outside the field of modernist studies, my project finds an important analogue – and, in many ways, a model – in the history of science. In a recent edited volume, Lorraine Daston and Elizabeth Lunbeck show that observation – a fundamental aspect of scientific practice – has a history too. This is also true, as Daston has argued elsewhere, of scientific description. In

[99] Ibid., 2 and 1.
[100] Ibid., 5.
[101] Ibid., 2.
[102] Ibid., 39.

Enlightenment natural history, a number of ingenious instruments – from magnifying lenses to glass-fronted, flattened beehives – were devised to observe the otherwise invisible and hidden. "But the *sine qua non* of sterling observation was fastidious attention to detail in word and deed. And since deeds were ultimately reduced to words in the naturalists' reports, it was above all the techniques of description that certified attentiveness. They are long, articulate in the root sense of the word, and stuffed with adjectives."[103] Daston charts the transformation of description from the prolix accounts by seventeenth century botanists, which included exhaustive details of particulars, to the parsimony of Linnaeus's two-word label by the early eighteenth century, where only number, shape, position and proportion counted in the identification of plants.[104]

For Daston, the changes in the descriptive practices of botanists are indicative of a change in what was perceived as a scientific fact between 1660 and 1730, during which time the category of the factual mutated "from a singular and striking event that could be replicated only with great difficulty, if at all, to a large and uniform class of events that could be produced at will. The texture of descriptions of nature changed accordingly, from long accounts bristling with particulars to concise reports made deliberately bland by summary, repetition and omission of details."[105] In the modernist period, aesthetic controversies over what, how, and whether to describe crystallized fundamental debates about how the world could be known and how it should be represented. As I continue to revise the dissertation, I hope to examine further the broader historical context and significance of the changes in aesthetic paradigms that I lay out here, as well as their connections to analogous methodological debates in other disciplines of knowledge.

Beyond Modernist Description

My dissertation restricts its focus largely to novels spanning the late 1890s to the 1930s, but

[103] Lorraine Daston, "Attention and the Values of Nature in the Enlightenment," 108.
[104] See Lorraine Daston, "Description By Omission."
[105] Ibid., 13.

the central problem opens onto a number of other avenues of inquiry, some of which I'd like to gesture at briefly. In the modernist period, description is a central method of phenomenology, whose practices would be worth considering in relation to the methods of modernist writers. Husserl's rallying cry of "to the things themselves," can also be linked to aesthetic movements advocating plain physical descriptions of solid objects, such as the objectivist poetry of William Carlos Williams, Louis Zukofsky, and others.

The next chapter in the chronicle of description in the novel might take up the *nouveau roman* of the 1950s and 1960s, which self-conscious mobilizes description in the service of rejecting narrative conventions of character and psychology, as well as metaphor and simile in favor of "objective" physical descriptions. Genette observes that the work of Alain Robbe-Grillet could be construed as an effort to constitute an *histoire* from a series of descriptions, slightly modified from one page to the next, "which can be regarded both as a spectacular promotion of the descriptive function and as a striking confirmation of its irreducible narrative finality."[106] Incidentally, this was another period in which the main practitioners of the style were also its primary theorists, and critical theories of the novel again proliferated. And although the *nouveau roman* is largely a French phenomenon, detailed descriptions also reappear with insistence, as Cynthia Wall notes, in contemporary American writers such as Nicholson Baker and David Foster Wallace.

Another direction would be to consider more extensively the impact of new visual technologies, notably the camera, on changes in descriptive practices and the reconceptualization of literary description in modernism. Representing the world with a new degree of visual verisimilitude, buttressed moreover by an apparently unassailable claim to reference, an *actual* link to reality, the advent of photography and later cinema reignited old debates of *ut pictura poesis* and foregrounded questions about the medium-specificity of the different arts. Writing in the eighteenth century in

[106] Gerard Genette, "Frontiers of Narrative," 135.

reaction to the dominance of ekphrastic poetry, Lessing insisted on the differences between the modes suitable to the literary and plastic arts. Poetry is successive, unfolding in time, and should therefore be narrative, whereas painting is simultaneous, bound to a single moment in time but able to depict the different parts of a visual field at once. The mistake that "painting is mute poetry and poetry a speaking painting," which Lessing dates to Simonides of Ceos, has engendered "in poetry a mania for description and in painting a mania for allegory."[107] Writing several centuries later on the centenary of photography in 1939, Valéry echoes Lessing, hailing the advent photography for releasing literature from the descriptive imperative under which it has labored.

> It is a very largely illusory claim that language can convey the idea of a visual object with any degree of precision. The writer who depicts a landscape or a face, no matter how skillful he may be at his craft, will suggest as many different visions as he has readers. Open a passport for proof of this: the description scrawled there does not bear comparison with the snapshot stapled alongside it.[108]

With the invention of photography, however, "we might be discouraged from making further efforts to describe what photography can automatically record, and we must recognize that the development of this process and of its functions has resulted in a kind of progressive eviction of the word by the image."[109]

But Valéry is optimistic about photography's ability to work to the advantage of *belles lettres*. "When photography first made its appearance, the descriptive genre in Letters was becoming an all-invading fashion." "And then came Daguerre," whom Valéry heralds as not only a transformer of "all standards of visual knowledge" but also a savior of literature who would restore the medium to its proper uses.

> If photography, which is now capable of conveying color and movement, not to mention depth, discourages us from describing, it is because we are thus reminded of the limits of articulate language and are advised, as writers, to put our tools to a use more befitting their true nature. A literature would purify itself if it left to other

[107] Gottfried Ephraim Lessing, *Laocöon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, 4 and 5.
[108] Paul Valéry, "Centenaire de la photographie," 366.
[109] Ibid., 367.

> modes of expression and production the tasks which they can perform far more effectively, and devoted itself to ends it alone can accomplish. It would thus protect itself and advance along its true paths, one of which leads toward the perfecting of language that constructs or expounds abstract thought, the other exploring all the variety of poetic patterns and resonances.[110]

The photograph's unrivaled mastery in describing how the world looks will free literature to pursue its own ends. Valéry's prediction is at work in André Breton's project to replace narrative descriptions with photographs in his novel *Nadja* (although Breton was more skeptical about the verisimilitude of photography). From James' remarks on Alvin Langdon Coburn's photographs for the frontispieces of the New York edition to Proust's complicated evocations of cameras and darkrooms in his aesthetic theory, to Woolf's comments about the distinct powers of word and image in "The Cinema," it is clear that these technologies had a significant impact on the novel's relationship to visuality, and accordingly, on the place of description, the novelistic feature most linked to visual depiction.[111]

There were also methodological debates about description in other disciplines during the modernist period. In *The Order of Things*, Foucault wrote of the "taxonomic" episteme, "Natural history in the Classical Age is not merely the discovery of one object of curiosity; it covers a series of complex operations that introduce the possibility of a constant order into a totality of representations. It constitutes a whole domain of empiricity at the same time *describable* and *orderable*."[112] Thus, the eighteenth century witnessed both the rise of natural history and the age of the Encyclopedia.[113] As the primarily descriptive enterprise of natural history gives way to the experimental and theoretical forms of modern science, we might wonder about the links between

---

[110] Ibid., 367.
[111] The impact on modernism and modernist aesthetics of new mediums of representation and communication in the twentieth century has received increasing critical interest, including, to name just a few, Louise Hornby's "The Cameraless Optic: Anna Atkins and Virginia Woolf" on modernism and photography; David Trotter's *Cinema and Modernism*; and Mark Goble's *Beautiful Circuits* on modernism and media technologies such as the telegraph.
[112] Foucault, *The Order of Things*, [page].
[113] For further discussion of this topic, particularly the figure of Buffon, naturalist and encylopedist, see Joanna Stalnaker, *The Unfinished Enlightenment*.

scientific observation and literary descriptions in the twentieth century. For instance, Otniel Dror charts the transformation in the observation of emotions at the turn of the twentieth century, from an emphasis on the embodied experiences of a perceiver to the recording of physiological changes by machines.[114] As this shift occurs in the sciences, it would seem literature becomes the repository for those accounts of embodied experiences, represented in my project by Woolf and to an extent Proust, and for which we could also cite D. H. Lawrence.[115]

The link is by no means straightforward. Willa Cather stresses the gulf between "emotion" and "mere sensory reactions" in her 1922 manifesto on the novel. Polemicizing against "literalness" no less of physical sensations than of material objects, Cather writes à propos Lawrence's *The Rainbow*, "Characters can be almost dehumanized by a laboratory study of the behaviour of their bodily organs under sensory stimuli – can be reduced, indeed, to mere animal pulp."[116] 1913, a watershed year of modernism, is also the year that John B. Watson publishes his essay, "Psychology as the Behaviorist Views it," decisively moving the burgeoning field of psychology away from its origins in philosophy and its methods of introspection. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries bear witness to a variety of new theories about the nature of emotions and mental states, as well as ways of studying them. The epistemological consequences of different understandings of observation and its correlate, description, in other disciplines may provide a fruitful context for the exploration of these questions in literature.

Finally, in recent years description has become subject to new critical attention in methodological debates about practices of reading in literary criticism. These have largely concerned

---

[114] See Otniel E. Dror, "Seeing the Blush: Feeling Emotions." Dror distinguishes between "observation in terms of feeling," which "framed observation around the embodied-experiential reactions of observers" and "observation in terms of seeing," which "framed observation around the new technologies for gauging emotions…inside the innards of the body, at the level of the internal milieu and the viscera (327)."

[115] One might cite the highly sensuous descriptions in Hardy, but these would not be typical nineteenth century fiction.

[116] Cather, "The Novel Démeublé," 42.

the continuing relevance of close-reading or critique as a mode of analysis, understood as ideological demystification, denunciatory unveiling, a "hermeneutics of suspicion," and "paranoid reading."[117] In a special 2009 issue of *Representations* on "The Way We Read Now," Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus propose a program of "surface reading" as an alternative to the current critical paradigms that have developed under the influence of Marxism and psychoanalysis. In contrast to a kind of reading that regards the text as a symptom whose meaning is hidden and must be unveiled, or the text itself as a symptom of some external condition, material, psychoanalytic, or otherwise, surface reading would attend *to* the surface rather than attempting to see *through* it. One prominent form of such reading put forth by Best and Marcus is "critical description," which "assumes that texts can reveal their own truths because texts mediate themselves; what we think theory brings to texts (form, structure, meaning) is already present in them. Description sees no need to translate the text into a theoretical or historical metalanguage in order to make the text meaningful."[118] Much remains to be worked out in these provocations, and critics such as Ellen Rooney have offered measured responses to Best and Marcus through a consideration of both the possibilities and limits of description.[119] Elsewhere, Heather Love has looked to the descriptive practices of the social sciences, in particular Erving Goffman, as a model of what she calls "close but not deep" reading.[120] In all of these varied articulations, it is clear that description, holding in tension depth and surface, form and history, theory and practice, is at the center of an intense moment of methodological self-reflection in literary studies.

---

[117] Another touchstone in this debate, though less relevant specifically to literary studies, is Bruno Latour's polemic "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam: From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern." While close-reading is by no means synonymous with critique, they share a number of important features that critics are placing under question. A tangential direction in these debates would be the "distant reading" or "sociological formalism" proposed by Franco Moretti, which I also leave aside here, although questions about descriptive methods borrowed from the social and natural sciences are salient to the issues at hand. See Franco Moretti, *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History*.

[118] Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: an Introduction," 11. Their emphasis.

[119] See Ellen Rooney, "Live Free or Describe: the Reading Effect and the Persistence of Form."

[120] See Heather Love, "Close But not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn."

My project attempts to offer a new theoretical framework for thinking about description, not by opposing it to narration as a separate element of the novel but instead asking about the effects of different modes of describing, how they produce meaning and where they assign value, and how literature shows us a likeness of the world. At the same time, it historicizes the problem by focusing on an earlier period when description was the subject of scrutiny and debate, tracing the epistemological implications of both theoretical discussions and actual novelistic practices. Description is a key site where the relation between fiction and reality is negotiated, and attending to its forms tells us the different ways in which this relation has been conceived. If describing is "the major activity of all writers," then attending to different kinds of literary descriptions may also tell us something about different modes of reading.[121] My account of novelistic description is restricted largely to a history of the forms of description within the novel, but I am guided by the assumption that forms *are* historical. If a "critical description" is one where "it is enough simply to register what the text itself is saying," and if the clarification of philosophy is one of "putting things before us," then what I attempt to do here is to describe critically what modernist texts say about the very enterprise of describing.[122]

[121] Bal, "Over-Writing as Un-Writing," 571.
[122] Best and Marcus, "Surface Reading," 8.

Chapter One

The Atmospheres of James

Two Rooms

Let us begin by setting the scene. As is so often the case in novels, the scene is a room, here two of them, drawn from two novels published three quarters of a century apart. They differ in a number of respects, but I am particularly interested in the disparities between the *ways* in which they are rendered.[1]

> Cette pièce, dont les deux croisées donnaient sur la rue, était planchéiée; des panneaux gris, à moulures antiques, la boisaient de haut en bas; son plafond se composait de poutres apparentes également peintes en gris, dont les entre-deux étaient remplis de blanc en bourre qui avait jauni. Un vieux cartel de cuivre incrusté d'arabesques en écaille ornait le manteaux de la cheminée en pierre blanche, mal scultpté…Aux quatre angles de cette salle se trouvaient des encoignures, espèces de buffets terminés par de crasseuses étagères. Une vieille table à jouer en marqueterie, dont le dessus faisait échiquier, était placée dans le tableau qui séparait les deux fenêtres. Au-dessus de cette table, il y avait un barometer ovale, à bordure noire, enjolivé par des rubans de bois doré…[2]

> He couldn't describe and dismiss them collectively, call them either Mid-Victorian or Early - not being certain they were rangeable under one rubric. It was only manifest they were splendid and were furthermore conclusively British. They constituted an order and abounded in rare material - precious woods, metals, stuffs, stones. He had never dreamed of anything so fringed and scalloped, so buttoned and corded, drawn everywhere so tight and curled everywhere so thick. He had never dreamed of so much gilt and glass, so much satin and plush, so much rosewood and marble and malachite. But it was above all the solid forms, the wasted finish, the misguided cost, the general attestation of morality and money, a good conscience and a big balance (WD, 56).

---

[1] Domestic interiors are one of the – if not *the* – privileged topoi of description in the nineteenth century realist novel, and it provides a clear site for charting the distinctiveness of the descriptive paradigm in James's late works. For studies of the representation of domestic interiors themselves, see Cynthia Wall, *The Prose of Things: Transformations of Description in the Eighteenth Century*, and Julia Prewitt Brown, *The Bourgeois Interior: How the Middle Class Imagines Itself in Literature and Film*.

[2] Honoré de Balzac, *Eugénie Grandet*, 28. "The room, whose two windows gave on to the street, had a wooden floor. Grey, wooden paneling with antique moulding lined the walls from top to bottom. The ceiling consisted of exposed beams, also painted grey, the spaces between them being filled with a yellowing mixture of whitewash and sand. An old copper clock, inlaid with tortoiseshell arabesques, adorned the white, badly carved, stone chimney-piece…In each corner of the room stood a corner-cupboard, a kind of side-board with grimy shelves above. An old marquetry card-table, whose top was used as a chess-board top, was placed in the space between the two windows. Above the table was an oval barometer set in a black frame decorated with gilded wooden ribbons (trans. 21)."

The first of these rooms is the humble hall of Monsieur Grandet's house from *Eugénie Grandet*, Honoré de Balzac's early 1833 novel. This passage is just one amidst several pages devoted to detailing miserly Monsieur Grandet's run-down abode, which are preceded by yet more pages devoted to a general description of the melancholy physiognomies of houses "in certain provincial towns." The second passage describes the opulent drawing room at Lancaster Gate in Henry James's *The Wings of the Dove* (1902), in which Merton Densher awaits an interview with the wealthy aunt of the penniless woman he loves and wishes to marry. The differences between these two passages make themselves felt immediately. But what are the precise contours of this difference?

An obvious observation to depart from is that whereas we could list a comprehensive catalogue of the furniture that populate Monsieur Grandet's hall, we know very little about the specific ornaments, upholstery, curtains, or carpets that lie within the Lancaster Gate drawing room. Densher cannot treat the objects in the room collectively, we are told, but James himself certainly proceeds to do so. Since they are not rangeable under a single label, "Mid-Victorian or Early," we might reasonably expect more finely distinguished specifications, but James proceeds in the opposite direction. Although there are allusions to objects, he makes no attempt to comprehensively decorate the narrative space with particular items in the manner of Balzac. So one critic attributes "the great provocation of James's late work" to "is its refusal of what one may call the novelistic norm of descriptive specificity – a norm of descriptive precision, which takes as its foundation…in J. L. Austin's phrase, 'moderate-sized specimens of dry goods'."[3] Indeed, the late James is famed for his vagueness. Even when he is specific he is vague, as here when he lists the various materials in the room – gilt, glass, satin, plus, rosewood, marble and malachite – but not the things that they compose. The Balzacian passage functions like instructions for an illustration, but it would be

[3] Michael Levenson, *Modernism and the Fate of Individuality*: *Character and Novelistic Form from Conrad to Woolf*, 27.

difficult to derive any such portrait from the Jamesian passage: if two illustrations were to be made on the basis of the latter, it is doubtful they would be the same. The description of Lancaster Gate, we can surmise, does not seem aimed at enabling the reader to visualize a picture of what the room looks like.

But although we remain ignorant of the precise arrangement of side-boards, tables, or foot-stools, we do know that whatever furniture the room contains, it is scalloped, fringed, buttoned, corded, gilded, drawn, and curled. In his critical essays on Balzac, James faults the latter for the preponderance of descriptions, which weights down the text with burdensome details. But descriptions do not disappear from James's own work. Rather, the location of descriptive significance has shifted: it does not matter what particular concrete things there are, only the attributes they embody that are salient to the general effect produced by the room. James's vagueness in inventorying specific objects is combined with detail in specifying the qualities that they impress on their perceiver. The confused mass of materials, shapes, lines and "above all the solid forms, the wasted finish, the misguided cost" present to Merton Densher (a journalist and man of letters) in their attestation to "a good conscience and a big balance" a resounding negation of his own flimsy "world of thought," the immaterial realm that he had not realized was his home until these solid masses brought it home to him.

Indeed, a prominent feature of the Lancaster Gate description is that it is focalized through the perspective of the character present in the room. While James was by no means the first to exploit the use of narrative point of view, he famously made the presentation of the world as it appears to a perceiving consciousness his supreme aesthetic principle, one that would become standard among subsequent novelists.[4] In *The Wings of the Dove*, this is thematized in the story itself,

[4] Although the term "point of view" is used as early as 1866, only with James did it become a common critical term. See Norman Friedman, "Point of View in Fiction: the Development of a Critical Concept." Scholars have pointed to earlier focalized descriptions in Dickens, and Michael Irwin argues that Dickens represents a shift from the practice

as Densher has been kept deliberately waiting in the room by its owner in order to receive its message. "It was the language of the house itself that spoke to him, writing out for him with surpassing breadth and freedom the associations and conceptions, the ideals and possibilities of the mistress" (WD, 55-6). The metonymic convention that underlies much nineteenth century description, where objects stand for their owners, is spelled out so explicitly in James that it becomes obtrusive in its self-consciousness.[5] As Densher walks to and fro, "taking in the message of [Mrs. Lowder's] massive florid furniture, the immense expression of her signs and symbols," these "huge, heavy objects," "abnormally affirmative" and "aggressively erect," "syllabled his hostess's story" (WD, 54–5). The insistently linguistic idiom in this section – the "language" of the house "syllables" its hostess's story with its "signs and symbols" – draws attention to the ways in which the description itself does not function as a portrait of the room.

We might put it this way: whereas the subject of the Balzacian description is a *room*, the subject of the Jamesian description is more properly speaking a *perception*. What is being described is not how the room *looks*, but what it is *like* to the person in it. James's method, as he reiterates over and over in the prefaces, is to present the world while seated "at the window" of a particular consciousness. Such narrative focalization means that descriptions of the novelistic world do not function primarily as part of a mise-en-scène. The room at Lancaster Gate is described in order to make clear how it is affecting the character inhabiting it, rather than in order to enable visualization

---

of listing non-focalized specific addresses and spatial coordinates as an itinerary, for instance in Gissing, "Down Pentonville Hill, up Euston Road, all along Marylebone Road, then northwestwards towards the point of his destination." See Michael Irwin, *Picturing: Description and Illusion in the Nineteenth Century Novel*, 156.

[5] An apposite passage on this score is Madam Merle's conversation with Isabel Archer in *The Portrait of a Lady*. To Isabel's defiant declaration "I don't care anything about his house," Madame Merle replies, "When you have lived as long as I, you will see that every human being has his shell, and that you must take the shell into account. By the shell I mean the whole envelope of circumstances. There is no such thing as an isolated man or woman; we are each of us made up of a cluster of appurtenances. What do you call one's self? Where does it begin? Where does it end? it overflows into everything that belongs to us – and then it flows back again…I've a great respect for *things!* One's self – for other people – is one's expression of one's self; and one's house, one's clothes, the book one reads, the company one keeps – these things are all expressive" (PL, Book XIX, #). Julia Prewitt Brown comments of this passage, "It would be difficult to find a more succinct statement of the philosophical presuppositions of nineteenth-century novelistic realism," adding that James would ultimately break from this tradition in his later fiction (*The Bourgeois Interior*, 84).

of a background where the narrative action is taking place. Visual inspection is one aspect of the affective experience of being in a space, but it is by no means the only one. "Nineteenth-century fiction is full of attempts to make the reader *see* what is taking place," Michael Irwin writes in a study of how description enables picturing.[6] Elaine Scarry argues a similar point more broadly in *Dreaming By the Book* (which I discuss at greater length in Chapter Three), where she suggests that novels give instructions for performing imaginative acts of "perceptual mimesis." Although picturing maintains an undeniable link to description in the history of the novel, my suggestion is that it is *not* the primary aim of the descriptions in James's late fiction.[7]

In fact, this observation is made by Woolf in "Phases of Fiction" (1929), an idiosyncratic survey of literary history. After discussions of, among others, Defoe ("Persistently, naturally, with a curious, almost unconscious iteration, emphasis is laid upon the very facts that most reassure us of stability in real life, upon money, furniture, food, until we seem wedged among solid objects in a solid universe" [CE 5:58]), Maupassant (the reality he brings before us "is always one of the body, of the senses – the ripe flesh of a servant girl, for example, or the succulence of food…It is all concrete; it is all visualized" [CE 5:61]), and Dickens (whose characters are instantly called into being by a pair of red-rimmed eyes, steel curlers, a white scar, but remain fixed as part of the design: "Human faces, scowling, grinning, malignant, benevolent, are projected at us from every corner. Everything is unmitigated and extreme" [CE 5:73]), she turns to James. When we take up *What Maisie Knew*, we have the sense of having left every world behind. "The visual sense which has

[6] Irwin, *Picturing*, 2. Irwin takes as exemplars Dickens, Hardy, Eliot and Gaskell, whose works are filled with descriptive set-pieces depicting faces, rooms, houses, and landscapes. He includes James at times in this list, although he also faults James for too little descriptive specificity, especially of physiognomies.

[7] Willa Cather spoke of the "popular superstition that 'realism' asserts itself in the cataloguing of a great number of material objects." Willa Cather, "The Novel Démeublé," *Willa Cather on writing: Critical Studies on Writing as an Art*, 45. It is this popular superstition of "realism" that I evoke in order to highlight the distinctiveness of James's description. Realism as such does not exist in pure form in a single author (although Balzac perhaps comes closest, not least because so many theories of realism have taken him as their exemplar), which is to say, evidence of non-realist passages of description can be found in supposedly realist authors. Nevertheless, the impurity of this category does not mean that the general characteristics it names in broad stroke are not present in certain texts, and the fact that the divide is not totally strict does not mean that it is not heuristically useful.

hitherto been so active, perpetually sketching fields and farmhouses and faces, seems now to fail or to use its powers to illuminate the mind within rather than the world without." The novelistic gaze now turns to that which cannot be pictured. "Henry James has to find an equivalent for the processes of the mind, to make concrete a mental state. He says, she was 'a ready vessel for bitterness, a sharp little porcelain cup in which biting acids could be mixed'. He is forever using this intellectual imagery. The usual supports, the props and struts of the conventions, expressed or observed by the writer, are removed" (CE 5: 81). The necessity of finding "an *equivalent* for the processes of the mind" would also be Woolf's own task, one that I will take up in subsequent chapters. Here she sounds a note that would be iterated in different forms by a number of writers – in turning away from picturing, the descriptive paradigm of modernist fiction could be characterized as turning from resemblance to equivalence.

Returning to Lancaster Gate, we could make a further refinement: if the subject of Balzac's description is the look of a room, the subject of James's description is more properly speaking the perception of an *atmosphere*. James's lexicon is suffused through and through with atmospheric vocabulary, and I want to take seriously its pervasiveness in order to argue that it shows his distinctive mode of conceptualizing perceptual experience and its representation in the novel.[8] Diffuse and unlocalizable, atmosphere is uncertain in its ontology but distinct in its character. At once vague (we cannot say where exactly it resides or what kind of being it has) and precise (we nevertheless feel it palpably), this concept offers a way of thinking about what, if not the look of things, it is that James's descriptions seek to make available. The qualities abstracted from the mass of objects in Lancaster Gate create a mood that cannot be conveyed through an inventory of goods

[8] Other atmospheric terms that become prominent in modernism include "penumbra" and "halo." On the importance of "rare matter," typically understood as molecular gases, in modernism (particularly air, fog, smoke, and haze), see Rohanna Green's PhD dissertation, *Atmospheric Modernism: Rare Matter and Dynamic Self-World Thresholds*. Green argues that the peculiar properties of rare, as opposed to dense, matter, including their semi-opacity, permeation, and blending, inform modernist representations of spatial experience and offer models for rethinking ontological boundaries between subject and object, and self and world.

or a visual report, and it is precisely this kind of atmosphere that the Jamesian passage is concerned with rendering. Immaterial but palpable, atmosphere may be in one sense vague and abstract, but it is also utterly *real*, capable of producing effects and acting on the world, as is repeatedly proven in the late novels. In his attention to the ethereal, James makes clear that what is real is not exhausted by what is physical. The pervasiveness of concepts and vocabulary of air in his work indicates a new conception of the ethereal, or better, a turn towards conceiving of reality as ethereal rather than material.[9] Whereas the solidity of matter is what signifies reality in the realist novel, James marks a turn toward locating what is real in the realm of the immaterial. His descriptive attention continually searches out what is in the air, and as the atmosphere becomes the locus of perception (not to mention the site of action), sensing rather than seeing becomes the dominant mode of perception. James writes of the artist's need to "guess the unseen from the seen" and the need to "go behind" what lies on the surface, a claim that became pervasive in modernism, which took surface/depth as one of its central oppositions.[10] But the descriptive texture of the novels themselves suggests that it would be more accurate to not to speak of going *behind* appearances, but of going *forth*, into the air. Not the camera (nor the x-ray, as Proust would characterize artistic vision) but the barometer is the instrument that stands closest to the work of Jamesian perception.

---

[9] Michel Serres and Peter Sloterdijk have both suggested that the gaseous is the paradigm of our time. In an interview with Bettina Funcke, "Against Gravity," Sloterdijk states, "All previous natural languages, including theoretical discourse [specifically the Frankfurt School], were developed for a world of weight and solid substances. They are thus incapable of expressing the experiences of a world of lightness and relations. Consequently they are not suited to articulate the basic experiences of the modern and the postmodern." For his part, Serres responds to a question about the end of philosophical systems, "The system's matter has changed 'phase,' at least since Bergson. It's more liquid than solid, more airlike than liquid, more informational than material. The global is fleeing towards the fragile, the weightless, the living, the breathing – perhaps toward the spirit (*Conversations about Science, Culture, and Time*, 121)?"

[10] The preoccupation with surface is, in Clement Greenberg's classic argument, characteristic of modernist abstraction, which developed from the increasing flattening of the visual plane across the canvas throughout the nineteenth century. See Clement Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoon." Mark McGurl highlights a number of strains of thought in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – notably Walter Pater's aestheticism and Bergson's philosophy – which conceived of "the *surface* of the object as the meeting place of matter and spirit. In the poetic project of Mallarmé, for example, obsessive attention to the literal surface of the text – to the apparently vulgar facts of printing, typography, and the shape of the page – enables an aesthetic of absolute transcendence, the idea being that it is *though* matter, not in simple denial of it, that one gains access to a realm of pure Being" (*The Novel Art*, 63).

The Art of Observation

As it is commonly understood, description transcribes what is perceived or observed without analysis or comment. Hence it maintains a strong link to vision: describing something seems to involve first of all detailing what it looks like, and numerous scholars have tied the prominence of description in the realist novel to the nineteenth century's privileging of visual inspection as the first means to knowledge.[11] We may think of Conrad's well-known claim in the preface to *The Nigger of the Narcissus* (1897) that the task of prose is "before all, to make you *see*!"[12] In James's late fiction, however, "seeing" is usually closer to its meaning as intellectual comprehension than it is to physical perception. Joyce sums up this distinction in contrasting realist and idealist vision, represented by Defoe and Blake respectively. Blake, the idealist, sees with the internal senses, with the "mind's eye" and with "the ear of his soul," proceeding subsequently to transfer his internal visions into matter. Defoe's starting-point, in contrast, is sensorial exactitude: he describes, reports, enumerates, and measures.[13] (Here we might also recall Woolf's comments on Defoe, "solid objects in a solid universe.") In James's late fiction, observation is rarely a matter of noticing facts about what is visible; his characters are visionaries more than they are eyewitnesses, and what they typically see is less a scene than a scenario.[14]

James lays out his theory of the novel programmatically in "The Art of Fiction," written in response to a widely-discussed essay of the same name by Walter Besant, an English antiquarian and

[11] "It is not coincidental that photography comes into being along with realism," Peter Brooks observes, "with the lens imitating the retina to reproduce the world" (*Realist Vision,* 3). And Bill Brown writes, "It remains customary to ascribe to the genre of the novel a specifically visual epistemic authority and to associate realism with other visualizing institutions" noting that the realist novel flourished in the same age as the development of the great museums, both seeming to say, "Look!" (*The Sense of Things*, 149). Brown's point here is in fact to draw attention to James's enlistment of nonvisual senses, as I will do, although he focuses on the proximity of touch in contrast to the distantiation of sight.

[12] Joseph Conrad, *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, 14. "Art itself may be defined as a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe, by bringing to light the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect (11)."

[13] James Joyce, *Occasional, Critical, and Political Writings*, 274-9.

[14] I borrow the "eyewitness/visionary" formulation from Mark McGurl, who, likening the golden bowl to the purloined letter, notes that the paradox of being hidden in full view is the ambiguity of "seeing" as physical sensation and as conceptual understanding (*The Novel Art*, 34).

popular novelist. Besant stated as the novel's first principle: "everything in Fiction which is invented and is not the result of personal experience and observation is worthless." After gathering the data from experience, the novelist must then carefully select and combine them according to the demands of the story.[15] He could be faithful to reality only by honing his art of observation, whose stylistic correlate is the art of description.

> It seems easy to describe; any one, it seems, can set down what he sees. But consider. How much does he see? There is everywhere, even in a room, such a quantity of things to be seen: far, far more in field and hedge, in mountain and in forest and beside the stream, are there countless things to be seen; the unpractised eye sees nothing, or next to nothing. Here is a tree, here is a flower, there is sunshine lying on the hill. But to the observant and trained eye, the intelligent eye, there lies before him everywhere an inexhaustible and bewildering mass of things to see.[16]

The art of fiction according to Besant necessitates first an education of the eye, where keenness of observation means being able to see *more*. This training in visual attention has two models: natural history and painting. Citing with approval the "remarkable descriptions" of one Mr. Jefferies, "a profound naturalist," Besant commends would-be novelists to undertake "daily practice in the description of things, even common things, that they have observed, by reporting conversations, and by word portraits of their friends," analogous to drawing exercises, in order to cultivate through practice the faculties of seeing, hearing, and noticing.[17]

It is no coincidence that the techniques of observation and description that were so essential to the nineteenth century novel were also central methods of natural history, particularly botany and zoology.[18] Balzac modeled himself on Buffon, and Zola undertook to introduce scientific rigor to

---

[15] Walter Besant, *The Art of Fiction*, 17–18. For more on the debate sparked by Besant's essay, including the responses of Robert Louis Stevenson and William Dean Howells, see Mark Spilka, "Henry James and Walter Besant: "The Art of Fiction" Controversy." Spilka writes that the last few decades of the 19th century witnessed "'that era of discussion,' as James put it, through which the novel in England and America acquired its modern credo (101)."

[16] Besant, *The Art of Fiction*, 20.

[17] Ibid., 21. Woolf's diaries attest precisely to such a practice, character sketches after dinners and social engagements, conceived self-consciously *as* writing exercises.

[18] For a history of description's importance to the development of botany in the Renaissance, when natural history came into being, see Brian Ogilvy, *The Science of Describing: Natural History in Renaissance Europe*. See Joanna

novelistic description. The understanding of the novelist as the careful observer of the social world, in the same way that the naturalist is the observer of the natural world, belongs to an empiricist epistemology that grounds itself on sensory information given in experience. In philosophy, this meant privileging concrete details of particulars over the abstraction of ideas through intellectual intuition (contra rationalism). In the case of aesthetics, it meant privileging fidelity to facts over the inventive powers of the imagination (contra Romanticism). James, who wrote ambivalently about "romance," tends not come down on one side, celebrating instead the combination of the two, even as he entrenches the opposition between them in the process.[19] So in a 1902 essay on Balzac, he attributes the latter's "unequalled power of putting people on their feet, planting them before us in their habit as they lived," to "a faculty nourished by observation, as much as one will, but with the inner vision all the while wide-awake, the vision for which ideas are as living as facts and assume an equal intensity" (LC, 2:95). Observation and "inner vision" combine in the Jamesian notion of what it means to "see."

In his own "Art of Fiction," James also insists on the need for observation, and he is often celebrated for his own observational powers ("endlessly observant and endlessly interested," Woolf writes of him). But if his epistemology is empiricist, it is strangely so, as evidenced by his simultaneous disinterest in concrete particulars.[20] Like Besant, he also recommends beginning from the observation of experience, but in James's hands, both of these terms receive a different inflection. Whereas for Besant, observational skill entails noticing ever more visual details while being able to order them according to the demands of the story, Jamesian aesthetics shifts the locus of perceptual attention, which results in a changed understanding of what it means for a novelist to

---

Stalnaker, *The Unfinished Enlightenment*, for Buffon's descriptive project in the context of eighteenth century French intellectual history.

[19] For more on James's engagement with romance, see Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, Chapter 6.

[20] Willa Cather would call the "power of observation" and its correlate, "the power of description," a "very low equipment" of the artist in "The Novel Démeublé" (1922), echoing Baudelaire's insistence on the importance of imagination in opposition to observation, where the artist's function is to invent, not to record.

be observant. He elaborates an art of describing that is not modeled on the science of describing, or more precisely, an art that was in the service of forms and ends distinct from those of other fields.[21] Although James's novels are deeply rooted in the social realities of its time, he insists throughout his critical writings on the separation of literature from history, reportage, and documentary, a stance that prefigures the more radical calls for aesthetic autonomy that would come to be a key tenet of modernism.

The notion of observation modeled on natural history encapsulated by Besant is essentially a positivist one. But as scholars have shown, the concept of observation has its own history, and it has at times been very differently understood. Before positivism, Ian Hacking argues, the concept of observation is not central to the empirical sciences. The word does not appear, for instance, in Francis Bacon. Bacon clearly sees "the difference between what is directly perceptible and those invisible events which can only be 'evoked'," but this distinction is, for him, "both obvious and unimportant." Similarly, Jonathan Crary notes that for Newton and Locke, the camera obscura functioned both as "a model simultaneously for the observation of empirical phenomena and for reflective introspection and self-observation."[22] In Hacking's account, the distinction between what is seen and what is thought really begins to matter only in the nineteenth century, when the very conception of 'seeing' undergoes something of a transformation. "After 1800, to see is to see the opaque surface of things, and all knowledge must be derived from this avenue. This is the starting point for both positivism and phenomenology…To positivism we owe the need to distinguish

[21] In the wake of developments in the empirical science in the nineteenth century, a number of scientists were also seeking different means of describing more accurately natural phenomena – e.g. waves, molecules, electrical currents – that were neither visible or substantial, and unlike anything known in ordinary experience. Gillian Beer traces the efforts of Maxwell, Tyndall, and Eddington in this regard, noting the shared problems of literary and scientific description. Gillian Beer, "Problems of Description in the Language of Discovery," in *Open Fields: Science in Cultural Encounter*.

[22] Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer*, 40.

sharply between inference and seeing with the naked eye (or other unaided senses)."[23] Critics have sometimes read James – understandably – as a phenomenologist, but he is curiously indifferent to surfaces and details.[24] His model of observation is one we might call post-positivist, where knowledge is not derived first of all from attending to the opaque surfaces of things.

Seeing and Sensing

James's protagonists have an uncanny ability to "see" a situation, to see it at once and as it really is. But this vision usually entails discerning the unseen relations between parts, inferring foregoing chains of events, and foreseeing subsequent consequences; it means grasping, seizing, sizing up – in short, understanding. Seeing in James tends more often to be an intellectual process than a physiological one, and in his late works, little of the drama takes visible forms (think, for instance, of the long excursus in *The Portrait of a Lady* that follows Isabel Archer's thoughts when she realizes the truth of her husband's relations with Madam Merle, during which she simply sits by the fire). Being able to see, that is, to understand instantaneously and without the aid of explanation, is both the measure of the "fineness" of a consciousness and also a way to separate those in the know from those who are not.[25] So the ultimate sign of mutual understanding between characters in the Jamesian world is seeing the same thing, and in all of these cases, the view is onto a situation, a state of affairs, a set of relations. The sense-perception of empirical observation is not strictly opposed to

[23] Ian Hacking, *Representing and Intervening: Introductory Topics in the Philosophy of Natural Science*, 169. For Hacking, positivists – such as Comte, Mach, or Carnap – make a sharp distinction between theory and observation. Philosophy of science in the 20th century has reacted in two ways: one by saying that there is no significant distinction between observable and unobservable entities (currently unobservable things will become observable as new techniques develop), and the other by saying that all observation statements are theory-loaded (171).
[24] See, for instance, Paul B. Armstrong, *The Phenomenology of Henry James*.
[25] Mark McGurl has pointed out the ways in which this distinction also marks social differentiations between different groups of interpreters in the novels, as well as a "Jamesian" reader from one who is not within the "common space of print culture (*The Novel Art*, 34)."

or separable from intellectual reflection, but nor is it any longer the starting point or the dominant element.[26]

What "seeing" means in James is made clear in a short chapter in Book I of *The Golden Bowl*, when Adam Verver first comprehends that his daughter Maggie worries for him, after she realizes that he is being hunted by the matrimonially-minded Mrs. Rance. As Maggie and Mrs. Assingham come upon him with Mrs. Rance in the billiard room, their appearance occasions in him, to borrow a phrase from Wittgenstein, the dawning of a new perception. "It *was* really remarkable: this perception expanded, on the spot, as a flower, one of the strangest, might at a breath have suddenly opened. The breath, for that matter, was more than anything else the look in his daughter's eyes – the look with which he *saw* her take in exactly what had occurred in her absence" (GB, 148). Maggie's realization about Mrs. Rance's designs in fact occurs to all the characters present, "counting out, that is, the Prince and the Colonel, who didn't care, and who didn't even see that the others did" (GB, 148). Adam Verver immediately discerns the others' realizations as well – he sees both *what* they see and *that* they see – but what matters is his "mute passage" with Maggie. "He again *saw* the difference lighted for her…For Maggie too at a stroke, almost beneficently, their visitor [Mrs. Rance] had, from being an inconvenience, become a sign." She is a sign for Maggie that her own marriage has left a vacancy in her father's "immediate foreground, his personal precint…They had made room in it for others – so others had become aware. He became aware for himself, for that matter, during the minute Maggie stood there before speaking; and with the sense moreover of what he saw her see he had the sense of what she saw *him*" (GB, 149, original emphases). Nor is this

[26] In Patrick Singy's account of observation before the ascendance of positivism, he argues that characteristics we tend to associate with skilled observers, sensory acuity, attention to minute details, and skepticism toward abstract theoretical thinking, are historically-determined values. For the pre-positivist observer, the acuity of the senses was not essential (it could even be epistemologically dangerous); attention is important, yet it serves the function not of perceiving details but of perceiving the relations between sensations; and observation and abstract thinking were two faces of the same coin rather than antagonistic epistemological practices. See Patrick Singy, "Huber's Eyes: the Art of Scientific Observation Before the Emergence of Positivism." See also Lorraine Daston and Elizabeth Lunbeck, eds. *Histories of Scientific Observation*.

even his "intensest perception." In the next instant, he sees even more in Fanny Assingham. "Her face couldn't keep it from him; she had seen, on top of everything, in her quick way, what they were both seeing" (GB, 149). In the narrative, this scene takes place in an instant, without any exchange of words or movement. But all the major characters, and even the minor Miss Lutches, instantly see, in Jamesian vocabulary, "where they are."

Adam Verver sees his daughter see. He sees her, moreover, see him see her see him. That is, she not only understands the situation, but also knows that he has seen her understand. On top of all this, Fanny Assingham sees not only what they both see but also sees them both see it. The mute passage between Maggie's vision and her father's is reminiscent of a scene featuring an earlier filial pair, Maisie and Mr. Beale in *What Maisie Knew* (1897). During a showdown after he has kidnapped her and taken her to his mistress's house, "while they sat together, there was an extraordinary mute passage between her vision of this vision and his, his vision of her vision, and her vision of his vision of her vision" (MK, 135). The clumsier formulation of the earlier novel makes clearer the non-naturalistic way in which James's reflective narrative principle is manifested and the strangeness with perception is depicted. The child Maisie is an exemplary non-intellectual observer, one who only sees with her eyes, not with her mind. She is the embodiment of a naïve positivist, proceeding to (often erroneous) knowledge only from observations gathered from the opaque surfaces of things. In James, where "seeing" rarely means looking at what is visible, knowledge tends to be derived less from the patient labor of observation than from feats of instantaneous realization that come closer to revelation.[27]

[27] The dynamics of sudden recognition when the reader comes into have been a linchpin in criticism since Percy Lubbock identified the dynamic in James's novels where "great hidden facts [pass] into possession of the reader *whole*…not broken into detail, bit by bit…but so implied and suggested that at some moment or other they spring up complete and solid in the reader's attention (*Craft of Fiction*, 176)." More recently, remarking on the peculiarity of Jamesian vision in her account of James as a pragmatist, Joan Richardson highlights its theological underpinnings of moments of revelation through the Swedenborgian influences inherited from Henry James Sr. and Henry Jr.'s important experience of reading of *Heaven and Hell*. In Swedenborg's cosmology, "The spiritual world is not an *other* world, but this one perceived in its intensities, seen as it were, with not only x-ray but all-ray vision. Seeing,

It will thus be unsurprising that in the Jamesian scenario, the visible realm is rarely informative. At a grand party shortly after her marriage in *The Golden Bowl*, for instance, Charlotte Stant is arrested by Colonel Assingham's gaze on a staircase, but visual cues yield little insight.

> This simplicity of his visual attention struck her, even with the other things she had to think about, as the quietest note in the whole high pitch – much in fact as if she had pressed a finger on a chord or a key and created, for the number of seconds, an arrest of vibration, a more muffled thump. The sight of him suggested indeed that Fanny would be there, though so far as opportunity went she hadn't seen her. This was about the limit of what it could suggest.
>
> The air, however, had suggestions enough – it abounded in them, many of them precisely helping to constitute those conditions with which, for our young woman, the hour was brilliantly crowned (GB, 213–214).

Although Charlotte is struck by the Colonel's visual attention, her impression of it is described notably in *sonic* rather than visual terms. From his presence she infers the presence of his wife, but that is the limit of what the *sight* of him could suggest. Directly the next sentence continues, "The air, however, had suggestions enough." The inferences that can be made on the basis of what is visible may be limited, but far more suggestive is what may be sensed in the atmosphere. Indeed, the air hangs heavy with suggestions in *The Golden Bowl*, which is essentially a novel about the potency of what does *not* take place. Maggie imposes her will and arranges all without ever saying anything directly. In effect, the second half of the novel unfolds on two planes, an explicit one existing in the world of speech and action, and a second, implicit one, taking place in the realm of thought, but both equally real.[28] Conversations are usually recounted twice, once to record what is said (if anything), and once to record what is *as if* said. In most cases, the latter is far more potent than the

---

understanding, and expressing the correspondences, the relations between all things visible and invisible, constitute the spiritual realm." See Joan Richardson, *A Natural History of Pragmatism*, 139. Like his brother William, Henry "loosened Swedenborg's cosmology from its theological moorings (139)."

[28] In this way we can read *The Golden Bowl* as a kind of continuation of *What Maisie Knew*, which also – though even more obviously – maintains a divide between the apparent and the implicit. In that case, it is explained through the child's perspective, which registers only the literal and fails to infer the implicit. Maisie, unlike Maggie, is not yet sensitive to what is in the air.

former; as Sharon Cameron notes, "thoughts become the medium in which meaning becomes audible, and speech the medium in which it is blocked."[29]

Indeed, suggesting rather than saying is usually – infamously – the preferred mode of communication in James, whose characters rarely syllable their story as explicitly as Mrs. Lowder's drawing room. And the atmosphere is the space where the implicit, neither spoken nor seen, exists and makes itself felt. In contrast, the order of the explicit, or the literal, corresponds to recording surfaces. But importantly, while not exactly on the surface, the order of the implicit is also not exactly interior or hidden. Remaining external in that it is perceptible to different perceivers, the order of the implicit exists rather *between* subjects, in the air. I will return to the distinction between explicit/implicit as a central analytic category through which to understand James when we turn to a more extended discussion of the notion of atmosphere. For now, let us simply note that atmosphere provides us with a way of conceptualizing that which is both empirical *and* immaterial – such is precisely the nature of relations, which are James's preeminent subject.

If looking at things fails to yield much knowledge, what is the alternative? The privileged mode of perception in James is made evident in a few passages from *The Golden Bowl*. In a conversation between Fanny Assingham and her husband, when he probes her as to whether her whole idea is that Maggie knows nothing of the affair between the Prince and Charlotte, she replies, "'It isn't my 'whole' idea. Nothing's my 'whole' idea – for I felt to-day, as I tell you, that there's so much in the air.' 'Oh in the air -!' the Colonel dryly breathed. 'Well, what's in the air always *has* – hasn't it – to come down to earth'" (GB, 302). This knowledge comes down to earth with a crash (the crash of a crystal bowl) later on in the novel, but the manner in which Mrs. Assingham first senses it is striking. Upon receiving a telegram from Maggie summoning her at once, she

[29] Sharon Cameron, *Thinking in Henry James*, 96.

understands that Maggie has finally discovered the revelation that she knew of the Prince's intimacy with Charlotte prior to his marriage.

> She had often put it to herself in apprehension, she tried to think even in preparation, that she should recognize the approach of her doom by a consciousness akin to that of the blowing open of a window on some night of the highest wind and the lowest thermometer. It would be all in vain to have crouched so long by the fire; the glass would have been smashed, the icy air would fill the place. If the air in Maggie's room then, on her going up, wasn't as yet quite the polar blast she had expected, it was none the less perceptibly such an atmosphere as they hadn't hitherto breathed together (GB, 429).

Although temperature is a significant feature in the analogy between Mrs. Assingham's apprehension of the significance of this telegram and feeling a blast of icy wind, perception is persistently described in terms of atmospheric sensitivity. The perceptual experience that James is most attentive to is of the kind we commonly call intuiting or sensing, in the way that we speak of sensing the tension in a room when we walk into it. Such perception yields knowledge not on the basis of visual or auditory relay of information, but an environmental attunement that is irreducible to conceptual analysis.

The nature of this kind of perceiving is clarified in another passage in *The Golden Bowl* when Maggie discerns, indistinctly but sharply, her husband's strain towards the end of the novel. "It was like hanging over a garden in the dark; nothing was to be made of the confusion of growing things, but one felt they were folded flowers and that their vague sweetness made the whole air their medium" (GB, 528-9). Reminiscent of Leibniz's *petites perceptions* (of which his favorite example was the murmur of the waves), the confusion of its component elements does not preclude the perception from having a character that is clear and distinct. Although unable to distinguish or to conceptually categorize her husband's intentions, Maggie has no trouble discerning their effects.[30]

[30] Grouping James together with Conrad, Ford, Proust, and Woolf as "literary impressionists," Jesse Matz argues that they all attempt to "reproduce the inchoate feelings that Impressionism locates between sensing and thinking (*Literary Impressionism and Modernist* Aesthetics, 65)." For Matz, "impression" is the key word for the inchoate borderlands of sense and intellect, and in the case of James, is associated with a particularly feminine acuity. There

The preoccupation with indistinct perception is in fact present from *The Golden Bowl*'s outset. Walking along Bond Street before his marriage, we meet the Prince as he pauses now and again "before a window in which objects massive and lumpish, in silver and gold, in the forms to which precious stones contribute, or in leather, steel, brass, applied to a hundred uses and abuses, were as tumbled together as if, in the insolence of Empire, they had been the loot of far-off victories" (GB, 43).[31] As in the Lancaster Gate scene with which we began, the objects in the window are again described in the plural, as a collective mass. This is not to say that the Prince's *impression* of them is itself unclear, but that he, like Densher, perceives them as an indistinct group. A perception may be indistinct because we are not aware of the discrete elements that comprise it, or it may be indistinct because what is being perceived is itself intrinsically indeterminate. This latter kind, like hanging over a garden in the dark, can produce an impression whose own character is perfectly clear, even if its content is confused. Such is the perceptual experience James's descriptions are concerned with, which, as we will see, also account for the distinct texture of his descriptions themselves.

Barometers of Reality

A thermometer appeared in the description of Mrs. Assingham's realization as feeling a blast of air, but in discussions of modern fiction, another meteorological gauge has featured with greater prominence. For Barthes, a barometer mentioned seemingly without any narrative significance in Flaubert's story, "Un Coeur simple," becomes the paradigmatic example of an object that signifies its reality through its very superfluousness to the narrative economy. "Useless details" appear in nineteenth century fiction in order to *de*note reality, but in Barthes's analysis they in fact *co*nnote "we

---

is no doubt that "impression" is a key term in modernism, but the notion of atmosphere, provides an essential and less-recognized trope by which James conceptualizes and figures the interactions of feeling and thinking in perceptual processes.

[31] Amerigo's perceptive blindness is linked to his social snobbery. He repeats twice the dictum that "at night all cats are grey," once in reference to the shopkeeper who first shows them golden bowl and members of his social class, and once again in reference to Maggie's likeness to her father, suggesting his association of the Ververs with the merchants. "Charlotte had more than once, from other days, noted, for his advantage, her consciousness of how, below a certain social plane, he never *saw*" (GB, 114).

are the real," creating a "reality effect." Incidentally, a barometer is also present in the description of Monsieur Grandet's hall cited at the beginning of this chapter, but the Balzacian barometer is emphatically not the Flaubertian one, for it is replete with significance. Earlier in *Eugénie Grandet*, we learn that in the provincial town of Saumur, "atmospheric vicissitudes control commercial life. Winegrowers, proprietors, wood merchants, coopers, innkeepers, mariners, all keep watch of the sun…A perpetual duel goes on between the heavens and their terrestrial interests. The barometer smooths, saddens or makes merry their countenances, turn and turn about."[32]

For Barthes, the presence of useless details in nineteenth century realism signals the emergence of a new paradigm of aesthetic verisimilitude. From the classical period through the Middle Ages, he writes, description was unbound by standards of exactitude or conformity to reality. "There is no hesitation to put lions or olive trees in a northern country; only the constraint of the descriptive genre counts; plausibility is not referential here but openly discursive: it is the generic rules of discourse which lay down the law."[33] In contrast, in the kind of verisimilitude associated with realism, "the referent's exactitude, superior or indifferent to any other function, governed and alone justified its description, or – in the case of descriptions reduced to a single word – its denotation: here aesthetic constraints are steeped – at least as an alibi – in referential constraints."[34] Once the real world rather than discursive conventions becomes the reference point of aesthetics, the question of whether a detail advances narrative intelligibility becomes irrelevant. The fact that the detail has a corresponding real referent – that such a barometer would be found in such a household – is sufficient in itself to warrant its inclusion in the story. Indeed, the presence of such details is required to guarantee of the truth of the fiction: by displaying its fidelity to fact. Accordingly, description becomes the element responsible for upholding a novel's measure of truth.

[32] Balzac, *Eugénie Grandet*, 5. This is exactly the kind of significant description Lukács so approves in "Narrate or Describe."
[33] Barthes, "The Reality Effect," 144.
[34] Ibid., 145.

Balzac stuffed his houses with details of period and type as evidence and alibi – the more accurately referential the description, the more real the fiction.

"This same 'reality' is the essential reference in historical narrative," Barthes goes on, "which is supposed to report 'what really happened': what does the non-functionality of detail matter, then, once it denotes 'what took place'; 'concrete reality' becomes the sufficient justification for speaking." It is no coincidence, Barthes goes on, that literary realism should have been approximately contemporary with "the regnum of 'objective' history, to which must be added the contemporaneous development of techniques, of works, and institutions based on the incessant need to authenticate the 'real': the photograph (immediate witness of 'what was here'), reportage, exhibitions of ancient objects…the tourism of monuments and historical sites."[35] Long before it entered the realm of *belles lettres*, description functioned as testimony, documentary report, and information-bearing guides for touristic, economic, and military ends, among others.[36] Little wonder, then, that it is in its descriptions that literature comes closest to being history. Nor is it surprising that description becomes the focus of censure for writers seeking to separate literature from history.

In this way, description is also the element in the novel that comes closest to photography. Writing on the centenary of photography a few decades before Barthes, Paul Valéry observes something similar about the questions photography raises for literature. It seemed initially as if this "*merveilleuse invention*" might diminish the importance of writing and displace it, rather than enlarging its scope. After all, "it is practically illusory to claim that language can convey the idea of how an object looks with any degree of precision."[37] However skilled at her craft, the writer who depicts a

[35] Ibid., 146. Tracing a different, more materialist account of description, Susan Stewart makes an argument that is not dissimilar to Barthes's in *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, which I discuss in the introduction. For her, however, the criterion of exactitude is always ideologically determined. "As the form of realism shifts to individual experience in its temporal and spatial context, the context of the interior of bourgeois space, it is the details of that context which become described, and such details must be described according to the conventions of bourgeois life" (27).
[36] For a history, see Philippe Hamon, *Introduction à l'analyse du descriptif*.
[37] Paul Valéry, "Centenaire de la photographie," 366.

landscape or a face will suggest as many different visions as she has readers. "Thus the existence of photography discourages us, rather, from wanting to describe what can inscribe itself by its own means." But if photography, with its conquest of movement, color, and depth, "discourages us from describing," by this same token it also encourages writers to exploit the means of expression and production proper to them and them alone.[38] In many ways Valéry echoes the injunction made several centuries earlier by Lessing in his famous discussion of the relation between word and image. If the photograph furnishes the visual description of the world par excellence, then the novel should describe something other than the world seen.[39] Valéry distinguishes history from literature by the different kinds of testimony they provide. History knows only what took place: its constituents are comprised of things seen, moments witnessed, things that could have been captured on camera. "*All the rest is literature*. All that is left consists of those components of the story or of the thesis that are products of the mind, consequently, imaginations, interpretations or constructions, bodiless things by nature imperceptible to the photographic eye or the phonographic ear, which thus could not have been observed and transmitted in their purity."[40]

For James, literature, no less than history or photography, has reality as its referent and its yardstick. His literature attests, however, to the reality of what is *not* visible, what has *not* been said, what has *not* taken place, but what is, for all that, utterly real. No barometer is named in any Jamesian room (in his world material well-being rarely depends on the mercy of the heavens), but his characters themselves become instruments sensitive to atmospheric vicissitudes, which vibrate with

[38] Ibid., 367. For Valéry the "purification" of language leads to two paths, one toward the expression of abstract thought, the other to the expression of poetic patterns.
[39] Or eliminate description altogether, as Valéry advocated, in favor of attention to the pure qualities of language, exemplified in poetry.
[40] Valéry, "Centenaire de la photographie," 371. Theo Davis argues that James's comments on the difference between the novel and the photograph testifies to "his interest in seeing and showing not the world (as the photograph does) but abstractions from it" ("Out of the Medium in Which Books Breathe," 413). So for instance in *A Small Boy*, he likens his drawing master's "little detached dashes" rendering cottages and trees to "stories told in words of one syllable, or even more perhaps in short gasps of delight" (cited 411).

a nexus of relations, palpable though invisible.[41] Lumping together objects that could be anything so long as they are scalloped and fringed, likening perception to sensing a change of wind, the enumeration of "concrete details," useless or otherwise, recedes from importance. The "reality effect" becomes what James identifies as the only criterion for a novel, the "air of reality," and what is most real for him is precisely what is in the air.

The Atmosphere of Experience

It would be hard to dissent from Besant's injunction to write from experience, James affirms in "The Art of Fiction," but "what kind of experience is intended, and where does it begin and end?" He answers in an oft-cited passage, "Experience is never limited, and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue." Much in the same way that his brother William posited the idea of a free-flowing stream of thought to refute the associationist view that consciousness is made up of discrete thoughts "about" this or that thing which come into and out of attention in a train, James rejects the notion of experience as bounded and comprised of discrete "incidents" that follow one another successively.[42]

His remarks are also directed at opposing a vulgar or naïve kind of materialism about what comprises experience. "It is the very atmosphere of the mind; and when the mind is imaginative - much more when it happens to be that of a man of genius - it takes to itself the faintest hints of life, it converts the very pulses of the air into revelations" (AF, 10). James's critique is not that novels have been too empiricist in their treatment of experience, but rather, that they have not been

[41] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's brilliant essay "The Weather in Proust" contains a discussion of Proust's explicit figuring of himself as a barometer, which entails containing within him a barometer, particularly one that he remembers from childhood in Combray that features a little man who doffs his hat when rain is imminent. Sedwick emphasizes that unlike discrete, isolable elements such as temperature, a barometer works by sensing atmospheric pressure, which can only be interpreted structurally and systemically. See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Weather in Proust*.

[42] For a summary of James's relation to evolutionary associationism, see Edward S. Reed, *From Soul to Mind*, Chapter 11.

empiricist *enough*, for what is empirical is not exhausted by what is physical. Although he emphasizes the transformative work of artistic imagination, he also maintains the need for fiction to be rooted in experience. So in the origin myth for his own work repeated over and over in the prefaces, his stories begin with a "germ" or a *donnée*, often an incidental or overheard anecdote, which forms the "lacerated lump of life" (AN, 120) out of which the stories grow. James's empirical commitments sound in the very word "*donnée*," the given, but he finds his most suggestive givens in the "air-borne particles" that experience catches in its web, the "atmosphere" of the mind, and the "pulses of the air" that the imagination converts into revelations.

Even the action in James's novels tends to be described in terms of the climates in which events take place. When the Prince serves tea to Charlotte in his drawing-room as they officially commence their illicit relations in *The Golden Bowl*, "the whole demonstration...presented itself as taking place at a very high level of debate – in the cool upper air of the finer discrimination, the deeper sincerity, the larger philosophy" (GB, 251).[43] A litany of other examples could be cited.[44] Air in James is colored and scented; it hangs (heavily, more often than not) over the proceedings, or is a cool element suspended on high; it thickens with intimations, pulses with vibrations, reverberates with tones, and sounds with notes.[45] "The power to guess the unseen from the seen, to trace the

[43] Of course, that this air is be "upper" and "finer" is important, since the adulterous nature of the relationship would have been for many readers morally objectionable. In *The Novel Art*, Mark McGurl also points to the importance of dimensionality in terms of social distinctions, which James recodes as intellectual distinctions. See note 43.

[44] For instance, just from *The Wings of the Dove*, "He would help her to the utmost of his power for, all the rest of that day and the next, her easy injunction, tossed off that way as she turned her beautiful back, was like the crack of a great whip in the blue air, the high element in which Mrs. Lowder hung" (WD, 53). Mrs. Stringham remembers her time in Switzerland and Germany during her youth in great sensory detail, "The irrecoverable days had come back to her from far off; they were part of the sense of the cool upper air and of everything else that hung like an indestructible scent to the torn garment of youth – the taste of honey and the luxury of milk, the sound of cattle-bells and the rush of streams, the fragrance of trodden balms and the dizziness of deep gorges" (WD, 85). Characters are marked by the atmospheres in which they have moved, so Densher is changed by his cosmopolitan upbringing: "But brave enough though his descent to English earth, he had passed, by the way, through zones of air that had left their ruffle on his wings, had been exposed to initiations indelible" (WD, 67).

[45] As Thomas Otten notes in a brief discussion of James's preoccupation with air, it "serves for James as the cynosure of the aesthetic." Thomas Otten, *A Superficial Reading of Henry James*, 155. Seeking to make air amenable to a "new materialist" critical approach, Otten insists on its material qualities, making it not "an evanescent image to maintain the aesthetic as a wholly autonomous realm of experience, a world one cannot touch,"

implication of things, to judge the whole piece by the pattern…this cluster of gifts may almost be said to constitute experience" (AF, 11), James writes in "The Art of Fiction," famously urging the would-be novelist to be someone on whom nothing is lost. But perceptual acuity, as I have suggested, is measured not by seeing more visual details, but by sensitivity to air-borne vibrations and the ability to convert its pulses into revelations. "If experience consists of impressions, it may be said that impressions *are* experience, just as (have we not seen it?) they are the very air we breathe" (AF, 11).

Before going on to closer examinations of the novels, a word is in order about the concept of atmosphere, which is suggestively elaborated as the fundamental concept of aesthetics by the contemporary German philosopher Gernot Böhme. As he observes, this term is by no means foreign to aesthetic discourse, but we tend to use it with a little embarrassment.[46] "One has the impression that 'atmosphere' is meant to indicate something indeterminate, difficult to express, even if it is only in order to hide the speaker's own speechlessness. It is almost like Adorno's '*Mehr*' which also points in evocative fashion to something beyond rational explanation."[47] In our ordinary speech, when we say that a garden is serene or that one is enveloped in a tense atmosphere upon entering a room, or that a person is surrounded by an erotic atmosphere, this term "indicates something that is in a certain sense indeterminate, diffuse but precisely not indeterminate in relation

---

but rather "produced by a whole system of objects, indeed…*the* figure of the object system itself (155)." Otten assumes that the immateriality of air renders it less real, whereas I am concerned with arguing for the reality of what is immaterial. However, Otten's understanding of atmosphere as the place in which things (and relations) make themselves felt is similar to the argument I wish to make about its importance in James. I have not found other commentary explicitly concerning the importance of air or atmosphere as a Jamesian trope.

[46] Gernot Böhme, "Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept of a New Aesthetics," 113; "Atmosphäre als Grundbegriff einer neuen Ästhetik," *Atmosphäre: Essays zur neuen Ästhetik*, 21. He discusses Walter Benjamin's concept of "aura" as one term through which aesthetics has treated of atmosphere. Böhme seeks to expand aesthetics to include domains usually excluded, especially fields associated with trade and commerce, such as cosmetics and set design. The concept of atmosphere has been taken up in the fields of architecture, urban planning, sociological studies dealing with marketing and advertising. Aside from the field of ecocriticsm, to my knowledge literary critics have not responded with great interest to the concept of atmosphere. Böhme also remains largely untranslated in English.

[47] Böhme, "Atmosphere," 113.

to its character."[48] The indeterminacy of atmospheres lies in particular in their ambiguous ontological status. "We are not sure whether we should attribute them to the objects or environments from which they proceed or to the subjects who experience them. We are also unsure where they are. They seem in a certain way to fill the space with a tone of feeling like a haze." In particular, Böhme adds, they have a "peculiar intermediary status between subject and object."[49] "Always spatially 'without borders, disseminated and yet without place, that is, not localizable,' they are affective powers of feeling, spatial bearers of moods."[50]

In arguing that James is interested in describing atmosphere, what I mean to say is that he is interested in describing – typically through highly elaborate, extended similes and metaphors – the distinct character of something that is however intrinsically vague in that it is diffuse, unlocalizable, and without clear ontological status. By these three measures, his vocabulary is saturated with language that we can broadly call atmospheric: "vibration," "reverberation," "pulsation"; acoustic or musical terms such as "tone," "note," "pitch," and "key"; the olfactory language of scents and smells; and not least, "air" itself. In an essay on Flaubert from 1874, James takes the latter to task for his assiduous attention to "'render[ing]' things - anything, everything, from a chimney-pot to the shoulders of a duchess - as painters render them" (FN, 171), which he sought to rectify in his own work by turning to the realm of what is not visible. "Human life, [Flaubert] says, is before all things a spectacle, a thing to be looked at, seen, apprehended, enjoyed with the eyes. What our eyes show us is all that we are sure of; so with this we will, at any rate, begin." But, James famously urges, "We

[48] Ibid., 114. We have a wide range of vocabulary with which to characterize atmosphere, Böhme writes. Indeed, it is the entire range of descriptive language, whose limits I discuss in Chapter Four.
[49] Ibid., 114 and 118.
[50] Ibid., 119. The citation is from the phenomenologist Hermann Schmitz's writings about atmosphere.

admit nevertheless that there is something else, beneath and behind, that belongs to the realm of vagueness and uncertainty, and into this we must occasionally dip" (FN, 170).[51]

Although James speaks of going "beneath and behind," the opposition of surface to depth – with its correlates interior/exterior and appearance/reality – fails to capture what is distinctive about his work, even if these are often the terms he himself uses in his critical writings.[52] I want to suggest instead that the central analytic distinction in his works is the one between the literal and the implicit. James is famous for his obliqueness and his refusal to state things directly; it is entirely possible to read pages upon pages without, at the end of them, being able to say what has happened. This feature, manifested syntactically in the long, labyrinthine sentences, is a prominent reason for his reputation as a "difficult" writer. So much is clear in the standard narrative, but what exactly is the nature and the effects of this interest in the implicit?

My contention is that James's interest in the plane of the implicit corresponds to the importance of atmosphere, which has a similarly uncertain ontological status, and that this concept gives us a fresh understanding of some familiar features of his work. James wants to describe, to stage, to make available the experience of sensing what does not present itself to appearance, what lacks the assurance of the indicative, but which nevertheless exists. The implicit is real in that it makes itself felt and has effects in the real world, yet it *is* not, if the order of "is" is the order of what actually takes place. We sense the implicit aspects of an interaction or a conversation in the way that we sense the character of an atmosphere when we walk into a room. If we move away from the reflexive identification of the pair surface/depth with corresponding oppositions of interior/exterior

[51] He also faults Flaubert for being concerned being interested only in "what *is*," without venturing beneath or behind, which for James means delving into the moral realm of the "ought."

[52] And also the ones used by critics. For instance, Myra Jehlen writes that while James grasped Flaubert's principle as description, "he was essentially mistaken about how Flaubert understood description, which was, differently from James, as the mode of writing that penetrated farthest and deepest…[Flaubert] did not assume, with James, that description was limited to surfaces, neither literally nor epistemologically." For James, on the other hand, "the division between the outside world and the life within was both insurmountable and essential to the meaning of both realms. Inside was where reality realized itself." See Myra Jehlen, *Five Fictions in Search of Truth*, 48 and 49.

and appearance/reality, James's insistence on reckoning with what does not lie on the surface takes on a different resonance. The privileged domain in his novels, that which he tries to find the language to describe, is not the realm of the visible but the realm of the palpable.[53] It is in these terms that James's critique of surface descriptions and his insistence on narrative techniques of "indirection" may be understood: the task is not so much to go *behind* appearances as to go *forth* into the air.

In the distinction between the literal and the implicit, it is not that one realm exists and the other one does not, that one is real and the other fictional, or that one is true and the other invented. James's critique of realism and naturalism, like those of later modernists such as Proust and Woolf, does not advocate a turn away from the real world, but points out that the real world has been too readily conflated with the material one. It calls for broadening the category of reality rather than rejecting it, expanding the given data of experience rather than finding experience inadequate. To say that the realists have not been real *enough* is not to reject the empirical but to urge a more radical kind of empiricism.[54] It is to take seriously, to include in the given of experience, vibrations in the air no less than the concreteness of tables and chairs. Both the literal and the implicit spheres of an interaction are real and existing, but they have different modes of being. One sphere exists in what is said and done, in the appearance of a room and the particular objects within it. The other's existence, while not separate from the first, has a more equivocal ontology and location, and it is this sphere that James's descriptions seek to make available.

---

[53] The OED gives as two definitions for this word both "that which may be touched, felt, or handled; perceptible by the sense of touch; tangible"; and "readily observable by a sense other than touch; plainly observable; noticeable." I wish to emphasize here the idea of something that exists empirically without being visible, or that which is so potent as to feel tangible.

[54] I am of course alluding to William James's philosophy of radical empiricism, which is characterized by a rejection of any substantial distinction between subject and object in favor of his theory of "pure experience," bits of which occupy positions that we call subjective or objective in particular situations, but which could change. For a discussion of the radical empiricism of both James brothers, see David Lapoujade, *Fictions du pragmatisme*.

That which fills the Jamesian air most palpably is *relations*, a term as ubiquitous as air in his vocabulary. For Böhme, making atmosphere the central term yields a different kind of aesthetics, one that is not centered on issuing judgments (that is, providing justifications for responses) but instead more attentive to sensuous experience.[55] Such an aesthetics is "concerned with the relation between environmental qualities and human states. This 'and,' this in-between, by means of which environmental qualities and states are related, is atmosphere."[56] The "and" or the "between" of relations is also precisely the subject of James's concern, both relations between people and objects, and between people and people. The concept of atmosphere thus provides a means of figuring the aspects of experience that he is trying to make available, the palpable things we sense and intuit, though we cannot see or locate them in any specific object or place.

Moreover, turning to atmosphere also provides a way of accounting for some of the peculiarities of James's late style, that is, the atmosphere that his own writing produces. The atmospheric effect produced by a text itself need not of course be the same as the atmosphere that the text is describing, although the two may coincide.[57] We should also take care to make another distinction. The fact that atmosphere names something intrinsically vague does not mean the term *itself* is incapable of being precise.[58] The embarrassment that tinges the use of this term derives from its seeming lack of rigor – it appears to be a last resort, invoked only when we cannot say anything

[55] Böhme calls this approaching aesthetics through the viewpoint of nature or ecology. I am less concerned with evaluating his program for a new aesthetics than the ways in which his suggestion about the fundamental concept of atmosphere elucidates the descriptive techniques in James and their consequences. Böhme's characterization of the old judgmental (i.e. Kantian) aesthetics is arguable. But his idea that aesthetic work (in a broad range of realms) should be understood as "the production of atmospheres," and that perception should be understood as "the experience of the presence of persons, objects and environments" remains provocative.

[56] Ibid., 114.

[57] As Sianne Ngai writes in a very similar discussion of "tone" and the difficulty of characterizing it as subjective or objective, "we can speak of a literary text whose global or organizing affect is disgust, without this necessarily implying that the work represents or signifies disgust, or that it will disgust the reader (though in certain cases it may also do so)." She goes on to ask, "Exactly 'where,' then, is the disgust?" (*Ugly Feelings*, 29-30). This is exactly the difficulty in speaking of atmosphere, a term that Ngai also uses, citing the work of the phenomenologist Mikel Dufrenne.

[58] Böhme makes this point. Although "atmosphere" is used "as an expression for something vague, this does not necessarily mean that the meaning of this expression is itself vague" (118).

more specific or more analytical. So in *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, William Empson identifies atmosphere as something mysterious, if not mystical. Critics have sometimes suggested "that what the poet has conveyed is no assembly of grammatical meanings, capable of analysis, but a 'mood,' an 'atmosphere,' a 'personality,' an attitude to life, an undifferentiated mode of being." Such a position holds that "any grammatical analysis of poetry, since it must ignore atmosphere, is trivial; that atmosphere is conveyed in some unknown and fundamental way as a by-product of meaning; that analysis cannot hope to do anything but ignore it; and that criticism can only state that it is there."[59] Such a view is precisely what I would like to resist. Atmosphere names something whose vagueness and indeterminacy in one way (in location, ontology) does not exclude its specificity and determination in another (its character, its effects). It is thus particularly helpful for thinking about James, who is similarly at once vague and precise.

Atmospheric Spaces

For Böhme, the primary "object" of perception is atmospheres. "What is first and immediately perceived is neither sensations nor shapes or objects or their constellations, as Gestalt psychology thought, but atmospheres, against whose background the analytic regard distinguishes such things as objects, forms, colours etc."[60] So it is that in being confronted with the drawing room at Lancaster Gate, Densher's impression is not of any particular cabinet or chair, but a general impression of things being "scalloped and fringed and corded and drawn." He senses the room's atmosphere, that is, what it is *like* to be in the room, which is not dependent on perceiving discrete

[59] William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, 17. Georg Lukács uses the term in much the same way when he comments on the current "general atmosphere" in his Preface to *Studies in European Realism*. "The clouds of mysticism which once surrounded the phenomena of literature with a poetic colour and warmth and created an intimate and 'interesting' atmosphere around them, have been dispersed." Things are now illuminated by the cold, hard, searching light of Marxism. Georg Lukács, *Studies in European Realism*. More recently, Sianne Ngai has pointed out the difficulties this theoretical concept – in her terms, "tone" – poses to analysis, but also the work it does implicitly. See Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 28-30.
[60] Ibid., 125.

objects but rather, "an indeterminate spatially extended quality of feeling."[61] Here we might also recall Maggie, sensing her husband's discomfort as if she hanging over a garden in the dark. What is described in all of these cases is a form of perception, we might call it intuition, that is at once clear and *in*distinct.

We have already seen the language of air used in "The Art of Fiction" to imagine "experience" and "reality." Such terms are also pervasive in James's discussions of character and personality, attending his well-known architectural metaphors. In the preface to *The Portrait of a Lady*, he writes famously of "the house of fiction," which has "not one window, but a million – a number of possible windows not to be reckoned" (AN, 46). The structure and symmetry of his novels' designs is often noted, but what is less remarked is that an essential element of the trope of architecture lies in the *atmospherics* of space. Buildings are important not only in their geometrical dimensions but also because they create and house atmospheres – it is in this way that they are able to provide a likeness for relations.[62] Understood experientially rather than geometrically, that is, in the kind of environment certain spatial configurations create, these familiar Jamesian tropes are given a new turn.

In the preface to the *Wings of the Dove*, James explains his narrative principle as requiring the establishment of "'successive centers'…fixing them so exactly that the portions of the subject commanded by them as by happy points of view, and accordingly treated from them, would constitute, so to speak, sufficiently solid *blocks* of wrought material, squared to the sharp edge, as to

[61] Ibid., 117-8.

[62] For a discussion of creating atmospheres through spatial design, see the phenomenology-influenced the architect Peter Zumthor's *Atmospheres: Architectural Environments, Surrounding Objects*. For more on architectural language in fiction and the analogy between literature and architecture, see Ellen Eve Frank, *Literary Architecture*; for a discussion of literature, domestic interiors, and architecture in the nineteenth century, see Sharon Marcus, *Apartment Stories*. I have not pursued the architectural line more here in itself because my subject is not so much rooms or buildings as such but what the descriptions of these things can tell us about what it means to describe in the novel. There is an extensive critical literature on space in literature. See Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*; Joseph Frank, "Spatial Form in Modern Literature"; W. J. T. Mitchell, "Spatial Form in Literature: Towards a General Theory."

have weight and mass and carrying power" (AN, 296). Thus he characterizes himself as watching Milly, "as it were, through the successive windows of other people's interest in her" (AN, 306), with each of these "reflectors" or "registers" requiring full development themselves if they are to offer expansive views. "Terms of amplitude, terms of atmosphere, those terms, and those terms only, in which images assert their fullness and roundness, their power to revolve, so that they have sides and backs, parts in the shade as true as parts in the sun – these were plainly to be my conditions, right and left" (AN, 296). These centers of consciousness need to be solid masses, but for full "amplitude" they also require volume. The geometrical and material terms composing James's trope of the house of fiction also include importantly an amorphous, immaterial element. So he writes of his characters' "who and what and how and why and whence and whither," "One's main anxiety, for each one's agents, is that the air of each shall be *given*…The young man's situation, personal, professional, social, was to have been so decanted for us that we should get all the taste; we were to have been penetrated with Mrs. Lowder, by the same token, saturated with her presence, her 'personality,' and felt all her weight in the scale" (AN, 299). The terms in which James conceives of personality (according to social markers no less than individual temperament) are atmospheric, anticipating Woolf's characterization of the phantom Mrs. Brown that "the impression she made was overwhelming. It came pouring out like a draught, like a smell of burning" (CE, 3:425).

This is even clearer in the extended description of Adam Verver when he is introduced for the first time in *The Golden Bowl*. Seemingly nondescript and unremarkable, we might well wonder how such an unprepossessing man should "have got, so early, to where he was."

> It argued a special genius; he was clearly a case of that. The spark of fire, the point of light, sat somewhere in his inward vagueness as a lamp before a shrine twinkles in the dark perspective of a church; and while youth and early middle-age, while the stiff American breeze of example and opportunity were blowing upon it hard, had made of the chamber of his brain a strange workshop of fortune. This establishment, mysterious and almost anonymous, the windows of which, at hours of highest pressure, never seemed, for starers and wonderers, perceptibly to glow, must in fact have been during certain years the scene of an unprecedented, a miraculous white-

> heat, the receipt [i.e. "recipe"] for producing which it was practically felt that the master of the forge couldn't have communicated even with the best intentions (GB, 130).

As happens repeatedly throughout this course of the novel, the mind is described in terms of an edifice, here both an industrial building and a dark church.[63] The significance of the burning forge as a figure for Adam Verver's mind is obvious. Images associated with industrial production recur in relation to both Ververs, underscoring their difference from the Prince and Charlotte Stant, who are aristocratic of spirit and untainted by commerce, though penniless. But heat in particular appears insistently to figure the intensity of mental workings, "the essential pulse of the flame, the very action of the cerebral temperature, brought to the highest point, yet extraordinarily contained" (GB, 131). There were in fact contemporaneous investigations into the temperature of the brain in the empirical sciences. William James's *Principles of Psychology* included a section on "Cerebral Thermometry" in the chapter "General Conditions of Brain Activity," where he cites the conclusion of one scientist, made on the basis of 60,000 observations of applying "delicate thermometers and electric piles placed against the scalp in human beings," that "any intellectual effort, such as computing, composing, reciting poetry silently or aloud, and especially that emotional excitement such as an anger fit, caused a general rise of temperature, which rarely exceeded a degree Farenheit" (PP 1:100).

In *The Golden Bowl*, cerebral temperature quickly leads to a language of broader atmospherics. "Mr Verver then, for a fresh full period, a period betraying, extraordinarily, no wasted year, had been inscrutably monotonous behind an iridescent cloud. The cloud was his native envelope – the soft

[63] A little later, "*His* real friend, in all the business, was to have been his own mind, with which nobody had put him in relation. He had knocked at the door of that essentially private house, and his call, in truth, had not been immediately answered; so that when, after waiting and coming back, he had at last got in, it was, twirling his hat, as an embarrassed stranger, or, trying his keys, as a thief at night. He had gained confidence only with time, but when he had taken real possession of the place it had been never again to come away (GB, 145)." The house as a trope for the mind, of course, has an old history. See Frances Yates, *The Art of Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).

looseness, so to say, of his temper and tone, not directly expressive enough, no doubt, to figure an amplitude of folds, but of a quality unmistakeable to sensitive feelers" (GB, 131). The focus of descriptive attention here is notably not on details of physiognomy (although these are not absent, they are not central), nor is it on recounting actions (no specific deals or acquisitions are mentioned as examples of Adam Verver's industrial successes). Like the decanted essence evoked in the preface to the *Wings of the Dove* that must be distinctly and palpably released into the air, the effects exuded by Mr. Verver make themselves felt in the environment around him. Less than enumerating specific qualities, what James is concerned with describing is a person's atmosphere, which is sensible without being localizable in any one trait or action. As Woolf would put the problem later when she encounters difficulty in describing her father, Leslie Stephen, "the whole was different from the qualities of which it was made" (MB, 111). The mark of perceptiveness is thus being a "sensitive feeler" – or having sensitive feelers – capable of registering even the subtlest of fluctuations.

Even in physiognomic descriptions, tropes that are at once architectural and spatial continue to proliferate. Something about Adam Verver makes "his relation to any scene or any group…a matter of the back of the stage, of an almost visibly conscious want of affinity with the footlights" (GB, 160). He is lacking in all marking or distinction. "His neat colourless face provided with the merely indispensable features, suggested immediately, for a description, that it was *clear*, and in this manner somewhat resembled a small decent room, clean-swept and unencumbered with furniture, but drawing a particular advantage, as might presently be noted, from the outlook of a pair of ample and uncurtained windows" (GB, 161). The eyes are, in standard fashion, compared to windows, but the way in which Adam Verver's face *resembles* a clean-swept and unencumbered room is clearly no relationship of visual mimesis. Whereas earlier the casual spectator could discern nothing of the blazing fires within the forge of his mind, now the windows are "uncurtained."

> There was something in Adam Verver's eyes that both admitted the morning and the evening in unusual quantities and gave the modest area the outward extension of a

> view that was 'big' even when restricted to the stars. Deeply and changeably blue, though not romantically large, they were yet youthfully, almost strangely beautiful, with their ambiguity of your scarce knowing if they most carried their possessor's vision out or most opened themselves to your own. Whatever you might feel, they stamped the place with their importance, as the house-agents say; so that on one side or the other you were never out of their range, were moving about, for possible community, opportunity, the sight of you scarce knew what, either before them or behind them (GB, 161).

It is not hard to see why some readers have faulted James for insufficient descriptive specificity.[64] The absence of precise details about many of Adam Verver's features makes it difficult to picture with any exactitude what he looks like. Indeed, although there are a few of the more standard specifications (his eyes are "deeply blue" though not "romantically large"), what is striking in this passage is how unconcerned it is with visual portraiture. Even though it concerns physical appearance, this description is not a representational portrait.

Relational Likeness

That the Jamesian world is a profoundly relational one is not a revelation. James himself continually asserts this claim, while also stressing the importance of the design woven by these relations, the figure in the carpet.[65] The most important side of James, Woolf writes in 1918, is suggested by the design he made to explain his conception of *The Awkward Age*. It featured, in James' own words, "'the neat figure of a circle consisting of a number of small rounds disposed at equal distances about a central object. The central object was my situation, my subject in itself…and

[64] Michael Irwin identifies in James (as in Austen) an absence of precise physiognomic descriptions compared with Dickens or Hardy. In contrast to Lucy Deane and Maggie Tulliver, Irwin writes, "Elinor Dashwood or Kate Croy may take on sufficient visual life for the roles assigned to them, but they certainly have none to spare. Physically insubstantial and imperceptive, they lack a vital dimension (*Picturing*, 41).

[65] Michael Levenson notes that James wrote to Hugh Walpole not long after finishing *The Ambassadors* that it is "a picture of relations." Levenson reads this as another expression of "the desire to avoid the contingencies of experiences; 'relation,' as it stands, bestows no content on any human tie; it escapes the definition of love, envy, respect or loathing, and allows James to arrange his characters as though they were colors and masses in a pictorial composition" (*Modernism and the Fate of Individuality*, 29). Evoking Mallarmé's description of himself as a "*syntaxier*," implying that "relations between words matter more than words themselves," Maude Ellman comments, "James could be described as a syntaxer of love, whose sexual combinations are determined by a grammar of relations, rather than by any personal endowments of the characters. This grammar has a certain 'give' to it; characters may rearrange themselves like parts of speech, altering the syntax of the sentence, but they accrue identity from their positions, from 'whereness' rather than from 'whoness,' to borrow Joyce's coinages." Maud Ellman, *The Nets of Modernism: Henry James, Virginia Woolf, James Joyces and Sigmund Freud*, 37.

the small rounds represented so many distinct lamps, as I liked to call them, the function of each of which would be to light with all due intensity one of its aspects." Citing this passage, Woolf concludes, "One has to look for something like that in the later books – not a plot, or a collection of characters, or a view of life, but something more abstract, more difficult to grasp, the weaving together of many themes into one theme, the making out of a design (CE, 2:348)."[66] Although James is usually hailed as a psychological realist, the central category in his works is not so much an individual mind as a situation, i.e. a relational nexus. The real Jamesian hero, T. S. Eliot comments, is the "social entity," his general scheme, "not one character, nor a group of characters in a plot or merely in a crowd. The focus is a situation, a relation, an atmosphere, to which the characters pay tribute."[67] The highly general term "relation" is ubiquitous throughout James's corpus, but here is one passage from *The Ambassadors,* when Lambert Strether first meets Mme. de Vionnet, which gives a sense of its range and complexity.

> He couldn't help it; it was not his fault; he had done nothing; but by a turn of the hand she had somehow made their encounter a relation. And the relation profited by a mass of things that were not, strictly, in it or of it; by the very air in which they sat, by the high, cold, delicate room, by the world outside and the little splash in the court, by the first Empire and the relics in the stiff cabinets, by matters as far off as those and by others as near as the unbroken clasp of her hands in her lap and the look her expression had of being most natural when her eyes were most fixed (AM, 173).

To know someone, indeed, to turn one's head and look at someone, is to be in relation with them. These extend in all directions with no end, each experience indelibly inflected and determined by a

[66] The imagery of lamps lighting distinct aspects of a central object features in Woolf's own writings. She herself makes a diagram to illustrate her design for *To the Lighthouse*, and Quentin Bell writes that she took the phrase "center of consciousness" from James. See Quentin Bell, *Virginia Woolf*, Volume I, 32. Roger Fry, like many of the Cambridge Apostles, was a great admirer of James, and in Fry's biography Woolf cites a letter of his about James's 1879 novel *Confidence*, which makes a similar point. "It hasn't the richness of texture of his late writing, but it has such a very elegant psychological pattern – you say you can almost *touch* Max's wit, well, I feel I can almost *draw* James's psychological pattern. I think I feel that aspect of things excessively – it gives me such special pleasure like the counterpoint of Poussin's designs…it's a sort of excited recognition of the aptness of formal relations like a mathematician's recognition of the validity of an equation? (RF, 273-4)."

[67] T. S. Eliot, "On Henry James," 110. Later in the essay, charting a connection between James and Nathaniel Hawthorne as two distinctly American writers, Eliot notes that Hawthorne "did grasp character through the relation of two or more persons to each other; and this is what no one else, except James, has done" (116).

thousand other factors near and far.[68] So the relation between Strether and Mme de Vionnet is affected by "a mass of things": the air of the room in which they sit, the splash in the courtyard outside, the objects in the cabinets – everything in their environment, in short, and without any way of demarcating or distinguishing the discrete effects of any single thing from the whole. In "The Art of Fiction," James compared consciousness to a vast spider-web, and as this passage makes clear, his conception of experience is one that is not only profoundly relational, but one where there is nothing *but* relations.

James's project, then, is to develop a language within the novel to describe the atmospherics of relations, for it is by no means clear how such invisible, immaterial things are to be represented. The task of describing things that are immaterial though utterly real was also a challenge increasingly faced by men of science in the nineteenth century. James Clerk Maxwell opens an 1873 lecture on the modern concept of molecules by noting, "no one has ever seen or handled a single molecule. Molecular science, therefore, is one of those branches of study which deal with things invisible and imperceptible by our sense, and which cannot be subjected to direct experiment."[69] Relations are, of course, familiar in a way that molecules are not, but James's call to expand the purview of experience (and of the novel) entails a need to make these experiences available in much the same way that new concepts of molecules, waves, and currents had to be given representational form by scientists. Commenting on the famous pagoda that Maggie circles in the opening of the second half of *The Golden Bowl,* which is an extended metaphor for her circling her "situation" in her thoughts, Bill

[68] Mark Goble takes up the notion of network in James in relation to technologies of communication such as the telegraph in *Beautiful Circuits: Modernism and the Mediated Life*. For a discussion of the fundamental importance of relations and networks in both Henry James's fiction and William James's philosophy, see David Lapoujade, *Fictions du pragmatisme*. Lapoujade also notes the nineteenth century developments of postal and rail networks. Similarly, in *Experience and Experimental Writing*, Paul Grimstad writes, "Henry's 1903 novel *The Ambassadors* takes as its formal organizing principle precisely the central claim of his brother's radical empiricism: that relations are external to, and as real as, their terms (2)."

[69] James Clerk Maxwell, "Molecules," in *The Scientific Papers of James Clerk Maxwell*, 361. For more on the descriptive challenges facing nineteenth century scientists, see Gillian Beer, "Problems of Description in the Language of Discovery," *Open Fields*.

Brown observes that James's need to clarify this image in the preface to the novel "discloses his own sense of the difficulty of what he's trying to accomplish, or what his character accomplishes: not the objectification of people (a relatively easy matter, demonstrated throughout the text) but the objectification of the relations among them."[70] Brown's discussion emphasizes the consequences of objectification, but my focus here is on the objectification of *relations*.

Architectural images dominate as a means of figuring relations between people, and as I have noted, houses, rooms, forges, and piazzas are important above all in terms of the effects of their spatial character.[71] The geometrical constructions that Woolf and Eliot emphasized in their remarks on James are missing a dimension – what matters about the elaborate edifices that figure "situations" is the experiential nature of their spatial dynamics. This becomes particularly clear at several moments in *The Golden Bowl*. Towards the end of the novel, the two couples are serving out the rest of their sentence at Fawns before Charlotte and Mr. Verver are to depart for America, which Maggie has arranged in order to end the affair between Charlotte and her own husband. Saying nothing explicitly, the four coexist in awareness of their mutual deceit.

> They had learned fairly to live in the perfunctory; they remained in it as many hours of the day as might be; it took on finally the likeness of some spacious central chamber in a haunted house, a great overarched and over-glazed rotunda where gaiety might reign, but the doors of which opened into sinister circular passages. Here they turned up for each other, as they said, with the blank faces that denied any uneasiness felt in the approach; here they closed numerous doors carefully behind them – all save the door that connected the place, as by a straight tented corridor, with the outer world, and, encouraging thus the irruption of society, imitated the aperture through which the bedizened performers of the circus are poured into the ring (GB, 524-5).

[70] Brown, *A Sense of Things*, 167.
[71] As Böhme observes, architecture shapes "the character of the space in which we find ourselves," but this is something we sense only by being physically present *in* a space, not merely by seeing it. Gernot Böhme, "Atmosphere as the Subject Matter of Architecture," in *Herzog & de Meuron, Natural History*, 402. This is one of the reasons it is so apt as a means of figuring the experiential qualities that cannot be described only by a visual report.

What matters in this image is the atmosphere that the space creates thanks to the configuration of different chambers and the movements this arrangement permits. The characters' performance of normalcy is likened more obviously to circus performers dressed up in finery who enter through the wings into the public ring where they will perform their roles, but just as important is the experience of the space where their performance takes place – a large, round open hall with doors leading to various sinister passages – which gives a "likeness" of how it feels to "live in the perfunctory."

A similar type of description appears earlier in the novel for the changes that Maggie's marriage to the Prince brings to her relations with her father. The Ververs' union "had resembled a good deal some pleasant public square, in the heart of an old city, into which a great Palladian church, say – something with a grand architectural front – had suddenly been dropped; so that the rest of the place, the space in front, the way round, outside, to the east end, the margin of street and passage, the quantity of overarching heaven, had been temporarily compromised" (GB, 136). The relations between father and daughter are figured for Adam Verver, from whose perspective this passage is focalized, in terms of closed or open spaces. Initially, "it was as if his son-in-law's presence, even from before his becoming his son-in-law, had somehow filled the scene and blocked the future – very richly and handsomely, when all was said, not at all inconveniently or in ways not to have been desired." Amerigo appears to him at first to be a large obstacle taking up all the room, but gradually, space and building equalize in proportion as Mr. Verver adjusts to this new presence. "Though the Prince…was still pretty much the same 'big fact,' the sky had lifted, the horizon receded, the very foreground itself expanded, quite to match him, quite to keep everything in comfortable scale" (GB, 135). The edifices do not move, but the air around them shifts and resettles.

> The Palladian church was always there, but the piazza took care of itself. The sun stared down in his fullness, the air circulated, and the public not less; the limit stood off, the way round was easy, the east end was as fine, in its fashion, as the west, and there was also side doors of entrance between the two – large, monumental,

> ornamental, in *their* style – as for all proper great churches. By some such process in fine had the Prince, for his father-in-law, while remaining solidly a feature, ceased to be at all ominously a block (GB, 136).

The Prince is compared to a grand Palladian church (his face is also likened to a historic architectural front earlier in the novel) because of his aristocratic "prenatal" history, and this passage has been read as another instance of *The Golden Bowl*'s pervasive tendency to objectify people. But the essential element in this elaborate metaphor is the experiential character of the spatial arrangement, which figures by analogy the experiential character of an arrangement of relations. Amerigo's entrance into the tight-knit lives of Adam and Maggie Verver is described in terms of its environmental effects, that is, how it changes the atmosphere of their previous relations. Since architectural configurations are a fundamental way of shaping how we experience an environment, it should be no surprise that spatial dynamics so often furnish the terms for describing relational dynamics. If James is remiss in visualizing the exterior of Fawns or the interior of Waterbath, he is assiduous in detailing the rooms that figure what it is like to live in the perfunctory, or the disturbances of filial atmospheres wrought by the introduction of a spouse.

The Ecstasies of James

The history of literary description has often been tied to histories of objects. Scholars have argued, for instance, that the "passion for *things*" James attributed to Balzac is a particularly nineteenth century phenomenon. Citing E. M. Forster's remark that the nineteenth century is "the age of property," Peter Brooks writes,

> The need to include and to represent things will consequently imply a visual inspection of the world of phenomena and a detailed report on it – a report often in the form of what we call description. The descriptive is typical – sometimes maddeningly so – of these novels…In fact, to work through the accumulation of things, of details, of particularities, could be considered nearly definitional of the realist novel.[72]

[72] Brooks, *Realist Vision*, 16.

Clothing, tools, furniture, accessories – these were, for the realist, "part of the very definition of 'character,' of who one is and what one claims to be," and thus necessary for the depiction of a person.[73] In her history of description's transformation over the eighteenth century, Cynthia Wall writes similarly, "Domestic interiors - the furniture and fabric and object details of particularized rooms as part of ordinary life and action - rarely appear in the high-level hierarchies of poetry or prose until in the eighteenth century, but then dominate nineteenth-century novels and poetry."[74] From Christopher Newman's search to conquer Europe to the Ververs' collection of valuables to the unnamed object manufactured by Woollett, James' novels are filled with material goods. In highlighting his critique of description as a kind of anti-materialism, I do not mean to suggest that things have no presence in the Jamesian universe. Against a version of James as absorbed solely in the minutiae of psychological phenomena, turning his back Milly Theale-like on the world, critics inspired by recent developments in thing theory and material studies have been concerned with recuperating a James who is invested in material objects and enmeshed in the economic circuits in which they are produced and circulated.[75] While important, this work has at times simply reinscribed the dichotomy between material/mental and surface/depth in order to reassign the order of privilege. I want to suggest that James's interest in the world is robust enough that it need not be buttressed by concreteness. We do not subtract reality from objects by focusing on their effects in the air, the sphere in which they interact with perceivers. Nor do we turn our back on the empirical by emphasizing the immateriality of relations and thoughts.

The Spoils of Poynton (1896) is perhaps the novel most explicitly concerned with material objects. Even as James thematizes "things" in his novels, Bill Brown observes, many of which

[73] "The realist believes you must do an elementary phenomenology of the world in order to speak of how humans inhabit it," Brooks adds, "and this phenomenology necessarily means description, detailing, an attempt to say what the world is like in a way that makes its constraints recognizable by the reader" (*Realist Vision*, 210).
[74] Wall, *Prose of Things*, 10.
[75] For instance, Thomas Otten's insistence on maintaining a "superficial" reading of James, which he suggests previous accounts of objects in James have failed to do, reading them symptomatically and reintroducing depth.

"mediate the relations between characters, who *are* characters precisely in their relations," he also "effectively efface[s] things from the descriptive register of a text…In the Jamesian lexicon, the word names a potent source of attraction, conflict, and anxiety; it does not (necessarily) name a group of physical objects."[76] *The Spoils of Poynton* is a novel that ostensibly has at its center a collection of objects, but in the preface, James makes clear the aspect of objects that matters to him.

> On the face of it the 'things' themselves would form the very center of such a crisis; these grouped objects, all conscious of their eminence and their price, would enjoy, in any picture of a conflict, the heroic importance. They would have to be presented, they would have to be painted – arduous and desperate thought; something would have to be done for them not too ignobly unlike the great array in which Balzac, say, would have marshaled them (AN, 123-4).[77]

But James evidently does not have Balzac's enthusiasm for rendering things in all of their individual, physical glory – "arduous and desperate thought." "The real center" for him, "the citadel of the interest, with the fight waged round it, would have been the felt beauty and value of the prize of battle, the Things, always the splendid Things, placed in the middle light, figured and constituted, with each identity made vivid, each character discriminated, and their common consciousness of their great dramatic part established" (AN, 126). In the preface, he attributes his decision *not* to describe the spoils in this individuated, concrete way to the editorial demands of concision, which he solves by developing the character of Fleda Vetch, who is "maintainable at less expense" (AN, 127),

---

[76] Brown, *The Sense of Things*, 141. Brown writes that it is precisely in *The Golden Bowl*, "where the eponymous object presents itself as something of a realist remainder, that "the physical object, however meticulously specified, becomes no more than a placeholder for something that remains unspecifiable, some absent ground of Maggie Verver's new knowledge (*The Sense of Things*, 141). What Brown calls the "realist remainder" of the golden bowl seems to be a kind of inverse of Flaubert's barometer, which attested, for Barthes, to the reality of the world by its concrete uselessness. In contrast, Mark McGurl insists on the resistance material objects can offer. "The golden bowl haunts *The Golden Bowl*, but it is a curious kind of haunting, having less to do with the rattling of restless spirits than with the hard fact of the object" (*Novel Art*, 31). He points out that the golden bowl is different from other images in that novel, such as the pagoda, by being actual – that is, "understood to be embodied in the same world inhabited by the novel's characters" – rather than metaphorical.

[77] When he first hears the anecdote that forms the germ of this story, James writes, he perceives immediately the interest, "the sharp light it might project on that most modern of our current passions, the fierce appetite for the upholsterer's and joiner's and brazier's work, the chairs and tables, the cabinets and presses, the material odds and ends, of the more labouring ages" (AN, 123). Critics have typically read this novel in the context of late nineteenth century interior decoration and the Victorian passion for collection. In addition to Bill Brown, *The Sense of Things*, see Julia Prewitt Brown, *The Bourgeois Interior*. Thomas Otten argues that not vision but touch is the most important sense in *Spoils*, see *A Superficial Reading of Henry James*, Chapter Three.

that is, with less description.[78] Although James's stated reason is a commercial one, the decision to train the focus not on the objects' physicality but on the perception of their effects, their "felt beauty," is also a result of his principles of indirection. The beautiful objects Mrs. Gereth has spent a lifetime collecting thus appear very rarely in the novel's visual register, causing an early reviewer to complain that he "is distinctly weak about the specifications of one of the most beautiful houses in England."[79] But in these objects' "felt beauty," the first term is no less essential than the second. As the sole center of aesthetic appreciation, Fleda is necessary insofar as she is a sensitive feeler.

Let me return to Böhme for a moment and to his proposal for how to think about objects and qualities in light of an atmospheric aesthetics. In a classical ontology of the thing, the decisive point is that "the qualities of a thing are thought of as 'determinations.' The form, colour, even the smell of a thing is thought of as that which distinguishes it, separates it off from outside and gives it its internal unity. In short: the thing is usually conceived in terms of its closure."[80] Against this understanding, Böhme wants to substitute a conception of qualities as those aspects of a thing that extend *outward* into its environment, what he calls "the ecstasies [Ekstasen] of the thing."

> If we say for example: a cup is blue, then we think of a thing which is determined by the colour blue which distinguishes it from other things. This colour is something which the cup 'has'. In addition to its blueness we can also ask whether such a cup exists. Its existence is then determined through a localization in space and time. The blueness of the cup, however, can be thought of in quite another way, namely as the way, or better a way, in which the cup is present in space and makes its presence perceptible. The blueness of the cup is then thought of not as something which is restricted in some way to the cup and adheres to it, but on the contrary as something which radiates out to the environment of the cup, coloring or 'tincturing' [tönt oder 'tingiert'] in a certain way this environment, as Jakob Böhme would say.[81]

---

[78] Bill Brown writes, "Whereas Lukács understood the commercialization of fiction – the complete transformation of the book into a commodity and the writer 'into a salesman of his merchandise' – as the reason for the triumph of description in the novel, James posits commercialization as the reason for its absence (*The Sense of Things*, 154)," suggesting that the novel registers the effects of reification that accompany the commodity form, which conceals the qualitative and material quality of things as things.
[79] Cited in Brown, *The Sense of Things*, 147.
[80] Böhme, "Atmosphere," 120. As Kant formulates it, "it is possible to *think* a thing with all of its determinations and then pose the question whether this completely determined thing actually exists" ("Atmosphere," 121).
[81] Ibid.

Thus understood, qualities are just the ways in which a thing make its presence externally perceptible. Blueness, like form and texture and pitch, is "a way of the cup being there, an articulation of its presence, the way or manner of its presence." In this light, a thing is not defined in terms of the internal unity that separates it from other things, but rather in terms of "the ways in which it goes forth from itself." Accordingly, atmospheres are "spaces insofar as they are 'tinctured' through the presence of things, of persons or environmental constellations, that is, through their ecstasies."[82]

Although the spoils of Poynton are not directly articulate, they have wondrous things to say. "The 'things' are radiant, shedding afar, with a merciless monotony, all their light, exerting their ravage without remorse," and Fleda "almost demoniacally both sees and feels (AN, 129)" their spirit. Animated, ecstatic, they tincture the atmosphere that exists between perceiver and perceived, the common reality shared by persons and things (or persons and persons), whose qualities go forth to produce environmental effects. It is not that things cease to matter to James as they did to Balzac, but that *what* matters about them changes. Or better, what changes is the way in which what matters about them is described. Thinking of atmosphere shifts the focus from the qualities of these objects as intrinsic properties – which would correspond to rendering their appearance – to the way this beauty is felt, the way it exerts its force outward and affects its environment.

James's remarks echo an older injunction for the literary arts to concern themselves with effects rather than appearances. Admonishing the over-proliferation of both ekphrastic poetry and allegorical painting in *Laocöon*, Lessing enjoins painting and poetry to respect the sensuous nature of

[82] Ibid. In the classical subject-object dichotomy, Böhme writes, an "ecstatic" understanding of qualities extends to "secondary qualities" – for instance, colors and smells – qualities that do not themselves belong to the thing except in relation to a subject. He wants to think of primary qualities, such as extension and form, as ecstasies as well. "In the classical ontology of the thing form is thought of something limiting and enclosing, as that which encloses inwardly the volume of the thing and outwardly limits it. The form of a thing, however, also exerts an external effect. It radiates as it were into the environment, takes away the homogeneity of the surrounding space and fills it with tensions and suggestions of movement" ("Atmosphere," 121). Hence Böhme's interest in the way architecture produces atmospheres.

their own respective mediums: the plastic arts juxtaposes different parts of a whole simultaneously in an instant and are thus suited to depicting appearance, whereas the literary arts unfold in parts successively in time and are thus suited to recounting narrative. Homer never enters into a description of Helen's beauty, Lessing writes, despite the fact that it is precisely this beauty on which the *Iliad* is based. If he had tried to give an account of her specific features, like Ariosto in *Orlando Furioso*, he would not have succeeded in creating the illusion of vision. Instead, Homer depicts the *effect* of Helen's visage on an assembly of Trojan elders. "What can convey a more vivid idea of beauty than to let cold old age acknowledge that she is indeed worth the war which had cost so much blood and so many tears?"[83] We do not *see* Helen's beauty in the way we see an image of her on the canvas, but we are made to *feel* what the Trojan elders felt at seeing her, and imagination is left to do the rest. "What Homer could not describe in all its various parts he makes us recognize by its effect. Paint for us, you poets, the pleasure, the affection, the love and delight which beauty brings, and you have painted beauty itself."[84]

For Lessing, describing the effects rather than the appearance of beauty is a historical approach, suitable for a medium that must unfold successively in time. For James too, the problem with description centers on the failures of what Willa Cather called description by "enumeration" rather than "suggestion."[85] Enumeration is narrative's way of trying to present a visual field in its simultaneity and, inevitably, failing. It is the mistaken attempt to represent the whole by listing its parts, a critique that we will also find in Woolf. James in fact alludes to Helen in the preface to *The Spoils of Poynton*, whose beauty he likens to that of the eponymous objects.

> Yes, it is a story of cabinets and chairs and tables; they formed the bone of contention, but what would merely 'become' of them, magnificently passive, seemed

[83] Gottfried Ephraim Lessing, *Laocöon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, 111.
[84] Ibid.
[85] Cather praises "some of the younger writers" who "are trying to break away from mere verisimilitude, and, following the development of modern painting, to interpret imaginatively the material and social investiture of their characters; to present their scene by suggestion rather than by enumeration" ("The Novel Démeublé," 40).

> to represent a comparatively vulgar issue. The passions, the faculties, the forces their beauty would, like that of antique Helen of Troy, set in motion, was what, as a painter, one had really wanted of them, was the power in them that one had from the first appreciated (AN, 127).

But despite his remarks here, he does not treat these objects "as a painter." James recounts his certainty that "a subject so lighted, a subject residing in somebody's excited and concentrated feeling about something – both the something and the somebody being of course as important as possible – ha[d] more beauty to give out than under any other style of pressure" (AN, 128). Although both the "something" and the "someone" are acknowledged as important, it is clear that his real interest is in the "feeling about," that is, in the relation that exists *between* two terms, in the force one exerts on the other, be these things cabinets and chairs or fathers and daughters.

Jamesian Thoughts

James's tendency to make material objects something less than material finds a correlate in his tendency to externalize and objectify thoughts that are immaterial, nowhere more so than in the second half of *The Golden Bowl*. As Maggie begins to entertain doubts about the nature of the relationship between her husband and her stepmother, turning her situation over in her mind, her question

> only went and lost itself in the thick air that had begun more and more to hang, for our young woman, over her accumulations of the unanswered. They were *there*, these accumulations; they were like a roomful of confused objects, never as yet 'sorted', which for some time now she had been passing and re-passing, along the corridor of her life. She passed it when she could without opening the door; then, on occasion, she turned the key to throw in a fresh contribution. So it was that she had been getting things out of the way. They rejoined the rest of the confusion; it was as if they found their place, by some instinct of affinity, in the heap. They knew in short where to go, and when she at present by a mental act once more pushed the door open she had practically a sense of method and experience (GB, 334–5).

As unpleasant thoughts are reified in order to be locked away in a room, the act of thinking is spatialized as roaming through passageways into different rooms.[86] James often figures mental acts – attention and reflection, especially – as dynamic physical actions. In this passage, Maggie's wanderings in her mental passageway gives way to an actual door opening when her husband finally returns home from his trip to Gloucester with Charlotte. As she turns away from her lumber room of thoughts in the metaphor, so in the narrative she turns away from the metaphor itself, as "the inward scene" is extinguished by the "outward": "The quite different door had opened and her husband was there" (GB, 335).

This passage demonstrates clearly the ambiguity created by James's frequently extended descriptive similes and metaphors, which often feature the same sets of characters in both the literal scene and the hypothetical illustrative image such that it is easy to lose track of which is the real action and which the figurative one.[87] There is a tenuous division between the imagined Maggie that wanders down a hallway, occasionally opening a door to throw an object into a jumbled heap, and the actual Maggie that sits still by her hearth, awaiting the return of her husband. The distinction between the two orders – figurative (or descriptive) and literal (or narrative) – is not always clearly maintained, an ambiguity that is here underscored explicitly by the transition between the door opening within the metaphor describing Maggie's thoughts and the "quite different" door opening in the diegetic world of actual events, as her husband comes into the room in which she is sitting. Indeed, the "action" of the story tends to advance far more readily on the imagined plane than on the actual one. As one critic observes, although James embarks on images in order to illustrate

[86] As Sharon Cameron notes, thinking is also persistently spatialized in *What Maisie Knew*. Knowledge is "out of reach, behind closed doors, in certain recesses, always, in any case, clearly compartmentalized," testifying to its double inaccessibility. It is "what others withhold from you or you from others, and (as the ventriloquized conversation Maisie has with her doll suggests) knowledge is what you withhold - won't go into - with yourself (*Thinking in Henry James*, 69)."

[87] Theo Davis notes that James's "literal descriptions are replaced by radical fictions, hypothetical images which are more lifelike than events and scenes which actually occur in the novel" ("Out of the Medium in Which Books Breathe," 412-3).

something in the main story, "he gradually edges away from the subject and begins to examine his metaphors and similes themselves, and even to imagine seeing those illustrative images rather than what they illustrate."[88]

This passage of *The Golden Bowl* has been the subject of much critical attention. Against the reading of James as a master psychological realist, Sharon Cameron highlights the way that consciousness is externalized from minds, exerting its "massive quantity," to borrow Jamesian vocabulary, independently of human agents. "A psychologizing account of consciousness understands it as "a phenomenon associated with subjectivity: as internal, centered, circumscribed, fixed."[89] Instead, Cameron argues, thinking in James happens between and across subjects; "consciousness is held like a sum in reserve…and then distributed as the source of power."[90] What I would like to draw attention to in James's tendency to simultaneously reify and dematerialize is the way that both thoughts and things, "congruous, incongruous," hang together in the atmosphere. When Maggie confronts her husband as he comes in, "the uncertainty of his face had become so, the next thing, an uncertainty in the very air" (GB, 335). Externalized thoughts create a "thick air" that hangs over everything, recalling James's statement in "The Art of Fiction" that impressions are the very air we breathe.

The realm of "vagueness and uncertainty" into which he exhorted the novelist to dip is not hidden *inside* the self but outside *between* selves, out of sight and hearing but perceptible nevertheless

[88] Theo Davis, "Out of the Medium in Which Books Breathe," 414.
[89] Sharon Cameron, *Thinking in Henry James*, 170. Cameron poses the question, in the second half of *The Golden Bowl*, why doesn't Maggie speak, or in a different iteration, why does she *think* instead of *speak*? She considers a number of possible psychological explanations and shows how each one of them is refuted by the text itself, suggesting that although the novel poses this problem in realistic terms, it cannot be answered in realist terms. The answers it purports to offer are refuted by "a scrutiny of its actual, rather than manifest, logic. In fact, the explanations, so poorly equipped to withstand scrutiny, almost appear designed to give way." They seem to push us to consider an issue raised realistically by the novel in a context "completely dissociated from realistic features of the plot (9)."
[90] Ibid., 171. Cameron focuses particularly on James' revision of the understanding of consciousness between the novel and the prefaces, showing persuasively that the latter are attempts to redetermine the reader's understanding of the central consciousness in the novel that follows, that they are stories about the stories. Mark Seltzer makes the case that in the late fiction, "the desire to know is also a will to power" in *Henry James and the Art of Power*, 77.

to sensitive feelers. During this scene of reunion both Maggie and the Prince are aware that something in the atmosphere is off-key, though neither knows exactly what. Their mutual doubts and suspicions as to the truth of the events and the extent of the other's knowledge thicken the air between them, "the common reality of the perceiver and the perceived," which becomes the plane on which an unspoken scene takes place alongside the spoken one.[91] The uncertainty in the Prince's face and the doubts in Maggie's mind make their presences felt in the intermediate space, palpable though not visible, real though not physical, that exists between subjects and objects. This palpability is evident in colloquial expressions, like when we say of a strained atmosphere that you could "cut the tension with a knife." In James, the dematerialization of objects and the materialization of consciousness converge in their mutual etherealization.

Quelconque

Understanding James as describing atmospherically also provides a way of accounting for the particular atmosphere produced by his own novels themselves, which is typically called vague, abstract, or ambiguous. A major contributing factor, already mentioned, is his refusal to be specific about concrete details and to individualize particular objects. But James is clear about his rationale for this decision. In the preface to *Roderick Hudson*, one of his earliest novels and the first in the New York edition, he expresses his regret at naming the town of Northampton, Massachusetts, when it would have been sufficient for the setting to have been "a peaceful, rural New England community *quelconque*." The fault for this over-specification lies at Balzac's door. "One nestled, technically, in those days, and with yearning, in the great shadow of Balzac," where, "if it was a question of Saumur, of Limoges, of Guérande, he 'did' Saumur, did Limoges, did Guérande." James thus regrets, in his own treatment of a "small American *ville de province*," having "'named' under his contagion"

[91] Böhme writes, "Atmosphere is the common reality of the perceiver and the perceived. It is the reality of the perceived as the sphere of its presence and the reality of the perceiver, insofar as in sensing the atmosphere s/he is bodily present in a certain way."

(AN, 9–10). Adopting eighteenth rather than nineteenth century aesthetics, James insists that where the general will do, the particular should as much as possible be left aside.

He offers his highest praise for Balzac's practice (as a good social historian) of always making an individual the representative of its type. But whereas Balzac's habit is to begin with the particular and move to the general, presenting each individual as specimen of his genus, James's procedure is to remain at the level of generality, or more precisely, indefiniteness. Indeed, when it comes to particulars, "*quelconque*" is usually the operative Jamesian modifier. So in the notebooks to *The Ambassadors*, the protagonist is conceived first "a man who hasn't 'lived'" and "a local worker," from which point James then begins to consider the possibilities of clergyman, journalist, lawyer etc. As Michael Levenson notes, "'sufficiently typical' is a standard requirement in James's late phase in which no imaginative reflex is more marked than the desire to be free of the contingent particularities of a fictional subject."[92] In his turn away from particulars and details, James is closer to a neoclassical or Romantic aesthetics than to a Victorian or realist one.[93]

One stylistic consequence is the pervasive use of plurals in James's descriptions, as we saw in the Lancaster Gate passage in *The Wings of the Dove*, where he treats the objects in the room collectively despite the fact that Densher ostensibly cannot, or again in the way that Prince regards the objects in the shop window as a mass at the beginning of *The Golden Bowl*. So too in *The Spoils of*

[92] Michael Levenson, *Modernism and the Fate of Individuality*, 27.

[93] Peter Brooks writes that the importance of material objects in the nineteenth century realist novel "signals their break from the neoclassical stylistic tradition, which tended to see the concrete, the particular, the utilitarian as vulgar, lower class, and to find beauty in the generalized and the noble" (*Realist Vision*, 16). Joshua Reynolds sums up the latter attitude when he hails the Italian painters for attending only to "the invariable, the great, and general ideas which are fixed and inherent in universal nature" while the Dutch painters are interested in "literal truth and a minute exactness in the detail, as I may say, of Nature modified by accident. The attention to these petty peculiarities is the very cause of this naturalness so much admired in the Dutch pictures, which, if we suppose it to be a beauty, is certainly of a lower order" (*Works*, 1:353-4). For a discussion of the detail in Romanticism and modernism, see Naomi Schor *Reading in Detail*. See Carol T. Christ *The Finer Optic: the Victorian Aesthetic of Particularity* for an argument about the shift in emphasis from universals to particulars during the eighteenth to nineteenth centuries. Christ argues that Victorians lose the Romantic assurance of the link between particular and universal, end up being simply descriptive of a single moment, no longer representative of some universal experience. This is consistent with Lukács's critique that naturalism becomes concerned with describing details for its own sake, which is echoed in James's comments about Balzac.

Poynton, "the shimmer of wrought substances spent itself in the brightness; the old golds and brasses, old ivories and bronzes, the fresh old tapestries and deep old damasks threw out a radiance" (SP, 58). If what matters is the atmosphere created by rooms and landscapes, this is not registered through noticing discrete elements one by one, and thus descriptions proceed in general rather than particular terms. A few particularized objects appear in less exalted domestic spaces in *The Spoils of Poynton*, but, as Bill Brown writes, "as though such individuating description were to be preserved for the elements of bad taste alone, or as though it were in bad taste to visualize exquisite taste, James renders the mise-en-scène at Poynton as a matter of aura, not artifacts."[94]

Back at Fawns, another house of exquisite taste, when Maggie and her father experience a moment of equally exquisite understanding during their last interview together late in the novel, their complicity is mirrored by the harmony of the room, whose objects are once again treated collectively. "She had passed her arm into his, and the other objects in the room, the other pictures, the sofas, the chairs, the tables, the cabinets, the 'important' pieces, supreme in their way, stood out, round them, consciously, for recognition and applause. Their eyes moved together from piece to piece, taking in the whole nobleness – quite as if for him to measure the wisdom of old ideas" (GB, 574). The atmosphere created by the objects accords with the feeling of complicity Maggie and her father share; their eyes move from piece to piece, but these pieces are not actually described for us but only evoked in general, indefinite terms. They could be anything, so long as they are examples of "the whole nobleness." If Balzac's distinguishing feature is, as James repeats, his unflagging quest for

[94] Brown, *The Sense of Things*, 147. For Brown, the obscuring of particular objects in favor of general effect has a number of effects. It confirms Mrs. Gereth's sense that choosing among the objects is impossible since their beauty lies in their general effect; it underscores that Mrs. Gereth's art is arrangement, not acquisition; and by emphasizing design over detail, the novel itself "participates in the decorating discourse of the day, which ultimately advocated transforming the physical into something, say, metaphysical" (148). Böhme notes that Benjamin's "aura" has been the concept around which aesthetic discussion of atmosphere has coalesced.

the "definite," the Jamesian article *par excellence* is instead the indefinite, *a* room, *a* house, *a* landscape of such and such general type, embodying such and such traits.[95]

In fact, visualizing things individually and specifically is, if not a matter of bad taste, certainly a matter of poor judgment. As he remarks in a number critical writings, particular details weaken rather than strengthen an impression. In the preface to *The Turn of the Screw*, when his goal is that of conveying the "utmost conceivability" of the worst evil, he evinces no hesitation about the best means of conveying the idea of the maximum.

> There is for such a case no eligible *absolute* of wrong; it remains relative to fifty other elements, a matter of appreciation, speculation, imagination – these things moreover quite exactly in the light of the spectator's, the critic's, the reader's experience. Only make the reader's general vision of evil intense enough, I said to myself…and his own experience, his own imagination, his own sympathy (with the children) and horror (of their false friends) will supply him quite sufficiently with all the particulars. Make him *think* the evil, make him think it for himself, and that will release you from weak specifications (AN, 176).

Sounding again like Lessing, who warned the painter against depicting the climax of a story because no literal representation could be more effective than the one conjured up by the imagination, James warns against the "weakness" of specifications. In order to evoke with greatest vividness the absolute evil, its exact details must be left unsaid; it is sufficient – in fact, optimal – to convey instead a "general" vision of evil.[96] The omission of particulars is thus due to the fact that they are less potent in their power of evocation.[97] This sense of the negligible importance, if not downright

[95] In his first essay on Balzac, James writes that his strength is with "the definite and the actual" (AC, 72). He repeats permutations of this assessment throughout the rest of the later essays.

[96] "There is nothing beyond [the climax, the limit], and to present the utmost to the eye is to bind the wings of fancy and compel it, since it cannot soar above the impression made on the senses, to concern itself with weaker images, shunning the visible fullness already represented as a limit beyond which it cannot go (*Laocöon*, 20)."

[97] A somewhat analogous shift in descriptive paradigm from a different discipline is found in Lorraine Daston's account of the change in practices of scientific description in the early eighteenth century, as prolix, detail-laden descriptions of plants gave way to the parsimony of the two-word Linnaean label. The parallel here concerns not verbal economy (James could hardly be accused of that) but the shift from favoring exhaustively detailing particulars to synthesizing, abstracting, and omitting particular details as the best way of describing an object. See Lorraine Daston, "Description by Omission: Nature Enlightened and Obscured," in *Regimes of Description*, 11–24. For Daston, the shift from prolixity to parsimony in description is emblematic of a wider-reaching change in the understanding of what constituted a scientific fact in the early decades of the eighteenth century.

dangers, of specifying particulars accounts for the kinds of descriptions that Brown calls a matter of aura rather than artifact, or, in the terms I have been using, of atmosphere rather than picture.

The New York edition of James's novels did in fact feature actual pictures, photographs taken by Alvin Langdon Coburn that served as frontispieces. But in his comments on these "illustrations" in the preface to *The Golden Bowl*, James deprives even photography of referentiality and definiteness. "The essence of any representational work is of course to bristle with immediate images," he writes, but he would have looked askance at any proposal to "graft or 'grow,' at whatever point, a picture by another hand on my own picture" (AN, 331-2). Sounding again like a latter-day Lessing, James adds that this last remark is directed at "the 'picture-book' quality that contemporary English and American prose appears more and more destined, by the conditions of publication, to consent, however grudgingly, to see imputed to it" (AN, 332). Illustrations are welcome, but they must "stand off…as a separate and independent subject of publication, carrying its text in its spirit, just as that text correspondingly carries the plastic possibility" (AN, 332-3). Thus, Coburn's photographic studies – "as different a 'medium' as possible" – work in concert with the novels precisely because they do not "keep, or pretend to keep, anything like suggestive step with their dramatic subject matter." By "discreetly disavowing emulation," they abandon the pretense of illustrating scenes or objects from the novel, thus respecting the "distinction between the writer's 'frame' and the draughtsman's" (AN 333).

Coburn's images are not meant to serve as illustrations of definite referents in the novels – not a picture *of* Portland Place, a picture *of* the old shop in which the golden bowl is found). Rather, they are confessions of "mere optical symbols or echoes, expressions of no particular thing in the text, but only of the type or idea of this or that thing" (AN 333). The same principle of indefinite description that leads to the use of plurals in James's own descriptions is much the same as the one he attributes to Coburn's non-referential photographs – not *this* thing, but this *type* of thing, of which

the actual object depicted is merely an "instance." The image of a house that would serve to evoke Portland Place should be "distilled and intensified, as it were, from a drop of the essence of such establishments in general" (AN 334).

Balzac, James observed, would often go to a town and find a real house to serve as a model for his fictional ones. In contrast, he characterizes his and Coburn's own peregrination through London looking for suitable photographic subjects as a search not for a model but an *instance*. The priority of procedure is reversed: first there is the shop in the mind, then there is the matter of finding a shop in the world. This actual shop is, however, not a stand-in for the fictional one, but rather another instance in a different medium of the general idea of which the shop described in the novel is also an instance. Unlike "wanton designers," James writes of himself and Coburn, their task was "not to 'create' but simply to recognize – recognize, that is, with the last fineness." Of the image of "some generalized vision" of Portland Place that became the frontispiece for the second volume of *The Golden Bowl*, "The thing was to induce the vision of Portland Place *to* generalize itself," a charge with which, miraculously, the "prodigious city" of London "for a splendid atmospheric hour" (AN 335) complied.

James's insistence on the medium-specificity of the verbal and plastic arts makes it clear that whatever the picture-making power of novels, it is distinct from that of the plastic arts, availing itself of different means. The novelist is a "manipulator of aspects", the "projector and creator of figures and scenes that are as nought from the moment they fail to become more or less visible appearances" (AN, 332), but literature must conjure up appearances in its own fashion. Casting a "literary spell" is to inspire the reader "to such a state of hallucination by the images one has evoked as doesn't permit him to rest till he has noted or recorded them, set up some semblance of them in his own other medium, by his own other art" (AN, 332). Like Coburn's photographs, James's descriptions also discreetly disavow emulation – the descriptive images with which his novels bristle

are illustrative but not illustrations.

The Weather in James

Much attention has been paid, justly so, to Jamesian economies, to the relentless reification and commodification of persons, thoughts, and things that so often drives his narratives.[98] But if his themes are economic, his descriptive practices are, rather, ecological. Indeed, art is conceived in environmental terms, and in a 1905 lecture entitled "The Lesson of Balzac," he offers a survey of literary history in the form of a weather report. His subject is the "projected light of the individual strong temperament in fiction – the color of the air with which this, that or the other painter of life (as we call them all), more or less unconsciously suffuses his picture." Unconsciously, that is, "because I speak here of an effect of atmosphere…that proceeds from the contemplative mind itself …an emanation of [the writer's] spirit, temper, history; it springs from his very presence…the particular tone of the medium in which each vision, each clustered group of persons and places and objects, is bathed" (LC, 2:125). Reminiscent of his comments about character, whose essence must be decanted, here again air, tinctured and textured, provides a way of figuring everything in an author's style that is not explicable by appealing to "calculation and artistry." Like Böhme's citation of Adorno's "Mehr," it names the extra-rational element in aesthetic experience that defies analytical determination but is nevertheless clearly felt with determinate effects.

How different is the climate in Fielding and Richardson, Scott and Dumas, Dickens and Thackeray, Hawthorne and Meredith, George Eliot and George Sand, Jane Austen and Charlotte Brontë, James marvels. Do we not feel the general landscape opened by each of them "not to open itself under the same sun that hangs over the neighboring scene, not to receive the solar rays at the same angle, not to exhibit its shadows with the same intensity or the same sharpness; not, in short,

[98] For instance, Jean-Christophe Agnew argues that James participates in a "commodity aesthetic" that sees "the world in general, the self and society, as so much raw space to be furnished with mobile, detachable and transactionable goods." See Jean-Christophe Agnew, "The Consuming Vision of Henry James," *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History 1880–1980*, 135.

to seem to belong to the same time of day or the same state of the weather?" (LC, 2:125). Life in Dickens always goes on in the morning, "or in the earliest hours of the afternoon at most, in a vast apartment that appears to have windows, large, uncurtained and rather unwashed windows, on all sides at once." In Eliot, "the sun sinks forever to the west, and the shadows are long, and the afternoon wanes, and the trees vaguely rustle, and the color of the day is much inclined to yellow." With Brontë we "move through an endless autumn," while in Austen "we sit quite resigned in an arrested spring." Hawthorne gives us a later afternoon hour than anyone else, "late, late, quite uncannily late, and as if it were always winter outside," whereas Thackeray's light is that of "rainy days in 'residential' streets," though quite different from "the mere dull dusk" (LC, 2:126). And what, finally, of the Balzacian climate? James announces – perhaps surprisingly given that Balzac is the ostensible subject of the lecture – that he will allow himself only one word on the matter. "It is rich and thick, the mixture of sun and shade diffused through the 'Comédie Humaine' – a mixture richer and thicker, and representing an absolutely greater quantity of 'atmosphere,' than we shall find prevailing within the compass of any other suspended frame" (LC, 2:126).

This meteorological survey invites as its natural next question: what of the air of James? That he is deeply concerned with creating and modulating his own air is richly attested by the prefaces and his critical writings, perhaps nowhere more so than his reflections on the act of revision, or as he calls it in the preface to *The Golden Bowl*, "dreaming the whole thing over." "I have prayed that the finer air of the better form may sufficiently seem to hang about them and gild them over – at least for readers, however few, at all *curious* of questions of air and form" (AN, 344). We can imagine any number of adjectives to answer the question of James's air, but what I want to draw our attention to is the very fact that he thinks, and describes, in atmospheric terms.

The link between literature and atmosphere is made even clearer in a short 1899 essay entitled "The Future of the Novel." Hailing the novel's recent rise in popularity, he wonders how to

explain the public's newfound appetite.[99] It seems at first blush a matter of some strangeness to account for the "great fortune" that has fallen on this form, for it is, after all, "mere unsupported and unguaranteed history, the *inexpensive* thing, written in the air, the record of what, in any particular case, has *not* been, the account that remains responsible, at best, to 'documents' with which we are practically unable to collate it" (LC, 1:102). The air has here become the very site of the fictional. In the earlier 1884 essay, "The Art of Fiction," James called the novelist a historian – "as the picture is reality, so is the novel history" (AF, 55), he wrote emphatically, urging the novelist not to renounce the claim to "compete with life" (AF, 54). By 1899, however, he no longer defends literature by appealing to its status as history: indeed, one appears to be a hollow version of the other, not unlike a crystal bowl masquerading as gold. Ultimately, James grounds his defense (and his encomium) of literature on the flexibility of its form, unbound from documentary reports and eyewitness accounts. But while he relinquishes the novel's identification with history, he continues to uphold not only its measure of reality but its potential to pay dividends, elaborating an almost Proustian aesthetic economy. "Life has no direct sense whatever for the subject and is capable, luckily for us, of splendid waste. Hence the opportunity for the sublime economy of art, which rescues, which saves, and hoards and 'banks,' investing and reinvesting these fruits of toil in wondrous useful 'works' and thus making up for us, desperate spendthrifts that we all naturally are, the most princely of incomes" (AN, 120). The record of what has *not* been may be inexpensive history, but it holds great wealth for the art that is concerned with presenting what is in the air.

[99] He simultaneously laments an "irreflective and uncritical" readership (newly literate women and children, primarily) that has lead to "the demoralization, the vulgarization of literature in general (LC, 1: 103)." The essay pleads for the need to allow the novel absolute freedom of form, and the importance of "experiments with the 'story' (LC, 1: 106)" for its continued health. Of course, James is writing at a juncture when his own readership has declined dramatically at the same time that his status as "the Master" has been cemented.

Chapter Two

Proust and the Effects of Analogy

The Proustian Fabric

James's critique of description proceeded from two directions, represented variously by Balzac and Flaubert. Balzac was faulted for the solidity – the heaviness – of his novelistic universe, his "choking doses of brick and mortar," and his inability to select among descriptive details. Flaubert, on the other hand, was indicted for his attention to surfaces, slavishly rendering the pictorial without dipping into the obscure. As I suggested, in his own descriptions James does not go "beneath or behind" so much as venture forth, toward the implicit that hovers in the atmosphere. Although articulated differently, Proust's critique runs along much the same lines as James's, identifying description with surface and appearance, in contrast with more authentic essences that, for him, can only be revealed by metaphor. We saw with James a frequent turn to extended similes and metaphors in order to figure the immaterial. In the case of Proust, the use of analogy becomes explicitly thematized, and this chapter will be concerned with tracing some of its effects.

In the theoretical apparatus of *À la recherche du temps perdu*, description is the foil to metaphor, corresponding to a series of other oppositions that are operative in the work: voluntary vs. involuntary memory, appearance vs. reality, and surface vs. depth. As the stylistic correlate of involuntary memory, metaphor joins together two different terms in a single phrase, releasing us from the shackles of time, and unveiling the hidden essences of things. Describing an experience, on the other hand, can only be at best an ineffective scratching at the surface, and at worst an obstacle to discerning reality.

> Tel nom lu dans un livre autrefois, contient entre ses syllabes le vent rapide et le soleil brillant qu'il faisait quand nous le lisions. De sorte que la littérature qui se contente de 'décrire les choses', d'en donner seulement un misérable relève de lignes

> et de surfaces, est celle qui, tout en s'appelant réaliste, est la plus éloignée de la réalité, celle qui nous appauvrit et nous attriste le plus, car elle coupe brusquement toute communication de notre moi présent avec le passé, dont les choses gardaient l'essence, ce l'avenir où elles nous incitent à la goûter de nouveau (RTP, 4:463-4).

The critique seems straightforward enough. As glossed by Beckett, Proust's dismissal of the literature that "describes" things is his contempt for "the realists and naturalists workshipping the offal of experience, prostrate before the epidermis and the swift epilepsy, and content to transcribe the surface, the façade, behind which the Idea is prisoner. Whereas the Proustian procedure is that of Apollo flaying Marsyas and capturing without sentiment the essence, the Phrygian waters."[1] But the distinction drawn so clearly in the theory encounters immediately the simple fact that *À la recherche du temps perdu* is endlessly, painstakingly, sometimes tediously descriptive. Close attention to *lignes* and *surfaces* – the play of sunlight, the passage of clouds, the colors and petals of flowers – is one of the most recognizable and distinctive features of Proust's immense phenomenology of experience.

A closer look at the descriptive fabric of the novel yields a further observation: it is relentlessly analogical. There is hardly a page of the *Recherche* that does not contain a "comme," "comme si," "pareil à," or "aussi...que...," usually several per page, often per paragraph. His sentences swell with analogies, sometimes multiplying in a cascading series, sometimes emerging in a brief flash, sometimes developed at far greater length than its ostensible subject. It is with great reason that in her book on Proust, Julia Kristeva titles a section of the chapter on metaphor, "Omniprésente analogie."[2] By means of an endless chain of likes, the Proustian world is constructed, not from the ground up, but from the ground across. Hardly can anything be mentioned – the color of asparagus, the visage of a woman listening to music, the look of a hedge of hawthorns – before it

[1] Samuel Beckett, *Proust and Three Dialogues*, 79.
[2] Julia Kristeva, *Le temps sensible.* As she sums up, "Elle découpe le monde et le récit en boucles successives, parfois lourdes, parfois fluides, qui confèrent au discours proustien la prégnance poétique d'une synesthésie, en même temps que l'intermittence calculée d'une multitude d'arrêts sur image" (270).

is compared to something else in order to be described; any step forward always entails two steps to the side. In many respects, Proust's novel conforms neatly to the framework within which eighteenth and nineteenth century rhetoricians as well as twentieth century narratologists have enclosed the couple description and narration, understanding the former as a pause interrupting the latter. The chronology of the *Recherche* is heterogeneous –sometimes a single evening is distended over the course of hundreds of pages, sometimes decades are lightly passed over in a sentence. But whatever the pace at which the narrative proceeds, it moves along its trajectory by a series of epicycles formed by the incessant descriptive analogies.

Proust's propensity for analogies is betrayed, among other signs, by their frequent appearance in parentheses, which makes them seem like afterthoughts, removable from the text without disturbing it. This is just how rhetoricians have regarded description, first as a decorative ornament, superfluous to structural integrity but a potentially pleasing adornment, and then later, when it began to proliferate, as a foreign element that threatened the unity of the narrative. But in Proust, the very expendability of such analogies (the fact that they are in parentheses) signals that they are essentially characteristic of his vision, for although they are superfluous for narrative – often even for illustrative – purposes, he leaves them in, as if he can't help himself, as if for whatever he was writing about, another "comme" always came to mind to describe it. This tendency is further highlighted by the prominence of analogies in moments of intensified emotion, as at the conclusion of *Le temps retrouvé* when joy at the discovery of his vocation unleashes the full force of the narrator's comparative energies.

> Pour en donner une idée, c'est aux arts les plus élevés et les plus différents qu'il faudrait emprunter des comparaisons; car cet écrivain...devait préparer son livre, minutieusement, avec des perpétuels regroupements de forces, comme une offensive, le supporter comme une fatigue, l'accepter comme une règle, le construire comme une église, le suivre comme un régime, le vaincre comme un obstacle, le conquérir comme une amitié, le suralimenter comme un enfant, le créer comme un monde sans laisser de côté ces mystères qui n'ont probablement leur explication que

> dans d'autres mondes et dont le presentiment est ce qui nous émeut le plus dans la vie et dans l'art (RTP, 4:610).

Although metaphor is singled out in the novel's own aesthetic theory as the stylistic correlate of involuntary memory, alone capable of stripping an experience of its ordinary veil and penetrating to its essence, the text is also filled with analogies far less miraculous, disclosing the particular appearances on the surface. It is these ordinary, unmarked analogies that I want to attend to – the offhand, ubiquitous ones not deemed exceptional or miraculous, that so characterize the distinct texture of the novel. "Je bâtirais mon livre, je n'ose pas dire ambitieusement comme une cathédrale, mais tout simplement comme une robe" (RPT, 4:610), the narrator claims about the work he is about to embark on. To remain with the humbler image, my inquiry into the effects of analogy in Proust is more concerned the text's ordinary descriptive fabric than with its glittering jewels.

Citing examples of specific analogies seems in many ways inadequate, since what interests me is precisely their frequency and ubiquity, the way in which they are essentially constitutive of the text. But we can depart from some general observations. To begin with, Proust's analogies come from a wide variety of sources: medicine, physics, astronomy, geology, metallurgy, chemistry, optics, botany, meteorology, architecture, and art, to name just a few.[3] Some fields are correlated consistently with certain phenomena (Swann's love with illness or pathology; girls with flowers), while others become more or less prominent at different moments of the novel; some analogies are repeated, others appear only once. In *Du côté de chez Swann* alone, Stephen Ullmann counts well over 750 metaphorical or analogical images, an average of nearly three every two pages.[4] Many of them are complex and elaborated in detail, Ullmann adds, which heightens the impression of density. It

[3] See Stephen Ullmann, *The Image in the French Novel*, for a fuller list and observations about each field.
[4] Ibid., 129. Ullmann cites a dissertation by V. E. Graham, *The Imagery of Proust* (Columbia University, 1953), which finds a total of 4578 images in the entire *Recherche*. In an earlier study, *Style in the French Novel*, Ullmann was among the first to point out the metonymic aspects of Proust's metaphors, which rely on a relationship of contiguity rather than resemblance.

often becomes difficult to tell which is the tenor and which is the vehicle, which the illustration and which the thing being illustrated.

Furthermore, the analogies are not evenly distributed. They are seldom used in dialogue, appearing instead in high concentration in descriptive and analytical passages attributed to the narrator. Focusing on *Du côté de chez Swann*, Ullmann distinguishes further significant differences in the frequency of images between the three parts. In the first and third part, "Combray" and "Nom de pays: le nom," he counts roughly seven examples every four pages, but in the middle section, "Un Amour de Swann," metaphorical images appear with much less frequency, only one per page. Ullmann suggests this can be explained by the fact that Swann's story is told from a more objective third-person perspective, whereas the first and last sections that recount his childhood and his first love are narrated in the first person.

We could add further to Ullmann's observations that with regard to the novel as a whole, analogies are particularly concentrated in the early volumes and then again in the final one, with certain fields appearing with greater frequency at different moments. As the novel proceeds, for instance, there is an increase in the number of comparisons to actual artworks, suggesting that as the narrator acquires greater knowledge about painting, music, and literature, he increasingly turns to them as means of assimilating and comprehending the world he observes around him (a characteristic shared by certain other characters, such as Mme de Guermantes and especially Swann). There are notably fewer analogies in *La Prisonnière* and *La Fugitive,* the volumes that center on Albertine, which we can speculate is due to the fact that analogical descriptions tend to be directed at the outside world, set into motion by external stimuli requiring comprehension. The Albertine volumes enclose us instead claustrophobically in the narrator's mind as it spins out hypotheses – indeed, although they are the volumes in which the least number of events actually happen, they are in many ways the most narrative, just on a hypothetical plane. Analogies proliferate again with

particular prominence in the last volume, unsurprisingly, when metaphor is realized to be the only style capable of conveying the essence of art. If the analogical imagination is that of the mature artist who has realized the capacities of metaphor, it would also explain why they are less prevalent in the Albertine volumes, where the presence of the older (and wiser) narrator is felt less than in the earlier volumes centered on his younger self, where he frequently intrudes to comment from the later vantage point of writing.

There are a number of ways to approach the topic of description in Proust. One might look at the extended set-pieces of ekphrasis, of which the most famous is the description of the eighteenth century Hubert Robert fountain in *Sodome et Gomorrhe*.[5] Much has been written about the role of the visual arts in the *Recherche*. Like Lambert Strether's vision of the French countryside as a Lambinet painting in *The Ambassadors*, the Proustian narrator (like Swann) tends to see his environment and the people around him in terms of artworks. As people are often compared to portraits (Odette to Boticelli's Zipporah, Bloch to Bellini's Mahammed II, Charlus to El Greco's grand inquisitor), Parisian views are also described by analogy with engravings by Piranesi, and even the asparagus peeled by a pregnant kitchen-maid (who herself resembles "la Charité de Giotto") have a counterpart in a Paduan fresco.[6]

One might also focus on different theories of metaphor, which too has been subject to much critical debate, most prominently with Gérard Genette and Paul de Man. This debate has often centered on the question of Proustian metaphor is actually metaphorical or metonymic, following Roman Jakobson's distinction between the metaphoric and metonymic poles of language, operating on principles of resemblance and contiguity respectively. As recent commentators have

[5] This is discussed at great length by Hayden White in "Narrative, Description, and Tropology in Proust," *Figural Realism: Studies in the Mimesis Effect.* White is concerned with showing how what appears to be a purely descriptive pause in the narrative, a passage belonging to the genre of ekphrasis, is in fact interpretive, demanding a rhetorical analysis. He reads this passage as a trope for interpretation itself.

[6] For more on Proust and ekphrasis, see Mack Smith, *Literary Realism and the Ekphrastic Tradition*, and Thomas Baldwin, *The Picture as Spectre in Diderot, Proust, and Deleuze*.

pointed out, however, it seems clear that both elements coexist.[7] Another option would be to take description vs. narration as the framework of analysis, as Mieke Bal does when she argues that Proust, more than any other writer, denaturalizes description at the same time that he shows the impossibility of detaching narration from it.[8]

Although touching on various aspects of the above, my own interest in the descriptive texture of the *Recherhe* takes as its focus instead Proust's analogical imagination. "Poetry is almost incredibly one of the effects of analogy," Wallace Stevens writes, meaning not that it is the outcome of tropes or figures of speech, but "the outcome of the operation of one imagination on another through the instrumentality of the figures...a rhetoric in which the feeling of one man is communicated to another in words of exquisite apositeness that takes away all their verbality."[9] This could also be said of Proust's poetics, although instead of speaking of the "apositeness" of an imaginative projection, he speaks (as does Stevens, too) of its "truth." Each analogy is an attempt to apprehend – and to describe – a phenomenon by means of a fitting imaginative projection. The distinctiveness of Proust's analogies lies in particular in their attention to resemblances between *relations* rather than between *things* – thus, comparatives are often forged on the basis of structural homologies rather than purely visual similarities. The practice of describing something by means of

[7] See Joshua Landy, *Philosophy as Fiction*, and Julia Kristeva, *Le temps sensible.* Jakobson identifies metaphor with poetry and metonymy with prose. David Lodge suggests that although modernist prose exhibits a greater tendency towards metaphor in contrast with the metonymic character of realism, it also exploits metonymic devices. In particular he identifies these with the use of simile to express analogy in explicitly anti-modernist writings of the period, taking Isherwood's Berlin Diaries as an example. See David Lodge, "Metaphor and Metonymy in Modern Fiction."

[8] See Mieke Bal, "Over-writing as Un-writing." Characters in realist fiction "*are* (continuous beings) and *do* (perform) the actions that propel the fabula and make the novel suspenseful." But in Proust, "characters are not *beings* at all...The descriptions of the many characters populating the world of *La Recherche* are not renderings in words of their static, or at least continuous, being; nor are they the creations of fictive entities contributing to the world in which the *fabula* takes place. Instead, the major players of *La recherche* are described along – and sometimes as representatives of – the two axes of the novelistic worl: space and time (585)." The difficulties of describing them are, for Bal, "the 'essence' of the novel (585)."

[9] Wallace Stevens, "The Effects of Analogy," *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination*, 117–118.

its parallels to something else is both the way in which experience becomes comprehensible to the narrator, and the method through which Proust discloses his world.

Although the theory of metaphor relies on a strict opposition between surface and depth, unequivocally rejecting one for the other, Proust's descriptive attention often dwells on the surface of the world, trained on highly specific aspects of how a phenomenon appears – how things look, taste, smell, and feel – and specific modes of being in the world. Sometimes it will turn out later that these descriptively specified phenomena are significant, subsequently revealed to have been the expression of a general law – so for instance, the way Legrandin bows, which strikes the young narrator in Combray, is later realized to have been a sign of his "inversion." But very often they are not signs laden with latent meaning, instead functioning simply to evoke some object more precisely for its own sake. Let me cite just one example, taken from the first volume. During his childhood walks along the Méséglise way at Combray, the narrator observes, "Parfois dans le ciel de l'après-midi passait la lune blanche comme un nuée, furtive, sans éclat, comme une actrice dont ce n'est pas l'heure de jouer et qui, de la salle, en toilette de ville, regarde un moment ses camarades, s'effaçant, ne voulant pas qu'on fasse attention à elle" (RTP, 1:144). So too when he walks along the Guermantes way, delighting in its course along the Vivonne, he observes first a water lily that, unfortunately placed in a moving current, "comme un bac actionné mécaniquement il n'abordait une rive que pour retourner à celle d'où il était venu, refaisant éternellement la double traverse" (RTP, 1:166). Farther on, as the current slows, little pools turn the river into a flowering garden, which is described through a variety of comparatives and hypotheticals.

> Ça et là, à la surface, rougissait comme une fraise une fleur de nymphéa au coeur éclarte, blanc sur les bords. Plus loin, les fleurs plus nombreuses étaient plus pâles, moins lisses, plus grenues, plus plissées, et disposées par le hasard en enroulements si gracieux qu'on croyait voir flotter à la dérive, comme après l'effeuillement mélancolique d'une fête galante, des roses mousseuses en guirlandes dénouées. Ailleurs un coin semblait réservé aux espèces communes qui montraient le blanc et le rose proprets de la julienne, lavés comme de la porcelaine avec un soin domestique...(RTP, 1:167).

The air, the moon, the sun all loom large in the descriptive texture of the text, since for the narrator the ambient surroundings that mark any epoch are essential to it, capable of awakening successive beings within him with a change of the weather.[10] And certainly flowers are a persistent theme throughout the novel, although unlike hawthorns, waterlillies do not bear special significance. But in these passages none of these things appear as illustrations of some higher law. Like the moon passing in the sky and the flowers floating by in the water, these are passing descriptions in the text, offhanded analogies revealing nothing more than the perception of a particular appearance. Indeed, what they seem most revealing of is the narrator's habit of mind, his fancifulness, his attention to the phenomenal world, and his tendency to constantly liken. These detailed evocations are also representative of the way descriptive analogies continually fill out the text, swelling it with specifying detail. And it is no doubt passages like these that have earned Proust his reputation for tedious prolixity.

In addition to phenomenal surfaces, Proust, like James and Woolf, uses descriptive analogies to figure that which doesn't look like anything at all – psychological states, abstract ideas, and dynamic relations.[11] Of his habit of associating a woman he desires with all the places he also longed for at that moment, the narrator comments, "si j'eusse voulu que ce fût elle qui me les fît visiter, qui m'ouvrît 'accès d'un monde inconnu, ce n'était pas par le hasard d'une simple association de pensée; non, c'est que mes rêves de voyage et d'amour n'étaient que des moments – que je sépare artificiellement aujourd'hui comme si je pratiquais des sections à des hauteurs différentes d'un jet d'eau irisé et en apparence immobile – dans un même et infléchissable jaillissement de toute les forces de ma vie" (RTP, 1:86). This commingling of desire obeys a key Proustian principle, the

[10] See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "The Weather in Proust."
[11] Stephen Ullmann points in particular to Proust's use of images from sciences "in the analysis of vague, elusive or highly complex experiences: time in its various aspects, dreams and semi-conscious states, the limitations of perception, the superimposed layers of memories, the workings of jealousy and other mental processes." Stephen Ullmann, *The Image in the Modern French Novel*, 151.

inextricability of any individual experience from its context. This idea is given form through the image of a futile attempt to cut a continuous jet of water at different heights – the sensory analogy furnishes the means to set forth this conceptual, abstract relation. As Barbara Stafford notes, "All of analogy's simile-generating figures are thus incarnational. They materialize, display, and disseminate an enigma that escapes words."[12] In the Proustian world, analogizing is an essential means by which relations, ideas, and appearances are made available.

Although Proust himself uses "*metaphore*" and "*analogie*" synonymously in the *Recherche*, I will use the term "analogy" rather than "metaphor" for several reasons. First, I want to avoid the debate between metaphor and metonymy, which seems to me to miss what is interesting by entrenching an unnecessary opposition. Second, metaphor is closely identified with a transference in name, as Aristotle defined it in the *Poetics*, but the examples I consider here are what we would call similes rather than metaphors, since they preserve an explicit comparative such as "like." In the French rhetorical tradition, as in classical rhetoric, the distinction between "simile" and "metaphor" is not always sharply drawn.[13] For instance, in the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle calls metaphor an abbreviated simile. For my purposes, what is important is that the operation is one of juxtaposition rather than substitution, "x is *like* y" rather than "x *is* y," avoiding the collapse of identity.

Analogy is, of course, also a type of reasoning by inference, which proceeds by assuming that since two cases are alike in certain respects they will also be alike in some other respect. Proust's novel furnishes many examples of such inferential logic, both in the narrator's overall project of discovering general laws, and in more local cases of characters trying to understand a particular phenomenon (for instance, Mme de Guermantes assimilating Swann's unfortunate marriage to botanical examples). Although I will not focus specifically on analogy as a logical procedure, this sense should also be retained in background, since I am interested in the way that they seem to

[12] Barabara Stafford, *Visual Analogy*, 24.
[13] See Pierre Fontanier's *Les figures du discours*, the definitive rhetorical treatise of the nineteenth century.

structure the narrator's mode of comprehension. Cognitive scientists and psychologists have argued recently that analogy-making is fundamental to our processes of cognition. While I do not take a cognitive approach here, it's worth noting that Douglas Hofstader and Emmanuel Sander's recent book on analogy as the "fuel and fire of thinking" bears the provocative title "Surfaces and Essences." Advancing the thesis that the ability to make analogies is at the root of our ability to form concepts, they also propose that surfaces and depths are not opposed. "The royal road to the depths of a thing, to its core, to its essence, is precisely what lies at its surfaces."[14] Without wishing to make Proust a neuroscientist *avant la lettre*, as has been suggested, it is nevertheless striking how much his use of analogies accords with work in psychology on our observance of the "the correlational structure of the world," so that the perception of surface-level features activates in our minds other features correlated with the first.[15] As a working definition, we might adopt Stevens's formulation that in its broadest sense, analogy can be thought of "as likeness, as resemblances between parallels."[16]

"L'esprit d'observation"

From the outset, the narrator is quick to disclaim his talents at observation. When he first spies Gilberte through the hawthorn bushes at Tansonville in *Du côté de chez Swann*, he is immediately arrested by the vision of a little girl with reddish-blond hair, who appears to be coming back from walk, holding a garden spade, raising a face scattered with pink freckles.

> Ses yeux noirs brillaient et comme je ne savais pas alors, ni ne l'ai appris depuis, réduire en ses éléments objectifs une impression forte, comme je n'avais pas, ainsi qu'on dit, asssez 'd'esprit d'observation' pour dégager la notion de leur couleur, pendant longtemps, chaque fois que je repensai à elle, le souvenir de leur éclat se présentait aussitôt à moi comme celui d'un vif azur, puisqu'elle était blonde: de sorte que, peut-être si elle n'avait pas eu des yeux aussi noirs – ce qui frappait tant la

[14] Douglas Hofstader and Emmanuel Sander, *Surfaces and Essences: Analogy as the Fuel and Fire of Thinking* (New York: Basic Books, 2013), 344.
[15] Cited in ibid., 354.
[16] Stevens, "The Effects of Analogy," 110.

> première fois qu'on la voyait – je n'aurais pas été, comme je le fus, plus particulèrement amoureux, en elle, de ses yeux bleus (RTP, 1:143-4).

L'esprit d'observation means noting objective facts about external reality, and is rejected because the reality of an impression is said here to be internal and subjective, located within the self. The primacy of the subject in determining the perception is indicated by the insistence that if Gilberte's eyes had *not* been so black, he would not have been so particularly in love with her blue ones.

The narrator repeats his disclaimer again during an evening at La Raspèliere with the Verdurins during his second stay at Balbec. In the midst of the painstakingly thorough record of the evening, he writes, "Je ne saurais dire aujourd'hui comment Mme Verdurin était habillée ce soir-là. Peut-être au moment même ne le savais-je pas davantage, car je n'ai pas l'esprit d'observation" (RTP, 3:339). The point is underscored in the immediately following section, when he reports that, having been absorbed in reflection, he was alone in failing to notice that Brichot's etymologies are prompting derision among the other guests. Of course, this remark takes place amidst pages of transcriptions of conversation and detailed descriptions of every aspect of social interaction. Much like James, Proust's notion of observation is a positivist one that restricts itself only to the evidence of what is apparent, assuming that looking at the world is the first step towards knowing it. Like the botanists and zoologists who study living organisms by attending to their morphology, aesthetic observers also depart from attention to surface forms.[17]

The narrator's first profession of inadequate attention in *Du côté de chez Swann* will seem doubtful to a reader who by that point has already traversed extensive, minute observations – and descriptions – about the experience of falling asleep and waking up, hours spent reading, the hypochondria of his Aunt Léonie, views of Combray, and the contradictions of Françoise, among

[17] In these condemnations of observation, Proust may also have had in mind Zola's recommendation in "Le Roman experimental" for the writer to adopt the experimental practices of the sciences (Zola took as his model the physiologist Claude Bernard's influential treatise, *L'introduction à l'étude de la médecine experimental*), which were in no way *opposed* to observation but simply a form of observation where the observer acts on the object.

others. More immediately, it is belied by the long, extended paragraphs preceding it that assiduously record the appearance of the hawthorn flowers along the lane at Tansonville, which we learn leave no spot unadorned, like pom-poms garlanding a rococo shepherd's crook. The narrator is particularly struck by a pink one amidst the white, and is color is described through a series of comparisons to pink sponge cake, cream cheese in which strawberries have been crushed, and a young girl's party dress.

By the time we get to *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, the claim is no longer tenable in the least. The very assertion that he cannot remember what Mme Verdurin was wearing feels intrusive (the lady doth protest too much), not to mention difficult to believe, coming from the man who devotes multiple pages to chronicling the changes in Odette's clothing, and who will spend even more describing Albertine's. Observation is disavowed because it is posited as excluding a more discerning type of perception, one that attends to internal impressions. So when the narrator waits in M. de Charlus's waiting room, eager to share his overflowing impressions from a party at Mme de Guermantes's, despite the twenty five minutes he spends there, "j'aurais tout au plus pu dire qu'il était immense, verdâtre, avec quelque portraits. Le besoin de parler n'empêche pas seulement d'écouter, mais de voir, et dans ce cas l'absence de toute description du milieu extérieur est déjà une description d'un état interne" (RTP, 2:840-1). The absence of external description signals his absorption in his internal state. Whereas external surroundings and internal traits mirror each other in realism, the former typically metonyms for the latter, in Proust the two have become mutually exclusive.

What is withheld here, notably, is a description of a room. "Other French novelists like Zola and Balzac carefully displayed in their homes (and exhaustively catalogued in their writings) every valuable possession they owned," Diana Fuss observes in her study of the spaces in which writers worked. But in his apartment at 102 boulevard Haussman, Proust "stored most of his furniture out of sight in his dining room, an unused chamber described by [his housekeeper and confidante

Celeste Albaret] as a 'repository crammed to the ceiling'."[18] Realist descriptions of rooms are not entirely absent in the *Recherche*, for instance, the passages on Aunt Leonie's rooms in "un de ces maisons provinciales," that eminently Balzacian formula, or the description of Odette's house in "Un Amour de Swann," where her bric-a-brac serve as indices of her character. Here, however, the absence of specifications about an interior, by no means isolated although distinguished in being explicitly signalled, seems designed to indicate distance from the *soi-disant* realist literature that will be condemned later, which would demand a more thorough inventory of the furniture.[19]

Although the narrator claims to lack *l'esprit d'observation*, Proust's readers continually observe his inability to look away. He is persistently singled out for his talents as a noticer, one whose attention lets nothing escape its beam. Gide calls Proust "quelqu'un dont le regard est infiniment plus subtil et plus attentif que le nôtre."[20] Benjamin writes, "There has never been anyone else with [his] ability to show us things. Proust's pointing finger is unequaled."[21] And as Woolf records in her diaries, "The thing about Proust is his combination of the utmost sensibility with the utmost tenacity. He searches out these butterfly shades to the last grain. He is as tough as a catgut & as evanescent as a butterfly's bloom" (D, 3:7). Kristeva sums up, "Des aliment aux sons, en passant par la peau: dur ou mou, rompu ou lié, homogène ou pluriel, aéré, ensoleillé, ombragé, moisi, velouté, soyeux, satiné, feutré...végétal, marin, aquatique...spongieux, coagulé, cristallisé...l'univers senti de Proust a été passé au crible."[22] What these remarks all point out is how much and how thoroughly Proust observes. The beam of his attention scans over the field of experience, distinguishing, selecting, and isolating among it shades and textures that we instantly recognize, but which we might not have noticed had they not been pointed out.

---

[18] Diana Fuss, *The Sense of an Interior*, 71.
[19] See also the ostentatiously absent descriptions of the "féeriques hôtels" of the ladies of the Faubourg St-Germain (III 138).
[20] André Gide, *Incidences* (Paris: Nouvelle Revue Française, 1924), 47.
[21] Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, 2:245.
[22] Julia Kristeva, *Le temps sensible*, 253-4.

Contre la Description

In *Le temps retrouvé,* the valorization of depth, reality, and insight contra surface, appearance, and observation reaches a climax, finding a foil in the naturalism of the Goncourt brothers and their *Journals des Goncourts 1851–1895*. A long pastiche of their journals is inserted into the text, read by the narrator while visiting Gilberte at Tansonville. Proust first wrote a pastiche of the Goncourts' style in 1907, and the one included in *Le Temps retrouvé* is directed mostly at the last volumes of the *Journal*, written by Edmond de Goncourt alone after his brother Jules died in 1870.[23] In *Le temps retrouvé*, the ostensible Goncourt excerpt is an assiduous report of a dinner at the Verdurins', prompting the narrator both to rue his own lack of literary talent, and to despair that literature has any truths to offer at all.[24] After reading pages of gossipy details about the guests, their attire, the food, and the plates (one that is not entirely unlike Proust's own accounts of parties), the narrator concludes, "Prestige de la littérature!" The detail and fidelity of the Goncourt's portrait sets the scene vividly before him, "Mais j'éprouvais un vague trouble. Certes, je ne m'étais jamais dissimulé que je ne savais pas écouter ni, dès que je n'étais plus seul, regarder. Une vieille femme ne montrait à mes yeux aucune espèce de collier de perles et ce qu'on en disait n'entrait pas dans mes oreilles" (RTP, 4:297). The Goncourts make clear to him the by now familiar claim that he has no skill at listening or looking – he has known all these same people, he thinks regretfully, without having found anything of interest in any of them.

But he reassures himself in several ways in response to these doubts. First, his observational deficiency is not complete: "Il y avait en moi un personnage qui savait plus ou moins bien regarder,

[23] In a consideration of the book for the literary supplement of the *Le Gaulois du dimanche* in May 1922, Proust praised the Goncourts' *Journal* as "un livre délicieux et divertissant," while reproaching them for having accorded more care to the minutiae of quotidian life than to the artistic creation of living beings, similar to his argument against them in the novel. See "Les Goncourts devant leurs cadets: M. Marcel Proust," *Contre Sainte-Beuve*, 642.
[24] The Pleiade editors note each sentence of Proust's pastiche has a corresponding one in the original, also observing that Proust's own style, "amplitude, reprises, références de culture, raffinement dans le rendu des nuances, n'est pas sans rapport avec celui de Goncourt" (RTP, 4:1189).

mais c'était un personnage intermittent, ne reprenant vie que quand se manifestait quelque essence générale, commune à plusieurs choses, qui faisait sa nourriture et sa joie" (RTP, 4:296). The narrator is fond of identifying different "personnages" inside himself, awakened or dormant depending on the situation, one succeeding another in the composition of his personality. Here, the being who doesn't know how to look or listen gives way to a *savant*.

> Alors le personnage regardait et écoutait, mais à une certaine profondeur seulement, de sorte que l'observation n'en profitait pas. Comme un géomètre qui dépouillant les choses de leurs qualités sensibles ne voit que leur substratum linéaire, ce que racontaient les gens m'échappait, car ce qui m'intéressait, c'était non ce qu'ils voulaient dire mais la manière dont ils le disaient, en tant qu'elle était révélatrice de leur caractère ou de leurs ridicules; ou plutôt c'était un objet qui avait toujours été plus particulièrement le but de ma recherche parce qu'il me donnait un plaisir spécifique, le point qui était commun à un être et à un autre (RTP, 4:296).

Like a geometer, he sees only formal relations between things, stripped of their sensory qualities, at a profundity inaccessible to "observation." What interests him is not what people say, but the manner in which they say it, this being revelatory of a person's idiosyncrasies and, from there, able to be abstracted into more general laws.

> Ce n'était que quand je l'apercevais que mon esprit – jusque-là sommeillant, même derrière l'activité apparente de ma conversation dont l'animation masquait pour les autres un total engourdissement spirituel – se mettait tout à coup joyeusement en chasse, mais ce qu'il poursuivait alors – par exemple l'identité du salon Verdurin dans divers lieux et divers temps – était situé à mi-profondeur, au delà de l'apparence elle-même, dans une zone un peu plus en retrait (RTP, 4:296).

It will not be surprising that Proust has been read as a Platonist. Like James, Woolf, and a number of other modernists, he locates reality behind appearances, at a "mi-profondeur."[25] When the narrator's perceptive faculty gets on the scent of common point between two things – when it senses the ability to ascend from the particular to the universal – it sets off joyfully in pursuit. Its object is an identity across time and space, here the identity of the Verdurin drawing room, and it forms the

[25] On the common opposition between surface and depth during this period, see Sanford Schwartz, *The Matrix of Modernism*. Schwartz identifies different ways of construing the opposition – for Bergson, depth is immediate intuitive sensation, for Nietzsche, it is a matter of imposing a different set of concepts.

object of his *recherche*, his active intelligence. This *personnage*, referred to in *La Prisonnière* as "un certaine philosophe," now turns somewhat more sinister. "Aussi le charme apparent, copiable, des êtres m'échappait parce que je n'avais pas la faculté de m'arrêter à lui, comme un chirurgien qui, sous le poli d'un ventre de femme, verrait le mal interne qui le ronge. J'avais beau dîner en ville, je ne voyais pas les convives, parce que, quand je croyais les regarder, je les radiographiais" (RTP, 4:296). First likened to the geometer who perceives the configurations of lines beneath the sensible qualities of an object, this linear outline now gives way to an internal malady ravaging a woman's organs beneath the skin, which the trained eye is instantly able to diagnose. Finally, the series concludes with his transformation into a machine – an x-ray that, unlike the camera, sees nothing of the surface.

Radiographic is contrasted to photographic vision along familiar lines. As the narrator steps out of the cab in the courtyard of the Guermantes *hôtel*, just before the redemption that will be offered by the series of involuntary memories, he despairs again of his talent for literature. Reflecting on an impression of sunlight on trees the previous day that had left him completely unmoved, he thinks "Je me redisais que je n'avais éprouvé, en essayant cette description, rien de cet enthousiasme qui n'est pas le seul mais qui est un premier critérium du talent. J'essayais maintenant de tirer de ma mémoire d'autres 'instantanés', notamment des instantanés qu'elle avait pris à Venise, mais rien que ce mot me la rendait ennuyeuse comme une exposition de photographies" (RTP, 4:444). In the nineteenth century, realist literature, with its detailed descriptions of ordinary life, often drew comparisons to seventeenth century Dutch painting. It was precisely in these terms that Balzac was taken to task by reviewers for his endless catalogues of everyday things.[26] Later commentators have also drawn the connection between the realist novel and photography, pointing out realism's

[26] See Ruth Yeazell, *The Art of the Everyday*. For the equation of Dutch painting with description in contrast to the association (and privileging) of Italian painting with narrative, see Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing*. See also Alpers's "Describe or Narrate? A Problem in Realistic Representation" for a discussion that includes literature.

emphasis on describing the visible world and the epistemic authority it accords to visual data.[27] Proust mobilizes the trope of photography in more complex ways in the asthetic theory, especially in the "development" of impressions which otherwise lie like negatives in a darkroom, their truth unrevealed. But here, the snapshots of Venice that leave him cold are equated with what he later calls the "littérature des notations." Indeed, the snapshot was often associated with description in nineteenth century in ways that mark both as intellectually inferior, for instance in the minor American genre of the literary sketches, which was primarily practiced by women.[28]

In contrast, the new technology of vision on which Proust grounds his theory of literature is the x-ray, invented in 1895. It was embraced by a range of modernists, hailed as a model for art by the Futurist painter Umberto Boccioni, and figuring new discontinuities between seeing and knowing in Thomas Mann's *Der Zauerberg*.[29] Woolf evokes it in *To the Lighthouse* in similar ways to Proust, as penetrating bodily surfaces and laying bare emotions. "Lily Briscoe knew all that. Sitting opposite him could she not see, as in an X-ray photograph, the ribs and thigh bones of the young man's desire to impress himself lying dark in the mist of the flesh – that thin mist which had laid over his burning desire to break into the conversation" (TL, 90-1). Modernist attacks on positivism and materialism, articulated in the rejection of surfaces and appearances, finds an important symbol in a technology that seemed to figure a different epistemological model.

The x-ray, the geometer, and the surgeon all serve as representatives of a penetrating vision that strips away the illusions of the surface. This is, in effect, the form of reading that Paul Ricoeur has called "les herméneutiques du soupçon." Taking Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud as the three

---

[27] Paul Valéry, "Centenaire de la photographie"; Nancy Armstrong, *Fiction in the Age of Photography;* Stuart Burrows, *A Familiar Strangeness.*

[28] See Kristie Hamilton, *American's Sketchbook: the Cultural Life of a Nineteenth Century Literary Genre*; also discussed briefly in Mieke Bal, "Over-writing as Un-writing," 582–3.

[29] In the "Technical Manifesto of Futurist Painting," written by Boccioni, Carlo Carrà, Luigi Russolo, Giacomo Balla, Gino Severini and published in *Poesia* in 1910, the authors state, "Who can still believe in the opacity of bodies, since our sharpened and multiplied sensitiveness has already penetrated the obscure manifestations of the medium? Why should we forget in our creations the doubled power of our sight, capable of giving results analogous to those of the X-rays?"

"masters of suspicion," Ricoeur argues that these disparate thinkers share a conception of interpretation as a demystifying activity, unmasking the apparent to reveal the real behind it. In this conception, apparent phenomena are symptoms of some underlying cause.[30] Carlo Ginzburg has identified a similar mode of interpreting as part a conjectural paradigm that emerges in the human sciences in the late nineteenth century (although he traces its roots to much older disciplines), which takes small, seemingly insignificant details to be symptoms of larger phenomena. Ginzburg, whose exemplars are the Italian art historian Morelli, Freud, and Sherlock Holmes, also adds, "It can easily be demonstrated that one of the greatest novels of our century, Proust's *Recherche*, was constructed according to a scientific conjectural paradigm."[31] It is not hard to see what Ginzburg has in mind, especially in light of Proust's own evocations of medicine, an originary semiotic discipline based on deciphering symptoms. And, elaborated in yet another way, Deleuze's Proust too is above all a decoder of signs.[32] In all of these frameworks, describing is the unanalytical, unintellectual, naïve opposite of some other more active, more authentic, more discerning procedure, whether it's understood as diagnosis, conjecture, insight, interpretation, or deciphering. These are the terms announced by Proust himself, and his readers have tended to take his program on faith. But if we extend a certain suspicion to his statements, it would seem that he is *less* suspicious than he claims.

In "The Weather in Proust," Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick highlights a dynamic tension in Proust that also illuminates the one I am concerned with here. Sedgwick distinguishes between two tendencies in Proust, an unrestingly demystifying one that seeks laws, and another one that she calls his mysticism (which owes nothing to the occult or esoteric, however), evinced, for instance, in the persistent narrative of reincarnation. His "scouring determination to unearth what he calls 'laws' or 'truths' of human desire, self-deception, and limitation" meets the "quotidian, unspecial, reality-

[30] See Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, 32.
[31] Carlo Ginzburg, *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, 124.
[32] Gilles Deleuze, *Proust et les signes*.

grounded structure and feel of Proust's mysticism," his incessant invocations of faeries, genies, daemons, and goddesses (of rivers, telephones, etc.).[33] Framing this in terms of the interaction between open and closed systems, Sedgwick finds in the weather an exemplar of a complex system that is at once absolutely rule-bound and also irreducibly contingent. "The order of these distinct, propositional laws and truths, delineating at most a grid on which to map the ground of reality, seems distinct from the non-propositional, environmental order of Proust's reality orientation, which coincides with his mysticism."[34] Similarly, what interests me is the rejection of observation and description in favor of the drive to unveil hidden essences, coupled with the fact that the "environmental order of reality," or what I am calling simply the ordinary fabric of the text, is densely descriptive of surface phenomena. The demystifying seeker of laws is the suspicious hermeneut, but, as Proust likes to personify the different and often successive aspects of his personality, this master "*philosophe*" coexists with an observer who sees that the surface in fact offers much to see.

Surface Appearances

According to the classical paradigm represented by the eighteenth century *Encyclopédie*, to define something is to say what an object is in terms of its essence, *quid est*. Description, in contrast, is a "définition imparfaite & peu exacte," enumerating accidental attributes "qui lui sont particulieres, suffisantes pour en donner une idée & la faire distinguer des autres, mais qui ne developpent point sa nature & son essence."[35] But in at least one realm, the social one, appearances *are* essential, constituting the currency of exchange and the measure of value. I want to offer just two examples of the offhand, ordinary way in which analogies are used to descriptively specify and render more vivd their object. The first is drawn from Mme. Verdurin's "little clan," the vulgar,

[33] Sedgwick, *The Weather in Proust*, 4.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Edme-François Mallet and Louis Jaucourt, "Description," *Encyclopédie*, eds. Denis Diderot and Jean d'Alembert, 4:878-9 < http://encyclopedie.uchicago.edu/>

bourgeois salon which Swann joins while pursuing Odette. One of the "faithfuls" of the little clan is the socially tone-deaf Dr. Cottard, who, because he is always unsure of whether people are speaking in jest or sincerely, maintains a constant expression of half-irony so that if it turns out someone was joking, he can pretend to have known it was the case all along. During the first evening that Swann visits the Verdurin salon, the guests all heap praise on the performance of Vinteuil's sonata that they have just heard. Dr. Cottard and his wife, aesthetic naïfs, feel mostly baffled, and at any rate have little appreciation for the piece. But he wishes to join in the chorus. "Pourtant les fidèles s'étant dispersés, le docteur sentit qu'il y avait là une occasion propice et, pendant que Mme Verdurin disait un dernier mot sur la sonate de Vinteuil, comme un nageur débutant qui se jette à l'eau pour apprendre mais choisit un moment où il n'y a pas trop de monde pour le voir: 'Alors, c'est ce qu'on appelle un musicien *di primo cartello*!'" (RTP, 1:210). What is being singled out in this highly specific simile is the manner in which Cottard tentatively tries out an aesthetic judgment, which is evoked by being likened to the manner in which a novice swimmer decides the only way to learn is to throw himself into the water in order to learn, but takes care to choose a moment when no one is looking so as not to embarrass himself. The operation here is not that of metamorphosis, Cottard does not *become* a swimmer, but a parallel between the two scenarios allows for one to be described be evoking the other.

Another example, this time from the other end of the social spectrum: at a party of the aristocracy given by the Marquise de Saint-Euverte, a minor character, the Marquise de Gallardon, is pained by the fact that, while seated next to a stranger, she is unable to outwardly manifest her kinship with the Guermantes, which she wishes to broadcast to the world. This kinship is the source of her great pride but also secret shame, since the Guermantes, higher up on the social hierarchy, keep her at a distance. Reflecting on the slight she has suffered by not having been invited to one of their parties, she tells herself that in fact she chose not to go because she did not wish to run into

another cousin who would be sure to be there, and ends up by convincing herself of this belief. "Ce n'est pas qu'elle ne fût par nature courtaude, hommasse et boulotte; mais les camouflets l'avaient redressée comme ces arbres qui, nés dans une mauvaise position au bord d'un précipice, sont forcés de croître en arrière pour garder leur équilibre" (RTP, 1:343). In likening Mme. de Gallardon's posture to the uprightness of certain trees brought about by their unlucky position on a cliff, what is at issue is how the fact of having to withstand and compensate for the harsh conditions of her social environment "avait fini par modeler son corps et par lui enfanter une sorte de présence." The resemblance concerns the parallel relations between one's bearing and one's environment, be they natural or social.

The list of examples could go on. Analogies such as these are found everywhere in the text, discerning and making evident – "*fait sortir*" – particularized aspects of even the most minor characters and minor objects. In both of these cases, something profound is disclosed simply by describing the surface of how things appear, rather than dispensing with appearances in order to reveal the actual thing underneath. These descriptions instantly give us a sense of what Dr. Cottard or Mme Gallardon is like, as well as the milieu in which they move and the rules under which they labor. Indeed, it is with good reason that Benjamin singles out Proust's great achievement as the depiction of social snobbery. His observing eye registers specificities of manner and being, and lays bare the operations of implicit codes and unspoken laws – notably their cruelty and hypocrisy – not by lifting the curtain but simply by recording how things appear. These descriptions disclose rather than demystify, since in fact everything already lies on the surface.[36]

The Miracle of an Analogy

[36] This is in fact very close to the understanding of description adumbrated by recent advocates of "surface reading." See Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best, "Surface Reading: an Introduction," and Heather Love, "Close But Not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn."

Although the narrator fails to recover Venice in snapshot-like memories, it *is* miraculously returned to him when he stumbles upon the uneven paving stones in the Prince de Guermantes's courtyard.

> Et presque tout de suite je la reconnus, c'était Venise, dont mes efforts pour la décrire et les prétendus instantanés pris par ma mémoire ne m'avaient jamais rien dit et que la sensation que j'avais ressentie jadis sur deux dalles inégales du baptistère de Saint-Marc m'avait rendue avec toutes les autres sensations jointes ce jour-là à cette sensation-là, et qui étaient restées dans l'attente, à leur rang, d'où un brusque hasard les avait impérieusement fait sortir, dans la série des jours oubliés (RTP, 4:446).

He realizes further that the happiness derived from the uneven paving stones, like that given to him previously by the taste of the madeleine, stems from the fact that these sensations have all been experienced at two moments, "jusqu'à faire empiéter le passé sur le présent, à me faire hésiter à savoir dans lequel des deux je me trouvais" (RTP, 4:449-50). The identity of two sensations from different moments can only be enjoyed in the same medium, "c'est-à-dire en dehors du temps"; the perception of identity accordingly calls up the same *personnage* who can only see *through* things, never look *at* them. "[Cet] être n'apparaissait que quand, par une de ces identités entre le présent et le passé, il pouvait se trouver dans le seul milieu où il pût vivre, jouir de l'essence des choses...Cet être-là n'était jamais venu à moi, ne s'était jamais manifesté, qu'en dehors de l'action, de la jouissance immédiate, chaque fois que le miracle d'une analogie m'avait fait échapper au present" (RTP, 4:450). Involuntary memories, unlike the intelligence and conscious memory, are capable of bringing about the miracle of an analogy, forming a bridge between past and present moments that allows one to be reborn in the other. "Une minute affranchie de l'ordre du temps a recrée en nous pour la sentir l'homme affranchi de l'ordre du temps" (RTP, 4:451). But in fact, the miracle Proust speaks of is the establishment of an *identity* – although the context is different, it is the sameness rather than the resemblance of the two sensations that allows time to be annulled. The miraculous operation depends not on a conjunction but a substitution: the past simply cancels out the present.

Time is, among other things in Proust, a container. "Une heure n'est pas qu'une heure, c'est un vase rempli de parfums, de sons, de projets et de climats." So when the narrator sees a copy of *François le champi* in the Prince de Guermantes's library, he feels the sudden return of both his childhood self, and that time itself. "Ce que nous appelons la réalité est un certain rapport entre ces sensations et ces souvenirs qui nous entourent simultanément – rapport que supprime une simple vision cinématographique, laquelle s'éloigne par là d'autant plus du vrai qu'elle prétend se borner à lui – rapport unique que l'écrivain doit retrouver pour en enchaîner à jamais dans sa phrase les deux termes différents" (RTP, 4:467–8). Reality is a matter of *rapports*, which can only be expressed by enchaining two different terms together in a single phrase.

> On peut faire se succéder indéfiniment dans une description les objets qui figuraient dans le lieu décrit, la vérité ne commencera qu'au moment où l'écrivain prendra deux objets différents, posera leur rapport, analogue dans le monde de l'art à celui qu'est le rapport unique de la loi causale dans le monde de la science, et les enfermera dans les anneaux nécessaires d'un beau style. Même, ainsi que la vie, quand en rapprochant une qualité commune à deux sensations, il dégagera leur essence commune en les réunissant l'une et l'autre pour les soustraire aux contingences du temps, dans une métaphore (RTP, 4:468).

While description is the stylistic correlate of cinematographic vision, voluntary and impotent, metaphor is the correlate of involuntary memory. Notably, this idea is itself elucidated by an analogy, between the artist and the scientist, as nature is said to show art the way. "[La nature] ne m'avait permis de connaître, souvent longtemps après, la beauté d'une chose que dans une autre, midi à Combray que dans le bruit de ses cloches, les matinées de Doncières que dans les hoquets de notre calorifère à eau. Le rapport peut être peu intéressant, les objets médiocre, le style mauvais, mais tant qu'il n'y a pas eu cela, il n'y a rien" (RTP, 4:468).

If essences are a matter of *rapports* then the problem with the theory is that does not go far *enough*, for it restricts these to the domain of temporal experience. If involuntary memories lead to the recognition of identity between different things, unmasking the substratum of their *under*lying laws, the ordinary, unmarked analogies disclose instead a network of criss-crossing lines laid *over* the

phenomenal surface of the world. These connections are not externally imposed but rather found on the surface. The *rapports* revealed in the ordinary descriptive texture of the novel are not only temporal, but also spatial, abstract, dynamic, and conceptual. Nothing is apprehended or experienced directly, but only in another thing – the work of the artist is thus the search "à apercevoir sous de la matière, sous de l'expérience, sous des mots quelque chose de different" (RTP, 4:474). And if this difference is necessary, then what is required is not identity but resemblance, not substitution but juxtaposition. Proustian apprehension involves proceeding away from the object, and analogy is a key technique of indirection, describing A by pointing out its parallels with B.

Having realized the nature of essences, "l'art prétendu réaliste" (RTP, 4:460) strikes the narrator as all the more evidently false. Realist art diligently transcribes the surface of reality, but since reality is continually covered over with the veil of habit, such art can also only be mendacious. Proust indicts the critical theories developed during the Dreyfus affair and again during the war that urge the writer to "leave his ivory tower" and to avoid subjects that are frivolous or sentimental.[37] His reaction to these – explained by way of an analogy, of course – is "comme un enfant vraiment bien élevé qui entend des gens chez qui on l'a envoyé déjeuner dire: 'Nous avouons tout, nous sommes francs,' sent que cela dénote une qualité morale inférieure à la bonne action pure et simple, qui ne dit rien. L'art véritable n'a que faire de tant de proclamations et s'accomplit dans le silence" (RTP, 4:460). So-called realist art *proclaims* its realism rather than *being* realist, much in the same way Mme Verdurin *displays* her emotion instead of simply emoting. Whence the great temptation for a writer to write an intellectual work. "Une oeuvre où il y a des théories est comme un objet sur lequel on laisse la marque du prix" (RTP, 4:461). This statement reads much like the narrator's claims to lack the spirit of observation, since it comes at the end of a book stuffed with theories, and in the midst of developing the grandest one of them all.

[37] Tthe Pléiade editors summarize Proust's position as being against humanitarian and social art, but also art seen as patriotic or ruled by intelligence. Romain Rolland is a particular target. See RTP, 4:843.

If we take Proust at his word, this statement could be read as something of a caution against his own theory. If art *shows* its realism instead of *announcing* it, we must attend to what the work *discloses* instead of what it *proclaims*. Despite the disavowal of surfaces, observation, and description, we are, after all, confronted with a book in which hundreds of pages are devoted to a single party at Mme de Guermantes' and several paragraphs to the color of asparagus, in which no passing object is left unspecified, no leaf, petal, cloud, or ray of light left undescribed. The novel is woven from a densely descriptive fabric that often dwells at length on the surface of the world, registering how things appear in an eminently ordinary, non-miraculous way. To take the analogy of the fabric quite literally, the material of the book, a significant percentage of its sentences, is comprised of descriptions. Whatever the narrator's claims to the contrary, Proust renders the phenomenal world with the utmost care and comprehensiveness. There are *more* descriptions, more observations in Proust, not less; they are amplified, not eliminated.

Analogies of Relation

What is meant by analogy? Here is a constellation of terms given by the *Oxford English Dictionary*: agreement of ratio; correlation; harmony; similarity; resemblance; parallelism; equivalence; a correspondence in the relationship between two things and their respective attributes; and a comparison made between one thing and another for the purpose of clarification or explanation. The common principle operative in all of these is one of resemblance. According to Benjamin, Proust evinces signs of a passionate "Kultus der Ähnlichkeit," whose reach is greater than we might expect. Understanding Proust's world as thoroughly analogical has several implications. Nothing is without precedent. Nor is anything originary or singular. Benjamin suggests the network of correspondences in the world is far vaster than we are aware. Appealing to an analogy himself, he likens what we ordinarily perceive as resemblance in our waking state to the part of an iceberg that protrudes above the water, which conceals below it an invisible mass whose immense size and shape

is in no way indicated by the visible portion. These hidden resemblances he calls "unsinnliche Ähnlichkeit," citing as an ancestral example the ancient practice of seeing correspondences between a constellation of stars and the fates of human lives.[38] Similarly, Ginzburg traces the mode of interpreting that he calls the conjectural or evidential paradigm to Mesopotamian divination texts beginning in the third millenium BCE. Linking these to hunters deciphering animal tracks via feathers, footprints, and other traces, for Ginzburg these all exhibit the assumption that investigating seemingly trivial details will lead to the discovery of events that could not have been directly experienced or known.[39]

A astral analogy appears in *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* when the narrator dines at Rivebelle, demonstrating his propensity to see correspondences between things and to understand one thing in terms of another. The tables that fill the restaurant appear to him "comme autant de planètes, telles que celles-ci sont figurées dans les tableaux allégoriques d'autrefois." The parallel is developed and sustained throughout the scene, as the diners at each table seem drawn by an irresistible force to have eyes only for the other tables, while on a higher plane than those seated, the waiters' dizzying revolutions circulate around "l'harmonie de ces tables astrales." "Et je plaignais un peu tous les dîneurs parce que je sentais que pour eux les tables rondes n'étaient pas des planètes et qu'ils n'avaient pas pratiqué dans les choses un sectionnement qui nous débarrasse de leur apparence coutumière et nous permet d'apercevoir des analogies" (RTP, 2:168). The deeply analogical nature of the narrator's schema of perception is evident not only from the fact that his intellegience carries out the *recherche* of common essences in the constant extrapolation of general laws, but also from the fact that it is how he perceives when he is less possessed of his wits, as here, when he has allowed himself more champagne than usual, or in the scene already mentioned late in *Le temps retrouvé*, when the thought of the work ahead of him leads to a torrent of comparisons.

[38] Walter Benjamin, "On the Image of Proust," *Selected Writings*.
[39] Carlo Ginzburg, "Clues: Roots of an Evidential Paradigm," 103.

Correspondences between the astral and terrestrial spheres is also evoked by Foucault to explain the principle of resemblance that, in his account, structured the field of knowledge in the West up to the end of the sixteenth century. Foucault identifies several figures of similitude that illuminate the ways resemblance, relation, and analogy are at work in Proust. The first is *convenientia*, adjacency of place, a "hinge between two things" where resemblance appears, the site where nature has indicated a relationship between them, however obscure.[40] Here we might think of the two "côtés" at Combray that represent two completely separate worlds to the child narrator, who discovers only in the final volume that in fact they intersect. The second figure of similitude named by Foucault is *aemulatio*, convenience that has been freed from the law of place and is able to function at a distance. "The relation of emulation enables things to imitate one another from one end of the universe to the other without connection or proximity: by duplicating itself in a mirror the world abolishes the distance proper to it."[41] It is often not possible to say which is reality and which the projection, "for emulation is a sort of natural twinship existing in things; it arises from a fold in being, the two sides of which stand immediately opposite to one another."[42] Whereas the elements of *convenientia* create a chain, those of *aemulatio* create rather a series of concentric circles reflecting and rivaling one another. Here we might think of the various salons in the *Recherche*, bourgeois and aristocratic, each one obeying its own laws and yet each eminently like the others, tumbling and ascending on the moving kaleidoscope of social heirarchies.

Third, Foucault identifies the figure of *analogia*. In analogy, *convenientia* and *aemulatio* are superimposed. "Like the latter, it makes possible the marvelous confrontation of resemblances across space; but it also speaks, like the former, of adjacencies, of bonds and joints. Its power is immense, for the similitudes of which it treats are not the visible, substantial ones between things

[40] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 18.
[41] Ibid., 19.
[42] Ibid., 19–20.

themselves; they need only be the more subtle resemblances of relations."[43] So "the relation of the stars to the sky is echoed in the relation between plants and the earth, between living beings and the globe they inhabit, between diamonds and the rocks in which they are buried, between sense organs and the face they animate, between skin moles and the body of which they are the secret marks."[44] Proust's perceptual gaze discerns above all to resemblances of this kind, pertaining to relations rather than to things.

Scholars have observed that Proust is distinctive in his use of metaphors not because he was the first or even because he used them more frequently than other writers, but because of the *kind* of relationship animating his metaphors, that is, the basis on which he constructs his comparisons. In a study of metaphors drawn from the sciences, Reino Virtanen notes that Balzac can be said to use scientific metaphors with equal prominence. "Animal magnetism, phrenology, and physiognomy are based on metaphors which are taken literally. And Balzac tends to accept them literally. He is inclined to see a substantive and not merely formal correspondence between physical energy and will, or between magnetism and hypnotism. Proust's correspondences are not substantive but purely formal."[45] Such correspondences are, according to the classical tradition, the only kind of resemblance that is properly analogical – *analogia* is the Greek word for mathematical proportions. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle famously defines metaphor as a transposition of names. "Metaphor is the transference of a name from the object to which it has a natural application; this transference can take place from genus to species or species to genus or from species to species or by analogy."[46] He

[43] Ibid., 21.
[44] Ibid. In Foucault's account, the terrestrial and celestial spheres mirror each other in an egalitarianf ashion, but as Kaja Silverman points out, Christian and Platonic analogies of being posit an asymmetric relationship, one world a degraded copy or pale reflection of the other. See Kaja Silverman, *Flesh of My Flesh* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 1. Silverman looks instead to Ovid for a different model of analogy that emphasizes kinship and that recognizes all phenomena as emerging from the same "flesh," new forms created from old ones.
[45] Reino Virtanen, "Proust's Metaphors from the Natural and the Exact Sciences," 1057. See also Nicola Luckhurst, *Science and Structure in Proust's* À la recherche du temps perdu*,* and Stephen Ullmann, *The Image in the French Novel*.
[46] Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1457b18-22.

goes on, "I mean by transference by analogy the situation that occurs whenever a second element is related to a first as a fourth is to a third."[47] For example, evening is to day as old age is to life; or, a cup is related to Dionyus as a shield is to Ares. "The poet will, therefore, speak of the cup as the shield of Dionysus and the shield as the cup of Ares."[48] Sometimes there is no standard name for the analogous relation (to scatter seeds is to sow, but the scattering of the sun's rays has no name), but nevertheless the related elements will be spoken of by analogy.[49] In the *Topics*, Aristotle comments in a similar vein, "Likeness should be studied, first, in the case of things belonging to different genera, the formulae being 'A:B = C:D' (e.g. as knowledge stands to the object of knowledge, so is sensation related to the object of sensation), and 'As A is in B, so C is in D' (e.g. as sight is in the eye, so is reason in the soul, and as is a calm in the sea, so is windlessness in the air)."[50]

Aristotle's remarks in the *Poetics* take metaphor as a transposition of a name, and Proust expresses such a view of metaphor as naming when the narrator visits Elstir's studio at Balbec and sees the Impressionist painter's seascapes. "J'y pouvais discerner que le charme de chacune consistait en une sorte de métamorphose des choses représentées, analogue à celle qu'en poésie on nomme métaphore et que si Dieu le Père avait crée les choses en les nommant, c'est en leur ôtant le nom, ou en leur en donnant un autre qu'Elstir les récréait" (RTP, 2:191). As a species of naming, metaphorizing is an Adamic act. Presaging the eventual aesthetic theory, this scene shows the narrator's stylistic apprenticeship through the work of Elstir.[51] Metaphor quickly becomes metamorphosis, and Elstir's particular method is to render his seascape in urban terms, and the landscape in marine terms, so that the demarcation between land and sea is suppressed. Certainly

[47] Ibid., 1457b31-3.
[48] Ibid., 1457b38-9.
[49] Ibid., 1457b44-8.
[50] Aristotle, *Topics*, 108a.
[51] Although his notebooks show his indecision about whether the formative role in the narrator's education would belong to Elstir or Bergotte, that is, to painting or literature. See for instance Esquisse LIX, a fragment extolling a work of art with the heading 'à mettre pour Elstir (ou pour Bergotte)" (RTP, 2:979).

this is the operation of involuntary memory– a past sensation is reincarnated in the present, which is itself annihilated. But as Kristeva points out, while the marine terms and urban terms overlap, they do not annul each other; Elstir's spaces are "amphibious."[52]

Transposed naming does not capture the operation of analogies of proportion, which do not transform one thing into another, but rather point out how one set of relations is parallel to another in some particular aspect. For instance, early in *Du côté de chez Swann*, a paragraph describing the narrator's experience of reading in his room is composed of two analogies, which themselves are in a relationship of proportional correspondence:

> Cette obscure fraîcheur de ma chamber était au plein soleil de la rue, ce que l'ombre est au rayon, c'est-à-dire aussi lumineuse que lui, et offrait à mon imagination le spectacle total de l'été dont mes sens si j'avais été en promenade, n'auraient pu jouir que par morceaux; et ainsi elle s'accordait bien à mon repos qui (grâce aux aventures racontées par mes livres et qui venaient l'émouvoir), supportait pareil au repos d'une main immobile au milieu d'une eau courante, le choc et l'animation d'un torrent d'activité (RTP, 1:82).

The construction of the paragraph as a whole is comprised of a series of nested comparisons, smaller analogical units (dimness of room : sun outside :: shadow : ray of light) forming larger ones (relationship of interior to exterior world :: relationship of repose of reading to adventures in the book being read). Staying in his shaded room in fact gives him the full experience of being out in the summer sun, just as sitting and reading gives him the full experience of active adventuring. In both cases the relation is the eminently Proustian one of inversion – by staying inside, I enjoy the summer more than if I left my room, just as by reading while comfortably seated I can be more active than if I sallied forth into the world.[53]

---

[52] Kristeva, 269.

[53] Thus Barthes formulates the Proustian principle of cognition, with the subset of homosexuality as his example, as "Le renversement et une loi. On comprehend alors pourquoi l'éthos de l'inversion proustienne est la surprise: c'est l'émerveillement d'un retour, d'une junction, d'une retrouvaille, (et d'une réduction)." Roland Barthes, "Une idée de recherché," 38.

Gérard Genette has pointed out the way in which metaphor in fact erases one of its terms – as soon as the present sensation conjures up the past one, it itself is annihilated.[54] Thus he speaks of Proust's "surimpressionism" and the continual superposition of images and objects onto each other – the magic lantern in the childhood bedroom, and the seascape that is reflected onto the glass panes covering the bookshelves in the hotel room at Balbec – finding the result to be a palimpsest. But the distinctiveness of a simile with an explicit comparative or a construction such as "comme" or "pareil à," which Proust usually tends to preserve, is that it operates on a model of juxtaposition rather than superposition – it holds two terms apart even as it elucidates one by means of the other. These are more simultaneous than palimpsestic; this kind of proportional analogy requires holding both terms present in order for their commonality to emerge. If metaphor takes an x-ray, defining the essence below the surface and capturing what something really *is*, simile conducts a phenomenology of experience on the level of appearance, saying what things are like by saying what they are like.

The Exact Curve of the Thing

The range and choice of analogies, Stevens tells us, is irrevocably subjective, expressive of and determined by an individual's "sense of the world."[55] One of Proust's most persistent themes is the way in which our own desires and assumptions mediate what we see –perception is determined as much by the subject as by the object. In the scene cited earlier from *Du côté de chez Swann* where the narrator has been cozily reading in his room, he realizes when his grandmother begs him to go outside that he remains, in some sense, always inside his own perspective.

> Et ma pensée n'était-elle pas aussi comme une autre crèche au fond de laquelle je sentais que je restais enfoncé, même pour regarder ce qui se passait au-dehors? Quand je voyais un objet extérieur, la conscience que je le voyais restait entre moi et lui, le bordait d'un mince liséré spirituel qui m'empêchait de jamais toucher directement sa matière; elle se volatilisait en quelque sorte avant que je prisse contact

[54] Gérard Genette, "Proust Palimpseste," and "Métonymie chez Proust."
[55] Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel*, 118.

> avec elle, comme un corps incandescent qu'on approche d'un objet mouillé ne touche pas son humidité parce qu'il se fait toujours précéder d'une zone d'évaporation (RTP, 1:83).

Contact with the external world is never immediate, but always filtered through the perceiving consciousness. The point will be reiterated repeatedly. So he recognizes that Gilberte and Albertine's faces have no features but those that he has placed there, and when he finally sees his grandmother as she is, as a aged, sick woman, this vision can only be figured by the lens, not the human eye.

The inescapability of perspective is made clear early on, in *Du côté de chez Swann*, in the prose poem written by the narrator (the only piece of his writing we see in the text) about the steeples of Martinville. First, the view is given in the text in ostensibly straightforward fashion in the narrative. During a drive back to Combray with Dr. Percepied, as the road bends, he sees two steeples, "sur lesquels donnait le soleil couchant et que le mouvement de notre voiture et les lacets du chemin avaient l'air de faire changer de place, puis celui de Vieuxvicq qui, séparé d'eux par une colline et une vallée, et situé sur un plateau plus élevé dans le lointain, semblait pourtant tout voisin d'eux" (RTP, 1:177-8). Then the scene is recounted again as the narrator manages to capture his impression in writing, the sole time he is able to carry all the way through to the end the work of investigating an impression and the happiness it provides him. "Seuls, s'élévant du niveau de la plaine et comme perdus en rase campagne, montaient vers le ciel les deux clochers de Martinville. Bientôt nous vîmes trois: venant se placer en face d'eux par une volte hardie, un clocher retardataire, celui de Vieuxvicq, les avait rejoints. Les minute passaient, nous allions vite et pourtant les trois clochers étaient toujours au loin devant nous, comme trois oiseaux posés sur la plaine, immobiles et qu'on distingue au soleil" (RTP, 1:179).

Like a number of other descriptive set-pieces, notably the ekphrastic passage about the eighteenth century Hubert Robert fountain in *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, this description follows the movement of the narrator as he proceeds towards an object, pausing to note the different

perceptions that strike him at each position, each successive one amending the others.[56] As the piece continues, he goes on to note the illumination of the setting sun playing on the sloping surfaces of the steeple. In addition to birds, they are also likened to "trois pivots d'or," and by the time he gets close to Combray, they are like "trois fleurs peintes sur le ciel," making him think also of "trois jeunes filles d'une légende, abandonnées dans une solitude où tombait déjà l'obscurité" (RTP, 1:179). As Joshua Landy sums up, comparing the two, the prose poem adds to the narrative description a set of images and personifications, and when second is subtracted from the first, "what is left over is something the narrator did not know he had—namely, a perspective."[57] The apparition of the steeples changes as the carriage moves along the road, but it is notably persistently described by means of likening, according to the narrator's chief mode of perception and understanding. Indeed, we learn that after he finishes writing the piece, he is so happy that "comme si j'avais été moi-même une poule et si je venais de pondre un oeuf, je me mis à chanter à tue-tête" (RTP, 1:180). And although the narrator claims not to look at this page again, the prose piece is subsequently published (much to his delight) in *Le Figaro*. He has managed to *ex*press his *im*pression and to bring to light its truth, that is, the truth of how it appeared to him. At the end of several more thousand pages, the externalization of an internal sensation will finally be revealed to be the task of art. The narrator's giddiness, which he compares to a hen having just laid an egg, stems from the fact that "je sentais qu'elle [the page he has written] m'avait...parfaitement débarrassé de ces clochers et de ce qu'ils cachaient derrière eux" (RTP, 1:180). Once captured in proper form, he is relieved of the impression.

Proust's embrace of metaphorical image-making is consistently coupled with an insistence that it must perfectly fit its thought. In his preface to Paul Morand's *Tendres Stocks* (a collection of

[56] This will be particularly prevalent at the final matinée, when he continually fails to recognize people only to realize who they are later. "Une grosse dame me dit un bonjour," he writes, and only at the end of the paragraph, after they have already been talking, "je reconnus Gilberte" (RTP, 4:558).
[57] Landy, *Philosphy as Fiction*, 56.

short stories published in 1921 and later translated into English by Ezra Pound), he writes, "Le seul reproche que je serais tenté d'adresser à Morand, c'est qu'il a quelquefois des images autres que des images inévitables. Or, tous les à peu près d'images ne comptent pas. L'eau (dans des conditions données) bout à 100 degrés. A 98°, à 99°, le phénomène ne se produit pas. Alors mieux vaut pas d'images."[58] And in a letter to Maurice Duplay in 1907, he takes similar issue with "un Jaurès," who considers the image as "la servante purement pratique et utilitaire du raisonnement, pareille à ces plans en relief qui servent à mieux faire comprendre aux élèves une leçon. Non, l'image doit avoir sa raison d'être en elle-même, sa brusque naissance toute divine" (CP: 8:167).[59]

Proust's sentiment is by no means isolated among his contemporaries. It finds a particularly notable echo in T. E. Hulme, the English translator of Bergson, who had a profound influence on Imagism as well as several key modernist figures including Pound and Eliot. In "Romanticism and Classicism" (1911), Hulme champions analogy as the method by which the new poetry can rejuvenate language. He condemns any excess or ill fit in the image for the expression of a thought, but "when the whole of the analogy is necessary to get out the exact curve of the feeling or the thing you want to express – there you seem to me to have the highest verse, even though the subject be trivial and the emotions of the infinite far away."[60] This comes very close to Proust's remark that the image must be boiling in order to work, and it expresses a similar view of the supremacy of style, to which I will turn presently. As Stevens would sum up several decades later, there is a reader for whom the effect of analogy is "the effect of the degree of appositeness, for whom the imaginative projection, the imaginative deviation, raises the question of rightness, as if in the vast association of ideas there existed for every object its appointed objectification."[61] The exactitude, inevitability, or rightness of the metaphorical image in all these elaborations is unlike the precision of logic or

[58] Proust, "Préface," Paul Morand, *Nouvelles complètes*, 11.
[59] Proust, *Correspondance*, 21 Vols, ed. Philip Kolb (Paris: Plon, 1970–),.
[60] T. E. Hulme, *Selected Writings*, 82.
[61] Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel*, 114.

mathematics. In modernism, a common notion of aesthetic or poetic precision emerges that entails being *adequate* to an object, which in the Proustian schema always includes the subjective aspect of how the impression appears to a perceiver. To be inevitable, the image has to fit the feeling or the thing expressed, with nothing left over; at the same time, each image conveys a particular view, a particular sense of the world.

For Proust, moreover, aesthetic precision is by definition oblique – as Beckett puts it, "the indirect and comparative expression of indirect and comparative perception."[62] In the final volume, the narrator observes that those who champion critical theories about realism in literature also tend to dismiss "la qualité du langage," unable to infer intellectual merit from "la beauté d'une image" but only when it is "exprimée directement" (RTP, 4:460). Sounding like Flaubert, he affirms that a frivolous theme will serve just as well as a serious one for a study of the laws of character – and here he adds a parenthetical analogy – just as a prosector can study the laws of anatomy equally well in the body of an imbecile as in that of a man of talent. Analogy, as a technique of indirect description, is not accidentally oblique, or employed because of a willful desire to be so, but because according to Proust's poetics this is the only way an impression can be adequately expressed. If figurative language were substitutable by "plain" language, it would be merely ornamental, a frill added to a dress that has already been constructed, but in Proust, it is *constitutive* of the fabric.

The criterion of inevitability for any image, however, is always a subjective necessity. The selection of analogies will always be idiosyncratic, drawing on what the perceiver is familiar with, and the accidental connections that cause one association to be recalled instead of another. To return to the steeples of Martinville, if we subtract the pivots, which are mentioned because of a physical similarity, we are left with birds, girls, and flowers. As commentators have pointed out, Proust's metaphors often work according to a principal of contiguity rather than resemblance. The vehicle is

[62] Samuel Beckett, *Proust*, 88.

chosen because of some accident of circumstance – they happen to be next to each other – rather than because of an essential connection between the two.[63] Indeed, the narrator has in fact just been much preoccupied with thoughts of girls and flowers, having recently seen at Tansonville lilacs, hawthorns, and the apparition of Gilberte. And that birds continue to be on his mind is evident in the subsequent passage that describes the melancholy that would overcome him as the walks along the Méséglise way would come to close, knowing that he would be sent up to bed and denied his mother's goodnight kiss. "La zone de tristesse où je venais d'entrer était aussi distincte de la zone où je m'élançais avec joie il y avait un moment encore, que dans certains ciels une bande rose est séparée comme par une ligne d'une bande verte ou d'une bande noire. On voit un oiseau voler dans le rose, il va en atteindre la fin, il touche presque au noir, puis il y est entré" (RTP, 1:180-1). The desires he felt a moment ago – to go to Guermantes, to travel, to be happy – are so external to him that their fulfillment would no longer bring any pleasure, but his likening the change of emotional states to the flight of a bird as it passes from one patch of striated sky to another seems prompted by the accident of his present surroundings.

Contingency is perhaps the most essential law of all in the Proustian world. In the classical definition given in the *Encyclopédie,* description can only reveal the accidental, never the essential. But in Proust nothing is more essential than accident. Although his interpreters have accorded privilege to memories, contemporaneous impressions – "un nuage, un triangle, un clocher, une fleur, un caillou" (RTP, 4:457) – are no less capable of yielding truths. In fact, whether they are impressions in the present or memories of the past are irrelevant, as he makes clear, "qu'il s'agît d'impressions comme celle que m'avait donnée la vue des clochers de Martinville, ou de réminiscences comme celle de l'inégalité des deux marches ou le goût de la madeleine, il fallait tâcher d'interpréter les

[63] Thus for Genette, Proust intends metaphors to discover the essences of things, but in fact they end up constructing mirages, contingent instead of necessary links. This failure, however, he sees as a sign of the novel's modernity. See "Proust Palimpseste" and "Métonymie chez Proust." Ullmann first made the argument about Proust's tendency towards metonymy in *Style in the French Novel*.

sensations comme les signes d'autant de lois et d'idées, en essayant de penser, c'est-à dire de fair sortir de la pénombre ce que j'avait senti, de le convertir en un équivalent spiritual" (RTP, 4:457).

The first criterion of these impressions is that they are not chosen but *given*: "leur premier caractère était que je n'était pas libre de les choisir, qu'elle m'étaient données telles quelles. Et je sentais que ce devait être la griffe de leur authenticité" (RTP, 4:457). Thus, they cannot be sought, but must be encountered. Contingency is the ineluctable sign of the real. But once encountered, they are felt to *have been* inevitable. He had not gone in search of the paving stones, "Mais justement la façon fortuite, inévitable, dont la sensation avait été rencontrée, contrôlait la vérité du passé qu'elle ressuscitait" (RTP, 4:457). The axes of *fortuite* and *inévitable* are the two pivots on which the Proustian real turns. Since any sensation enchains all the others in its temporal and spatial orbit, as well as all the emotions and thoughts present in the perceiver at that moment, analogies that are drawn from realms associated by immediate circumstance in fact obey the fundamental Proustian law of association.[64] As Landy argues, "the aim of a metaphor can be—and in Marcel's description *quite explicitly is*—to convey not an objective but a subjective connection between two impressions or ideas."[65] The descriptive analogies are directed towards revealing not simply how the world appears at a particular momentbut how it appears to a particular observer.

What they reveal, moreover, is just the narrator's *propensity to analogize* as a fundamental feature of his cognitive disposition. Since a perspective is something we look *through* rather than *at*, descriptions of the world are a key site for the disclosure not only of the world seen but also the one seeing it. Proust insists continually on the inescapability of an individual's perspective in determining the exterior world that is perceived, and the myraid descriptions of the world – of shapes and colors, of the weather, of sensations, of gestures and appearances – are just the sites where his own

[64] Christie McDonald discusses association as a fundamental epistemological problem at the juncture of general and particular, type and individual in *The Proustian Fabric.*
[65] Landy, *Philosophy as Fiction*, 73.

perspective is rendered visible.[66] The Proustian zone of evaporation continually preceding any contact with the object is the habit of likening by analogy. Sometimes these are arrestingly apposite. Sometimes they become obstacles, so long and cumbersome that we lose sight of the object altogether. For all his drive towards universal laws, he is also obsessively interested in the particular, willing to tax a reader's patience, to sacrifice narrative cohesion and momentum, by describing in utmost detail how everything appeared and felt, sometimes by way of long digressions. So, for instance, Françoise's mixture of devotion to her family and her mistress but cruelty towards the other servants is told by way of an elaborate comparison to certain insects.

> Et comme cet hyménoptère observé par Fabre, la guêpe fouisseuse, qui pour que ses petits après sa mort aient de la viande fraîche à manger, appelle l'anatomie au secours de sa cruauté et, ayant capturé des charançons et des arraignées, leur perce avec un savoir et une addresse merveilleux le centre erveux d'où dépend le mouvement des pattes, mais non les autres fonctions de la vie, de façon que l'insecte paralysé près duquel elle dépose ses oeufs, fournisse aux larves quand elles écloront un gibier docile, inoffensif, incapable de fuite ou de résistance, mais nullement faisandé, Françoise trouvait pour servir sa volonté permanente de rendre la maison intenable à tout domestique, des ruses si savantes et si impitoyables que, bien des années plus tard, nous apprîmes que si cet été-là nous avions mangé presque tous les jours des asperges, c'était parce que leur odeur donnait à la pauvre fille de cuisine chargée de les éplucher des crises d'asthme d'une telle violence qu'elle fut obligée de finir par s'en aller (RTP, 1:122).

The resemblance here is again formal or relational rather than substantial – Françoise is to her ruses to chase away servants on the sly as the hymenopteran to its ability to kill without wounding. The narrator's disclaimer about observation is particularly striking given Proust's tendency to draw on analogies from natural history: entomology, botany, and zoology, all eminently observational and descriptive sciences.[67] Indeed, his perceptive acuity is frequently displayed in his conjoining of behavioral, morpohological, and structural observations about the natural world to the human one,

[66] Landy comments that to see a perspective "we always require an external object, something from which to work back in order to calculate, a posteriori, the nature of our subjectivity, its index of refraction" (*Philosophy as Fiction*, 80).

[67] Perhaps the famous of these is the extended analogy between Charlus and Jupien's union and that of bees and orchids in *Sodome et Gomorrhe*, which commentators have analyzed as both metaphoric and metonymic.

illuminating analogous patterns of behavior and appearance in disparate worlds. But the extended parallel in this case is intrusive, pulling us away into a second narrative about the insect so elaborate that we lose the thread of what it is meant to illustrate about Françoise, which is in fact explained quite straightforwardly in the second part of the passage.[68] Aside from a display of erudition, what a passage like this bespeaks most of all is Proust's inability to stop analogizing, even when it occludes rather than clarifies. Incapable of perceiving A except by perceiving that it is like B, the frequent analogies in parentheses suggest that he also cannot stop himself from adding A's likeness to C, D, and E.

Proust's correspondence attests to the deliberateness of his use of such techniques, canvassing his friends for illustrative examples for things he wants to describe. As Nicola Luckhurst has observed, his typical procedure is to outline a phenomenon (often an aspect of behavior) and then ask his correspondent whether there is any corresponding phenomenon in their field of expertise.[69] In 1913 he asks both Max Daireaux and André Foucart about the phrase "comme dans le dessin en perspective d'un solide, une de ses faces opposées du spectateur," writing to Foucart, "Pouvez-vous rendre cette phrase correcte, je veux dire qu'elle ne contienne pas de *monstruosité*" (CP, 21:652). This phrase later appears in *À l'ombre des jeunes filles en fleurs* as a description of M. de Norpois, in whose eyes "ce regard vertical, étroit et oblique (comme, dans le dessin en perspective d'un solide, la ligne fuyante d'une de ses faces), regarde qui s'adresse à cet interlocuteur invisible qu'on a en soi-même" (RTP, 1:470). And, in the same letter to Foucart, Proust asks, "Comment s'appelle ce qui fait que la rotation de la terre n'est pas exactement ce qu'elle serait si...(déclinaison?) et comment s'appelle ce qu'il y a de plus complet pour mesurer le temps (je suppose une horloge prodigieuse

[68] Although the entomologist Jean-Henri Fabre is cited here, the more likely source is Élie Metchnikoff's *Études sur la nature humaine*, which Proust mentions in his correspondence. See RTP: 1:1159.
[69] See Luckhurst, *Science and Structure in Proust*, 134–137. She understands these as examples of Proust's use of models, in the way that models are used in science not only to illustrate but to expand knowledge.

comme il doit y en avoir dans les observatoires marquent tout ce qu'elle peut marquer d'astronomique etc.) Le temps exact s'appelle le *temps vrai* n'est-ce pas. *Y a-t-il d'autres mots.*"[70]

The practice of analogy-making is also clear from Proust's drafts, for instance, in a fragment from the *Cahiers* where, commenting on the way in which experiences in life provide the material for art, he writes, "ils [frivolité, paresse, douleur] s'étaient amassés en moi aussi à mon insu, aussi inconnus de moi que peut l'étre dans la plante les réserve de *(mettre un exemple tiré par example des légumineuses, blé ou je ne sais quoi...)" (*esquisses,* RTP, 4:863). Indeed he then does find a long, extended analogy from botany, of albumen lodged in the ovaries of plants from which it draws nourishment to make seeds, which we are ignorant of while the plant embryo develops, but which is the site of secret but very active chemical and respiratory phenomena (RTP, 4:863). Descriptive analogies are so characteristic of his style that in *La Prisonnière*, when Albertine is eager to show the narrator how she has changed under his influence, she launches on a florid ode to ices that can only be a pastiche of Proust's own style. They are compared variously to temples, churches, obelisks, rocks, votive pillars, Monte Rosa, mountains painted by Elstir, Japanese dwarf trees, and a Venetian church built out of a porphyry of strawberries. The narrator is impressed at her intelligence and new taste, though he feels that he himself would never use such "formes littéraires" in speech, and ultimately finds her speech "un peu trop bien dit" (RTP, 3:636).

If describing by analogy is an essentially Proustian characteristic, this will be unsurprising given that the characteristically Proustian essence is *relationality* itself. The most celebrated *rapports* leading to the discovery of essence are temporal, but they are only one expression of a more general principle. Nothing can be accessed except by something else, no experience had the first time, because everything is relational. Nothing is isolated, nothing singular, nothing original, nothing capable of being evoked without calling up a whole chain of associations. The principle regulating

[70] Ibid., 653.

these *rapports* can be varied – contiguity, resemblance, or some other association – and coexist alongside each other. Hence the impossibility of finishing the work, the famed *paperoles* with their endless emendations and additions: when the principle of composition always entails another *comme*, how could it ever be complete?

The correlational structure of the Proustian universe also accounts for the novel's refusal to cohere. In her appraisal of the *Recherche* in a 1929 essay, "Phases of Fiction," Woolf celebrates Proust's penetrating perception, but also points out the pitfalls of his inability to stop observing. "We have to stop and look even against our will (CE, 5:83)," which accounts for the difficulty facing the reader.

> In Proust, the accumulation of objects which surround any central point is so vast and they are often so remote, so difficult of approach and of apprehension that this drawing-together process is gradual, tortuous, and the final relation difficult in the extreme. There is so much more to think about them than one had supposed. One's relations are not only with another person but with the weather, food, clothes, smells, with art and religion and science and history and a thousand other influences (CE 5:84).

He amplifies, he digresses, he is impossible to hold together. "If one begins to analyse consciousness, it will be found that it is stirred by thousands of small irrelevant ideas stuffed with odds and ends of knowledge. When, therefore, we come to say something so usual as 'I kissed her', we may well have to explain also how a girl jumped over a man in a deck-chair on the beach before we come tortuously and gradually to the difficult process of describing what a kiss means" (CE, 5:84). The singular place Proust holds in Woolf's estimation is evident in the frequency with which he appears – more than any other author – in "Phases of Fiction," her idiosyncratic survey of literary history. In addition to being placed among "The Psychologists," with James as his forerunner, he also belongs to "The Poets," in which class she includes Melville and Emily Brontë, with their outsized characters who are more forces of nature than people. In the *Recherche*, however, the poetry is of a different kind.

> The analysis of emotion is carried further by Proust than by any other novelist; and the poetry comes, not in the situation, which is too fretted and voluminous for such an effect, but in those frequent passages of elaborate metaphor, which spring out of the rock of thought like fountains of sweet water and serve as translations from one language into another. It is as though there were two faces to every situation; one full in the light so that it can be described as accurately and examined as minutely as possible; the other half in shadow so that it can be described only in a moment of faith and vision by the use of metaphor (CE, 5:97).

These two aspects – one analytical, one poetic – are the terms that Woolf herself would call granite and rainbow. But we might also put it another way: I don't think it's too controversial to say that Proust is not someone whom we read for the plot. Events are difficult to piece together into a coherent chronology, and impossible to hold in mind all at once. Moreover, they unfold according to laws and patterns established early on, quickly becoming predictable and repetitive – one need not read far into the novel to know how every love affair will end. But on the level of description, in the disclosure of a world, the reader continually meets with surprise and a sense of plenitude. As Rilke wrote in a 1922 letter of being one of Proust's first readers, "It is simply not yet possible to foresee *all* that has been opened to us and those to come with these books, they are crammed so full of a wealth of discovery, and the strangest thing is the use, already so natural and in its way quiet, of the boldest and often most unheard-of [und das Seltsamste ist die schon so selbst-verständliche und in ihrer Art stille Anwendung des Kühnsten und oft Unerhörtesten]."[71] And if surprise is a guarantee of the truth of an impression, then for the reader the descriptive texture of the novel holds the possibility of an encounter with the Proustian real.

Entendre l'univers

The particular analogies chosen to capture the exact curve of the feeling or the thing are the repository of that which is idiosyncratic and particular to each individual, that which distinguishes the character of her vision, that which discloses her world. Although the *Recherche* ends with an affirmation of the power of literature, for most of the novel it is music that stands at the top of the

[71] Rainer Maria Rilke, *Briefe*, 2:372; translation 2:213.

aesthetic hierarchy.[72] When, in *La Prisonnière*, the narrator hears Albertine play Vinteuil's septet, it seems to him truer than all the books he knows. The sounds seem to take the inflexion of being, "reproduire cette pointe intérieure et extrême des sensations qui est la partie qui nous donne cette invresse spécifique que nous retrouvons de temps en temps et que, quand nous disons: 'Quel beau temps! Quel beau soleil!' nous ne faisons nullement connaître au prochain, en qui le même soleil et le même temps éveillent des vibrations toute différentes" (RTP, 3:876). Since the same external conditions create different responses in each individual, our own sensations are not communicated in the slightest by words that are commonly understood because they name what is shared by all. The inadequacy of language to express the particularities of an individual's feeling is also a problem that preoccupies Woolf, which I will take up in a later chapter. When this issue arises again in *Le temps retrouvé*, the solution to the inadequacies of language will be metaphorical style, but words remain a persistent obstacle to expression.

In the musical phrase, the narrator receives a hint of a "l'ineffable" and "l'invisible" that he has encountered before at certain privileged moments. "Rien ne ressemblait plus qu'une belle phrase de Vinteuil à ce plaisir particulier que j'avais quelquefois éprouvé dans ma vie, par exemple devant les chochers de Martinville, certains arbres d'une route de Balbec ou plus simplement, au début de cet ouvrage, en buvant une certaine tasse de thé" (RTP, 3:876-7). Nothing *resembles* Vinteil's phrase more than these impressions that seemed to harbor some truth. "Comme cette tasse de thé, tant de sensations de lumière, les rumeurs claires, les bruyantes couleurs que Vinteuil nous envoyait du monde où il composait, promenaient devant mon imagination, avec insistance mais trop raipdement pour que'elle pût l'appréhender, quelque chose que je pourrais comparer à la soierie embaumée d'un geranium" (RTP, 3:877). Since Proustian perception is first and foremost analogical, the impression

[72] Scholars have speculated that Proust's privileging of music may be due to the influence of Schopenhauer and his French disciples See Anne Henry, "Schopenhauer et la musique," *Marcel Proust, théorie pour une ésthetique*, 46–55.

he receives from the music can only be grasped by comparison to a scent – his famed synesthesia can thus be explained by the more general structure of his understanding. The resemblance between the music and the scent is again one of equivalence or correspondence.

> Seulement, tandis que dans le souvenir ce vague peut être sinon approfondi du moins précisé grâce à un repérage de circonstances qui expliquent pourquoi une certaine saveur a pu vous rappeler des sensations lumineuses, les sensations vague données par Vinteuil venant non d'un souvenir mais d'une impression (comme celle des clochers de Martinville), il aurait fallu trouver, de la fragrance de géranium de sa musique non une explication matérielle, mais l'équivalent profond, la fête inconnue et colorée (dont ses oeuvres semblaient les fragments disjoints, les éclats aux cassures écarlartes), mode selon lequel il 'entendait' et projetait hors de lui l'univers (RTP, 3:877).

This thought leads him to speculate to Albertine that perhaps "cette qualité inconnue d'un monde unique et qu'auncun autre musicien ne nous avait jamais fait voir" is the most authentic mark of genius, "bien plus que le contenu de l'oeuvre elle-même." "Même en littérature?" Albertine asks. "Même en littérature," comes the swift reply. That which Vinteuil's music suggests – to the narrator it is like the fragrance of geraniums – is the unknown quality of the artist's unique world, which is nothing but the mode according to which he hears the world and projects it outside him. For Proust, art is a means of world-disclosure.

He is by no means alone in this view. The idea of the artwork as "the source of a world which is its own" is prominent in the tradition of phenomenology, including the work of two post-war French philosophers, Paul Ricoeur and the lesser-known Mikel Dufrenne.[73] "The aesthetic objet signifies neither in the manner of a history or physics book nor as a signal would," Dufrenne writes in *The Phénoménologie de l'expérience aesthetique* (1953), "It *shows* and sometimes shows only itself, without referring to anything real. In any case, the aesthetic object does not claim to imitate the real (even if some aesthetic theories presecribe such imitation). When the authentic artists draws his

[73] Mikel Dufrenne, *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, 167. Dufrenne and Ricoeur were captured in Germany during WWII in the same prisoner of war camp, where they studied the philosophy of Karl Jaspers together.

inspiration from the real, he does so in order to measure himself against it and to remake it."[74] So much is consistent with Proust's aesthetics. And like Proust, Dufrenne also attributes the disclosure of a world to the work of style. When we speak of the world of the aesthetic object, "we emphasize the presence of a certain style, a unique way of treating a subject, of making the sensuous serve representation…Sometimes it is even by means of that world that we identify the work, as surely as we do by the style, since the world is that which the style expresses."[75]

Stevens elaborates a similar idea in "The Effects of Analogy": "The corporeal world exists as the common denominator of the incorporeal worlds of its inhabitants. If there are people who live only in the corporeal world, enjoying the wind and the weather and supplying standards of normality, there are other people who are not so sure of the wind and the weather and who supply standards of abnormality. It is the poet's sense of the world that is his world."[76] In Dufrenne's terms, the creator's world is expressed, not represented. Although it is not without relation to the represented (or diegetic, we might say) world, nor is is identical to the latter. So although Phaedra and Athalie live before us on the stage in two different represented worlds – in two different plays – they nevertheless communicate in the same world of Racine. It is very difficult to say exactly what this "world" is, although we are immediately sensitive to it once the aesthetic object introduces it to us. "It is not a world of identifiable objects. One can neither explore it nor survey it…In truth, it is less a world than the atmosphere of a world, in the sense that we say an atmosphere is tense or lively."[77] A little later, Dufrenne identifies the unity of an atmosphere with "the unity of a Weltanschauung," which is "not a doctrine" but "the way of being in the world which reveals itself in a personality," or the world that each person already "radiates."[78] For him, the world of the

[74] Ibid.
[75] Ibid., 167–8.
[76] Wallace Stevens, *The Necessary Angel*, 118.
[77] Dufrenne, *Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience*, 168.
[78] Ibid., 177.

asthetic object is always internal to itself. For Stevens, on the other hand, the relationship of the poet's world to the common, "real" world is complex and inseparable. It would be simple to determine the relation of the poet to his subject if the poet wrote about his own world, "But what he writes about is his sense of *our* world."[79]

The poet's task is, according to Proust, to hear the world and to to project it outside himself, and *entendre* is not only a matter of *hearing* but of *understanding*. Understanding, of course, can mean varying things in different rubrics: it might mean being able to give a causal account of how something came to be what it is, or knowing how to use something, or having experienced a situation first-hand. In *Sein und Zeit*, where Heidegger takes up this question, he suggests that to understand something means, rather, attunement to its mode of being. Without wishing to make Proust a Heideggerean, several points of Heidegger's analysis elucidate the work of description that I am concerned with here. When we talk about "*Verstehen*" as simply one mode of cognition among others (for instance, "*Erklären*"), Heidgger calls this a derivative sense of the concept. In an ontic, less authentic sense, we sometimes use the expression "to understand something" in the sense of "being able to handle a thing," or "being able to do something," but in its primordial sense, understanding something is to disclose its being. Furthermore, this being is the being of possibilities [*Möglichsein*], which is never separate from the world in which Dasein finds itself thrown.[80] The narrator turns first to things outside him (travel, love, society), and then to things inside him (memories, impressions), not for any of these as ends in themselves but rather for their potential to open up an unknown world, or, to use Heidegger's language, a new *Möglichsein*.

---

[79] Ibid., 119, my emphasis.

[80] This possibility does not refer to "'Gleichgültigkeit der Wilkur' (libertas indifferentiae)," instead, Dasein is always already in determined possibilities of being. As the being that it *is*, it has already let certain possibilities of being go by; it constantly adopts possibilities and goes astray, it is "geworfene Möglichkeit" thoughout. See Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 144; *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (the translation lists the German page numbers).

Expressions of "Sicht" dominate traditional philosophical conceptions of understanding, but Heidegger situates these in terms of disclosure, *Erschlossenheit*, neither simply seeing with bodily eyes nor purely nonsensory perception (thought or intuition).[81] In his account, to understand something is to see its being *as it is*, in the projective disclosure of its possibilities. "Attunement and understanding characterize the primordial disclosedness of being-in-the-world [Befindlichkeit und Verstehen charakterisieren als Existenzialien die ürspringliche Erschlossenheit des In-der-Welt-seins]."[82] The work of description carried out tirelessly in every realm is just to disclose the world that Proust *entends*, projecting its possibilities of being through each "like" or "as." The notion of disclosure offers an alternative paradigm for conceiving of understanding to the radiographic vision that penetrates beneath the surface of false appearances. It also characterizes the actual effects of Proust's novel, rather than its announced intentions. Although the narrator disparages describing in order to champion interpreting, deciphering, decoding, and diagnosing, he fails to recognize the essential ways in which description is implicated in these other, seemingly more active procedures, and the fact that describing is a mode of understanding. What is at issue is how beings become visible in the first place, how experience becomes available to be talked about, comprehended, known, and set forth.

What is it Like to Be a Proust?

When Proust speaks of individual perspectives, it is usually less as a matter of a "point of view," a vantage point onto an objective reality, than a world unto itself. As Joshua Landy notes, "point de vue" is used far more often to designate aspects of experience accessible by all; so topics are considered "from a physical point of view," "from a spiritual point of view," "from a practical point of view," "from an intellectual point of view," "from an aesthetic point of view," "from a

[81] Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* "It corresponds to the clearedness characterizing the disclosedness of the there ["der Gelichtetheit, als welche wir die Erschlossenheit des Da charakterisierten] (Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit*, 147)."
[82] Ibid., 148.

moral point of view," "from a social point of view," or "from a historical point of view."[83] When Proust speaks of the singular character of individual vision, however, it is persistently in terms of "*monde*" and "*univers*." It is for this reason that Deleuze calls his aesthetics a monadology. "The essences are veritable monads, each defined by the viewpoint to which it expresses the world, each viewpoint itself referring to the ultimate quality at the heart of the monad."[84] The allure of each infatuation, not only with Gilberte, with Mme de Guermantes, or with Albertine but also with Venice, with a church spire, with the passing of the sun over the Vivonne, all derive from their promise to expand the horizon of the narrator's being. And none harbors the promise of a *monde inconnu* more than art.

> Mais alors, n'est-ce pas que ces éléments, tout ce résidu réel que nous sommes obligés de garder pour nous-mêmes, que la causerie ne peut transmettre même de l'ami à l'ami, du maître au disciple, de l'amant à la maîtresse, cet ineffable qui différencie qualitativement ce que chacun a senti et qu'il est obligé de laisser au seuil des phrases où il ne peut communiquer avec autrui qu'en se limitant à des point extérieurs communs à tous et sans intérêt, l'art, l'art d'un Vinteuil comme celui d'un Elstir, le fait apparaître, extériorisant dans les couleurs du spectre la composition intime de ces mondes que nous appelons les individus, et que sans l'art nous ne connaîtrions jamais? (RTP, 3:762).

How the artist *entends* the world is what her world is. This point could not be less banal. Or rather, however banal, it could not be more important, for what is at stake is the very possibility of communication. Deleuze does not exaggerate when he observes that there is no intersubjectivity without art. The only window or door available to the Proustian monad – "ces monde que nous appelons les individus" – is an aesthetic one.

If transposed anachronistically into terms from more contemporary philosophy, Proust's passage suggests that art offers a mode – the only mode possible – for expressing qualia, "the way things seem to us," or what I have simply been calling a "world."[85] One need not even have read the

[83] Landy, *Philosophy as Fiction*, 63.
[84] Deleuze, *Proust and Signs*, 42.
[85] Daniel Dennett, "Quining Qualia," 519.

novel to know that it is filled with detailed descriptions of the way things seem to us. Proust's attention to the minutiae of experience is central to the novel's lore, for instance, the oft-cited story of an early publisher who rejected the manuscript, professing amazement that it would take thirty pages to describe a man turning around in bed before falling asleep. Finding the means to render subjective experiential textures is a task a number of modernists set for the novel, and when Woolf takes up this preoccupation, she recognizes her close kinship with Proust. She too turns to analogical strategies, but with far more ambivalence about the powers of art to open windows between our own room and others'. Proust, however, seems to have no such doubts.

> Des ailes, un autre appareil respiratoire, et qui nous permissent de traverse l'immensité, ne nous serviraient à rien. Car si nous allions dans Mars et dans Vénus en gardant les même sens, ils revêtiraient du même aspect que les choses de la Terre tout ce que nous pourrions voir. Le seul véritable voyage, le seul bain de Jouvence, ce ne serait pas d'aller vers de nouveaux paysages, mais d'avoir d'autres yeux, de voir l'univers avec les yeux d'un autre, de cent autres, de voir les cent univers que chacun d'eux voit, que chacun d'eux est; et cela nous le pouvons avec un Elstir, avec un Vinteuil, avec leurs pareils, nous volons vraiment d'étoiles en étoiles (RTP, 3:762).

To see a new world requires not a change of scenery but a new set of eyes. Proust's passage finds a striking echo in the philosopher Thomas Nagel's influential 1974 article, "What Is It Like To Be a Bat?" Concerned with refuting a physicalist account of consciousness, Nagel defines an organism as having subjective conscious experience if "there is something it is like" to be that organism.[86] Taking the example of a bat, Nagel argues that although we know that bats perceive by sonar, this perceptual apparatus is so different from ours that "there is no reason to suppose it is subjectively like anything we can experience or imagine."[87] If I try to imagine webbing on my arm that allows me to fly around at dusk and dawn and catch insects, this will tell me "only what it is like for *me* to behave as a bat behaves." It doesn't tell me "what it is like for a *bat* to be a bat. Yet if I try to imagine this, I am restricted to the resources of my own mind, and those resources are inadequate

[86] Nagel, "What is it Like to Be a Bat?" 436.
[87] Ibid., 438.

to the task. I cannot perform it either by imagining additions to my present experience, or by imagining segments gradually subtracted from it, or by imagining some combination of additions, subtractions, and modifications."[88] Nor do we need not take such a far-flung example, Nagel adds. Between people, we need only think of the subjective character of a sighted person and a blind one.

The inability to subtract our own perspective from what we perceive is particuarly evident when we try to imagine our own absence. The thought experiment Nagel proposes is one whose failure Proust dramatizes at multiple moments in his novel, albeit from the opposite angle. Nagel's point is that we cannot in our language accomodate a descriptive phenomenology of the subjective experience of a bat or a Martian because we cannot imagine an experience so different from ours.[89] Proust phrases it the other way. Even if we had wings that could take us to Mars or Venus, as long as we retained the same senses we would see nothing different than what we see on earth. The point about the limitations of our own perspective and the irreducibility of the subjective character of consciousness is the same, although it provokes quite different responses in the philosopher and the novelist. Nagel urges the development of an objective (in the sense of publicly available and shareable) descriptive phenomenology not dependent on empathy or imagination, which would make the subjective character comprehensible as far as possible to beings incapable of having those experiences. He dismisses "the loose intermodal analgies – for example, 'Red is like the sound of a trumpet'" as being useless in explaining to a person blind from birth what red is like. For Proust, of course, such analogies are the only means of gaining access to another's perspective, enabling us to see through another's eyes, to understand the world that is disclosed to them. Art can communicate what it is like, if not to be a bat, at least to be a Vinteuil, to be an Elstir, indeed, to be a Proust.

[88] Ibid., 439.
[89] Importantly, however, Nagel is not talking about *individual* differences in subjective experience, between one person and another, but rather of types. In saying "our experience" vs. that of a bat, he means not "just 'my own case,' but rather the mentalistic ideas that we apply unproblematically to ourselves and other human beings (438)."

In literature, such communication occurs crucially through style. Against Anatole France's declaration that "toute singularité dans le style doit être rejetée," Proust wonders incredulously how France can believe in the unity of style, "puisque les sensibilités sont singulières."[90] As Deleuze puts it, essence is not so much individual as individualizing, and style is the individualizing essence of literature.

> Le style pour l'écrivain aussi bien que la couleur pour le peintre est une question non de technique mais de vision. Il est révélation, qui serait impossible par des moyen directs et conscients, de la différence qualitative qu'il y a dans la façon dont nous apparaît le monde, différence qui, s'il n'y avait pas l'art, resterait le secret éternel de chacun. Par l'art seulement nous pouvons sortit de nous, savoir ce que voit un autre de cet univers qui n'est pas le même que le nôtre et dont les paysages nous seraient restés aussi inconnus que ceux qu'il peut y avoir dans la lune. Grâce à l'art, au lieu de voir un seul monde, le nôtre, nous le voyons se multiplier, et autant qu'il y a d'artistes originaux, autant nous avons de monde à notre disposition, plus différents les un des autres que ceux qui roulent dans l'infi (RTP, 4:474).

In this aesthetic economy, no qualitative difference of experience seems inexpressible through style, no monad without a window. Style is that which allows us to speak of "the Proustian world" (or the Balzacian or Jamesian one, as we habitually do about authors) and for others to know instantly what we mean. In every Proustian analogy, two things are disclosed, sometimes one more than the other: the object perceived, and the eyes of the perceiver – not only *what* he sees, but also *how* he sees. If the involuntary memories (the madeleine, the paving stones) and their correlated theory of metaphor are central to the theory, the places where Proust's vision is announced, the ordinary descriptive texture is the site where his vision is disclosed.

In the Proustian account, art does not provide a filter from which to observe a world, it is *itself* a world, or rather, it discloses a world. At issue in the question of understanding is not simply the body of what there is in his universe – the themes, characters, and situations in the novel – but the very modes by which things are able to emerge as distinct, comprehensible and articulable. The

[90] Proust, "Préface" to *Tendres Stocks*, in Paul Morand, *Nouvelles complètes*, Vol 1, ed. Michel Collomb (Paris: Bibliotheque de la Pléiade, 1992), 3.

field of experience emerges into view in Proust through the process of likening, through describing this by describing that, point out the qualities common to two disparate beings, be it of people and insects, faces and clouds, or chemical processes and aesthetic effects. Proust's vision – the schema of perception that allows the world to become visible – is analogical, and the topology of the world it sees is traversed everywhere by a dense latticework of relations.

Le livre à venir

Let me conclude by returning to the questions raised at the beginning of this chapter. How can we reconcile the narrator's claim to lack *l'esprit d'observation* with the unceasing beam of his observational attention? Why, if the literature that describes only gives miserable lines and surfaces, are there so many descriptions that delineate in great detail lines and surfaces? If a book with theories in it is like an object with its price tag left on, what are we to make of such a pronouncement in a book that has theorized just about everything under the sun?

The narrator assumes that observing the outer world entails missing the internal one, that looking at the surfaces of the things precludes seeing what is below them, where their truth resides. But although sight and insight are posited as mutually exclusive in these disclaimers, they coexist without difficulty in the novel itself. Indeed, the reality or truth discerned from an impression, be it the madeleine or the steeples of Martinville, is only *in part* interior and subjective. The other part remains in the external world, material. So involuntary memories are said to exist not within the self but outside it, in sights, sounds, and smells fortuitously stumbled upon. As Merleau-Ponty comments, "Personne n'a été plus loin que Proust dans la fixation des rapports du visible et de l'inivisible, dans la description d'une idée qui n'est pas le contraire du sensible, qui en est la doublure et la profondeur,' and which is moreover not abstracted, not detached from sensible appearances and erected into "une seconde positivité."[91] Hence, we recall, the absolute emphasis that the

[91] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Le Visible et l'invisible*, 195 and 196.

impressions be *given* – they cannot be found in fantasies invented entirely in one's own head but must be encountered in the external world. Only these things bear the mark of the real, for they exceed the will. And if the possibility of truth lies in impressions that must be accidentally stumbled upon, not voluntarily chosen, we cannot know in advance where these will lie – this is why real life can only be illuminated the second time round, why it must be *recreated* in literature.

The last consideration leads to another question: is the work described by the narrator the one that we are now reading, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, or is it a description of a work that has yet to be written? In one sense, it is of course the former – the narrator speaks from his present vantage point to relate past events, and has no hesitations about making authorial intrusions commenting on the story he is telling. But in another sense, at least according to its own theory of literature, it is not clear at all that this work can ever be written, since it must always be in some sense to come. The essence of things is preserved in the past, and the future is the place "où elles nous incitent à la goûter de nouveau (IV, 463-4). In a future that is defined by the possibility it holds for the resurrection of the past, the book to come has to be, in some sense, one that has already been written. Thus, the book of life furnishes the raw material for the book of art, which must translate it. But this resurrection also necessitates a kind of transformation. The *personnage* that is nourished by essences, who is awoken in the presence of commonlity, languishes not only "dans l'observation du présent" but also "dans l'attente d'un avenir que la volonté construit avec des fragments du présent et du passé auxquels elle retire encore de leur réalité en ne conservant d'eux que ce qui convient à la fin utilitaire, étroitement humaine, qu'elle leur assigne" (RTP, 4:451). Although the future holds the possibility for the past to reappear, it is not by anticipating a mechanical repetition of some past fragment, like playing a recording of a symphony over and over. This is why literature's task is one of translation: to recreate the past, but as something *different*.

In the litany of comparisons the narrator takes recourse to for describing the work of writing – regrouping forces like a military offensive, tolerating it like a headache, accepting it as a rule, constructing it like a church, following it like a regime, vanquishing it like an obstacle, conquering it like a friendship, nourishing it like an infant – the last in the series is "le créer comme un monde sans laisser de côté ces mystères qui n'ont probablement leur explication que dans d'autres mondes et dont le presentiment est ce qui nous émeut le plus dans la vie et dans l'art" (RTP, 4:610). To create a world without leaving aside the mysteries that probably have their explication only in another world. But whose?

An answer is suggested if we take seriously the narrator's immediately following claim that it would be inexact to speak of the readers of his book as *his* readers: "Car ils ne seraient pas, selon moi, mes lecteurs, mais les propres lecteurs d'eux-mêmes, mon livre n'étant qu'une sorte de ces verres grossissants comme ceux que tendait à un acheteur l'opticien de Combray; mon livre, grâce auquel je leur fournirais le moyen de lire en eux-mêmes" (RTP, 4:610). If the task of the writer is to recreate *life*, the task of the reader is to recreate *literature*. Just as the impression that yields truth has an external and an internal component, the act of translation that Proust calls writing does not cease after the first movement of externalization, but proceeds to another movement of internalization. After the expression comes again the impression, as writing encounters reading. The work remains always to come, then, beause it always engenders and necessitates another act of translation.[92]

The work of art is a place that harbors the possibility of contingency and surprise, one that, to a reader willing to internalize and interpret its impressions, may yield truths of her own. "Quant aux vérités que l'intelligence – même des plus hauts esprits – cueille à claire-voie, devant elle, en pleine lumière, leur valeur peut être très grande; mais elles ont des contours plus secs et sont planes,

[92] In "The Weather in Proust," Sedgwick shows deftly the various ways in which the reincarnation myth operates in Proust – the succesive beings born in successive epochs, with prime motors of regeneration being sleep, love, and the weather. We might say that reincarnation extends not only to the self but also to the work.

n'ont pas de profondeur parce qu'il n'y a pas eu de profondeurs à franchir pour les atteindre, parce qu'elles n'ont pas été recréées" (RTP, 4:477). In Proust's own work, the madeleine, the steeples, and the uneven paving stones are miracles of analogy that are already *faits accomplis*. The hard-won truths extracted from them and celebrated have already been illuminated and revealed. Thus, according to the work's own logic, they are less likely to be appropriated and recreated by a reader. But the unmarked analogies, the offhanded, ordinary, endless descriptions of variegated shades of experience, which in the end don't turn out to be significant, reveal no higher-order law, and offer no transcendence – these "déchets de l'experience" may nevertheless furnish something that solicits a reader's attention, reminds her of something she didn't know she had forgotten, triggers some association she didn't know she had experienced, and perhaps open up an unknown world. We might even call them involuntary descriptions. Disowned by the narrator within the theory, but bearing witness to his essential temperament, they disclose the vision of the Proustian world.

Chapter Three

Woolf's Equivalent Images

Stop! Stop!

In her 1924 essay, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," Virginia Woolf affirms that novelistic form, "so clumsy, verbose, and undramatic, so rich, elastic and alive," has evolved first and foremost in order to create character.[1] Surveying her immediate "Edwardian" predecessors, whose key representatives are H. G. Wells, John Galsworthy and above all, Arnold Bennett, she concludes, "we see factories, prisons, workhouses, law courts, Houses of Parliament…but in all this vast conglomeration of printed pages, in all this congeries of streets and houses, there is not a single man or woman whom we know" (CE, 3:385). Amidst the concern with accurately rendering generalities of class, profession or type, the singularity of the individual has been lost.

In Woolf's diagnosis, the vitality of novelistic character has been weakened by the overweening importance accorded to precise depictions of physical surroundings and exhaustive inventories of material goods. Imagining a scenario of observing a man and a woman in a train carriage, she summarizes how the Edwardians would attempt to capture the woman, the eponymous Mrs. Brown. Wells and Galsworthy are dispensed with in a single paragraph. Bennett, she allows, "would observe every detail with immense care. He would notice the advertisements; the pictures of Swanage and Portsmouth; the way in which the cushion bulged between the buttons; how Mrs. Brown wore a brooch that cost three-and-ten-three at Whitworth's bazaar; and had mended both gloves – indeed the thumb of the left-hand glove had been replaced" (CE, 3:428-9). Although such careful observation might seem initially promising for the vivid portrayal of an individual, it becomes

[1] "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown" was originally read to the Heretics in Cambridge, then revised and published in several versions in 1923 and 1924: also under the title "Character in Fiction."

quickly apparent that these objects burden the text with inessential details that provide no real illumination.

> I asked [the Edwardians] – they are my elders and betters – How shall I begin to describe this woman's character? And they said, 'Begin by saying that her father kept a shop in Harrogate. Ascertain the rent. Ascertain the wages of shop assistants in the year 1878. Discover what her mother died of. Describe cancer. Describe calico. Describe – ' But I cried, 'Stop! Stop!' and I regret to say that I threw that ugly, that clumsy, that incongruous tool out of the window, for I knew that if I began the cancer and the calico my Mrs Brown, that vision to which I cling though I know no way of imparting it to you, would have been dulled and tarnished and vanished for ever (CE, 3:432).

The malady ailing character in the novel, it seems, has a stylistic correlate: description, an "ugly, clumsy and incongruous tool" that must be promptly discarded from the window of the house of fiction. If the task of the modern writer (whose representatives are Eliot, Forster, Joyce, Lawrence and Strachey) is "to bring back character from the shapelessness into which it has lapsed, to sharpen its edges, deepen its compass" (CE, 3:387), it would appear that description is to have no part in constructing the new novelistic edifice.

The characterization of Edwardian realism (particularly its representative, Arnold Bennett) in "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown" is tendentious, to be sure.[2] Like Proust and James, as well as other contemporaneous writers such as Willa Cather, Woolf's polemical program for the "modern" novel involves getting rid of its furniture, doing away with exhaustive visual descriptions of bricks and mortar. Whatever their characterization says (or fails to say) about the nineteenth century authors in question, the critique of description forms a point of departure for a number of theories of the novel in the early twentieth century. As Nancy Armstrong has argued in *Fiction in the Age of Photography*, Woolf "asks us to assume that her Mrs. Brown represents what humanity had been

[2] Bennett himself criticized *Jacob's Room* precisely for failing to adequately capture character. "I have seldom read a cleverer book than Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room*, a novel which has made a great stir in a small world. It is packed and bursting and originality, and it is exquisitely written. But the characters do not vitally survive in the mind, because the author has been obsessed by details of originality and cleverness (*Things That Have Interested Me*, 162)." For a discussion of the debate between Bennett and Woolf, see Samuel Hynes, "The Whole Contention Between Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Woolf."

before nineteenth-century realism reduced it to a predictable set of conventional images." But this notion of a true, authentic individual identity, which is distorted and occluded by visual stereotypes, is one that has been constructed by modernist after the fact and retrospectively projected. To put it simply, the modernist concept of authenticity was a post-photographic way of imagining one's relation to the real." Thus Armstrong reads modernism "as a set of techniques that relocated identity on the other side of the image and sought to reveal what was there before realism misrepresented that more primary reality of self and object. In this respect, modernism confirmed the very principle it characterized as both naïve and arrogant, namely, the primacy of certain images."[3] Placing description on the side of the stock image, modernism dismisses it as unable to provide any insight. As Armstrong argues, the notion of a more authentic individuality or truth is one that modernists create and retrospectively project, in the process affirming the primacy of the visual stereotypes they disparage. Focusing on Lawrence, Joyce, and Forster's uses of pornographic subject matter to "dramatize the limitations of the visible world and to lay claim to a truth beyond it."[4] I also want to suggest that Woolf does not simply abandon description, but rather employs it in a different mode, to create analogical, non-representational images of mental processes and emotional states that do not look like anything at all.

Let us first take a closer look at the heart of Woolf's objection and its implicit assumptions. Turning to Bennett's novel, *Hilda Lessways*, she cites a long passage in which "he begins to describe, not Hilda Lessways, but the view from her bedroom window, the excuse being that Mr Skellorn, the man who collects rents, is coming along that way. The description is indeed detailed and arduous,

[3] Armstrong, *Fiction in the Age of Photography*, 246.
[4] Ibid., 272. "To find a language for the primitive impulses on which it had based such claims to authenticity, modernism went to marginal people and practices that nineteenth century authors and intellectuals from Thomas Malthus through Max Nordau had represented as essential to human identity and yet hostile to reason, taste, social authority, familial relations, and enduring love. What had been peripheral – the working class, the Irish, the homosexual – resurfaced at the core, as a new subject, a lost childhood, a buried erotic life that lay closer to the very center of consciousness than any of the desires that literate people were apparently willing to acknowledge in themselves or allow into publication (272-3)."

and it is difficult for the reader not to skip it. One line of insight would have done more than all those lines of description" (CE, 3:430). If *in*sight employs a spatial metaphor of depth, description seems doomed to remain on the surface, never to penetrate appearances to what is hidden below. Woolf continues her attack on the unlucky Hilda Lessways.

> And now – where is Hilda? Alas. Hilda is still looking out of the window. Passionate and dissatisfied as she was, she was a girl with an eye for houses. She often compared this old Mr Skellorn with the villas she saw from her bedroom window. Therefore the villas must be described…Heaven be praised, we cry! At last we are coming to Hilda herself. But not so fast. Hilda may have been this, that, and the other; but Hilda not only looked at houses, and thought of houses; Hilda lived in a house. What sort of a house did Hilda live in? Mr Bennett proceeds…(CE, 3:430)

What Woolf finds so objectionable in description is not so much the technique itself, but primarily *what* is being described. It is against the age of property, as E. M. Forster called the nineteenth century, that Woolf is railing. In trying to make us believe in the reality of Hilda Lessways, "[Bennett] began, being an Edwardian, by describing accurately and minutely the sort of house Hilda lived in, and the sort of house she saw from the window. House property was the common ground from which the Edwardians found it easy to proceed to intimacy" (CE 3,431). In contrast, she records in her diaries while working on *Mrs. Dalloway*, "Characters are to be merely views: personality must be avoided at all costs. Directly you specify hair, age, etc. something frivolous, or irrelevant gets into the book" (D, 2:265).

The Edwardians "have laid an enormous stress upon the fabric of things," and consequently, Bennett is "trying to hypnotise us into the belief that, because he has made a house, there must be a person living there" (CE, 3:430). He has rendered the outline in exquisite detail, and believed its minutely-rendered surface sufficient to evoke a "solid, living, flesh-and-blood" being (CE, 3:388). As critics have noted, this does not mean that things are without symbolism or significance in Woolf's novels, but she is clear that a character is not made convincingly real by inventories of her material

possessions or surroundings.[5] In realism, descriptions of things, governed by the aim of fidelity to fact, was a method of signaling the reality of a fiction, buttressing it by references to the real world. In "L'effet de réel," Barthes identifies a new paradigm of verisimilitude that emerges with nineteenth century realism. Whereas classical authors had no hesitation about placing olive trees in a northern country, because descriptions followed rhetorical and generic conventions, the verisimilitude of realism rests on being faithful to the actual facts of the world.

Woolf laments that the reading public has in turn learned to recognize factual descriptions and references to the recognizable world as signs of a fiction's truth. How are we to believe in your Mrs. Brown, she imagines readers asking, when "we do not even know whether her villa was called Albert or Balmoral; what she paid for her gloves; or whether her mother died of cancer or of consumption. How can she be alive? No; she is a mere figment of your imagination"' (CE, 3:433). Her key objection is to citing objects and places as *evidence* of a character's reality. Specific and local details act as a kind of guarantor of truth against the charge of "fiction" (always preceded implicitly by the modifying adjective "mere"). At the beginning of *Le Père Goriot,* the question is posed, "Sera-t-elle comprise au-delà de Paris? Le doute est permis. Les particularités de cette scène pleine d'observations et de couleurs locales ne peuvent être appréciées qu'entre les buttes de Montmartre et les hauteurs de Montrouge…"[6] At the end of this passage, Balzac goes on, "Ah! sachez-le: ce drame n'est ni une fiction, ni un roman. *All is true*, il est si veritable, que chacun peut en reconnaître les elements chez soi, dans son coeur peut-être."[7] And immediately following, the location of the *pension* Vauquer is specified in great detail, "Elle est située dans le bas de la rue Neuve-Sainte-Geneviève, à

[5] Peter Brooks argues that Woolf's writing is not as free of significant objects as this essay would suggest. See *Realist Vision*, 210-211. For an extended study on the importance of the material objects in Woolf and modernism more generally, see Douglas Mao's *Solid Objects*.
[6] Honoré de Balzac, *Le père Goriot*, 28.
[7] Ibid. "All is true" is in English in the original, a reference to the alternative title of Shakespeare's *Henry VIII*. This phrase was used as an epigraph to an article on the play by Philarète Charles, published in the *Revue de Paris* in 1831.

l'endroit où le terrain s'abaisse vers la rue de l'Arbalète par une pente si brusque et si rude que les chevaux la montent ou la descendent rarement."[8] There is no dearth of reference to the real world in Woolf's novels – we need only think of the mentions of Oxford St., Big Ben, and St Margaret's in *Mrs. Dalloway* as examples. But these proper names are not invoked as evidence of the characters' reality. Woolf's argument is that signaling the "reality" of a character by references to details in the actual world does not thereby make a character "real" in the sense of alive, believable, to use Forster's terms, round. Placing Clarissa in a house in Westminster, an actual geographical location, does not suffice to convince us that she is a living and breathing being.

What, then, *will* give a character the air of reality, to borrow James's terms? Much hinges on what is meant by "reality," a term which recurs over and over in her works. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf defines it similarly to her well-known formulation "moments of being," as a kind of authentic experience of which other modernist varieties include Joyce's epiphanies or Proust's involuntary memories and impressions.

> What is meant by 'reality'? It would seem to be something very erratic, very undependable – now to be found in a dusty road, now in a scrap of newspaper in the street, now a daffodil in the sun. It lights up a group in a room and stamps some casual saying. It overwhelms one walking home beneath the stars and makes the silent world more real than the world of speech – and then there it is again in an omnibus in the uproar of Piccadilly…But whatever it touches, it fixes and makes permanent. That is what remains over when the skin of the day has been cast into the hedge; that is what is left of past time and of our loves and hates…It is [the writer's] business to find it and collect and communicate it to the rest of us (RO, 108).[9]

"Reality," it seems, is conveyed through successfully conveying the impressions that linger after an experience itself has passed, the sensations that remain "when the skin of the day has been cast into the hedge." These, in turn, depend not on any determinate content – they are contingent, as likely to be found in a scrap of newspaper as the roar of a passing bus – but instead on the strength of the

[8] Ibid., 28-9.
[9] This passage recalls Woolf's famous comment about the "moments of being" that pierce through the "cotton wool" of daily life (MB, 72).

impression, how it is registered, and the feelings it produces. In the well-known essay "Modern Fiction," Woolf echoes her critique in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," affirming that the novel's current vestments cannot contain the essential thing, "whether we call it life or spirit, truth or reality" (CE, 4:160). She laments that "so much of the enormous labour of providing the solidity, the likeness to life, of the story" is not merely wasted but misplaced, "to the extent of obscuring and blotting out the light of the conception." So the realist writer is in the thrall of "some powerful and unscrupulous tyrant" who compels him "to provide a plot, to provide comedy, tragedy, love interest, and an air of probability embalming the whole so impeccable that if all his figures were to come to life they would find themselves dressed down to the last button of their coats in the fashion of the hour" (CE, 4: 160). Importantly, although she objects to the probabilistic constraints of realism, she does not abandon a commitment to naturalistic style altogether, in the manner of other contemporaries chafing against similar constraints, such as the Surrealists.

Turning from her survey of the literary landscape, Woolf asks, "Is life like this? Must novels be like this? Look within and life, it seems, is very far from being 'like this'" (CE, 4: 149). What life *is* like leads to her well-known formulation of "the incessant shower of innumerable atoms" that fall on an ordinary mind on an ordinary day, the "myriad impressions – trivial, fantastic, evananescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel" (CE, 4: 160), which the novelist must record with the utmost fidelity. The "reality" Woolf seeks for her characters lies in presenting the world as it is experienced, which entails finding the means to represent above all the *feel* of consciousness as it goes through "the life of Monday or Tuesday" (CE, 4: 160). This is, of course, modernism's well-known "inward turn," with its Jamesian principle that "what a man thinks and what he feels are the history and the character of what he does" (AF, 66). In the ideology of modernism (at least in this version of it) individual identity, or character, is revealed not through actions or events but through the presentation of a consciousness as it moves through the world. For Woolf, this begins with

conveying sensory perceptions, sensations, memories, emotions, and the movements of thought. James made narrative focalization the cornerstone of his poetics, and Woolf would adapt it to her own ends, developing her distinctive style of employing *style indirect libre* to shift frequently between different minds as well as to range associatively across time and space. As a public world is built out of a collection of fragmentary, atomized perspectives (for instance, London, from the perspectives of its denizens, both in the form of major and minor characters in *Mrs. Dalloway*), individual private selves are built up out of a collection of impressions (both present feelings and perceptions, as well as past memories).[10]

The question that remains, the one that this chapter will be concerned with, is how the experience of consciousness is to be described. For in spite of her polemical remarks in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," even the most cursory reading of Woolf's novels reveals that far from eliminating description, there is hardly a sentence of hers that is not richly and evocatively descriptive. Her critique assumes that particular novelistic techniques are appropriate to particular objects, and in taking issue with *what* is described, she casts the problem as a critique of description itself, whereas it seems to lie more with the calico and the cancer and Hilda Lessways' endless fascination with villas.[11] When read against the evidence of the novels, the apparent condemnation of description in her critical writings must be revised. The "ugly, clumsy, incongruous tool" of description has become synonymous with descriptions of material objects, and at the same time that Woolf restricts this technique to a narrow purview in her critical writings, she expands its domain and reconceptualizes its nature in her novelistic practice. If the objects of description change, so too, it seems, must its methods, and it will be the concern of this chapter to outline the major features of

[10] See Banfield, *The Phantom Table*, for a complete account of the ways in which Woolf accomplishes these.
[11] In this regard, she echoes both the traditional rhetorical classifications of description according to the domains its referents, as well as the more specific 20th century accounts of description, which have deemed it appropriate only for the treatment of the material. See, for instance, Gerard Genette's classic account in "Frontiers of Narrative," in *Figures of Literary Discourse*. I discuss this more fully in the Introduction.

that change. Unlike villas, rooms, and buttons "sewn on as the Bond Street tailors would have it (CE, 4: 150)," impressions and sensations do not look like anything. Accordingly, descriptions of them operate not according to a principle of visual resemblance that calls for the enumeration of an object's physical attributes in ever greater detail, but by a principle of experiential homology, which appeals to some congruence of felt qualities between one experience and another. Finally, although the domain of what is described is expanded in Woolf's novels, the enterprise of describing itself comes up against limits, and the foregrounding of these limits will be taken up in the next chapter.

Descriptive Picturing

If exhaustive depictions of setting furnished with accurate material objects and details are insufficient to convey the "reality" of a character, what are the alternatives that Woolf presents in her own fiction? We can distinguish several broad ways in which her descriptive practices differ from conventionally realist ones. First, descriptive elements permeate all aspects of the text rather than existing as distinct and autonomous segments that could be easily extracted or skipped over, in the manner of "set-pieces" or tableaus. These latter tend to appear with particular frequency at the beginning of a chapter, to set the scene where the action is to take place, or the first time a character is introduced, to illustrate her physical appearance. By no means does description exist *only* in discrete segments in realist novels, but we rarely find in Woolf the autonomous set-pieces that are characteristic of the nineteenth century novel.

Second, the privileged descriptive mode undergoes a shift. Gone is the primacy of ekphrastic renderings of a picture of a background or setting, so often of a room, a house or a landscape, as in this example from Dickens' early 1841 novel, *Barnaby Rudge*, a description of the country inn where much of the novel's action takes place.

> At length we stopped before a very old house bulging out over the road – a house with long low lattice-windows bulging out still further, and beams with carved heads on the ends bulging out too, so that I fancied the whole house was leaning forward, trying to see who was passing on the narrow pavement below…The old-fashioned

> brass knocker on the low arched door, ornamented with carved garlands of fruit and flowers, twinkled like a star; the two stone steps descending to the door were as white as if they had been covered with fair linen…[12]

Even when we do find descriptions of rooms or houses in Woolf, such as the meditation on the Ramsays' empty house in the "Time Passes" section of *To the Lighthouse*, these are not presented as if the scene were a framed picture that must be enumerated part by part. Such pictorializing, which typically involves cataloguing the individual parts of the image in sequence and in relation to each other, explains the preponderance of spatial specifications in these passages, as in the celebrated description of the Maison Vauqer at the beginning of *Père Goriot*, "La façade de la pension donne sur un jardinet, en sorte que la maison tombe à angle droit sur la rue Neuve-Sainte-Geneviève, où vous la voyez coupée dans sa profondeur. Le long de cette façade, entre la maison et le jardinet, règne un cailloutis en cuvette, large d'une toise, devant lequel est une allée sablée, bordée de géraniums, de lauriers-roses et de grenadiers plantés dans de grands vases en faïence bleue et blanche."[13] Or, in an example closer to home, the opening of Bennett's *Old Wives' Tale*, "A little way to the north of [Constance and Sophia Baines], in the creases of a hill famous for its religious orgies, rose the river Trent, the calm and characteristic stream of middle England. Somewhat further northwards, in the near neighbourhood of the highest public-house in the realm, rose two lesser rives, the Dane and the Dove…"[14]

Such descriptions make evident one reason that rhetoricians and critics since the eighteenth century have objected to description: its lack of any internal organizing principle. As Mieke Bal summarizes, "unbound by narrative sequentiality, the enumeration of the elements of the object in description is fundamentally arbitrary. In contrast, the narration of events follows the chronology in

[12] Charles Dickens, *Barnaby Rudge*, 230-231.
[13] Balzac, *Le père Goriot*, 29.
[14] Arnold Bennett, *Old Wives' Tale*, 1. For more examples from nineteenth century novels including those by Hardy, Eliot, Dickens and Gissing, see Michael Irwin's list of passages in *Picturing: Description and Illusion in the Nineteenth Century Novel,*133–136. These are in Chapter 6, "Villages and Towns," which is particularly relevant in terms of specifying spatial coordinates and mapping itineraries and topography.

which the events take place. Even when this chronology is broken, the deviations are marked, for instance, as flashback to an earlier time. Of course, organizing principles did exist by convention, if not intrinsically. In realism, the order of the description of a person typically moves from head to foot, or from the eyes outward to the rest of the face, proceeding directionally from top to bottom, or center to periphery. In the case of landscapes, the order might be from foreground to background, vague to clear, left to right.[15] However, although such an order claims to follow the order of the perceptual process, for instance, the conceit of recording what a character sees as she enters a room, following her eyes as they survey the scene, this order seems created as much, if not more, by the very act of describing itself. "But one can often argue that the gaze describes or follows description rather than being followed by it," Bal writes, the order is one where "the elements refer not to the described object but to description."[16]

Descriptions in realism are replete with geographical details, locating a house, a town, or a character in some kind of larger background setting – we can think back to the precision with which the *pension* Vauquer is mapped. These often take the form of identifying the spatial positions of different elements relative to each other within a frame. Indeed, "picturing" is perhaps the best term to characterize the nature of such activity.[17] Description has been called "word-painting" or "verbal portraits," and has often been associated with the genres of still-life or landscape painting, usually to its detriment. Balzac's minute and detailed descriptions were sneeringly compared to Dutch miniatures by his contemporaries, a comparison later echoed – slightly more charitably – by Henry James.[18] "Static situations are described," Lukács comments disparagingly, "states or attitudes of

[15] Mieke Bal, "Over-writing as Un-writing: Descriptions, World-Making and Novelistic Time," 577.
[16] Ibid.
[17] So a few critics who have written on description in Victorian literature have done so under the rubric of "word-pictures" or "picturing." See Rhoda Flaxman, *Victorian Word-Painting and Narrative: Toward the Blending of Genres,* and Michael Irwin, *Picturing*.
[18] For an extended discussion of the link between nineteenth century realism and Dutch painting, see Ruth Yeazell, *The Art of the Everyday: Dutch painting and the Realist Novel*. Yeazell concludes with a consideration of Proust's

mind of human beings or conditions of things – still lives."[19] And Valéry calls the increase of novelistic description in the nineteenth century a "remarkable parallel" to the growing dominance of landscapes in the domain of painting, both of which, in his view, lead to a diminution of the "intellectual element of art."[20]

In modernism, the hostility towards visual description is part of the opposition between truth and reality on one hand and appearance and illusion on the other. In *Fiction in the Age of Photography*, Nancy Armstrong offers a compelling account of the "collaboration between words and images" that is characteristic of Victorian, realist aesthetics in the wake of a massive proliferation of photographic images. Modernists, she argues, sought to undo this collaboration by understanding conventional images "in terms of what they conceal and thus what they do not allow us to know." For Woolf as for Proust, attending to material surfaces, recorded in detailed visual descriptions, is a barrier to accessing the truth of individual identity. "Modernists working in a range of media declared that henceforth images should display objects that could not be verbally described and, by the same token, words should refer to a reality that could not be pictured in conventional images."[21] Since the visible world conceals the truth rather than revealing it, skepticism towards the legibility of visual representation (in both theory and practice) was an effort to break the continuity between seeing and knowing.

Elaine Scarry's discussion in *Dreaming By the Book* of the mental image-making that we perform when we read offers another account of the pictorial nature of descriptions. Unlike the visual arts or music, Scarry notes, literature is singularly devoid of actual sensory content. It

---

ambivalence with the model of realism provided by Dutch painting. For the argument that Dutch painting is particularly descriptive, see Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Description: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century*.

[19] Georg Lukacs, "Narrate or Describe," *Writer and Critic*, ed. and trans. Arthur Kahn (London: The Merlin Press, 1970), 130. For further examples of this comparison see Brooks, 16, and Michel Beaujour, "Some Paradoxes of Description," *Yale French Studies*, 48.

[20] Valéry, "Degas, Dance, Drawing," *Degas, Manet, Morisot*, 76.

[21] Armstrong, *Fiction in the Age of Photography*, 247-8.

possesses instead only "*mimetic content*, the figural rooms and faces and weather that we mimetically see, touch, and hear, though in no case do we actually do so."[22] How is it then, she asks, that what we imagine when reading can feel so perceptually vivid? Scarry appeals to the notion of "instruction" to characterize how literature calls forth the imagination of perceptual experiences. "When we say 'Emily Brontë describes Catherine's face,' we might also say, 'Brontë gives us a set of instructions for how to imagine or construct Catherine's face'."[23] Although Scarry's interest is in how literature prompts the imagination to compose a mental picture, she also offers an implicit account of description itself, as the element most concerned with instructing the imagination.

> We habitually say of images in novels that they 'represent' or 'are mimetic of' the real world. But the mimesis is perhaps less in them than in our seeing of them. In imagining Catherine's face, we perform a mimesis of actually seeing a face; in imagining the sweep of the wind across the moors, we perform a mimesis of actually hearing the wind. Imagining is an act of perceptual mimesis, whether undertaken in our own daydreams or under the instruction of great writers.[24]

In this understanding of descriptions as instructions for the performance of "perceptual mimesis," each descriptive sentence in a novel or poem is preceded by implicit imperatives like "picture this" or "look closely here" or "let your eyes drift over there."[25] Although Scarry identifies a number of ways our imaginations are instructed to compose pictures, she does not link these explicitly to different types of literary descriptions, and the vast majority of her references come from novels that fall under the broad category of "realism," most notably those of Hardy, Flaubert, and Tolstoy.[26]

My claim is not that Woolf's descriptions, which we will turn to very shortly, do not call forth perceptual mimesis – indeed she is concerned above all with conveying the feel of perceptual

[22] Elaine Scarry, *Dreaming by the Book* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1999), 6.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid.
[25] See ibid., 36-7, where she interpolates a passage from Hardy with these implicit imperatives.
[26] An early section includes a discussion of a scene from Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu*, and a short story of Woolf's is mentioned in passing, but Scarry's novelistic references do not extend later, though her poetic references include a number of contemporary poets.

processes – but that they do so in a different way from the examples Scarry discusses. The notion of instructions for the composition of a mental picture is extremely apt for a description like:

> [Norcombe Hill] was a featureless convexity of chalk and soil – an ordinary specimen of those smoothly-outlined protuberances of the globe which may remain undisturbed on some great day of confusion.
>
> The hill was covered on its northern side by an ancient and decaying plantation of beeches, whose upper verge formed a line over the crest, fringing its arched curve against the sky, like a mane.[27]

These types of descriptions enumerate the literal details of a picture, hence the frequent indications of spatial positions and relations within a frame. Scarry characterizes them as directives that break down a visual tableau into parts and describes them in order so that the reader can then recompose it in the imagination. Woolf's mode is not literal enumeration of physical attributes, but analogical appeals to some equivalent quality of felt experience. Scarry's definition of imagining as perceptual mimesis is persuasive, and novels certainly seem to offer particularly vivid instructions for acts of imagined picturing. But we need to differentiate between different modes of novelistic instructions for imagining, which dominate and recede at different historical moments and, of course, in different authors. Indeed, descriptions are arguably one of the most distinctive elements of an author's style. One way to characterize the shift in descriptive paradigms evinced in Woolf's work is that there is a turn from a part-whole listing (a visual tableau broken down into successive elements) to whole-whole likening (one experience likened to another), or from predication (*a* is *x*, *y*, *z*) to analogy (just as *x*, so *a*). Like Proust, Woolf turns to analogical resources in order to give form to the invisible, in her case, often felt experiences. Her descriptions do not decompose a hillside or a room and then ask us to recompose the picture in our imagination. If we adopt Scarry's method of inserting the erased implicit imperatives in a description [put these in], in Woolf's case these would be directives such as, "imagine feeling this quality of *y*, see how it corresponds to that quality of *x*?"

[27] Thomas Hardy, *Far From the Madding Crowd*, 11. Scarry cites this passage on 55 as an example of how Hardy directs us to focus our attention on a single patch on the surface of the composition, "the northern side…" followed by an extensive description of the effects of a storm there.

rather than directives such as, "first look here, then look to the right, now let your eyes drift over there."

Moving Similes

From the records of her diaries and other autobiographical writings, not to mention her fiction, it's clear that Woolf is extraordinarily sensitive to the sensory realm, on which she persistently trains her descriptive attention. In "A Sketch of the Past," she records her first memory as pure sensations of light and sound. "It is of hearing the waves breaking one, two, one, two, and sending a splash of water over the beach," and "lying and hearing this splash and seeing this light, and feeling, it is almost impossible that I should be here; of feeling the purest ecstasy I can conceive (MB, 65)."[28] Again like Proust, Woolf is highly susceptible to synaesthesia, "Everything would be large and dim; and what was seen would at the same time be heard; sounds would come through this petal or leaf – sounds indistinguishable from sights. (MB, 66)."[29]

Since sensory impressions cannot be framed as a tableau and enumerated in parts successively, Woolf's primary mode of describing them is to liken the impression as whole to another analogically, a strategy familiar to us by its rhetorical name, simile.[30] In English today, this term refers to "a figure of speech in which particular attributes of one thing are explicitly compared with particular attributes of another thing, usually using the words 'like,' 'as' or 'as if' [we could add

[28] This evokes Leibniz's *petit perceptions*, of which his favorite example was the murmur of the waves, a fact recorded by Russell in his first book, based on his dissertation on Leibniz.

[29] Surprisingly little scholarly work exists on the links between Proust and Woolf. A notable exception, largely a biographical influence study, is Pericles Lewis, "Proust, Woolf, and Modern Fiction."

[30] For a discussion of classical concepts of comparison and the argument that there is no specific ancient theory of simile in the restricted sense that it has in English today, see Marsh H. McCall Jr., *Ancient Rhetorical Theories of Simile and Comparison*. The *locus classicus* of discussions of metaphor, of which simile is usually a subdivision, is Aristotle's *Poetics*, as well as his remarks in Book 3 of the *Rhetoric*. I will be describing the operation of "simile" as one of "analogy," which I do not use in the classical sense of a four-part proportional relation of "A is to B as C is to D," but more broadly to indicate the procedure of making an illustrative parallel between two processes. As I. A. Richards defined it, metaphor includes all "those processes in which we perceive or think of or feel about one thing in terms of another – as when looking at a building it seems to have a face and to confront us with a peculiar expression (*Philosophy of Rhetoric*, 116-7)." All thought, Richards suggest, is in some way metaphoric.

'just as…so…'] to link up tenor and vehicle."[31] Woolf's similes are employed for dynamic states involving actions and movements, often precisely specified, and they aim not to describe how something looks, but rather, to describe how an experience feels. Unlike an ekphrastic depiction of a visual image, Woolf's descriptive process works to convey sensations and emotions by means of affective homologies to other experiences. The tenors of the similes are typically specific sensations, as the examples below make clear.

> She looked at Peter Walsh; her look, passing through all that time and that emotion, reached him doubtfully; settled on him tearfully; and rose and fluttered away, as a bird touches a branch and rises and flutters away (MD, 43).
>
> The cold stream of visual impressions failed him now as if the eye were a cup that overflowed and let the rest run down its china walls unrecorded (MD, 164).
>
> "You've not changed," he said – the face he meant…
> "And you –" she said, looking at him. It was as if she were trying to put two different versions of him together; the one on the telephone perhaps and the one on the chair. Or was there some other? This half knowing people, this half being known, this feeling of the eye on the flesh, like a fly crawling – how uncomfortable it was, he thought; but inevitable, after all these years (Y, 297)."
>
> Suddenly, as if the movement of his hand had released it, the load of her accumulated impressions of him tilted up, and down poured in a ponderous avalanche all she felt about him. That was one sensation. Then up rose in a fume the essence of his being. That was another. She felt herself transfixed by the intensity of her perception (TL, 24).

Comparisons like these may be found on almost any page of her novels, but for all the power of their visual resonance and the arresting "images" that result, they do not present a picture of how the world looks, not least because what they are describing do not "look" like anything at all. There are no spatial markers here to indicate positions within a frame, e.g. "to the right of," "next to," etc., and if anything is pictured, the picture is not a representational image.[32]

---

[31] Jack Myers and Michael Simms, *The Longman Dictionary of Poetic Terms*, 277-8. The terms "tenor" and "vehicle" come from I. A. Richards, *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*.

[32] More than for any other mode of literature, sight is paramount for realism, Peter Brooks contends, being centrally "attached to the visual, to looking at things, registering their presence in the world through sight (*Realist Vision*, 3)." Critics have also read Woolf as a primarily visual writer. Harvena Richter writes, "The world of objects, which Mrs.

Woolf's concern is to convey felt qualities of particular experiences – in the passages cited above, the sensation of being scrutinized under another's gaze, or the feeling that one's perceptual capacities are saturated. Intangible sensations, perceptions, and emotions present no physical parts to detail, and the attempt to represent them inevitably calls for different methods of figuration. If, in the second example above, we imagine a cup overflowing, this is not a picture of what Peter Walsh's sensation *looks* like. My claim is not that this is the first time such descriptions appear in literature, but that the new attention to registering sensory impressions – for Woolf, the world *seen* is the world *felt* – results in their gaining a new dominance. In keeping with her synaesthetic tendencies, there are frequent transpositions across sensory modes, as when she writes of seeing Mrs. Brown on the train, "The impression she made was overwhelming. It came pouring out like a draught, like a smell of burning (CE 3, 425)." Or, returning to Peter Walsh's feeling in the second example cited above, the transposition may be one of medium, where the "stream" of visual impressions that can no longer be registered when one is "glutted with sensations (W, 158)" is literalized and becomes water that runs over a cup.

The absence of a visually mimetic connection in these similes is coupled with their dynamism. The criticisms that compared description to still-life painting and faulted it for its stasic qualities – pausing the narrative – become moot. In the first example cited in block quotes above, the subject is Clarissa's act of looking at Peter, whose movement is evoked by its comparison to the action of a bird that alights momentarily and flies away again. The movement is maintained when, during this same scene, Peter Walsh hears the bell of St Margaret's toll and experiences "an extraordinarily clear, yet puzzling, recollection of [Clarissa], as if this bell had come into the room years ago, where they sat at some moment of great intimacy, and had gone from one to the other

---

Woolf herself (as writer) assumed control of through verbal imagery, is mainly a visual world." There are very few tastes or smells in Woolf's world, Richter goes on, "The world is mainly *seen*, with an emphasis on form and color." *Virginia Woolf: The Inward Voyage*, 69. My aim is not to deny the importance of the visual, but to insist that the way visuality operates in Woolf is not to paint a representational picture in words, as it is typically understood to do.

and had left, like a bee with honey, laden with the moment (MD, 49-50)."[33] For much of the twentieth century, description has been conceived as secondary to the master category of "narration" – summed up in Genette's formulation description as "quite naturally *ancilla narationis*, the ever-necessary, ever-submissive, never-emancipated slave."[34] If, however, we reconceive description as the master category, the oppositions of movement and stasis become less clear. Narration might then be understood as simply the description of actions, and dialogue the description of speech etc. In this way, a memory is described actively by being compared to the flight of creatures borne through the air, carrying moments across space and time like so much pollen, fertilizing the past in the present.

The importance of sensory impressions as well as Woolf's non-representational descriptive methods have an analogue in the visual arts of her period, particularly Post-Impressionism.[35] "The Post-Impressionist movement had cast – not its shadow – but its bunch of variegated lights on us (MB, 200)," wrote Woolf of Bloomsbury in a delivery to the Memoir Club, a society of close friends, in 1921 or 1922. This light was filtered, crucially, through the figure of Roger Fry, the influential art critic and early British champion of Post-Impressionism whose biography Woolf wrote and published in 1940. A member of the Cambridge Apostles who was greatly interested in philosophy and science in addition to the visual arts, Fry was introduced to Bloomsbury through Vanessa and Clive Bell, and became a central figure in the group.

"Though they must part in the end, painting and writing have much to tell each other (CE, II: 241)," Woolf writes in the same text. Ann Banfield has persuasively shown the influence of Fry's

[33] Imagery from the natural world is pervasive in Woolf's writing, and her characters often feel their selves to reside in or be one with natural elements. For more on the importance of nature in Woolf, see Gillian Beer, "Physics, Sound and Substance," and Louise Westling, "Virginia Woolf and the Flesh of the World," *New Literary History* 30, 4 (Autumn, 1999), 855-875.
[34] Gérard Genette, "Frontiers of Narrative," 134.
[35] For a fuller discussion of the influence of Roger Fry and post-Impressionist aesthetics on Woolf, see Ann Banfield, *The Phantom Table* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), particularly Chapter 6. Jane Goldman, in *The Feminist Aesthetics of Virginia Woolf: Modernism, post-Impressionism and the Politics of the Visual*, situates Woolf's relation to post-Impressionism in light of feminism.

aesthetics on Woolf's poetics, and there is an obvious analogy between Post-Impressionism's turn away from the conventions of naturalistic representation and Woolf's turn away from the ekphrastic tendencies of realist description. I want to pause here in particular on Fry's idea of equivalence as an aesthetic principle. In her biography of him, she quotes him at length on the reaction to the Post-Impressionist exhibit he organized in London in 1910, which is often cited as one factor in the formulation of her famous remark, "on or about 1910, human character changed."

> It was not surprising that a public which had come to admire above everything in a picture the skill with which an artist produced illusion should have resented an art in which such skill was completely subordinated to the direct expression of feeling. Accusations of clumsiness and incapacity were freely made, even against so singularly accomplished an artist as Cézanne… Now these artists do not seek to give what can, after all, be but a pale reflex of actual appearance, but to arouse the conviction of a new and definite reality. They do not seek to imitate form, but to create form, not to imitate life but to find an equivalent for life. By that I mean that they wish to make images which by the clearness of their logical structure, and by their closely-knit unity of texture, shall appeal to our disinterested and contemplative imagination with something of the same vividness as the things of actual life appeal to our practical activities. In fact they aim not at illusion but at reality (RF, 177-8).

Art, according to Fry, is fundamentally a creative, not imitative practice, and Woolf's methods may be understood in light of his characterization of the Post-Impressionists as seekers of equivalence . Her descriptions, we might say, are governed by a principle of adequation rather than mimesis, aiming not to depict how something looks, but to provoke an equivalent feeling. Fry's preoccupation with form and design are explicitly evident in the artist character of Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse*, a novel that Woolf wished she had dedicated to him. But it also casts its "bunch of variegated lights" on her analogical practices of description, which depend on drawing formal similarities between felt experiences, pointing out parallel sensory structures and congruent emotional shapes.[36]

[36] Ann Banfield argues that Roger Fy's commentary on Cézanne gave Woolf the aesthetic principles by which an objective world is constructed in the novel from the collection of disparate and atomized perspectives onto it. See Banfield, *The Phantom Table*, particularly Chapter 6.

Such analogies give rise to visual images that are not representational portraits, and Fry's remarks could be juxtaposed with some of Woolf's other comments on the visual, from her 1926 essay, "The Cinema." There, she locates the medium's potential in its capacity to express emotions through a new language of shapes and symbols belongs to it alone. This prompts her to wonder,

> Is there any characteristic which thought possesses that can be rendered visible without the help of words? It has speed and slowness; dartlike directness and vaporous circumlocution. But it has, also, especially in moments of emotion, the picture-making power, the need to lift its burden to another bearer; to let an image run side by side along with it. The likeness of the thought is for some reason more beautiful, more comprehensible, more available, than the thought itself. As everybody knows, in Shakespeare the most complex ideas form chains of images through which we mount, changing and turning, until we reach the light of day (CE, 4: 351).

Although Woolf lauds the power of visual symbols to run alongside thought, bearing the burden of its expression, she is also clear that there is an image-making power specific "to words and to words alone," and that the visual is, moreover, only the most obvious aspect of the "thousand other suggestions" compact in language. Like Henry James, she too insists, like a latter-day Lessing, on the medium specific of the visual and literary arts. "But obviously the images of a poet are not to be cast in bronze or traced by pencil," she writes. "Even the simplest image 'My luve's like a red, red rose, that's newly-sprung in June' presents us with impressions of moisture and warmth and the glow of crimson and the softness of petals inextricably mixed and strung upon the lift of a rhythm which is itself the voice of the passion and hesitation of the lover. All this, which is accessible to words and to words alone, the cinema must avoid" (CE, 4: 351). Just as Woolf calls for the cinema to exploit the particularities of its visual language, so her novelistic description seeks to develop its own particular "picture-making power," one based on correspondence, equivalence, and analogy rather than resemblance or mimesis.

Feeling Thinking

Among the sensations that are described by means of dynamic similes, there is a subset, namely, the sensations of mental events, that seem particularly susceptible to this kind of representation. Here are some examples:

> But – but – why did she suddenly feel, for no reason that she could discover, desperately unhappy? As a person who has dropped some grain of pearl or diamond into the grass and parts the tall blades very carefully, this way and that, and searches here and there vainly, and at last spies it there at the roots, so she went through one thing and another…(MD, 120-121).

> What then was this terror, this hatred? Turning back among the many leaves which the past had folded in him, peering into the heart of that forest where light and shade so chequer each other that all shape is distorted, and one blunders, now with the sun in one's eyes, now with a dark shadow, he sought an image to cool and detach and round off his feeling in a concrete shape (TL, 185).

> All of this [Lily Briscoe's impressions of Mr. Ramsay and Mr. Bankes] danced up and down, like a company of gnats, each separate, but all marvelously controlled in an invisible elastic net – danced up and down in Lily's mind, in and about the branches of the pear tree, where still hung in effigy the scrubbed kitchen table, symbol of her profound respect for Mr. Ramsay's mind, until her thought which had spun quicker and quicker exploded of its own intensity; she felt released; a shot went off close at hand, and there came, flying from its fragments, frightened, effusive, tumultuous, a flock of starlings (TL, 25).

Woolf is, justifiably, known as a writer of consciousness, whether this fact is celebrated or condemned. But her interest is above all in conveying the *feel* of consciousness, to find a means of representing its experiential qualities. In the first example above, the subject is Clarissa Dalloway's process of rummaging in her mind for the cause of an emotion. The second example, from *To the Lighthouse*, concerns James Ramsay's attempt to isolate or identify a feeling, combing through his past in search of definition. (Incidentally, his search for "an image to cool and detach and round off his feeling in a concrete shape" is an apt description of Woolf's own process.) In the third passage, the subject is the sense of confusion when one's impressions lose cohesion. Here the feeling is underscored by the literal shot that goes off immediately after the simile, and the flock of scattering starlings it sends off parallels – via an easily-missed transition from the figurative to the literal plane marked only by a semi-colon – the impressions that spin out of control in Lily Briscoe's mind. As

much as *what* is thought, felt or sensed, these descriptions are concerned with conveying what it is *like* to think, feel and sense.

Woolf was by no means alone in being preoccupied with conveying the feel of experience. As Dorrit Cohn has shown in *Transparent Minds*, extended similes describing the movements of consciousness constitute a prevalent feature of modernist fiction. Citing examples from Woolf, Proust, Sarraute, and especially Musil, Cohn calls these "psycho-analogies," arguing that the technique underscores the contradictory nature of thoughts and feelings and "objectifies, animalizes, and personifies psychic forces."[37] What clearly emerges from Cohn's examples is that these analogies serve quite a different purpose than the narration of "inner speech" that we are accustomed to call interior monologue, which tell us what a character is thinking. The objects of psycho-analogies are not the *content* of a character's thoughts, but rather the *process* of thinking.

Their prominence and frequency suggest that such analogical methods are particularly suited to the representation of mental phenomena. Sarraute proposes as much in a preface to her 1956 collection of essays, *L'ère du soupçon*, when she records the writer's struggle to capture the rapid "internal actions" of the mind that produce the impressions from which novelists draw their material. Although we are able to consciously distinguish discrete and defined gestures, words and feelings, these have at their origin "indefinable movements." How then to capture them in writing? "Since, while we accomplish these movements, no words – not even the words of interior monologue – can express them…it was possible to communicate them to the reader only by images which render their equivalents and which make him feel analogous sensations."[38] Once again, we find an appeal to equivalence. In order to adequately represent the feel of consciousness – and we

[37] Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction*, 42. "Psycho-analogies" form one aspect of the widespread modernist practice of what Cohn calls "psycho-narration," or the representation of mental processes. She singles out Musil as a particularly avid practitioner, citing one scholarly count of 337 similes found in the 38 pages (43).
[38] Nathalie Sarraute, *L'ère du soupcon: essais sur le roman*, 2, my translation. Also cited in part in Cohn, 46.

should not forget that "adequate" is to be equal to – it is necessary to provoke an equivalent sensation in the reader. Unable to approach the object head-on by enumerating its parts, it seems the only access is a parallel one, running alongside it. With no materially manifest attributes to be detailed, the experiences of thinking and feeling can, it seems, only be described by analogy. Here we can also recall Roger Fry's comments about Post-Impressionism and its search to find an equivalent for life rather than an imitation of it, not to replicate "a pale reflex of actual appearance, but to arouse the conviction of a new and definite reality."

Sarraute suggests that her only method for representing the indefinable movements of consciousness was to find an image to provoke a corresponding sensation in the reader, and this is in effect what Woolf invites us to do in her sensory descriptions. In a passage cited earlier from *The Years,* where Sara Pargiter feels North Pargiter's scrutinizing gaze as like a fly crawling over the flesh, this image is repeated a little later in the same scene, "These little snapshot pictures of people left much to be desired, these little surface pictures that one made, like a fly crawling over a face, and feeling, here's the nose, here's the brow." Returning to Scarry's notion of perceptual mimesis, such a description of a sensation invites us to feel it on our own skin. Woolf's pervasive use of focalization and *style indirect libre* means that the narrative is presented through the thoughts and perception of particular characters in first-person accounts, although not told in the first person. One consequence of this is that the descriptions become, we could say, empathetic rather than observational. Due to the use of *style indirect libre*, we are is invited to inhabit the character's perspective, to feel it on our own skin, rather than to regard the character from the standpoint of an observer. The proxy for the reader is the character herself, rather than a narrator.

Describing the Stream of Thought

In fact, strikingly similar analogical processes are also at work in other attempts to describe the workings of the mind during the modernist period, not in fiction but in the budding discipline of

psychology. We find particular evidence of this in the work of William James, who is credited with coining the phrase "stream of consciousness," a term that has become synonymous with modernism in general and Woolf in particular.[39] Over-extended though it may be, it is nevertheless worth revisiting the source of this term, *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), for an attempt to describe the feel of the mind that resonates strongly with Woolf's.

The first eight chapters of James' monumental work proceed by analytic third-person observations about different mental faculties. But n the opening of the ninth chapter, "The Stream of Thought," he announces a change: "We now begin our study of the mind from within" (PP, 1:224).[40] James' procedure in this section could be characterized as a phenomenology of consciousness: his account of its nature is based on its felt qualities. Insisting on the continuous rather than successive nature of thought within "each personal consciousness," he writes, "Consciousness…does not appear to itself chopped up in bits. Such words as 'chain' or 'train' do not describe it fitly as it presents itself in the first instance. It is nothing jointed; it flows. A 'river' or a 'stream' are the metaphors by which it is most naturally described. In talking of it hereafter, let us call it the stream of thought, of consciousness, or of subjective life" (PP, 1: 239).

The first thing that strikes us about this stream, James goes on, is the pace of its parts. When it moves slowly, "we are aware of the object of our thought in a comparatively restful and stable way. When rapid, we are aware of a passage, a relation, a transition *from* it, or *between* it and something else…Like a bird's life, it seems to be made of an alternation of flights and perchings. The rhythm of language expresses this, where every thought is expressed in a sentence, and every

[39] Cohn notes the related though distinct concept, "interior monologue," introduced by the French psychologist Victor Egger in his 1881 book, *La parole intérieure* (*Transparent Minds*, 78). James cites Egger's work approvingly, but disagrees with him on the exact nature of the relation of thought to word, see PP, 1:280-282. Critics have speculated about the possible influences of psychology on Woolf's attempts to represent her characters' thought processes. Harvena Richter writes, "she seemed to follow the observations of William James, who charted certain directions of the flow of thought (*Inward Voyage*, 37)."

[40]. In fact, the term that appears throughout the *Principles of Psychology* is "stream of thought." James only switches to the term "stream of consciousness" in the 1892 *Psychology: Briefer Course.*

sentence closed by a period."[41] James' evocation of a bird's life recalls a simile from Woolf cited earlier, in which the look that passes from Clarissa to Peter is likened to a bird that lands momentarily and flies away again. A closer resemblance is found in another simile from *Mrs. Dalloway* describing Septimus Warren Smith watching his wife Rezia, "…And as she sat there, waiting, looking down, he could feel her mind, like a bird, falling from branch to branch, and always alighting, quite rightly; he could follow her mind, as she sat there in one of those loose lax poses that came to her naturally and, if he should say anything, at once she smiled, like a bird alighting with all its claws firm upon the bough" (MD, 147).[42]

James calls the resting-places of the stream of thought its "substantive parts," often "sensorial imaginations of some sort" which may be held in contemplation without changing. These substantives are, in essence, what we say our thoughts are "about." In contrast, the places of flight, or "transitive parts" of the stream are the relations that obtain between substantives, between thoughts *about* one thing to thoughts *about* another. Against the dominant associationist view of psychology, according to which substantive thoughts occur in consciousness discretely and discontinuously in the way that, for instance, a thunder-clap breaks into silence, James insists on the continuity of the stream. Our thoughts are always determined by their relations to other thoughts, even if these relations occur below the threshold of consciousness.

> Into the awareness of the thunder itself the awareness of the previous silence creeps and continues; for what we hear when the thunder crashes is not thunder *pure*, but thunder-breaking-upon-silence-and-contrasting-with-it…The thunder itself we believe to abolish and exclude the silence; but the *feeling* of the thunder is also a feeling of the silence as just gone; and it would be difficult to find in the actual

[41] Ibid., I, 243.

[42] Harvena Richter also notes this resemblance. Indeed, avian imagery abounds in *Mrs. Dalloway*: At the beginning of the novel, Clarissa's neighbor Scrope Purvis thinks of her as having "a touch of the bird about her, of the jay (MD, 4)." Rezia often thinks of Septimus as a "young hawk (MD, 146)." She is herself "like a bid sheltering under the thin hollow of a leaf, who blinks at the sun when the leaf moves; starts at the crack of a dry twig (MD, 65)" and Septimus watches her "snip, shape, as one watches a bird hop, flit in the grass, without daring to move a finger (MD, 89)." Richter cites some of these examples as well, see *The Inward Voyage*, 47.

> concrete consciousness of man a feeling so limited to the present as not to have an inkling of anything that went before.[43]

It is worth noting that in this example of the nature of thinking, James' preoccupation is with "the *feeling*" of thunder; for him as for Woolf, thinking and feeling are never separate. Every defined thought is thus inflected by its relations to what has preceded and what follows, and these are what psychologists overlook when they conceive of consciousness as discrete thoughts about substantive things.

> Every definite image in the mind is steeped and dyed in the free water that flows round it. With it goes the sense of its relations, near and remote, the dying echo of whence it came to us, the dawning sense of whither it is to lead. The significance, the value, of the image is all in this halo or penumbra that surrounds and escorts it, - or rather that is fused into one with it and has become bone of its bone and flesh of its flesh; leaving it, it is true, an image of the same *thing* it was before, but making it an image of that thing newly taken and freshly understood.[44]

For James, this free water with its dying echoes and dawning senses is crucially constitutive of the way we experience consciousness, which we neglect in our blinkered view of thoughts as "'about' this object or 'about' that, the stolid word *about* engulfing all their delicate idiosyncrasies in its monotonous sound."[45] These relations do not alter the substantive object of the thought, but they make its image "freshly understood," that is, the thunderclap would be the same thunderclap whether it broke into silence or din, but it would be quite differently experienced in each case.

We cannot fail to be reminded in these remarks of Woolf's oft-quoted statement from "Modern Fiction," "life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end" (CE, 4:160).[46] Just as James insists on the importance of the overlooked penumbra for the psychologist,

---

[43] William James, *Principles of Psychology*, I, 240-241.
[44] Ibid., I, 255.
[45] Ibid., I, 246.
[46] Richter notes the resemblance between Woolf's "luminous halo" and the various expressions "halo of relations," "psychic overtone" and "fringe" in James's *Principles of Psychology* (9-10). The figure of the halo also appears elsewhere in modernist literature. In the framing narrative of *Heart of Darkness*, we are told that Marlow is not

this luminous halo is for Woolf precisely that which demands attention from the novelist, whose task is "to convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit, whatever aberration or complexity it may display, with as little mixture of the alien and external as possible" (CE, 4: 160-1). Her descriptions are less concerned with expressing the *substance* of particular thoughts than with catching the *feel* of thinking.

The task of conveying the felt qualities of consciousness accounts for the highly associative nature of Woolf's characters' represented thoughts, which dart back and forth across time and space as one impression recalls another. Any thought is always inflected by its relations to other thoughts, be these of something that happened a minute ago, memories from years earlier, or anticipations of what is impending. In our focus on the "aboutness" of thoughts, James observes, almost as if presaging Wittgenstein in the *Philosophical Investigations*, we have been mislead by our use of language. "We ought to say a feeling of *and*, a feeling of *if*, a feeling of *but*, and a feeling of *by*, quite as readily as we say a feeling of *blue* or a feeling of *cold*. Yet we do not: so inveterate has our habit become of recognizing the existence of the substantive parts alone, that language almost refuses to lend itself to any other use."[47] By means of her extended similes describing the experience of different mental processes, Woolf develops a way of conveying the feelings of consciousness that cannot be captured by dwelling on its substantive contents alone.

Although James admonishes psychologists for having overlooked the transitive parts of consciousness, he is quick to admit the difficulties of clarifying these, since their movements, by their very nature, cannot be arrested and examined. "If they are but flights to a conclusion, stopping

---

typical of seamen, whose yarns have a simplicity that his lack. To him, the meaning of an episode is 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 those misty halos that sometimes are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine."

[47] William James, *Principles of Psychology*, I, 245-6. In fact, Wittgenstein was influenced by this passage. See Steven Meyer, *Irresistible Dictation*.

them to look at them before the conclusion is reached is really annihilating them."[48] There is also the difficulty of reckoning with their speed, "The rush of thought is so headlong that it almost always brings us up at the conclusion before we can arrest it…As a snowflake crystal caught in the warm hand is no longer a crystal but a drop, so, instead of catching the feeling of relation moving to its term, we find we have caught some substantive thing, usually the last word we were pronouncing, statically taken, and with its function, tendency, and particular meaning in the sentence quite evaporated."[49] Attempting introspective analysis in such cases is "like seizing a spinning top to catch its motion, or trying to turn up the gas quickly enough to see how the darkness looks."[50]

James's comments about both the necessity and the difficulty of examining the inchoate elements that link substantive thoughts is similar to Sarraute's suggestion that the "indefinable movements" and "internal actions" of the mind are most in need of clarification precisely because they are so difficult to represent. Her solution was to find images that render their equivalents and produce analogous sensations in the reader. James makes no explicit recommendations in this regard, but it is significant that in describing the paradox itself, he relies on a number of striking images: catching a snowflake in a warm hand, seizing a spinning top in order to see its motion, and turning up the gas in order to see how the darkness looks. These movements of consciousness will not stop in order to pose for their portrait, but analogy appears to offer a way of capturing a snapshot in motion. In all of these cases, the stream of thought is described through an image that runs alongside it, bearing the burden of its likeness, which cannot be otherwise made visible. If Woolf's concern is with conveying the movements of consciousness as it proceeds about its daily life, not only what thoughts are *about,* but also what it is *like* to think, which for her is never separate

[48] Ibid., I, 243.
[49] Ibid., I, 244.
[50] Ibid., I, 243-244.

from what it is like to sense and to feel, it will not be surprising to find her descriptive method comprised chiefly of finding equivalent analogues.

Epic Similes

Woolf's use of similes may also be situated in a literary-historical context. "Books descend from books as families descend from families," she remarks, "Some descend from Jane Austen; others from Dickens. They resemble their parents, as human children resemble their parents; yet they differ as children differ, and revolt as children revolt" (CE, II: 163). In addition to her immediate predecessors and contemporaries, scholars have traced in her descriptive methods an older lineage, in the tradition of epic similes. Also known as "Homeric similes," these are, according to one scholar, "based on the juxtaposition of two passages describing objects, persons, or events connected by the words 'like' or 'as,' in which the subject of the simile may be developed as an independent picture."[51] Here is an example from the *Iiliad*:

> [Hector] leaped into the crowd as when beneath the clouds a rushing wave
> churned by the wind falls upon a swift ship. The whole ship
> is hidden in the spray, and the fearful blowing of the wind
> roars in the sails; the sailors tremble in their hearts,
> fearing – for only by a little have they escaped death.
> So were the hearts of the Achaeans split…[52]

More than "mere static descriptions of objects," such extended analogies are "long digressions" but each "each digressive interruption is in motion," possessed of its own beginning, middle and end.[53] One dictionary of poetic terms characterizes epic similes as "elaborate comparisons developed in a lengthy passage" which "develops the *vehicle* into an independent set of images that exclude the *tenor*,

[51] William C. Scott, *The Artistry of the Homeric Simile* (Lebanon, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2009), 6. For a mostly thematic account of resemblances between *Mrs. Dalloway* and Homer, see Molly Hoff, "The Pseudo-Homeric World of Mrs. Dalloway," *Twentieth Century Literature*, 45.2 (Summer, 1999), 186-209.
[52] Homer, *Iliad* (15.624–28), cited in Scott, 7.
[53] Scott, *The Artistry of the Homeric Simile*, 8 and 4. Marsh H. McCall notes that simile is the regular form of comparison in Homer, who, along with Vergil, is the classical author who uses simile most prominently (*Ancient Rhetorical Theories of Simile and Comparison*, vii).

as well as temporarily obscuring the main thread of the *narrative*."[54] The digressions become stories within the story, and the narrative orbit moves, in effect, through a series of epicycles, a structure we saw with Proust.

We find a number of similes in *Mrs. Dalloway* that are epic both in structure and subject matter. During the scene of Clarissa and Peter Walsh's first reunion, for instance, we read, "So before a battle begins, the horses paw the ground; toss their heads; the light shines on their flanks; their necks curve. So Peter Walsh and Clarissa, sitting side by side on the blue sofa, challenged each other" (MD, 44). One scholar observes of this passage that it "sounds more like a hyperliteral translation of the Greek formula ὥς…ὥς than like a colloquial English rendering, say, 'Just as... so'," although we should note that the latter construction also appears frequently in the novels.[55]

Another function of Woolf's epic similes, Ann Banfield suggests, is to evoke an order of both space and time that is not limited to the here-now perspective of an individual "I." Woolf first discovered a way to move between present and past perspectives in *Mrs. Dalloway*, her famous "tunneling process, by which I tell the past by installments, as I have need of it" (D, 2:272), digging out "beautiful caves behind my characters" in order to give "humanity, humor, depth" (D, 2:263). As a complement to the individual past perspectives conveyed in flashbacks, Woolf's epic similes have a universalizing force. "They interconnect the caves not only among themselves but relate them to a larger world both social and natural, to a history longer than the human life or indeed human life on earth."[56] The "epic" scale here does not, or not only, hearken back to classical antiquity, but rather to the impersonality of a pre-history. Mortal time is but a blink in the life of the cosmos, a fact which more often comforts than terrifies Woolf's characters as they think of "the ebb

[54] Myers and Simms, The Longman Dictionary of Poetic Terms, 100.
[55] Steven Monte, "Ancients and Moderns in *Mrs. Dalloway*," 590. Monte notes that when critics mention such similes at all in Woolf's work, they tend to label them mock-heroic. He argues that the extended similes in the novel work, like flashback memories, "bring to mind paths in life not taken (592-3)." This seems contradictory, since similes are used to indicate what something is *like*, rather than what did not happen.
[56] Ann Banfield, "Mrs. Dalloway," 894.

and flow of things" that will go on without them, while they must "inevitably cease completely (MD, 9)."

An important means of achieving the impersonal element in these similes is through the comparison of a particular character or situation to something general and atemporal, marked by the use of the indefinite article, e.g. "as a cloud crosses the sun, silence falls on London (MD, 49)"; "like a woman who had slipped off her print dress and white apron to array herself in blue and pearls, the day changed (MD, 161)." The use of the indefinite article is also a means of highlighting the artificiality of the technique, shifting registers from the recognizable concrete (a real day in a real place) to the unspecific abstract, which is marked as fictive and literary, or mythic ("*a* woman who slips off her dress") yet which is nevertheless meant to give a realer, more evocative sense of what this nightfall was like. These similes counteract the naturalizing effect of motivating a description through the perspective of a character looking out at a scene. Like a visible brushstroke on a canvas, Woolf's attempt to get closer to reality foregrounds its own representational strategies.

Like, Like, and Like

Unlike the existential collapse of metaphor, which says that one thing *is* another thing, the "like" of simile joins its two terms together while allowing each to remain distinct. Much as Proust does, Woolf pervasively uses the comparative conjunction to figure what has no form by analogical means. To state something by likening it to something else is a strange sort of description, for it says something about its object only by saying what this thing is *like*, not what it *is*. The dictionary of poetic terms cited above differentiates simile from metaphor by suggesting, among other ways, "the construction of [simile] displays a characteristic tentativeness, while the metaphor displays a sense of directness and certainty."[57] In these likenesses, to borrow Roland Barthes' words from a somewhat

[57] This is one of the three ways Myers and Simms differentiate simile from metaphor in *The Longman Dictionary of Poetic Terms*. The others are, "(1) The simile does not attempt to use its vehicle as an identity or substitution, but simply as a comparison, (2), [simile] is a form of extension while metaphor is a form of compression (278)."

different context, "even the copula would seem excessive, like the remorse of a forbidden definition, forever kept at bay."[58] "'Like' and 'like' and 'like' – but what is the thing that lies beneath the semblance of the thing?" (W, 163). Bernard asks in *The Waves*, after a simile describing "ripple and laughter." Although he feels Percival's death to have given the gift of "let[ting] me see the thing. There is a square; there is an oblong," we can also see how "semblances of the thing" escape the rigidity of a single definition that Woolf's characters are perpetually trying to evade.

If character is to be "views," similes offer a perpetually shifting array of windows, like and like and like, each one itself like a different dress to be tried on and taken off. Indeed, in contrast to the more customary metaphors of "lenses" and "filters," clothing offers a different understanding of how describing gives form to an experience. Such an image is used by Gottlob Frege, a founder of the analytic tradition of philosophy in which the logical structure of descriptions became a central question in the early to mid twentieth century. Although typically taken to have inaugurated what we now call philosophy of language, Frege hastened to clarify that his concern with language is only accidental. Like Hobbes, he finds the metaphorical to be improper to philosophy, and regrets in a footnote in his 1918 essay "The Thought" that he is not in the happy position of a mineralogist who can show his audience a crystal that they can examine minutely from all sides. Instead, in order to discuss ideas the philosopher must take recourse to language and show a thought, "in itself immaterial, wrapped in sensible linguistic form," even though the metaphorical, imagistic, or representational aspects of language (*Bildlichkeit der Sprache*) inevitably renders expression improper.[59] So it is that Frege (and Russell after him), distrustful of the ambiguities of natural languages, set about fashioning a more proper, precise means of expressing immaterial thought in the form of a symbolic logic.

---

[58] Roland Barthes, *Empire of Signs*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), 83.
[59] Gottlob Frege, "The Thought: A Logical Inquiry," trans. A. M. and Marcelle Quinton, *Mind*, 65:259 (July, 1956), 289-311, note 4: 298.

In the last chapter, I noted a poetic ideal of linguistic precision circulating in modernism analogous to the philosophical one, where language is conceived as a material that must be shaped into a form that can fit its object. Recall T. E. Hulme's claim in "Romanticism and Classicism" (1911) that "language is by its very nature a communal thing; that is, it expresses never the exact thing but a compromise – that which is common to you, me and everybody." Nevertheless, it remains an indispensable resource for communicating impressions. "I have no material clay to mould to a given shape; the only thing which one has for the purpose, and which acts as a substitute for it, a kind of mental clay, are certain metaphors modified into theories of aesthetic and rhetoric. A combination of these, while it cannot state the essentially unstateable intuition, can yet give you a sufficient analogy to enable you to see what it was and to recognize it on condition that you yourself have been in a similar state."[60] The essentially unstateable intuition – the idiosyncrasy of each individual's experience – will be the subject of the next chapter, but for now let us note the similarity of the idea expressed by Hulme, Fry, Sarraute, and, I propose, implicitly by both William James and Woolf. For Hulme, the only poetic language capable of achieving accurate, precise and definite description is "that of analogy."[61] Modernism is dominated by contradictory tropes: dry, hard, and definite on one side versus vague, misty, and fluid on the other.[62] Woolf is usually cited as an exemplar of the latter camp, but in fact her insistence on the utmost fidelity to life is another expression of the ideal of precision. Like Proust, her attention is trained closely on the phenomenal aspects of experience, although she is much more hesitant to make the move from singular observation to universal theory. Woolf's recognition of the vagueness and ambiguity inherent in experience should not be misunderstood as imprecision. As with James, she is intensely interested in rendering precisely what may itself be intrinsically indistinct, most prevalently the experiential feels

[60] Hulme, *Selected Writings*, 77.
[61] Ibid.
[62] See Levenson, *Genealogy of Modernism*.

of consciousness, "that side of the mind which is exposed in solitude… its thoughts, its rhapsodies, its dreams."

For many modernists, the use of analogy, metaphor, image, or symbol belonged to poetry, in opposition to prose. "Plain speech is essentially inaccurate, it is only by new metaphors…that it can be made precise," Hulme insisted.[63] Contrasting the "physical image" of the a poet who says "a ship 'coursed the seas'," rather the prosaic "sailed," he writes, "Visual meanings can only be transferred by the new bowl of metaphor; prose is an old pot that lets them leak out. Images in verse are not mere decoration, but the very essence of an intuitive language."[64] T. S. Eliot, on whom Hulme had a great influence, would articulate this idea in his own way, coining his own term, "objective correlative." A related idea of the image or symbol can be traced to French symbolist poetry, passed to Anglophone modernism (Eliot and Yeats in particular) through Arthur Symons's *The Symbolist Movement in Modern Literature* (1899). In "Impassioned Prose" (1926), an essay on De Quincey (from whose phrase the title derives), Woolf argues against the critical commonplace that "nothing is more reprehensible than for a writer to write like a poet. Poetry is poetry and prose is prose—how often have we not heard that!" (CE, 4:?)." Prose writers marshal their "army of facts," and

> Of all writers the novelist has his hands fullest of facts. Smith gets up, shaves, has his breakfast, taps his egg, reads The Times. How can we ask the panting, the perspiring, the industrious scribe with all this on his hands to modulate beautifully off into rhapsodies about Time and Death and what the hunters are doing at the Antipodes? It would upset the whole proportions of his day. It would cast grave doubt upon his veracity (CE, 4:?).

These critiques are by now familiar, although framed here in terms of the different expectations of poetry and prose. Like Henry James, Woolf is concerned with establishing the novel as an art on par with poetry, and to claim for it some of cultural authority that belonged to poetry. Her use of analogical descriptions to give linguistic, imagistic form to experiences otherwise unarticulable was

[63] Hulme, *Selected Writings*, 81.
[64] Ibid., 80.

both an effort to be faithful to life, and also an effort to develop her own "mode of impassioned prose" that would make space within the novel for what has usually been conceived as the poetic.

Narrative Descriptions

Narrative theory in the twentieth century has understood description as being concerned with depicting objects, while narration is concerned with recounting events and actions (not coincidentally, many of its theorists have taken nineteenth century realist fiction as their primary corpus).[65] One unfolds along a spatial axis, while the other unfolds along a temporal one. We can identify two fronts on which Woolf's work resists this divide. First, it broadens the definition of what counts as an event by recognizing that mental processes – perception, sensation, thinking, remembering – are events, in much the same way that Henry James refused to distinguish between the "novel of character" and the "novel of incident" in "The Art of Fiction," insisting on the need for an expansive notion of what counts as an "incident" (AF, 13).

Second, Woolf also makes descriptions narrative by the specificity and dynamism of her analogies, which are usually possessed themselves of a strong narrative component. In consequence, description can no longer be understood as a pause or interruption of narrative time, as it typically has been. Here, for example, is the changing of day into night in *Mrs. Dalloway*.

> Like a woman who had slipped off her print dress and white apron to array herself in blue and pearls, the day changed, put off stuff, took gauze, changed to evening and with the same sigh of exhilaration that a woman breathes, tumbling petticoats on the floor, it too shed dust, heat, colour; the traffic thinned; motor cars, tinkling, darting, succeeded the lumber of vans; and here and there among the thick foliage of the squares an intense light hung (MD, 161).

This description, at once imagistic and dynamic, does not pause the narrative flow in order to paint a tableau, but is rather an integral part of the narrative with its own sequence of events. Time and plot

[65] Here I am thinking of Lukács in particular. As Mieke Bal summarizes this theory, "Actions and events belonged to narrative texts; things, places, and characters to descriptive texts. A similar distinction was based on the object's mode of existence: objects in descriptive texts existed in space; those in narrative texts existed in time (*On Storytelling*, 110)."

(the day changing into night) are advanced within this extended simile, which is not an interruption or a digression that obscures the narrative, but the very means by which narrative time unfolds. The same is true of another extended simile in a scene when Peter Walsh and Clarissa Dalloway first meet again after many years, and Clarissa accidentally alludes to Peter having wanted to marry her.

> Of course I did, thought Peter; it almost broke my heart too, he thought; and was overcome with his own grief, which rose like a moon looked at from a terrace, ghastly beautiful with light from the sunken day…And as if in truth he were sitting there on the terrace he edged a little towards Clarissa; put his hand out; raised it; let it fall. There above them it hung, that moon. She too seemed to be sitting with him on the terrace, in the moonlight (MD, 42).

Here, as is often the case in extended comparisons, concrete events within the narrative are likened to something more lyrical and dreamlike, bringing together the earthly and the visionary, "that queer amalgamation of dream and reality, that perpetual marriage of granite and rainbow."[66] In this passage, the description of Peter's grief as rising like a moon seen from a terrace becomes incorporated into the movement of the narrative itself. He enters the dream, "as if in truth he were sitting there on the terrace," where Clarissa joins him, "she too seemed to be sitting with him on the terrace, in the moonlight."

This long simile goes on to extend over the rest of the scene, its borders becoming entirely porous with the actual narrative events. "Then, just as happens on a terrace in the moonlight, when one person begins to feel ashamed that he is already bored, and yet as the other sits silent, very quiet, sadly looking at the moon, does not like to speak, moves his foot, clears his throat, notices some iron scroll on a table leg, stirs a leaf, but says nothing – so Peter Walsh did now" (MD, 42). Similar to the epic simile in length and the independent development of the vehicle, it is not, however, a digression that "temporarily obscur[es] the main thread of the narrative" as the dictionary entry had it. The substance of this detailed simile is in fact precisely the narration of the actual events. What

[66] Woolf uses this phrase in "A New Biography" (1927), asserting that the days of Victorian biography are over, and that the method for accomplishing this marriage "still remains to be discovered (CE 4 478)." The phrase "rainbow and granite" also appears in *Orlando*.

actually *happens* here? Growing bored as they sit together, Peter fidgets a little uncomfortably, but does not move because he fears disturbing Clarissa, who is still absorbed in reverie. These are the diegetic events that are being recounted, but they are not presented as actually happening. Instead, they are presented as the *type* of thing ("just as") that happens in such situations, which, as it happens ("so"), is happening precisely at this moment.[67] Both sitting on this figural terrace with the moon rising, Peter and Clarissa share a kind of collective vision, suggesting the strength of the understanding between them that still persists despite the years: "they had always this queer power of communicating without words" (MD, 60). Just as, thematically, their streams of thought seem to have merged, "they went in and out of each other's minds without any effort" (MD, 63), so the descriptive and the narrative have become formally knitted together in a single fabric. The analogy of sitting on a terrace looking at a moon, first introduced as a metaphorical description of Peter Walsh's grief, is progressively woven into the diegetic plane of events until the two become indistinguishable.

When Dorrit Cohn identifies "psycho-analogies" as a widespread characteristic of modernist fiction, she finds such analogies static. The modernist dilation of "each minute inner event" through similes "is the main stylistic feature that imbues the text with an anti-narrative, nearly stationary quality," Cohn writes.[68] But descriptions of inner states are dilatory and stultifying only if we assume that narration (the recounting of actions) is the norm and the end of a novel, precisely the idea that modernists were so concerned with dismantling. In fact, describing inner states is precisely the task Woolf urges the novelist to undertake. Although she dismisses description as fit for reciting litanies of facts in "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown," a number of remarks in "Impassioned Prose" suggest a

[67] This scene is in fact filled with the recounting of events through analogies, e.g. "Now it was time to move, and, as a woman gathers her things together, her cloak, her gloves her opera-glasses, and gets up to go out of the theatre into the street, she [Clarissa] rose from the sofa and went to Peter (MD, 47)."

[68] Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds*, 43. So she writes the "hypertrophy of analogies" in a story like Musil's "The Perfecting of Love" results in "one of the most 'unreadable' stories every written (43)."

more nuanced view. De Quincey's most perfect passages, she writes, "are not lyrical but descriptive. They are not cries of anguish which admit us to closeness and sympathy; they are descriptions of states of mind in which, often, time is miraculously prolonged and space miraculously expanded." Lyric is on the side of poetry while description is on the prose, but here Woolf seems to defend the possibility of poetic description. "If he was not a lyric writer, he was undoubtedly a descriptive writer, a reflective writer, who with only prose at his command—an instrument hedged about with restrictions, debased by a thousand common uses—made his way into precincts which are terribly difficult to approach." Sounding almost idealist, she returns to a recurring theme that also preoccupied Proust and other modernists: the reality of solid objects and the reality of our own thoughts.

> The breakfast table, he seems to say, is only a temporary apparition which we can think into non-existence, or invest with such associations that even its mahogany legs have their charm… It is not the actual sight or sound itself that matters, but the reverberations that it makes as it travels through our minds. These are often to be found far away, strangely transformed; but it is only by gathering up and putting together these echoes and fragments that we arrive at the true nature of our experience.

In her remarks on De Quincey Woolf may as well have been speaking of herself. Whatever her dismissal in "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown," her work shows not a rejection but a transformation of description, as modernism embraced the idea that giving a likeness of the world meant giving a likeness of how it was experienced. These descriptions borrowed techniques usually associated with poetry, or from older traditions, in order to give form to their subjects, immaterial, invisible, and experiential.

Cataloguing Features

In "Mr. Bennett and Mrs Brown," Woolf maintained that the central aim of the novel was to create character, an end not helped by her elders' enthusiasm for real estate. A more promising approach, it would seem, is to turn away from describing villas towards describing their inhabitants.

But here too lies pitfalls, and in *Mrs. Dalloway* we find a gentle parody of another kind of façade favored by realist description, not bricks and mortar but individual physiognomy, which tend to appear particularly the first time a character is introduced. Skepticism about the trustworthiness of physiognomic portraiture is already evident in James, as our first introduction to Merton Densher in *The Wings of the Dove* makes clear: "He was a longish, leanish, fairish young Englishman, not unamenable, on certain sides, to classification - as for instance by being a gentleman, by being rather specifically one of the educated, one of the generally sound and generally civil; yet, though to that degree neither extraordinary nor abnormal, he would have failed to play straight into an observer's hands" (WD, 33). But in James, the fact that Densher cannot be classified signals his exceptionality more than it does the futility of the classificatory endeavor.

By the time we arrive at the following sketch of Septimus Warren Smith, the shell-shocked solider who is Clarissa's Dalloway's counterpoint, such an enterprise has become altogether hopeless.

> To look at, he might have been a clerk, but of the better sort; for he wore brown boots; his hands were educated; so, too, his profile – his angular, big-nosed, intelligent, sensitive profile; but not his lips altogether, for they were loose; and his eyes (as eyes tend to be), eyes merely; hazel, large; so that he was, on the whole, a border case, neither one thing nor the other, might end with a house at Purley and a motor car, or continue renting apartments in back streets all his life…(MD, 84).

Far from being indices of moral traits or socio-economic standing, physical features here become auto-referential, yielding no hidden meaning. Eyes, traditionally the most significant feature of a face, are not windows into the soul but, "(as eyes tend to be), eyes merely." Along with houses and clothing, physiognomy, too, loses its reliability as indications of profession, rank, and character. In this regard, it is of course no coincidence that *Mrs. Dalloway* is set in post-WWI London and that the

young man of indeterminate station is a returned soldier, the war having upended the rigidity of social categories.[69]

An earlier Woolfian soldier, Jacob Flanders, is similarly subject to attempted physiognomic classification. *Jacob's Room*, Woolf's first full-length experimental novel, foregrounds the problem of type and individual in the representation of character.

> "Distinction" – Mrs. Durrant said that Jacob Flanders was "distinguished-looking." "Extremely awkward," she said, "but so distinguished-looking." Seeing him for the first time that no doubt is the word for him… distinction was one of the words to use naturally, though, from looking at him, one would have found it difficult to say which seat in the opera house was his, stalls, gallery, or dress circle. A writer? He lacked self-consciousness. A painter? There was something in the shape of his hands (he was descended on his mother's side from a family of the greatest antiquity and deepest obscurity) which indicated taste. Then his mouth – but surely, of all futile occupations this of cataloguing features is the worst. One word is sufficient. But if one cannot find it? (JR, 71)

Like Septimus, Jacob is of an indeterminate social class, his physical attributes and observable qualities failing to provide useful guides to its determination. The absence of a reliable taxonomy of distinct and definitive types leads to a proliferation of hypotheses, as each one is tried out and discarded. Cataloguing features has become a futile occupation, the link between physiognomy and personality definitively broken. To be sure, physical appearances and objects in the realist novel, too, often play us false in what they reveal about their possessors – the assumption of a new social identity by means of external accoutrements is often an essential narrative generator – but this is simply a testament to their signifying power. Only due to faith in the symbolism of objects (and their intrinsic connection to their owners, no longer possible in a marketplace newly flooded with interchangeable commodities produced on a mass scale) is it possible to become noble (if only for an evening) by wearing the right clothing. When we lose faith in the occult-like power of symbolism, all that is left are uncertain "border cases." As scholars have noted, in order to represent the truths

[69] Much has been written on the impact of the war on Woolf and its depiction in her novels. See Mark Hussey, ed. *Virginia Woolf and War: Fiction, Reality, and Myth* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press), 1991, and Karen L. Levenback, *Virginia Woolf and the Great War* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press), 1999.

of character that Woolf claimed would always elude Bennett's powers of visual description, she relies on stereotyped images just as he does, but her parody marks the change in attitude as skepticism towards any continuity between appearance and reality became entrenched in modernism.[70]

Jacob's Room dramatizes a scenario already familiar to us from "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown," a stranger being observed on a train. This time, the observer is the old woman, a Mrs. Norman, and the observed is Jacob, the mysterious young man who constitutes a kind of void at the center of the novel around which all the other consciousnesses revolve. Mrs. Norman – a character who appears for the first and last time during this scene, seemingly introduced for the sole purpose of recording observations about Jacob – is on her way to Cambridge to see her son. In the first sentence, when Jacob enters her train carriage, he is described only as a "powerfully built young man" who causes her to fear for her safety. Mrs. Norman's attempt to see, or to read Jacob in familiar typological terms is rendered self-consciously.

> She read half a column of her newspaper; then stealthily looked over the edge to decide the question of safety by the infallible test of appearance…
>
> Taking note of socks (loose), of tie (shabby), she once more reached his face. She dwelt upon his mouth. The lips were shut. The eyes bent down, since he was reading. All was firm, yet youthful, indifferent, unconscious – as for knocking one down! No, no, no! (JR, 28)

Now she revises her initial assessment of the danger Jacob poses, smiling at the foolishness of her misreading and taming this once-threatening stranger by assimilating him to the domestic archetype of a son. "But since, even at her age, she noted his indifference, presumably he was in some way or other – to her at least – nice, handsome, interesting, distinguished, well built, like her own boy?" (JR, 29). Here as throughout the novel, Jacob's key trait is his absolute unconsciousness of others, highlighting his status as a figure for their observation. Deductive inferences from observable characteristics, however, are not reliable. Lest we miss the point, the narrator makes it explicit.

---

[70] See Nancy Armstrong, *Fiction in the Age of Photography*, 245; and Rachel Bowlby, *Feminist Destinations and Further Essays on Virginia Woolf*, especially Chapter 6, "Jacob's Type."

"Nobody sees anyone as he is, let alone an elderly lady sitting opposite a strange young man in a railway carriage. They see a whole – they see all sorts of things – they see themselves…" (JR, 29, Woolf's ellipsis).

But however limited Mrs. Norman's observations are, "One must do the best one can with her report. Anyhow, this was Jacob Flanders, aged nineteen. It is no use trying to sum people up. One must follow hints, not exactly what is said, nor yet entirely what is done – for instance, when the train drew into the station, Mr. Flanders burst open the door, and put the lady's dressing-case out for her, saying, or rather mumbling: 'let me' very shyly; indeed he was rather clumsy about it (JR, 29)." If it is futile to sum people up, the "hints, not exactly what is said, nor yet entirely what is done" are the minutely-observed specificities of actions and sensations described with dynamic similes that we have discussed above. They tend to be random and trivial, incidental rather than definitive. Jacob's shy, clumsy insistence on carrying Mrs. Norman's luggage for her, Sara Pargiter's sense that being scrutinized is like a fly crawling over her face, Peter Walsh's feeling of being an overflowing cup of impressions – these are the hints that form "views" of a character. As she writes in "Impassioned Prose" of prose poetry, "A shrug of the shoulders, a turn of the head, a few words spoken in a hurry at a moment of crisis—that is all" (CE, 4:?).

But if the project of summing up is impossible, the instinct to keep trying seems nevertheless unavoidable, judging from the insistence with which the pronouncement of its futility is repeated throughout *Jacob's Room*.[71] Woolf's critique of character typologies is simultaneous with her recognition that it is impossible to do without them – the "test of appearance" may not be infallible,

[71] In an essay tracing G. E. Moore's influence on Woolf, S. P. Rosenbaum writes, "People cannot be summed up in *Jacob's Room* because people are not sums but Moorean organic unities that may be better or worse, greater or less, than the sums of their parts." S. P. Rosenbaum, "The Philosophical Realism of Virginia Woolf," *English Literature and British Philosophy*, ed. S. P. Rosenbaum (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972), 327. In *Principia Ethica*, Moore proposes the notion of an "organic whole" that has no regular relation to the sum of its parts.

but it remains an initial and inevitable yardstick.[72] Indeed, although she faulted Bennett for the crudeness with which he drew his characters, losing thereby all sense of "the singularity of the individual," Woolf herself frequently employs typologies. "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" itself includes a taxonomy of national literary characteristics, and in "A Sketch of the Past," she writes of the man whom her half-sister Stella Duckworth was to marry, "He stands in my mind's picture gallery for a type – and a desirable type; the English country gentleman type, I might call it, by way of running a line round it" (MB, 101). But this silhouette must subsequently be shaded in to gain depth and volume. So in the next paragraph she wonders, "can I quickly fill in that outline?" proceeding to sketch out details of his family and upbringing. Types function as a kind of necessary but not sufficient shorthand, an initial way of tracing a circumference around a shape. The outline must be filled in by particular descriptions of specific, individual moments in a stream of thought. The importance of the social world in Woolf's novels testify to the fact that identity is for her fundamentally relational, constituted through interaction with external perspectives of the self, which are in turn inevitably formed according to socially-determined categories. This is reflected in the structure of the novels themselves, as characters are constructed not only from the glimpses we have of their private interior worlds but also, just as importantly, from others' views of them.

"Who Was I Then?"

The question of how to describe a person is explicitly posed in the sketches and notes Woolf began in 1939 for an unfinished memoir, published subsequently as "A Sketch of the Past." These were written as relief from the biography of Roger Fry that she was writing at the time, a task she found difficult and laborious. Like the biographer (and Woolf is, of course, the daughter of an editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*), the memoirist is principally concerned with describing who

[72] Rachel Bowlby suggests that the novel "is both an interrogation of the notion of individuality and, at the same time, a demonstration of the inescapability of 'typing' in the making – autobiographically and as perceived by others – of what is thought of as an individual self" (*Feminist Destinations*, 86).

someone is, and these late writings suggest some general difficulties facing the descriptive enterprise when it encounters the human figure, as well as some potential methods of "following hints."

Woolf begins by recalling her earliest memory, one of lying in a nursery and hearing the waves break, suggesting that though she could spend hours trying to "write that as it should be written," she would fail. Instead, then, she will begin "by describing Virginia herself" (MB, 65). Memoir writers, she tells us, are guilty of an important omission in their task. "They leave out the person to whom things happened. The reason is that it is so difficult to describe any human being. So they say: 'This is what happened'; but they do not say what the person was like to whom it happened. And the events mean very little unless we know first to whom they happened" (MB, 65). Just as a person's house and the cost of her brooch fail to convey a sense of a "solid, living, flesh-and-blood" human being, so too events and actions remain skeletal on their own. Although the memoir differs from the novel, both share a similar task: to provide a convincing answer to the question posed by the little interrogative pronoun which could be said to give rise to the entire problem of character: "who?"

"Who was I then?" The passage begins to answer in standard biographical fashion, "Adeline Virginia Stephen, the second daughter of Leslie and Julia Prinsep Stephen…" (MB, 65). That the first response to the question "who was I?" should be the proper name is a fact whose interest may be obscured by its obviousness. The significance that names may carry is evident in the notion of blasphemy, taking the name in vain. Our name functions not only as our first identifying label, but also, in John Searle's metaphor, as a peg on which to hang descriptions.[73] It can also be a kind of talisman, anchoring the self to its identity when it wanders astray. So in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* when a young Stephen experiences a momentary loss of his sense of self upon arriving in Cork with his father, he regains it by reciting a litany of proper names. "He could scarcely recognize his

[73] John Searle, "Proper Names," 171.

own thoughts, and repeated slowly to himself, 'I am Stephen Dedalus. I am walking beside my father whose name is Simon Dedalus. We are in Cork, in Ireland. Cork is a city. Our room is in the Victoria Hotel. Victoria and Stephen and Simon. Simon and Stephen and Victoria. Names.'"[74] A proper name, "Clarissa," is central to the conclusion of *Mrs. Dalloway*, to which we will turn more fully in the next chapter, but for now let us follow Woolf a little further in her description of herself.

"I do not know how far I differ from other people. That is another memoir writer's difficulty. Yet to describe oneself truly one must have some standard of comparison; was I clever, stupid, good looking, ugly, passionate, cold –?"(MB, 65). The need for comparison is also the need for other people, hence a richly populated novelistic world in which discrepancies and differences render identity more distinct. So in his classic essay, "The Brown Stocking," Erich Auerbach locates the novelty of Woolf's technique in the fact that "we are given not merely one person whose consciousness (that is, the impression it receives) is rendered, but many persons, with frequent shifts from one to the other." He finds in this evidence that "we are here after all confronted with an endeavor to investigate an objective reality," one that is not opposed to but constituted by the accumulation of multiple perspectives.[75] The point applies equally to character, and is most explicitly evident in *Jacob's Room,* which offers very limited access to Jacob's consciousness, presenting him instead through the fragmented views others have of him from differing vantage points of intimacy.[76]

---

[74] James Joyce, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, 92. This passage goes on later, "The memory of his childhood suddenly grew dim. He tried to call forth some of its vivid moments but could not. He recalled only names. Dante, Parnell, Clane, Clongowes (93)."

[75] Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis*, 473. Citing Woolf's criticisms of Joyce for creating a work overly centered in a single voice that leaves one feeling trapped, James Naremore notes that Woolf views a stream of consciousness method that is "centered in a self" as a claustrophobic, egocentric style to be avoided. See James Naremore, *The World Without a Self*, 72. Like James, though to different effects, the first person must be given up.

[76] Hermione Lee calls *Jacob's Room* an "alternative to the false reality of the biography of fact (72)," concluding, however, "Jacob's name is all that we finally know him by, and this is no knowledge at all." See Hermione Lee, *The Novels of Virginia Woolf*, 87. In a different way, this is also true of Percival in *The Waves*.

Woolf's method of showing us different perspectives *of* a person also allows us to see *through* different perspectives. "One plunges hypothetically into another privacy," writes Ann Banfield, citing Woolf's comment that in order to be real, a character must have "the power to make you think not merely of itself, but of all sorts of things through its eyes."[77] Even the minor characters who seem mentioned only in order to notice something about a major character reveal something of themselves in their observations.[78] As Wittgenstein remarks, "The language-game of reporting may be given such a turn that a report is not meant to inform the hearer about its subject matter but about the person making the report…(You may measure to test the ruler)."[79]

While a character is gradually composed, view by view, of observations from differing perspectives, we also find ourselves with reflections of the ones doing the observing.[80] The function of mirroring that fell to the narrator in James' novels becomes in Woolf distributed among the other characters, mothers, sisters, old suitors, and strangers on a train whose nets of observation overlap and intertwine. So Bernard thinks in *The Waves*, "To be myself (I note) I need the illumination of other people's eyes, and therefore cannot be entirely sure what is my self" (W, 116). This illumination always casts its beam in both directions; every description of a view is a two-sided mirror, reflecting the describer as well as the described. If we are told in *Jacob's Room* that it is no use summing up, perhaps one way of indirectly following hints is to develop a character "through their views and appraisals of other people."[81]

---

[77] Cited in *Phantom Table*, 313. Banfield writes, "The method of multiple perspectives is the novelist's route to wider knowledge (312)."

[78] Writing of the observations of characters like Mrs. Norman who "seem created for the nonce simply to catch [Jacob] within the circle of their observations (*Phantom Table*, 331)," Banfield comments, "their subjective thoughts acquaint us with the listeners, but render their objects…by description (332)."

[79] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, p. 162.

[80] Harvena Richter comments that the structure of personality in Woolf "takes on the outlines not so much of that person as of the consciousness perceiving it (*The Inward Voyage*, 112)." Richter identifies this indirect method of conveying personality of one of what she calls Woolf's "mirror modes."

[81] Ibid., 111.

It will be no surprise, then, that Woolf's own self-portrait emerges in her memoiristic sketch through her observations of those around her, notably her parents and siblings.[82] But the endeavor to describe people is not without its difficulties, ones that are also developed in the novels and that hint at the limits of the descriptive enterprise. Of her father, the philosopher and intellectual historian, Leslie Stephen, Woolf writes first, "It bores me to write of him, to try to describe him, partly because it is all so familiar; partly because it is a type that for me lacks picturesqueness, oddity, romance" (MB, 109). Here, a description appears too easily accomplished by reference to a type, a categorization that too neatly covers the entirety of his being, leaving nothing undone and nothing else to say, no "crannies or corners to catch [the] imagination" (MB, 109). However, she goes on a few pages later:

> He had clearly that – something – which is not this quality or that quality, but all sorts of qualities summed up into what one calls 'character'; personality; a way of impressing silence; a way of impressing the word 'damn'; so that if one points to his obvious qualities – his honesty, his unworldliness, his lovableness, his perfect sincerity – one is singling out from a whole single qualities which were part of that whole; and the whole was different from the qualities of which it was made (MB, 111).

Now the task of describing an individual meets a new problem, one that is not due to a poor choice in the object of description, nor simply a crudity in the appeal to type. Rather, there appears to be something in the nature of individuality itself that, by its very nature, escapes a descriptive method of representation.

This difficulty is attributed to the fact that the whole of a personality is not equivalent to the sum of its parts. In Philippe Hamon's theory of description, its simplest form tends towards a list, an

[82] According to an early biography of Woolf, her brother Adrian Stephen wrote of "Virginia's technique of taking hold of an anecdote as though it were a painted top, tossing it in the air, setting it spinning, and then describing, not the top, but the radiations it gave off as it whirled around." See Aileen Pippett, *The Moth and the Star: A Biography of Virginia Woolf*, 63. The passage continues, "What began as a plaything, made of colored wood or metal, of a definite size and ascertainable cost at a toyshop, might end, once she got her hands on it, as the great globe itself, the very platonic form of a top (63-4)." According to Pippett, Adrian also notes Woolf's youthful habit of recording her impressions "in the notebooks which most young writers seem compelled to keep in an attempt to teach themselves how to write, how to find the right word, to describe what they see. Because the right word *must* be found. 'Nothing can exist unless it is properly described' (64)."

endless fragmentation of an object's features which must then be catalogued.[83] Here, however, Woolf suggests an incommensurability between part and whole in the nature of individual identity. To be sure, not all parts are equally effective in giving a sense of the whole – so mentioning Leslie Stephen's way of impressing the word "damn" is more revealing than calling him "honest" or "unworldly." But the more fundamental problem raised is that the enterprise of listing a person's attributes, no matter how exhaustive or finely-shaded the inventory, will always fail to adequately capture *who* the person is. This latter task, it is suggested, can only be accomplished by giving the whole of a person at once, which will always elude full description.

The Glove's Twisted Finger

Before we turn to its limits, let us look at another attempt to describe someone in *To the Lighthouse*, which suggests the philosophical problem animating the descriptive enterprise. Here, the describer in question is Woolf's most vividly-realized artist character, Lily Briscoe, and her subject is Mrs. Ramsay, the matriarch of the family at the center of the novel, with whom Lily is staying on the Isle of Skye.[84] The attempt to understand, to know, and to characterize Mrs. Ramsay occupies a great deal of Lily's thoughts. "What was the spirit in her, the essential thing, by which, had you found a crumpled glove in the corner of a sofa, you would have known it, from its twisted finger, hers indisputably (TL, 49)?" By coincidence or not, the symbol of Mrs. Ramsay's singularity, the glove, is enlisted as an example by Kant in an objection to Leibniz's theory of the identity of indiscernibles, the principle which states that if two objects had identical properties, they must be

[83] Hamon suggests that this is one reason description seems particularly to resist structuralist methodologies, "comme si la notion de *structure* était fondamentalement antinomique de celle de *liste*, forme simple à laquelle tend souvent l'énoncé descriptif." Philippe Hamon, *Introduction à l'analyse du descriptif*, 7. I discuss this more fully in the Introduction.

[84] Critics have often identified with Woolf herself So Lyndall Gordon writes, for instance, "Lily Briscoe, composing [the Ramsay's] portrait, enacts the obsessive drama of Virginia Woolf, transforming personal memory into impersonal art." *Virginia Woolf: a Writer's Life*, 7. For a discussion of the relation to painting, specifically Post-Impressionism, embodied in the character of Lily, see *The Phantom Table*, and for readings of Lily in the general context of the creative process, see J. Hillis Miller, "Mr. Carmichael and Lily Briscoe: the Rhythm of Creativity in *To the Lighthouse*."

the same object.[85] The glove's twisted finger is the mark of absolute idiosyncrasy, the individual essence that distinguishes Mrs. Ramsay from all others and makes her instantly identifiable – the thing, in short, that makes her *her*.

The passages that follow present Lily's attempt to describe Mrs. Ramsay in order to understand her. They are comprised of a typically Woolfian conglomeration of synaesthetic similes, incidental anecdotes, and habitual actions, interspersed throughout with parentheticals in which Lily interrupts her own train of thoughts, as in an internal dialogue. Ultimately, her attempt to describe Mrs. Ramsay satisfactorily and to find the mystery of the glove's twisted finger leads to a meditation on the final impossibility of knowing people. Sitting on the floor with her arms around Mrs. Ramsay's knees, Lily "imagined how in the chambers of the mind and heart of the woman who was, physically, touching her, were stood, like the treasures in the tombs of kings, tablets bearing sacred inscriptions, which if one could spell them out, would teach one everything, but they would never be offered openly, never made public (TL, 51)." Knowing someone is characterized here first as a project of reading, with the problem being that we are barred access to the room of another's mind and the "sacred inscriptions" written there. But the scenario quickly becomes more complicated.

> What art was there, known to love or cunning, by which one pressed through into those secret chambers? What device for becoming, like waters poured into one jar, inextricably the same, one with the object one adored? Could the body achieve, or the mind, subtly mingling in the intricate passages of the brain? or the heart? Could loving, as people called it, make her and Mrs. Ramsay one? for it was not knowledge but unity that she desired, not inscriptions on tablets, nothing that could be written in any language known to men, but intimacy itself, which is knowledge, she had thought, leaning her head on Mrs. Ramsay's knee (TL, 51).

The striking image for the unity Lily Briscoe desires is that of two streams of water (echoing streams of consciousness) being poured into a single jar, suggesting the desire to *be* (or to be one with),

[85] Very briefly, if there were a pair of gloves with identitical properties and the right-handed one were held up in a mirror, it would by Leibniz' account be the same object as the left-handed glove, but they are clearly two distinct entitities. Kant uses this example of "incongruent counterparts" to show that Leibniz's theory does not account for position in space. See Immanuel Kant, *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, AA 4:286.

rather than to *know*, Mrs. Ramsay. Whereas earlier it seemed that the self was written in secret inscriptions on tablets inaccessible to others, now it seems to resist being written in any language at all. In a final turn at the end of this passage, however, the intimacy or unity that is sought is said to be just knowledge itself.

In the final section of the novel, "The Lighthouse," Lily's thoughts return to her desire to know Mrs. Ramsay, who has in the meantime, we learn in an abrupt parenthetical in "Time Passes," "died rather suddenly" (TL, 128).

> One wanted a most secret sense, fine as air, with which to steal through keyholes and surround her where she sat knitting, talking, sitting silent in the window alone; which took to itself and treasured up like the air which held the smoke of the steamer, her thoughts, her imaginations, her desires. What did the hedge mean to her, what did the garden mean to her, what did it mean to her when a wave broke? (Lily looked up, as she had seen Mrs. Ramsay look up; she too heard a wave falling on the beach) (TL, 198).

The earlier desire for intimacy with another, like two streams of water fused into a single jar, is the expressed here as Lily's desire to see and to hear what Mrs. Ramsay sees and hears. She attempts to achieve identification through imitation, looking up exactly as she has observed Mrs. Ramsay look up in the past, in order to inhabit her perspective. Seeing the world through another's eyes promises a means of access to those secret chambers.

Lily's attempts to inhabit another's perspective meet with limited success, but Woolf herself finds a novelistic means of satisfying the desire to see through other eyes in the technique that she calls "oratio obliqua," which allows for the direct representation of multiple, shifting perspectives.[86] Widely known in English as "free indirect style," this grammatical form, particular to the novel, combines elements of both direct speech and indirect speech, eliminating the first person pronoun and replacing it with a third person "he" or "she" rendered subjective. Suppressing the quotation marks that are characteristic of direct speech, it nevertheless represents the thoughts, speech and

[86] Woolf contrasts it to her "few direct sentences (D, 3:106)." The overwhelming dominance of this style in her mature fiction is impossible to miss.

perceptions of a character directly, without the intervention of a narrator who reports or comments on them.[87] Hailed by Auerbach as an essential hallmark of twentieth century modernist fiction, the vast majority of Woolf's sentences are written in this style, presenting directly the thoughts and perceptions of a consciousness.[88] Take the example:

Could loving, as people called it, make her and Mrs. Ramsay one?

We understand that Lily wonders this to herself and that the question is not being reported by an external narrator, which would require a different syntax:

She wondered if loving, as people called it, could make her and Mrs. Ramsay one.

We also understand that although the sentence is in the third person, it has the same force of directness as:

Could loving, as people called it, make me *and Mrs. Ramsay one?*

Not bound by the first person pronoun, free indirect style is liberated from the tyranny of a single perspective, free to shift between minds, sometimes within a single sentence, as in this example: "What damned rot they talk, thought Charles Tansley, laying down his spoon precisely in the middle of his plate, which he had swept clean, as if, Lily thought (he sat opposite to her with his back to the window precisely in the middle of view), he were determined to make sure of his meals" (TL, 85). Woolf employs this technique to particular effect in scenes when a number of people are gathered

[87] A complete linguistic account of this style as well as its history are given by Ann Banfield in *Unspeakable Sentences*. She uses the term "represented speech and thought," modified from Otto Jespersen's "represented speech," since "free indirect style" is a literal translation of the French "*style indirect libre*," but "libre" refers only to syntactic independence and non-subordination. Although Banfield's arguments for why "represented speech and thought" is the more accurate term are persuasive, I will continue to use "free indirect style" here for the sake of convenience and clarity, since the latter has gained widespread dominance. See note 14: *Unspeakable Sentences*, 277-278. For a discussion of Woolf's particular use of this form, see Banfield, *The Phantom Table*, 307–311. For another discussion of free indirect style, see Roy Pascal, *The Dual Voice: Free Indirect Speech and Its Functioning in the Nineteenth Century Novel*.

[88] Auerbach cites "*erlebte Rede*, stream of consciousness, *monologue intérieur*" as examples of its names (472). Critics cite Jane Austen as one of the earliest practioners of free indirect style in English, and although it became widespread after Flaubert in the 19th century French and British novel, Dorrit Cohn argues that only with the Jamesian principle of modernism that "what a man thinks and what he feels are the history and the character of what he does," does it finally take its place of central importance. Henry James, AF, 66, cited in Cohn, *Transparent Minds*, 115.

together, as in the dinner scene in *To the Lighthouse* (from which the above example is taken), or during the Clarissa's party in *Mrs. Dalloway*.

Style indirect libre allows the reader to inhabit a character's perspective, to see and to think with her directly, while allowing the narrative to move easily between different minds, looking out from the windows of their different private chambers onto the same external world. "The novel gives form to the imaginative adoption of multiple perspectives through a style unique to it," Ann Banfield observes, "which Woolf erects into a structural and thematic principle, her fiction's branching scaffolding."[89] The Woolfian universe is a pluralistic one comprised of a multitude of points of view, between which the narrative shifts fluently and frequently, alighting and perching here, then flying away again to land over there. "One wanted fifty pairs of eyes to see with," Lily Briscoe thinks, "Fifty pairs of eyes were not enough to get round that one woman with" (TL, 198). In this style, Woolf finds the linguistic resources to represent the perspectives of fifty pairs of eyes, as well as some eyeless ones representing "the world seen without a self" (W, 287).[90] The world is pieced together from what is seen through these individual points of view, and through them the reader is granted from moment to moment the intimate knowledge of another that Lily Briscoe seeks.

This privilege, however, is denied the characters themselves, just as it is denied us in life, if not in novels. Lily's desire for a "secret sense" fine as air with which to steal through keyholes and surround Mrs. Ramsay encapsulates a central thematic problem of Woolf's corpus: the breach between two minds. "What art was there, known to love or cunning, by which one pressed through into those secret chambers?" The question of how to effect a passage between two sealed rooms echoes a similar question posed in *Mrs. Dalloway*, to which we will turn to in the next chapter. It is no

[89] Banfield, *The Phantom Table*, 314.
[90] In Banfield's account of Woolf's epistemology, the representation of perspectives unoccupied by any embodied, perceiving subject is crucial, most clearly seen in the "Time Passes" section of *To the Lighthouse*, and the opening sections of each chapter in *The Waves*. See *The Phantom Table*, especially Chapter 3.

coincidence, however, that Lily's meditation on the difficulty of knowing other people is accompanied by her attempt to describe Mrs. Ramsay in order to understand her. If the descriptive enterprise always arrives at final closed door to another's secret chambers, description is nevertheless the first step towards gaining "this knowledge which is intimacy itself."

"How, then, she asked herself, did one know one thing or another thing about people, sealed as they were?" This question receives no ultimate answer, but in Woolf it is always coupled with an acknowledgment of our need for proximity to others, regardless of the limits of our knowledge about them. So at the same time that Lily despairs, she also feels keenly, like a bee "drawn by some sweetness or sharpness in the air intangible to touch or taste," the impulse to draw near and haunt "the hives with their murmurs and their stirrings; the hives, which were people" (TL, 51). The impulse to haunt human hives coupled with the limits of any entry within another's chamber – these are the twin principles of intersubjective relations in the Woolfian world. They correspond, I will suggest, to a twofold strategy of representation: the impulse to haunt the hives of humanity calling forth description, the seal of each individual hive marking a descriptive limit in the mode of designation.

The question of descriptive limits is the problem to which we now turn. In "A Sketch of the Past," it was said that lists of qualities fail to give a sense of who a person is. Woolf's objection suggests that there is something about the idiosyncrasy or the singularity of an individual that is not susceptible to descriptive representation. It will be my contention that she finds a way not of *solving* this descriptive difficulty, but of *staging* it, representing the limit of description by pointing to it. Through the exploitation of a particular class of non-descriptive words, most crucially demonstratives like "this," she foregrounds the feeling of being unable to describe certain complex wholes. These include not only the entirety of a person, the answer to the question "who," but also the particular qualities of feelings and sensations that escape expression, however familiar they are to

the one experiencing them. This expressive failure is just the limit of description, and in words that in fact offer no description at all, Woolf finds the proper name of the indescribable.

Coda

Naming the Indescribable

Standing in front of her easel on the lawn of the Ramsays' house, the artist Lily Briscoe is introduced to us at the beginning of *To the Lighthouse* just as she undergoes an experience that is likely to be familiar to anyone who has attempted the ordinary activity of describing to another a vision she sees in her mind.

> She could see it all so clearly, so commandingly, when she looked: it was when she took her brush in hand that the whole thing changed. It was in that moment's flight between the picture and her canvas that the demons set on her who often brought her to the verge of tears and made this passage from conception to work as dreadful as any down a dark passage for a child. Such she often felt herself – struggling against terrific odds to maintain her courage; to say: 'But this is what I see; this is what I see,' and so to clasp some miserable remnant of her vision to her breast, which a thousand forces did their best to pluck from her (TL, 19).

Lily Briscoe's inability to midwife the vision she sees so clearly from the privacy of her mind onto the external canvas foregrounds the thematic problem of artistic expression, but it also presents Woolf with a question in representing this failure in the novel itself – how describe the failure of description? The feeling of being unable to describe cannot be conveyed by the standard means of enumerating an object's qualities, since it registers precisely the limit of any such enterprise. Nor is it adequately evoked by a simple use of the adjective "indescribable," a word that does not feature largely in the Woolfian vocabulary.[1] "Indescribable" names a quality that applies to the object, the thing in question that resists description. But what is really at issue here is the subject's *feeling* of being unable to communicate something she herself knows well. Lily is notably not confronting a

[1] According to a concordance of Woolf's works, "indescribable" appears 14 times in all her novels. In contrast (to take a few alphabetically close examples), "lovely" appears 87 times, and "honest" 36 times. However, rarer words certainly exist – for instance, "intangible" features three times, and "indelible" only once. See James M. Haule and Philip H. Smith, Jr., eds., *A Concordance to the Novels of Virginia Woolf*. I mention this as a suggestive fact, not to suggest that statistical frequency is a definitive argument one way or the other.

strange, foreign vista but a perfectly familiar landscape, not a sublime beyond cognitive comprehension, but something with which she is intimately acquainted.

An answer to this question – how to describe the inability to describe? – is suggested in the passage itself. Failing to paint with her brush what she sees so clearly with her eyes, Lily Briscoe's frustration with her communicative failure articulates itself in a single word: the demonstrative "this." Her thought "But this is what I see; this is what I see" is akin to a sweep of the arm across the landscape in front of her, *pointing* to something that she has no other way of conveying. It is at once a cry of defiance (she clutches her vision to her breast, refusing to give it up) and an imploring plea (How can I make you understand? *This* is what I see). Here, the demonstrative does not only refer to the content of Lily's vision, *what* it is she sees, it also indicates the vision's indescribability, *that* she cannot express it. A semantically slight "this" is all that can be said when there is no way of describing the "what."

Through the figure of the artist, this passage raises the encounter of description with the indescribable, and the task of this chapter is to trace the effects of such an encounter in the medium of the novel: language. It will be my contention that Woolf finds the linguistic resources to represent the limits of description in words that, in fact, do not describe at all. Such words – above all demonstratives, supplemented by personal pronouns and proper names – are thus uniquely able to register the limits of linguistic expression.[2] They mark the junctures where the art of describing can go no further; but by making evident its limits, they also thereby call forth ever more urgently the need for description.

It is a peculiar fact that what is most indescribable is often also what we know best, the feelings, sensations and impressions that make up our individual experience, the ordinary qualia in

[2] These are, however, not homogenous among themselves. Demonstratives and pronouns number among the class of indexicals, while proper names, whose nature has been subject to great debate in twentieth century philosophy of language, seem to contain more descriptive content, even if their function is purely to designate.

the course of "the life of Monday or Tuesday," but which we struggle with difficulty to convey to others. Two causes may be identified for this difficulty, one concerning the nature of language, the other concerning the nature of our experience. We will come to the first in due course, but for now, let us simply note that since words are general, they are ill-equipped to capture what is particular. The second cause of difficulty in describing particular experiential feels to others is what William James called the most fundamental breach in nature, the one between two minds (PP, 1:226). Woolf is well aware of this breach. Indeed, it forms a central preoccupation throughout her novels, expressed most concisely in what Forster would call the summation of her message insofar as her novels contain one: Clarissa Dalloway's conclusion, as she observes through her window the old lady in the house opposite, that "the supreme mystery…was simply this: here was one room; there another" (MD, 127).[3]

Whatever its limits may be, descriptions of our interior lives, what we see and what we feel, thus respond to a need. "Did religion solve that, or love (MD, 127)?" is the question that follows the supreme mystery of here was one room, there another. And sitting at Mrs. Ramsay's knee, Lily Briscoe wonders, "What art was there known to love or cunning, by which one pressed through into those secret chambers…How then, she had asked herself, did one know one thing or another thing about people, sealed as they were?" (TL, 51). Neither religion nor love appears any longer to be a solution, but Woolf, like Proust and a number of other modernists, turned to art as a way of ensuring intersubjectivity, even as she also continually thematizes the unknowability of other people in her novels.

Simply This

With Lily Briscoe, we have already met the paradigmatic non-descriptive word. Before turning to an account of its peculiar nature, let us look at a few more examples of the

[3] E.M. Forster, "The Early Novels of Virginia Woolf," 130.

demonstrative's appearance in Woolf, of which *Mrs. Dalloway* furnishes particularly numerous cases. Leaving Clarissa's house after their first meeting of many years, we find Peter Walsh deep in reflection as he walks across London. "The compensation of growing old, Peter Walsh thought, coming out of Regent's Park, and holding his hat in hand, was simply this; that the passions remain as strong as ever, but one has gained - at last! - the power which adds the supreme flavour to existence - the power of taking hold of experience, of turning it round slowly, in the light" (MD, 79). With age comes the ability to reflect on experience without thereby losing any of its immediate intensity – but we should not overlook the fact that before being elaborated, the compensation of age is introduced first as "this."

Such a syntactic construction, with the intervention of the little demonstrative before its explication, signals the intimacy with which we are ensconced in Peter Walsh's consciousness. The passage is in *style indirect libre*, representing the thought in Peter's mind directly as he is thinking it, rather than as reported externally. In his own thoughts, "this" indicates Peter Walsh's mental pointing at an object known to him, which must be further described, however, in order to be made clear to the reader. Moreover, it signals the fact that he is *aware* of his thinking. If the demonstrative were omitted: "the compensation of growing old, Peter Walsh thought…was simply that the passions remain as strong as ever…," we would still understand the sentence as representing a thought in his mind, but the presence of "this" reinforces the sense that he is thinking the thought *self-consciously*, that is, he is both reflecting to himself and aware that he is reflecting. In this way, the content of the sentence is mirrored in its very syntax. Peter Walsh feels that age graces one with the ability to experience intensely while being able to reflect self-consciously on that experience at the same time, and this sentiment is conveyed in a sentence which indicates by its formal features that he is self-consciously reflecting on this very sentiment.

A similar structure is exhibited in the representation of Richard Dalloway's thoughts a little later in the novel, again during a walk, this time from lunch at Lady Bruton's towards home. During lunch, Richard finds himself thinking of Clarissa, feeling it a miracle that they should have had their life together, and immediately resolves to tell her of his love "in so many words, when he came into the room" (MD, 116). Filled with a sense of pride and well-being, he strides through London. "His own life was a miracle; let him make no mistake about it; here he was, in the prime of life, walking to his house in Westminster to tell Clarissa that he loved her. Happiness is this, he thought. It is this, he said, as he entered Dean's Yard" (MD, 117). Like Peter Walsh, Richard is both happy and aware that he is happy, and in reflecting on his happiness he too characterizes the feeling as simply "this."

The upsurge of emotion is checked upon his arrival at home when he finds himself suddenly unable to tell Clarissa he loves her as he had intended. Instead, husband and wife recount to each other the events of the day, but the phrase continues to repeat in Richard's thoughts, forming a kind of refrain throughout the scene. "(But he could not tell her he loved her. He held her hand. Happiness is this, he thought)" (MD, 119), and again a few lines later, "He had not said 'I love you'; but he held her hand. Happiness is this, he thought" (MD, 119). There are myriad reasons why Richard Dalloway cannot tell Clarissa he loves her – socio-historical customs of time and place, the expectations of his class and upbringing, or his diffidence and reserve, to name a few. Regardless of the cause of his communicative failure, it is notably accompanied each time by the thought, "happiness is this." Unlike Lily Briscoe, Richard finds non-verbal ways to communicate his feeling, trusting Clarissa to understand – as she indeed does – the flowers he brings and his holding her hand. Nevertheless, his quietly contented "happiness is this" bears a certain echo of her plaintive cry.

"This" belongs to a class of words that has received attention from a variety of thinkers interested in language, including philosophers and linguists. Sometimes called "indexicals,"

sometimes "deictics," this class includes, among others, demonstratives (this, that), the first and second person pronouns, a set of adverbs of time (now, today, tomorrow), and a set of locatives (here, there). As the etymologies of "demonstrative," "deictic" and "indexical" suggest, these words can be understood as a kind of linguistic pointing, and in contrast to ordinary nouns such as "tree" or "dog" whose meaning do not shift, indexicals such as "here" and "now" derive their referent each time from the context of their use, hence Roman Jakobson's term for them, "shifters."[4] As Émile Benveniste writes "*This* will be the object designated by ostension simultaneous with the present instance of discourse, the reference implicit in the form (for example *hic* as opposed to *iste*) associating it with *I* or *you*."[5]

The frequency with which indexicals appear in Woolf's novels is difficult to ignore, and it is explicable in large part by the fact that they are a central feature of free indirect style, the grammatical form in which the vast majority of her novelistic sentences are written. Literary criticism is familiar with the remarks of Benveniste and Jakobson on this class of words, especially the first person pronoun and its spatio-temporal anchors, here and now. But we also find particularly striking, less well-known remarks on the demonstrative "this" in the work of one of Woolf's contemporaries, Bertrand Russell. Along with G. E. Moore, Russell was the most prominent philosopher of the Cambridge Apostles, the intellectual society that included many of the male members of Bloombsury, among them Leonard Woolf, John Maynard Keynes, and Lytton Strachey.[6] Woolf's "Apostolic influences" have been noted by S. P. Rosenbaum and Jakkao

[4] Roman Jakobson, "Shifters, Verbal Categories, and the Russian Verb." Incidentally, Jakobson takes this term from the linguist Otto Jespersen, a German linguist who was also the first to identify free indirect style in German, coining the term "*erlebte Rede*" or "reported speech."

[5] Émile Benveniste, *Problèmes de linguistique génerale*, 1:253, my translation. Similarly, the spatial and temporal indexicals "here" and "now" delimit the spatial and temporal instance coextensive and simultaneous with the present instance of discourse.

[6] The Woolfs possessed Russell's *Problems of Philosophy* among other works in their library. See *Catalogue of books from the library of Leonard and Virginia Woolf*. They also knew Russell socially, and Woolf makes references to him a number of times in her diaries. She visited him as early as 1908 and records after meeting him

Hintikka, among others, and her historical connections and intellectual congruencies with Russell have been comprehensively elaborated in Ann Banfield's *The Phantom Table*.[7] My interest in Russell here is of a more limited scope, focused on his suggestion that certain words do not *describe* their referents but rather, name them directly without thereby saying anything more about them.[8]

Making Acquaintance

Russell's remarks on the demonstrative arise in the context of a distinction between two modes of knowing: inferential, indirect "knowledge by description," and immediate, direct "knowledge by acquaintance." He first introduces these terms in his seminal 1911 paper "Knowledge by Acquaintance and Knowledge by Description," read to the Aristotelian Society, a philosophical club founded in Bloomsbury in 1880. The term "acquaintance" had in fact also appeared a few decades earlier in another paper delivered to the Aristotelian Society in 1884 by William James. James suggested that there is a particular way in which we know a "feeling of *q*" when we experience it ourselves, which is different from the way we know everything outside our own experience. "Let the *q* be fragrance, let it be toothache, or let it be a more complex kind of feeling, like that of the full-moon swimming in her blue abyss, it must first come in that simple shape…before any knowledge *about* it can be attained."[9] As he would write later in *The Principles of Psychology*, we are first of all acquainted with immediately present "feelings," that is, "the *emotions*, and the *sensations* we get from skin, muscle, viscus, eye, ear, nose, and palate" (PP, 1:222). Beyond the sensory data of the present moment, we are also acquainted with memories of "our own past states of mind," which "appear to us endowed with a sort of warmth and intimacy" (PP, 1:223). But we *are*

---

again at a dinner party in 1924, "One does not like him. Yet he is brilliant of course; perfectly outspoken; familiar; talks of his bowels; likes people…Nevertheless, I should like the run of his headpiece (D, 2:295)."

[7] See S. P. Rosenbaum, "The Philosophical Realism of Virginia Woolf," and Jaakkao Hintikka, "Virginia Woolf and Our Knowledge of the External World."

[8] Russell uses interchangeably the terms "referring," "denoting," and "naming," and "designating." Naming and referring have become the dominant terms in subsequent philosophy of language, and I have tended to use these as well, although I depart from Russell's view on what counts as a proper name.

[9] James, *The Meaning of Truth*, 19.

limited in such direct apprehension by the bounds of our own experience. "Our senses only give us acquaintance with the facts of body…of the mental states of other persons we only have conceptual knowledge" (PP, 1:222-3).

Such immediate, intuitive knowledge is utterly certain, James asserted, but it remains incapable of verbalization.

> I know the color blue when I see it, and the flavor of a pear when I taste it; I know an inch when I move my finger through it; a second of time, when I feel it pass; an effort of attention when I make it; a difference between two things when I notice it; but *about* the inner nature of these facts or what makes them what they are, I can say nothing at all. I cannot impart acquaintance with them to any one who has not already made it himself. I cannot *describe* them, make a blind man guess what blue is like…At most, I can say to my friends, Go to certain places and act in certain ways, and these objects will probably come (PP, 1:221).

I can say many things *about* the color blue that I see and the flavor of the pear that I taste, but the way in which *I* know my experience of these things myself cannot, by definition, be verbalized; so it is that James calls it a "dumb" way of knowing (PP, 1:222). To have acquaintance with something is thus only "a very minimum of knowledge," and although our own sensory experience always remains the ground of all knowledge for James, cognition proceeds outwards from acquaintance to knowledge-about like the "germ" to the "developed tree."[10]

When Russell introduces the notion of acquaintance again a few decades later, it shares many features with James's account. Russell also calls it "a direct cognitive relation" – "we shall say we have *acquaintance* of anything with which we are directly aware" – opposing it to inferential, indirect "knowledge by description" (PPH, 46). Like James, Russell identifies as first among our acquaintance our own "sense-data," the immediately present information given to us by our senses: everything "of which I am immediately conscious when I am seeing and touching my table" – its colour, shape, hardness, smoothness etc. – all that makes up the appearance of the table to me (PPH, 46). Importantly, acquaintance is an absolutely certain form of knowing, but it yields no

[10] Ibid., 17.

knowledge of *truths*, or in James's terms, it tell us nothing *about* the table, not even that it is "a table." It is rather the name both thinkers use for our relation to our experience of the table, the patch of brown in my vision, the hard texture at my fingertips, and so on.

By contrast, my knowledge of the table as a physical object is "knowledge by description," with descriptions defined as "any phrase of the form 'a so-and-so' or 'the so-and-so'," for instance, "a man" or "the man with the iron mask" (PPH, 52).[11] Describing something no longer names what is immediately apprehended, but instead characterizes it through inferences and generalizations. "The table is 'the physical object which causes such-and-such sense-data.' This *describes* the table by means of the sense-data" (PPH, 47). As is clear, talking about what we know by acquaintance without in some way describing it – and thus generalizing, inferring, losing something of its particularity – is extremely difficult, not to say impossible, hence James's suggestion that such knowledge is unverbalizable.

If acquaintance were restricted solely to immediate sensory information, Russell observes, "the experience of each moment" would be "a prison for the knowledge of that moment," and its boundaries would be "the boundaries of our present world" (LK, 134). The first extension beyond sense-data that he identifies, much like James, is acquaintance by memory, through which we are still immediately aware of what we have seen or heard, "in spite of the fact that it appears as past and not as present. This immediate knowledge by memory is the source of all our knowledge concerning the past" (PPH, 48–9). The next extension is acquaintance by introspection. "We are not only aware of things," for instance, seeing the sun, or feeling pleasure or pain, "but we are often aware of being aware of them. When I desire food, I may be aware of my desire for food; thus 'my desiring food' is an object with which I am acquainted." Such acquaintance, which we more commonly call self-

[11] I will leave aside Russell's actual theory of descriptions, which concern their logical structure in propositions and are less relevant to the present discussion. For more on the role of sense-data in Woolf, see *The Phantom Table*, particularly Chapter 3.

consciousness, is the source of all our knowledge of "the events which happen in our minds" (PPH, 49).[12]

The color blue when we see it, the flavor of a pear when we eat it, feelings of pleasure and pain: these examples make clear that first among our acquaintance are the felt qualities of our everyday experience, whose character we know, in terms used by both Russell and James, with a particular "warmth and intimacy." But for both thinkers, our immediate awareness of our own sensations, memories, and thoughts provides only the departure point for knowledge of the external world. Only through descriptive inferences and generalizations can we then move from a statement like "I see this" (referring to a pattern of colors occurring in my vision) to "I see a chair," which is able to be publicly understood and to be true or false. "In view of the very narrow range of our immediate experience," Russell writes, the "chief importance" and "vital result" of description "is that it enables us to pass beyond the limits of private experience" (PPH, 59). Indeed, description is the crucial means by which we come to know everything outside our own minds and bodies, including, notably, "other people's minds." But acquaintance names the inexorable, irreducible way in which we know our own experience. It names that which remains continually fugitive to language when I try to describe what I see or feel, however finely I qualify the description. This relation of proximity interests the philosophers insofar as it belongs to a theory of knowledge, but this intimate mode of knowing is also of concern to the writer attempting to represent "an ordinary mind on an ordinary day (CE, 4:160)."[13] Woolf's work bears witness both to the descriptive impulse and to the constant encounter with the indescribable.

---

[12] Although less relevant to the present discussion, Russell holds that we also have acquaintance with universals (general qualities like "brotherhood" or "redness") and abstract ideas such as the facts of logic or mathematics.

[13] Like Russell's epistemology, Banfield writes, "Woolf's aesthetic is similarly acquaintance-based" (*Phantom Table* 297). Banfield's account emphasizes the way in which "atomic propositions" like "this is here," "this is now" and "this is what I see" are part of a primitive "nursery language" that forms a departure point for a more complete language of description in Woolf (*Phantom Table,* 300). My argument does not disagree, but, like a contrastive stress, it highlights the way in which such words also mark the limit of describing experience.

To be sure, the possibility of direct, pre-linguistic knowledge has been subject to much critique. Against the idea that knowledge pre-exists expression, Russell's one-time student Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote, "The words are not a translation of something else that was there before they were," an argument that would later be echoed from a different angle by deconstructionists.[14] But the question of acquaintance was a significant philosophical problem in the early twentieth century, and my concern here is less with vindicating it as an epistemological theory than with highlighting the problem it raises of describing first person experience in language.[15] Russell identifies a set of words that register this difficulty while circumventing it, terms whose peculiar features Woolf exploits to foreground the limits of description. If the philosophers make acquaintance the beginning of knowledge, the novelist shows us it is also the end of description.

The Sharp Point

The distinction between direct and indirect knowledge has a long philosophical heritage, but Russell's distinction was to suggest that these correspond to distinct functions of language: describing and naming. As Gareth Evans remarks, "Russell introduced us to the idea that demonstrative identification is a mode of identification quite unlike descriptive identification."[16] The basic form of a description is "the table" or "a chair," but these can be infinitely enriched: "the perfect hostess," "the charming woman with a touch of the bird about her," or "one of the most thoroughgoing skeptics Peter Walsh had ever met." In contrast, the language of acquaintance is comprised of "logically proper names" that "merely designate […] an object without in any degree

[14] Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, no. 191. Hegel already cautioned against naïve acceptance of the immediacy of sensory knowledge in the first chapter of *Phenomenology of Spirit*, although he also affirms the unique relation of such knowledge to demonstratives like "this."
[15] The Aristotelian Society, for instance, held two symposia on the subject, once in 1919, and again in 1949. See G. Dawes Hicks, G. E. Moore, Beatrice Edgell and C. D. Broad, "Symposium: Is There Knowledge by Acquaintance?" and H. L. A. Hart, G. E. Hughes and J. N. Findlay, "Symposium: Is There Knowledge by Acquaintance?"
[16] Gareth Evans, *The Varieties of Reference*, 143.

describing it" (IMT, 135).[17] Describing is perforce mediated, comprised of inferences and generalizations about an object's properties; we can think of it as casting a qualitative net under which an object falls. A logically proper name, on the other hand, seizes its object directly, referring to it without recourse to its qualities or saying anything further about *what* the thing is.

If the semantic wealth of nouns and adjectives belong to the "what" of description, language furnishes very few such words capable of referring to things known by acquaintance. Russell dismisses the vast majority of what appear to be names, including ordinary proper names such as "Clarissa Dalloway," as disguised or abbreviated descriptions.[18] In his later writings he speculates that there may in fact only be one true, *logically* proper name, "this."[19] The demonstrative, we have already noted, is possessed of several peculiar characteristics. There is first of all, to paraphrase Jakobson, its shiftiness in continually changing referents. But not only does it "seldom mean…the same thing two moments running," Russell observes, it also "does not mean the same thing to the speaker and to the hearer." Not only is the referent of the demonstrative continually changing, but my "this" is also never the same as yours. The only name that is proper in the logical sense is thus also ambiguous. Strictly speaking, when used to denote an object of acquaintance such as a sensation, each individual "this" is mutually unintelligible, because no one can be acquainted with another's sensations.

[17] In addition to "naming," Russell also uses interchangeably the terms, "referring," "denoting," and "designating." All are opposed to describing.

[18] This view was challenged most importantly by Saul Kripke in a series of lectures in 1970 published subsequently as *Naming and Necessity*. Kripke argues that ordinary proper names, which he calls "rigid designators," do name directly, in the manner of the demonstrative "this." Although a full explication of Kripke's objection is beyond the scope of the present discussion, I treat ordinary proper names in this chapter, contra Russell, as non-descriptive. But my rejection of this single aspect does not entail having to give up the whole of his framework, nor does it negate the ability of his ideas to elucidate Woolf's text. I depart from Russell only in regard to which words designate, not in regard to the more important *nature* of designating.

[19] Russell's term for indexicals is "egocentric particulars," words whose "denotation is relative to the speaker." He speculates that all indexicals can be defined in terms of "this." "Thus 'I' means 'The biography to which this belongs'; 'here' means 'The place of this'; 'now' means 'The time of this'; and so on" (IMT, 134).

"The senses are the source of privacy," Russell writes, likening the body to "a sensitive recording instrument, constantly transmitting messages from the outside world," and "many of the facts of which each one of us is most certain are known to us by means private to ourselves."[20] If I say, "this is white," while holding up a piece of chalk, and you agreed, "meaning the 'this' that you see, you are using 'this' as a proper name. But if you try to apprehend the proposition that I am expressing when *I* say 'This is white,' you cannot do it" (LK, 201). It is for this reason that the complete description of the external world sought by science is expunged of all "egocentric" words, but logically proper names mark the "the sharp point, in language, of the essential privacy of each individual's experience."[21] So it is that, yearning to know Mrs. Ramsay as she sits by her knee, Lily Briscoe "imagined how in the chambers of the mind and heart of the woman who was, physically, touching her, were stood, like the treasures in the tombs of kings, tablets bearing sacred inscriptions, which if one could spell them out, would teach one everything, but they would never be offered openly, never made public" (TL, 51). The inscriptions in an individual's sealed chamber may remain illegible, but perhaps what they spell out is just each person's "this."

The vocabulary of acquaintance is limited and primitive, but to be expressed in their completeness and particularity, the qualitative feels of experience cannot be described, only designated by a name that is truly proper, which is capable of the most precise description precisely because it remains utterly undescriptive. Here is one reason for the importance of marking the representations of a character's thought as self-reflective: only thus – in the thoughts of someone aware of his thinking – do these words attain their proper sense. When we use the demonstrative in our thoughts to refer to the events in our minds and the sensations in our bodies, we understand it

[20] Russell, *Human Knowledge*, 11 and 48.
[21] Russell, *Human Knowledge*, 84. Wittgenstein attacks this position in the "private language argument" in the *Philosophical Investigations*. For a summary of the debate about the privacy of language, see Ian Hacking, *Historical Ontology*, Chapter 8. It is worth noting that philosophers, including Wittgenstein, consistently (though usually not self-consciously) use demonstratives to characterize first-person experiential qualities, even when they are arguing against any special epistemological access to these.

perfectly well. We understand "this" better than any other word, in fact, for it names the things we know most intimately. In Richard Dalloway's own thoughts, "this" is the most comprehensive and precise way of referring to his feeling of happiness. Although Wittgenstein would attack what he saw as Russell's idea of a private language, in Woolf, demonstratives constitute rather an *intimate* language. Crucially, however, the epistemic proximity we have to our own experience should not be confused with knowing everything *about* that experience. We know *that* we feel something with utter clarity, but the *what* of the feeling, not to mention its significance, can be just as (if not more) opaque to ourselves as to others.

Descriptive Dialectics

At the beginning of the chapter, I alluded to the difficulty language poses to describing what is most individual in our experience. Here, Russell makes clear the nature of this conundrum. In the occurrence of a certain pattern of colors when I see a chair, "no words exist for describing the actual occurrence in all its particularity; all words, even [ordinary] proper names, are general, with the possible exception of 'this,' which is ambiguous. When you translate the occurrence into words, you are making generalizations and inferences, just as you are when you say 'there is a chair'." In fact, the exact occurrence of colors that I see is "unutterable, and what *can* be put into words involves inferences which may be mistaken."[22] Among the curiosities of language, the only words capable of expressing the full particularity of individual experience are precisely the ones that indicate the limit of its linguistic expression. This limit, this "sharp point," is what the demonstrative signals in Woolf's novelistic representation of an individual's interior life.

When described in words that are general, something of the particularity of a qualitative feel is inevitably lost. But of course, even as the demonstrative perfectly captures its referent, it cannot

[22] Russell, *An Outline of Philosophy*, 13. Russell's concern is to draw attention to the fact that "there is thus something subjective and private about what we take to be external perception (11)," not to suggest that we can never proceed from our private perceptions to public knowledge of the external world.

be understood by anyone else. Words are general, Russell argues, because language is essentially social, "a means of externalizing and publicizing our own experiences," even if, "when it comes to knowledge expressed in words, we seem inevitably to lose something of the particularity of the experience we seek to describe, since all words classify." In order to serve its chief purpose of communication, "it must be public, not a private dialect invented by the speaker."[23] The privacy of the sharp points is thus what also necessitates their descriptive elaboration, in order to be made intelligible to others. Idiolect must become dialect if we wish to avoid imprisonment within our own rooms – the impossibility of saying completely and exactly what we mean by "this" drives us towards ever more words. Simultaneously empty and full, these words give rise to others that say more by saying less. The feeling Richard Dalloway knows by acquaintance, perfectly crystallized in the demonstrative in his own thoughts, must be described in the novel itself for the reader. So we can surmise, it is a renewed sense of love for his wife and gratitude for his blessings; or, if we are less charitable, we might chalk it up to the self-satisfaction of what Peter Walsh calls his "public-spirited, British Empire, tariff-reform, governing-class spirit" (MD, 76).

Although the promise of novels is to allow entrance into another's mind, we can never actually be acquainted with what we find there. To create the *fiction* that we are inside a character's mind, the novel must represent the intimacy with which we are acquainted with our *own* feelings and sensations (happiness is this). At the same time, in the novel's own construction this fiction must be set aside and the feeling further elaborated (happiness is etc. etc.). We are invited to fill the empty demonstrative with our own sense of what happiness is like, but in order to know something of Richard's feeling we also need a little description. Woolf's representation of consciousness reaffirms the breach between minds in the same breath that it promises to draw a bridge across it. This dual movement forms the dialectical principle of her novels: as the sentences in free indirect style allow

[23] Russell, *Human Knowledge*, 4.

the reader to inhabit fluidly shifting perspectives, her characters are constantly preoccupied with the problem of how we can know another. A major thematic concern throughout Woolf's corpus is thus also registered on a linguistic level in the perpetual movement between describing and naming: adjectives and nouns must fill out and shade in what is *completely* but *merely* named.

Hence the frequent structure of demonstrative designation accompanied by descriptive enumeration, as when Peter imagines the emotions provoked in Clarissa, an old lover, by his surprise visit. "She had felt a great deal; had for a moment, when she kissed his hand, regretted, envied him even, remembered possibly (for he saw her look it) something he had said – how they would change the world if she married him perhaps; whereas, it was *this*; it was middle age; it was mediocrity…" (MD, 155, my emphasis). Not only the proximal but also the distal demonstrative functions in this way of punctuation and summation, the distal form suggesting the thinker's desire to distance herself from the referent of "that" as opposed to "this."[24] When Clarissa sees Peter at her party, she marvels, "It was extraordinary how Peter put her into these states just by coming and standing in a corner… But why did he come, then, merely to criticise?...There he was wandering off, and she must speak to him. But she would not get the chance. Life was *that* – humiliation, renunciation" (MD, 168, my emphasis). And in the same scene, when she unexpectedly sees an old friend with whom she had been in love as a girl, Clarissa thinks, "It was Sally Seton! Sally Seton! after all these years! She loomed through a mist. For she hadn't looked like *that*, Sally Seton, when Clarissa grasped the hot water can, to think of her under this roof, under this roof! Not like that!...The luster had gone out of her. Yet it was extraordinary to see her again, older, happier, less lovely" (MD, 171, original emphasis). Older, happier, less lovely, yes, but we have the sense that these adjectives do not exhaust the "*that*!" of Sally Seton's appearance to Clarissa at their reunion after so many years. The distal

[24] John Lyons calls a speaker's use of proximal and distal indexicals "empathetic" or "non-empathetic" deixis, encoding within it the expression of psychological proximity or distance from the referent. See Lyons, *Semantics*, 677.

demonstrative here serves not only to emphasize the differences effected by time in Sally, but also to distance Clarissa's current self from a former, youthful one that had felt a love outside conventional bounds.

Demonstratives used in this way often serve to name complex wholes, none more exemplary than "life itself," as in the first two passages cited above. Since any descriptive qualification of this all-encompassing term must be partial (middle age, mediocrity, humiliation, renunciation), it is as if "this" and "that" are first required to sum it up, distilled in its complex entirety, before it can then be specified and elaborated. And if they are markers of a limit reached in the descriptive powers of language, it is no coincidence that such words are found above all during moments of intensified emotion, as in this scene during Peter and Clarissa's first meeting, when a childhood memory becomes a present vision.

> For she was a child, throwing bread to the ducks, between her parents, and at the same time a grown woman coming to her parents who stood by the lake, holding her life in her arms which, as she neared them, grew larger and larger in her arms, until it became a whole life, a complete life, which she put down by them and said, 'This is what I have made of it! This!' And what had she made of it? What, indeed? (MD, 43)

Bowled over by the feeling produced by her vision, the emphatic, demonstrative "this!" is the only word Clarissa finds appropriate to its subject, the "whole life, a complete life" that she wishes to lay at her parents' feet. We can give close approximations of what these words designate by listing qualities, but such descriptive inventories will always, at some point, fall short. So Woolf records one of her earliest memories, of "hearing the blind draw its little acorn across the floor as the wind blew the blind out," and despairs that she could spend hours trying to "write that as it should be written" but she would still fail (MB, 65). Like a throwing up of hands in a gesture of defeat, the mute finger of the demonstrative pronoun points not only at its object, but also simultaneously to the stumbling of description.

> Some spray in a hedge, though, or a sunset over a flat winter field, or again the way some old woman sits, arms akimbo, in an omnibus with a basket – those we point at

> for another to look at. It is so vast an alleviation to be able to point for another to look at. And then not to talk. To follow the dark paths of the mind and enter the past, to visit books, to brush aside their branches and break off some fruit (W, 179-180).

Such pointing designates its object in a way that is irreplaceable by any description, which, as soon as substituted, would prove itself to miss the point. In Woolf, the lingering presence of these sharp points in the literary sentences that represent consciousness serve as a marker of the irrevocable gulf between individual minds, indicating not only the need for description but also the limits of linguistic communication. The semantic value of the demonstrative in itself is slight, but what it communicates, not by its meaning but by its very presence, is precisely the feeling of something being, in a strict sense, indescribable. In the modernist period, diverse figures such as Hulme, Russell, Proust, and Woolf all observe that words that are general can never fully convey the essential particularity of individual experiences. Hulme would advocate poetic analogy, Proust turned to music, and Woolf looked to the cinema, speculating about the power specific to visual images, "Is there some secret language which we feel and see, but never speak, and, if so, could this be made visible to the eye" (CE 4:350)? In addition to images, a secret language seems furnished by words that speak without saying anything. Unlike a Romantic sublime beyond comprehension, the ineffable in modernism is what we know *too* well for words.

Look, There

The unique way in which demonstratives name the specificities of our sensations and feelings is explicitly elaborated by Russell, but this insight is no less evident (albeit implicit) in James's remarks. Since being unverbalizable is definitional of our elemental way of knowing, it follows that "the minimum of grammatical subject, of objective presence, of reality known about, the mere beginning of knowledge must be named by the word that says the least. Such a word is the interjection as *lo! there! ecco! voilà!* Or the article or demonstrative pronoun introducing the sentence, as *the*, *it*, *that*" (PP, 1:222). Whereas for Russell, what is essential about the demonstrative is its ability

to refer to a *private* meaning, for James, the demonstrative's importance lies rather in the fact that it is *non-qualitative*. They are the barest of words, referring without predicating, and thus uniquely suited to expressing our most primitive knowledge. The interjections *lo! there! ecco! voilà!* have the force of pointing, offering up their referent in a way that is irreplaceable by any description, which, as soon as substituted, would prove itself to miss the point. The demonstrative is thus not only punctuation and summation but also an imperative, issuing the command that Bernard hears in *The Waves*, "Look! Take note of that!" (W, 115).

James, who does not accord ultimate privilege to any single term in Russell's manner, alerts us to another important demonstrative in Woolf, one that features in the famous conclusion of *Mrs. Dalloway*: "there." At the end of Clarissa's party, Peter Walsh and Sally Seton are waiting for her to finish her social duties so she can speak to them at last (she has in fact retreated to reflect on the news she has just heard about an unknown young man's suicide). Compelled by the lateness of the hour, Sally finally gets up to leave.

> "I will come," said Peter, but he sat on for a moment. What is this terror? what is this ecstasy? he thought to himself. What is it that fills me with extraordinary excitement?
> It is Clarissa, he said.
> For there she was (MD, 194).

"There she was" forms a refrain in Peter's thoughts of Clarissa throughout the novel. Earlier on he thinks, "She came into a room; she stood, as he had often seen her, in a doorway with lots of people round her. But it was Clarissa one remembered. Not that she was striking; not beautiful at all; there was nothing picturesque about her; she never said anything specially clever; there she was, however; there she was" (MD, 76). Mrs. Dalloway is, it would seem, the woman without qualities. These lines appear at the end of a paragraph in which Peter turns over thoughts and memories of Clarissa, trying out various descriptions of her, none of which seem to adequately capture what it is about her that moves him so deeply, what it is, in short, that makes her *her*.

Clarissa impresses herself upon a crowded room not by any particular attribute she possesses, but by simply being there. Just as Peter Walsh's love for Clarissa does not proceed from any of her qualities – she is not striking, not picturesque, not beautiful, not clever – her appearance to him, the cause of his extraordinary excitement, ecstasy and terror, cannot be adequately described with reference to her properties; the whole of the person exceeds the sum of any enumerable attributes. Recall Woolf's quandary when describing her father in "A Sketch of the Past," "if one points to his obvious qualities – his honesty, his unworldliness, his lovableness, his perfect sincerity – one is singling out from a whole single qualities which were part of that whole; and the whole was different from the qualities of which it was made" (MB, 111). The last lines of *Mrs. Dalloway* are an attempt to capture the whole, an attempt, to borrow a phrase from Faulkner, "to put it all, if possible, on one pinhead."[25]

The distal form of the final demonstrative – "*there* she was," not "*here* she was" – maintains the distance between her and Peter, but his assertion of her presence is also not without a note of joy. In her diaries, Woolf records her own excitement as she approaches the novel's completion, outlining a plan that will "knit […] together everything," ending "on three notes, at different stages of the staircase, each saying something to sum up *Clarissa*. Who shall say these things? Peter, Richard, and Sally Seton perhaps: but I don't want to tie myself down to that yet. Now I do think this might be the best of my endings and come off, perhaps." We know her decision on the score of the last speaker, and a month later, she records "that astounding fact – the last words of the last page of *Mrs. Dalloway*…'For there she was'" (D, 2:312).[26]

[25] This term appears in a 1944 letter to Malcolm Cowley, where Faulkner writes that his primary goal is to tell a story, "which is myself and the world…This I think accounts for what people call the obscurity, the involved formless 'style,' endless sentences. I'm trying to say it all in one sentence, between one Cap and one period. I'm still trying to put it all, if possible, on one pinhead." Malcolm Cowley, *The Faulkner-Cowley File: Letters and Memories 1944–1962*,14.

[26] In an early plan of the novel, Clarissa was to have committed suicide at the end, further underscoring her parallels with Septimus Warren Smith, with whom she feels a strong empathetic connection when she hears of his death. I discuss Septimus briefly in the fuller chapter from which this excerpt is taken. Although his shell-shock causes him

An echo of these lines is found in a short book review Woolf published at the same time that she was completing the novel. The review, of *A Nineteenth-Century Childhood* by her friend and fellow Bloomsbury writer Mary (Molly) McCarthy, praises McCarthy for catching "beautifully with a fling of a phrase" the "dazzling and erratic butterfly and any other queer Victorian insects (CE, 3:443)," without thereby "dish[ing] up the eminent Victorians once more (CE, 3:444)."[27] Of particular interest is how Woolf describes this successful capture: "There they are, fluttering and feasting on their dahlias and their ivy blossoms – Mr Shorthouse asking for a hymn tune, Mr Oscar Browning sipping tea, Mary Coleridge reading Browning aloud…Mr Henry James surveying the ballroom – there they are (CE, 3:444)."[28] The inclusion of Henry James in this list is striking in light of the last line of *The Ambassadors*, spoken by Lambert Strether to Maria Gostrey, "There we are!"[29] Combining a descriptive catalogue of its subjects enclosed at either end by the demonstrative assertion "there they are," this passage exhibits a structure not unlike the apposition we saw earlier of "this" or "that" with subsequent descriptive enumerations.

The demonstrative statement functions to insist on the presence and the reality of the pronoun's referent – *there she is, right there before us*. In fact, it conjures her up by the very act of pointing towards her. We cannot describe to a blind man what blue is like, James suggested, because

---

great difficulties in communicating his private thoughts, these seem to raise a host of issues distinct from the issues at hand, and are registered in quite different language. Septimus' descriptive problems are well worth considering, but they would require another chapter.

[27] The review was published on October 2, 1924 in the *TLS*, and Woolf mentions it briefly in her diaries, see D, 2:265. Steven Monte makes the connection between this review and *Mrs. Dalloway* in "Ancients and Moderns in *Mrs. Dalloway*." He writes, "The similarity in phrasing reinforces the idea of hostess or observant partygoer as novelist – it is James who surveys the ballroom – and reminds us that Woolf's ideal of literary representing, a 'pointing toward' rather than a description of reality, is subjective in that it signals a point of view, yet it also suggests transparency and immanence (593)." I am unsure what Monte means by "transparency" and "immanence" here, but his statement that Woolf's literary ideal is a "pointing toward" is very much in accord with my argument.

[28] Further examples of this formulation can easily be found in other novels. For instance, when Lily Briscoe tries to describe Mrs. Ramsay, "There she sat, simple, serious. She had recovered her sense of her now – this was the glove's twisted finger." (TL, 50). This passage and the importance of its demonstrative is singled out in B.R. Daugherty, "'There She Sat': the Power of the Feminist Imagination in *To the Lighthouse*." Banfield argues that the demonstrative gesture was deliberately employed by Woolf, citing a diary entry, "The rain pelts – look at it (as the people in The Waves are always saying) now (D, 3:319)," cited in Banfield, *Phantom Table*, 300.

[29] In fact, this line and variants on it repeat throughout the novel with insistence. In these cases, however, the "there" does not usually seem to be demonstrative.

we cannot "impart acquaintance" to another. But "there she was" is just the attempt to impart acquaintance in the most proper means available to language. Pointing to what is before it, capturing its referent completely and instantaneously, the demonstrative injunction yields a counterintuitive understanding of what we could call the hyperrealism of Woolf's modernist aesthetics, her insistence on hewing more closely to the likeness of life. Extended to its limit, realist verisimilitude tends not toward greater descriptive detail but toward the austerity of ostension, this being in fact the most precise way of describing. Here is one version of the ideal of poetic exactitude that runs through modernist aesthetics, the urge to capture, in Hulme's words, "the exact curve of the feeling or the thing."[30]

"Merely to be themselves"

Moreover, the demonstrative evokes its referent – be it a feeling, a thing or a person – just as it is, without any qualifications. When Peter Walsh feels himself most profoundly moved by Clarissa, the result is not a piling up of ever more precise adjectives, but instead a spare gesture of pointing and naming. Although "summing up" a person is roundly condemned in *Jacob's Room* as futile and misguided, a different of kind of summation seems operative here in *Mrs. Dalloway*, one that does not seek to define an individual with any particular description, but that simply names her as she is, and lets her be.

For Woolf, whose characters chafe under the weight of others' descriptions of them, such a mode of reference is possessed of an ethical charge. The objection to summing up is to summing up *qualitatively*, defining any individual with a description of their attributes. No one represents this position more than the Bradshaws, representatives of the ossified Edwardian social order who worship the goddess Proportion, work diligently under her name to eliminate all idiosyncrasy and

[30] Hulme, *Selected Writings*, 82.

difference, most disastrously in the case of the shell-shocked soldier, Septimus Warren Smith.[31] "[They] saw nothing clear, yet ruled, yet inflicted. 'Must' they said" (MD, 50), and just before his suicide, Septimus thinks, "'Must,' 'must,' why 'must'? what power had Bradshaw over him? 'What right has Bradshaw to say "must" to me?' he demanded" (MD, 147). In contrast to the imperial "must," Clarissa prefers the optative "let," as we see clearly in the scene during which she realizes the "supreme mystery" of "here was one room; there another," prompted by glimpsing the old woman in the house across from hers. "Let her climb upstairs if she wanted to; let her stop; then let her, as Clarissa had often seen her, gain her bedroom, part her curtains, and disappear again into the background" (MD, 126).

In addition to William Bradshaw's "Proportion," Doris Kilman's religion and Peter Walsh's love are also perceived as coercive forces threatening autonomy ("clumsy, hot, domineering, hypocritical, eavesdropping, jealous, infinitely cruel and unscrupulous" [MD, 127]). Both are false solutions to the supreme mystery of "here was one room; there another," two forms of what one critic calls "interpersonal imperialism."[32] "Had she ever tried to convert anyone herself?" Clarissa thinks indignantly as she feels the weight of their imposition bearing down on her, "Did she not wish everyone merely to be themselves (MD, 126)?" The desire for people to be "themselves" instead of what they ought to be entails a resistance to the attributions of qualitative description in favor of the neutrality and indeterminacy of the name and the pronoun.[33] Critics have observed that Woolf's works promulgate what we could call a kind of ethics of non-imposition.[34] But imposition is

[31] Peter Brooks writes of William Bradshaw, "He must be combated, not with Edwardian tools, not through the realist presentation of milieu, detail, character, but in a fluid narrational style that negates the kind of Edwardian fixity and solidity of 'character' in which Arnold Bennett and Sir William Bradshaw both believe (*Realist Vision*, 207).

[32] Ellen Bayuk Rosenman, *The Invisible Presence: Virginia Woolf and the Mother Daughter Relationship*, 78.

[33] Of course, Woolf does not always abide by her own ethics of non-imposition, frequently typologizing her characters, especially according to class.

[34] For instance, Maria DiBattista writes, "The value and significance of Woolf's art is precisely in her refusal to make the world a witness to her convictions, the novel the course of her impassioned testimony (*Virginia Woolf's Major Novels*, 21)." The reluctance to impose definitions has also been understood in light of Woolf's

in a sense inherent in the very nature of description, which entails attributing qualities to another, "saying of someone that they are this or that," where this phrase indicates committing to a particular definition. Identifying someone by appealing to a list of qualities is to reduce her to an instantiation of these attributes, with the consequence that in theory, any two people who possess the same properties could be substituted for each other. In this way, a qualitative description always in a way fails to respect precisely the singularity of the individual that it is trying to describe. As represented by the Bradshaws, Peter Walsh and Doris Kilman, a descriptive understanding of personal identity isolates particular traits and makes them the basis for assigning value. It is not difficult to see how this logic could lead to a utilitarianism that converts individuals and the lived experience of social interactions into abstract measures of labor-time, where each person is infinitely fungible because reduced to an attribute or a function that could be exhibited or fulfilled by anyone.

Ipse, or Tautology

In trying to sketch her father in her notes for a memoir, we saw Woolf's encounter with the problem of describing who someone is, the problem of character. When she turns to her half-sister Stella Duckworth, things are no better. "Her charm was great; it came partly from this modesty, from this honesty, from this perfectly simple unostentatious unselfishness; it came too from her lack of pose, her lack of snobbery; and from the genuineness, from something that was – could I put my finger on it – perfectly herself, individual (MB, 96-7)." And again a few lines later, "however simple she was in brain, she was not, as George's sister might so well have been, a cheery ordinary English upper middle class girl with rosy cheeks and bright brown eyes. She was herself (MB, 97)." A long series of candidates are considered here as potential reasons for Stella's charm, but they ultimately

---

impersonality, her insistence on multiple perspectives and her resistance to the tyranny of a single "I." See, for instance, Naremore, *The World Without a Self*, and Hermione Lee, *The Novels of Virginia Woolf*. Woolf criticizes the "egotistic" tendency in Joyce (D, 2:189), and cautions in her diaries that "writing must be formal," "if one lets the mind run loose it becomes egotistic; personal, which I detest (D, 2:321)." She adds in a diary entry from 26 April, 1938 about the plural consciousness of *Between the Acts*, "'I' rejected: 'We' substituted (D, 5:135)."

run aground against the "something" that makes her "perfectly herself, individual," a something that is notably specified no further.

In *A Lover's Discourse,* Barthes identifies a similar problem, which sheds some light on its appearance in Woolf.

> By a singular logic, the amorous subject perceives the other as a Whole…and, at the same time, this Whole seems to him to involve a remainder, which he cannot express…he imagines that the other wants to be loved, as he himself would want to be loved, not for one or another of his qualities, but for *everything*, and this *everything* he accords the other in the form of a blank word, for the Whole cannot be inventoried without being diminished.[35]

The impossibility of saying everything without diminishing it by an inventory of its parts, identified variously by both Barthes and Woolf, is akin to Russell's observation that what is idiosyncratic cannot be expressed by words that are general. An image for the singular whole is offered in *To the Lighthouse*, when Lily Briscoe wonders of Mrs. Ramsay, "What was the spirit in her, the essential thing, by which, had you found a crumpled glove in the corner of a sofa, you would have known it, from its twisted finger, hers indisputably?" (TL, 49). The glove's twisted finger is the stamp of absolute idiosyncrasy, that which individuates Mrs. Ramsay from all others and makes her instantly identifiable, that which makes her *herself*. Desiring to say everything about the loved one, Barthes's amorous subject finds the whole expressible only by a "blank word," recalling Woolf's comment that it is impossible to single out individual qualities about her father because "the whole was different from the qualities of which it was made" (MB, 111).

As soon as we begin listing particular parts, we lose the whole in its entirety (no inventory without diminishment). It can thus only be marked by a zero degree, a blank space, a marker of absence where something singular (*this* person, *this* desire) has eluded linguistic capture. In Latin, Barthes goes on, the trace of this escape is registered in the word *ipse*, "it is himself, it is he himself in person…From word to word, I exhaust myself trying to put into other words [dire autrement] the

[35] Barthes, *Fragments of A Lover's Discourse*, 19.

ipseity of my Image, to express improperly the propriety of my desire: a journey at whose end my final philosophy can only be to recognize – and to practice – tautology."[36] Love, according to Barthes, is not a question of *quidditas* but of *ipseitas*, not of whatness but of itselfness. The struggle to put his image of the loved one into other words, to say what he wants to say *otherwise* – when Peter Walsh finds himself in this plight, he too ends in an appeal to a proper name and a demonstrative.

Dire autrement, putting into other words, saying otherwise – these are apt descriptions of description itself, which operates according to the principles of substitutability and equivalence. Philippe Hamon characterizes the logic of description as that a single lexeme undergoing the declension of a paradigm, for instance "house" giving rise to "roof," "walls," "window," "stairs," "doors" etc. This descriptive series is considered equivalent to the "integral term" and must then be organized according to a hierarchy.[37] Thus understood, the principle of equivalence governing description tends toward synonymy. What happens, however, when we reach something incomparable, for which nothing may be substituted? The question is posed by the dedication in one of Woolf's earliest novels *Night and Day* (1919) to her sister, the person to whom she was always the closest. "To Vanessa Bell. But looking for a phrase I found none to stand beside your name."

When no way of saying otherwise can be found, the result is a tautology. As Neville says of Percival, the absent center in *The Waves*, "You are you. That is what consoles me for the lack of many things" (W, 181). Or in the formulation of Jacob's "obstinate irrepressible conviction which makes youth so intolerably disagreeable," "I am what I am and I intend to be it" (JR, 34). Faced with the incomparable, in the absence of any adequate substitution, no word will do but the repetition of a pronoun. "When I say to myself, 'Bernard,' who comes? A faithful, sardonic man, disillusioned,

[36] Ibid., 20-1.
[37] Philippe Hamon, *Introduction à l'analyse du descriptif* (Paris: Hachette, 1981), 43. Description, Hamon reminds us, was in the rhetorical tradition a means of *amplificatio*, of lexical proliferation, leading to the tendency towards the potentially infinite list. Thus he writes, "(its emblematic sign could be the infinite 'etc.') (15, my translation)." I discuss Hamon's comments on description at greater length in my Introduction.

but not embittered. A man of no particular age or calling. Myself, merely" (W, 81). After a string of adjectives, the descriptive inventory arrives at the end in something that eludes inventory, the glove's twisted finger on which no finger may be put. The tautological expression of identity does not result from the failure to find a better description, but from having reached something whose final description can only be itself, a purity of idiosyncrasy. Or, if it is a failure, it is achieved only with difficulty, for it is also the affirmation of something for which there is nothing equivalent.

The tautology thus communicates something not by means of its content, which is held to be one of the most basic laws of logic and thus entirely self-evident, but, like the demonstrative, by its very presence. And what it announces is that a limit has been reached. Without synonyms, not susceptible to declension or substitution, what can only be said tautologically cannot be said otherwise. Perhaps something like this is expressed in the old dictum, "*individuum est ineffabile*," or in Bishop Butler's maxim that G. E. Moore makes the epigraph to his *Principa Ethica*, "Everything is what it is and not another thing." In the strictest sense, the question "who is she?" cannot be appropriately answered by any description, "she is the wife of a member of parliament," "she is a thoroughgoing skeptic," etc., but only with semantically impoverished words emancipated from the constraints of predication and definition to which nouns and adjectives are beholden. Woolf shows that the only precise answer to "who is she?" is "she is who she is," or "she is herself." An instantaneous comprehensiveness within language can be achieved only at the expense of all determinate content.[38]

For Barthes, the inadequacy of describing the beloved means "I accede (fitfully) to a language without adjectives. I love the other, not according to his (accountable) qualities, but according to his existence; by a movement one might well call mystical, I love, not what he is, but *that he is*. The language in which the amorous subject then protests (against all the nimble languages

[38] This is essentially the realization of sense-certainty in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, where the immediacy with which deictics offer up the subject is realized to be illusory.

of the world) is an *obtuse* language."[39] The semantic wealth of adjectives and nouns is of no help to the lover, for whom the gift of the beloved is just "to be, to exist, to sum it all up in the moment." What renders Peter Walsh dumbstruck is not this or that trait of Clarissa's, not *what* she is, but *that* she is. He loves her because she exists, but this serves as an explanation only because he loves her. There is no way around the tautological structure; love has no ground of legitimization except its own existence. Woolf's novel ends, appropriately, with a display of obtuseness in which the loved one is simply there, her being there concomitant with the fact of her being herself.

The plethora of carefully-wrought, richly-evocative, finely-shaded descriptions in Woolf's novels is ample evidence that she does not, like Barthes, accede to "a language without adjectives." But the counterpoint to the lyricism are the sharp points and obtuse statements that mark the encounter with a limit. Nor are such formulations by any means isolated across the modernist landscape. I have already mentioned the frequent appearance of the oddly contentless "there we are" peppered throughout *The Ambassadors*.[40] Meanwhile, in *The Golden Bowl*, uncertain as to her next course of action after discovering proof of her husband's infidelity in the eponymous object, Maggie Verver cries, "How do I know? With *this*!" causing her interlocutor, Mrs. Assingham, to marvel at "the way the little word representing it seemed to express and include for her the whole of her situation" (GB, 439). Gertrude Stein is more succinct still in "Composition as Explanation," a 1926 lecture published subsequently by the Woolfs' Hogarth Press, when she states crisply, "By this I mean this."[41] What became the "Food" section of *Tender Buttons* (1914) was originally entitled "Studies in Description," and it was with James's comments in mind that Stein composed the 1929 text, "An Acquaintance with Description," published by Robert Graves and Laura Riding's Seizin

[39] Barthes, *Fragments of a Lover's Discourse*, 222.
[40] Michael Levenson also notes this peculiar feature in *Modernism and the Fate of Individuality*.
[41] Gertrude Stein, *Writings 1903–1932*, 520. For more on Stein's engagement with William James, and her initial attempt at scientific, "complete description" in *The Making of Americans* of see Steven Meyer, *Irresistible Dictation*.

Press. In *À la recherche du temps perdu*, the tragedy of this is that it never *remains* this. Marveling at time's transformation of each person into a different one at the Prince de Guermantes's final matinée, Proust's narrator can hardly believe of an old woman he initially fails to recognize "that this [ceci] can ever have been that [cela], that the material of that [cela] has not taken refuge elsewhere but, thanks to the subtle manipulations of time, has itself become this [ceci] (RTP, 4:419)."[42] From an unnamed old lady at one party to the aged Sally Seton at another, the result of Time Passing can be summed up in an equation: this will equal that.

In a 1922 letter to Roger Fry in which Woolf records having embarked on the *Recherhe*, her response to reading Proust suggests one final point pertinent to the problem at hand. "Well – what remains to be written after that?" she wonders. "I am in a state of amazement…How, at last, has someone solidified what always escaped – and made it too into this beautiful and perfectly enduring substance? One has to put the book down and gasp."[43] The stupefaction Woolf experiences upon reading a work that captures "the exact curve of the feeling or the thing" is echoed and generalized by a later critic who also happens to be an admirer of Proust. "In its perfect moments," Roland Barthes remarks in his last lectures at the Collège de France, literature "tends to make us say 'That's it, that's absolutely it! ['C'est ça, c'est tout à fait ça!']" The context is a discussion of haiku, in particular one by the seventeenth-century Japanese poet Teishitsu, "'That, that'/Was all I could say/Before the blossoms of Mount Yoshino." Barthes comments, "saying you can't say, the whole haiku tends toward this, toward '*that*.' There's nothing to say, in short, other than the vertiginous limit of language, the *deictic Neutral* ('that')." He then poses a question, "Dare I extend this hypothesis around *Absolutely* to the whole of literature?"[44] If we take up Barthes's dare, ostension

[42] For an illuminating discussion of how the demonstrative pronoun in Proust moves from individual to type ("*that* man" becomes "one of *those* men"), see Christopher Eagle's "On 'This' and 'That' in Proust: Deixis and Typologies in *À la recherche du temps perdu*."
[43] Virginia Woolf, *The Letters of Virgina Woolf*, 2:565–6.
[44] Roland Barthes, *Preparation of the Novel*, 80.

may be the end of literature in more than one way. A perfect description of what something is like, it would seem, can elicit only a response of speechlessness. In the face of so close a likeness nothing more remains to be said, except perhaps a gasp of recognition at the familiar sight of an acquaintance. If that is the name of the indescribable, this is how Woolf points to the end of description.

Works Cited

*Unless a translation is given, all translations are mine.

Agamben, Giorgio. *The Coming Community*, trans. Michael Hardt. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

Agnew, Jean-Christophe. "The Consuming Vision of Henry James," *The Culture of Consumption: Critical Essays in American History 1880–1980*, ed. Richard Wrightman Fox and T. J. Jackson Lears. New York: Pantheon, 1983.

Allen, Garland. *Life Science in the Twentieth Century*. New York: Wiley, 1975.

Alpers, Svetlana. *The Art of Description: Dutch Art in the Seventeeth Century*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.

Altieri, Charles. "Modernist Poetry's Encounter with Epistemic Models of Value," *Common Knowledge* 19:2 (2013): 334–350.

Anscombe, G. E. M. *Intention*. Oxford: Blackwell, 1957.

Aristotle. *Poetics*. Trans. Leon Golden. Tallahassee: Florida State University Press, 1981.

---. *Topics Books I and VIII, with excerpts from related texts*. Trans. Robin Smith. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

Armstrong, Nancy. *Fiction in the Age of Photography: the Legacy of British Realism*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999.

Armstrong, Paul B. *The Phenomenology of Henry James*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1983.

Auerbach, Erich. *Mimesis*, trans. Willard R. Trask. New York: Anchor Books, 1957.

Bachelard, Gaston. *The Poetics of Space*. Trans. M. Jolas. Boston: Beacon Press, 1984.

Bal, Mieke. "Over-Writing as Un-writing: Descriptions, World-Making and Novelistic Time." In *The Novel*. Vol 2. Ed. Franco Moretti. 571-610.

---. *On Storytelling: Essays in Narratology*, Ed. David Jobling. Sonoma: Polebridge Press, 1990.

Balzac, Honoré de. *Eugénie Grandet*, Paris: Garnier Frères, 1965; *Eugénie Grandet*. Trans. Sylvia Raphael. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

---. *Le père Goriot*. Paris: Gallimard, 1971.

Bally, Charles. *Traité de stylistique française*, 2 Vols. Geneva and Paris: Georg, 1951.

Banfield, Ann. *The Phantom Table: Woolf, Fry, Russell and the Epistemology of Modernism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

---. "Mrs. Dalloway," *The Novel*, Vol. 2, ed. Franco Moretti.

---. *Unspeakable Sentences*. Boston: Routledge Kegan & Paul, 1982.

Barthes, Roland. "L'effet du réel," In *Bruissement de la langue*. Paris: Seuil, 1984; "The Reality Effect." In *The Rustle of Language*. Trans. Richard Howard. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989.

---. *Empire of Signs*, trans. Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1982.

---. *Fragments d'un discours amoureux*. Paris: Seuil, 1977; *Fragments of a Lover's Discourse*, trans. Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1978.

---. "Une idée de recherché." In *Recherche de Proust*. Ed. Gerard Genette and Tzetvan Todorov. Paris: Seuil, 1980.

---. *Preparation of the Novel*. Trans. Kate Briggs. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011.

---. *Roland Barthes*. Paris: Seuil, 1975; *Roland Barthes*, trans. Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang, 1977.

Baxandall, Michael. *Patterns of Intention: the Historical Explanation of Pictures*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985.

Beaujour, Michel. "Some Paradoxes of Description." *Yale French Studies*, 61 (1981): 27-59.

Beckett, Samuel. *Proust and Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit*. London: John Calder, 1999.

Bender, John and Michael Marrinan, eds. *Regimes of Description: in the Archive of the Eighteenth Century*. Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2003.

Benjamin, Walter. *Selected Writings*. Vol. 2. Eds. Michael Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005.

Bennett, Arnold. *Things That Have Interested Me*, *Third Series*. New York: George H. Doran Company, 1926.

---. *Old Wives' Tale*. New York: Hodder & Stoughton, 1909.

Benveniste, Émile. *Problèmes de linguistique générale*. 2 Vols. Paris: Gallimard, 1966–1974.

Beer, Gillian. *Open Fields: Science in Cultural Encounter*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.

---. "Physics, Sound and Substance," *Virginia Woolf: the Common Ground*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996.

Besant, Walter. *The Art of Fiction.* Boston: Upples, Cupham and Company, 1885.

Best, Stephen and Sharon Marcus, "Surface Reading: an Introduction," *Representations* 108 (Fall, 2009): 1–21.

Bhat, D.N.S. *Pronouns.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Böhme, Gernot. "Atmosphäre als Grundbegriff einer neuen Ästhetik," *Atmosphäre: Essays zur neuen Ästhetik*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1995; "Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept of a New Aesthetics." Trans. David Roberts. *Thesis Eleven* 36 (1993): 113–126.

---. "Atmosphere as the Subject Matter of Architecture." In *Herzog & de Meuron, Natural History*. Ed. Philip Ursprung. Montreal: Canadian Center for Architecture, 2002. 398–406.

Bowlby, Rachel. *Feminist Destinations and Further Essays on Virginia Woolf.* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997.

Brooks, Peter. *The Melodramatic Imagination*: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976.

---. *Realist Vision.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005.

Brown, Bill. *A Sense of Things: the Object Matter of American Literature.* University of Chicago Press, 2003.

Brown, Julia Prewitt. *The Bourgeois Interior: How the Middle Class Imagines Itself in Literature and Film.* Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2008.

Burrows, Stuart. *A Familiar Strangeness: American fiction and the language of photography, 1839-1945*. Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 2008.

Cameron, Sharon. *Thinking in Henry James.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989.

Cather, Willa. "The Novel Démeublé," *Willa Cather on Writing: Critical Studies on Writing as an Art.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1988.

Christ, Carol T. *The Finer Optic: the Victorian Aesthetic of Particularity*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1975.

Cohn, Dorrit. *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978.

Connor, Steven. *The Matter of Air: Science and the Art of the Ethereal.* London: Reaktion, 2010.

Conrad, Joseph. *The Nigger of the Narcissus.* New York: Doubleday, 1914.

Cowley, Malcolm. *The Faulkner-Cowley File: Letters and Memories 1944–1962*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978.

Crary, Jonathan. *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990.

Crow, Christine M. *Paul Valéry: Consciousness and Nature*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972.

Curtius, E. R. *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*. Trans. Willard R. Trask. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990.

Chalmers, David J. *The Conscious Mind: In Search of a Fundamental Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.

Danto, Arthur. *Narration and Knowledge*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1985.

Daston, Lorraine. "Attention and the Values of Nature in the Enlightenment." *Visual Sense: a Cultural Reader*. Eds. Elizabeth Edwards and Kaushik Bhaumik. London, Berg Publishers, 2008

---. "Description by Omission: Nature Enlightened and Obscured," in *Regimes of Description: in the Archive of the Eighteenth Century*, eds. John Bender and Michael Marrinan. 11–24.

Daston, Lorraine and Elizabeth Lunbeck, eds. *Histories of Scientific Observation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.

Daston, Lorraine and Peter Galison. *Objectivity*. New York: Zone Books, 2007.

Davis, Theo. "'Out of the Medium in Which Books Breathe': The Contours of Formalism and *The Golden Bowl*," *Novel* 34.3 (2001): 411–433.

Daugherty, B.R. "'There She Sat': the Power of the Feminist Imagination in *To the Lighthouse*," *Twentieth Century Literature*, 37.3 (1991): 289–308.

Deleuze, Gilles. *Proust et les signes*. Paris: Presses universitaires de la France, 1964.

Dennett, Daniel, "Quining Qualia." *Mind and Cognition: A Reader*. Ed. William Lycan. Cambridge: Blackwell, 1990, 519–547.

DiBattista, Maria. *Virginia Woolf's Major Novels*: *the Fables of Anon*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1980.

Dickens, Charles. *Barnaby Rudge*. Suffolk: The Chaucer Press, 1975.

Diderot, Denis, and Jean le Rond d'Alembert, eds. *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire raisonné des sciences, des arts et des métiers, par une Société de Gens de lettres*, eds.17 vols, Paris, 1551–1772. <http://encyclopedie.uchicago.edu/>.

Doty, Mark. *Still Life with Oysters and Lemon*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2002.

Dror, Otniel E. "Seeing the Blush: Feeling Emotions" in *Histories of Scientific Observation*, eds. Lorraine Daston and Elizabeth Lunbeck. 326–348.

Dufrenne, Mikel. *The Phenomenology of Aesthetic Experience.* Trans. Edward L. Casey et. al. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973.

Eagle, Christopher. "On 'This' and 'That' in Proust: Deixis and Typologies in *À la recherche du temps perdu*," *MLN* 121 (2006): 989–1008.

Eliot, T. S. "On Henry James." In *The Question of Henry James*. Ed. F. W. Dupee. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1945.

Ellenbogen, Josh. *Reasoned and Unreasoned Images: the Photography of Bertillon, Galton, and Marey.* University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2012.

Ellman, Maud. *The Nets of Modernism: Henry James, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce and Sigmund Freud.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Empson, William. *Seven Types of Ambiguity.* New York: New Directions, 1947.

Evans, Gareth. *The Varieties of Reference.* New York: Oxford University Press, 1982.

Flaubert, Gustave. *Bouvard et Pécuchet*. Ed. Claudine Gothot-Mersch. Paris: Gallimard, 1979.

Flaxman, Rhoda. *Victorian Word-Painting and Narrative: Toward the Blending of Genres.* Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989.

Forster, E.M. "The Early Novels of Virginia Woolf," *Abinger Harvest.* London: Arnold, 1953.

Foucault, Michel. *Order of Things: An Archaeology of Human Sciences.* New York: Vintage, 1994.

Frank, Ellen Eve. *Literary Architecture.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979.

Frank, Joseph. *The Idea of Spatial Form.* New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1991.

Frege, Gottlob. *Translations from the Philosophical Writings of Gottlob Frege.* Eds. P. T. Geach and M. Black. Oxford: Blackwell, 1952.

Friedman, Norman. "Point of View in Fiction: the Development of a Critical Concept," *PMLA* 70.5 (1955): 1160–1184.

Geertz, Clifford. "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture." In *An Interpretation of Cultures.* New York: Basic, 1973.

Genette, Gérard. *Figures.* 3 Vols. Paris: Seuil, 1966–.

---. *Figures of Literary Discourse.* Trans. Alan Sheridan. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.

Ginzburg, Carlo. *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*. Trans. John and Anne Tedeschi. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992.

Goble, Mark. *Beautiful Circuits: Modernism and the Mediated Life*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2010.

Goldman, Jane. *The Feminist Aesthetics of Virginia Woolf: Modernism, post-Impressionism and the Politics of the Visual*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

Gordon, Lyndall. *Virginia Woolf: a Writer's Life*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1984.

Green, Rohanna. *Atmospheric Modernism: Rare Matter and Dynamic Self-World Thresholds*, PhD Dissertation, University of Toronto, 2011.

Greenberg, Clement. "Towards a Newer Laocoon." *The Collected Essays and Criticism*. 4 Vols. Ed. John O'Brian. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986–1993.

Greimas, A. J. and J. Courtès. *Sémiotique: Dictionnaire raisonné de la théorie du langage*. Paris: Hachette, 1979.

Grimstad, Paul. *Experience and Experimental Writing: Literary Pragmatism from Emerson to the Jameses*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

Hacking, Ian. *Historical Onotology*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002.

---. *Representing and Intervening: Introductory Topics in the Philosophy of Natural Science*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983.

Hamilton, Kristie. *American's Sketchbook: the Cultural Life of a Nineteenth Century Literary Genre*. Athens: Ohio University Press, 1998.

Hamon, Philippe. *Introduction à l'analyse du descriptive*. Paris: Hachette, 1981.

Hardy, Thomas. *Far From the Madding Crowd*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1986.

Hart, H. L. A., G. E. Hughes and J. N. Findlay, "Symposium: Is There Knowledge by Acquaintance?" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes*, 23 (1949): 69-128.

Haule, James M. and Philip H. Smith, Jr., eds. *A Concordance to the Novels of Virginia Woolf*, 3 vols. New York: Garland, 1991.

Heidegger, Martin. *Sein und Zeit*. Tübingen: Niemayer, 1986; *Being and Time*. Trans. Joan Stambaugh. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996.

Henderson, Linda Dalrymple. *The Fourth Dimension and Non-Euclidean Geometry in Modern Art*. Revised ed. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013.

Henry, Anne. "Schopenhauer et la musique," *Marcel Proust, théorie pour une ésthetique*. Paris: Klincksieck, 1983.

Hewett Koelb, Janice. *The Poetics of Description: Imagined Places in European Literature*. London: Macmillan, 2006.

Hicks, G. Dawes, G. E. Moore, Beatrice Edgell and C. D. Broad, "Symposium: Is There Knowledge by Acquaintance?" *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 2 (1919): 159-220.

Hintikka, Jaakkao. "Virginia Woolf and Our Knowledge of the External World," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 38.1 (1979): 5-14.

Hoff, Molly. "The Pseudo-Homeric World of Mrs. Dalloway," *Twentieth Century Literature*, 45.2 (Summer, 1999): 186-209.

Hofstader, Douglas, and Emmanuel Sander. *Surfaces and Essences: Analogy as the Fuel and Fire of Thinking*. New York: Basic Books, 2013.

Holleyman & Treacher Ltd. *Catalogue of books from the library of Leonard and Virginia Woolf*. Brighton: Holleyman & Treacher Ltd., 1975.

Holyoak, Keith and Paul Thagard. *Mental Leaps: Analogy in Creative Thought*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995.

Hornby, Louise. "The Cameraless Optic: Anna Atkins and Virginia Woolf." *ELN* 44.2 (Fall/Winter 2006): 87-101.

Hulme, T. E. *Selected Writings*. Ed. Patrick McGuinness. Manchester: Carcanet, 1998.

Hynes, Samuel. "The Whole Contention Between Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Woolf," *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 1.1 (Autumn, 1967): 34–44.

Irwin, Michael. *Picturing: Description and Illusion in the Nineteenth Century Novel*. London: Allen & Unwin, 1979.

Jakobson, Roman. "Shifters, Verbal Categories, and the Russian Verb," *Russian and Slavic Grammar: Studies 1931-1981*. Eds. Linda Waugh and Morris Halle. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1984. 41–58.

James, Henry. *The Ambassadors*. New York: Norton, 1994.

---. *Art of Criticism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986.

---. *Art of the Novel: Critical Prefaces by Henry James*. Ed. R. P. Blackmur. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011.

---. *French Poets and Novelists*. London: MacMillan and Co., 1878.

---. *Literary Criticism*. 2 Vols. New York: Library of America, 1984.

---. *The Golden Bowl*. New York: Penguin, 1987.

---. *Wings of the Dove*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

---. *What Maisie Knew*. New York: Penguin, 2010.

James, William. *Essays in Radical Empiricism*. Ed. Ralph Barton Perry. New York: Longmans, Green & Co., 1912.

---. *The Meaning of Truth*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975.

---. *Principles of Psychology*. 2 Vols. New York: Dover, 1950.

Jehlen, Myra. *Five Fictions in Search of Truth*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008.

Joyce, James. *Occasional, Critical, and Political Writings*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

---. *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. St Ives: Wordsworth Classics, 1992.

Kant, Immanuel. *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*. Trans. Gary Hatfield. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004.

Kripke, Saul. *Naming and Necessity*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980.

Landy, Joshua. *Philosophy as fiction: Self, Deception, and Knowledge in Proust*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Lapoujade, David. *Fictions du pragmatisme: William et Henry James*. Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 2008.

Latour, Bruno. "Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam: From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern," *Critical Inquiry* 30.2 (Winter 2004): 225-248.

Lawrence, D. H. *Selected Literary Criticism*. Ed. Anthony Beal. New York: Viking, 1956.

Lee, Hermione. *The Novels of Virginia Woolf*. London: Methuen, 1977.

Lessing, Gottfried Ephraim. *Laocöon: An Essay on the Limits of Painting and Poetry*, trans. Edward Allen McCormick. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984.

Levenson, Michael. *Modernism and the Fate of Individuality*: *Character and Novelistic Form from Conrad to Woolf*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1991.

Lewis, Pericles. "Proust, Woolf, and Modern Fiction." *The Romanic Review* 99.1 (2008): 79–86.

Lippit, Akira Mizuta. *Atomic Light: Shadow Optics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005.

Littleton, Jacob. "Portrait of the Artist as a Middle-Aged Woman." *Twentieth Century Literature*, 4.11 (Spring, 1995): 36-53.

Lodge, David. "Metaphor and Metonymy in Modern Fiction." *Critical Quarterly*, 17.1 (1975): 75–93.

Love, Heather. "Close But not Deep: Literary Ethics and the Descriptive Turn." *New Literary History* 41.2 (2010): 371–391.

Lubbock, Percy. *The Craft of Fiction*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1921.

Luckurst, Nicola. *Science and Structure in Proust's À la recherche du temps perdu*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Lukács, Georg. "Narrate or Describe." In *Writer and Critic*. Ed. and trans. Arthur Kahn. London: The Merlin Press, 1970.

---. *Studies in European Realism*. New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1964.

Lyons, John. *Semantics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977.

Matz, Jesse. *Literary Impressionism and Modernist Aesthetics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.

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

Marcus, Sharon. *Apartment Stories: City and Home in Nineteenth Century Paris and London*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.

Maxwell, James Clerk. "Molecules." In *The Scientific Papers of James Clerk Maxwell*. Vol 2. Ed. W. D. Niven. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1890.

McCall, Marsh H. *Ancient Rhetorical Theories of Simile and Comparison*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1969.

McDonald, Christie. *The Proustian Fabric: Associations of Memory*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991.

McGurl, Mark. *The Novel Art: Elevations of American Fiction After Henry James*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *Le Visible et l'invisible*. Paris: Gallimard, 1964.

Meyer, Steven. *Irresistible Dictation: Gertrude Stein and the Correlations of Writing and Science*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001.

Miller, J. Hillis. "Mr. Carmichael and Lily Briscoe: the Rhythm of Creativity in *To the Lighthouse*." *Modernism Reconsidered*. Eds. Robert Kieley and John Hildebidle. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983.

Mitchell, W. J. T. "Spatial Form in Literature: Towards a General Theory," *Critical Inquiry* 6.3 (1980): 539–567.

Monte, Steven. "Ancients and Moderns in *Mrs. Dalloway*." *Modern Language Quarterly* 61.4 (December, 2000): 585–616.

Morand, Paul. *Nouvelles complètes*. Vol. 1. Ed. Michel Collomb. Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1992.

Moretti, Franco. *Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for a Literary History*. London: Verso, 2005.

---. Ed. *The Novel*. 2 Vols. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.

Myers, Jack and Michael Simms, *The Longman Dictionary of Poetic Terms*. New York: Longman, 1989.

Nagel, Thomas. "What is it Like to Be a Bat?" *Philosophical Review* 83 (1974): 435–456.

Naremore, James. *The World Without a Self*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1973.

Ngai, Sianne. *Ugly Feelings*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005.

Ogilvy, Brian. *The Science of Describing: Natural History in Renaissance Europe*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.

Otten, Thomas J. *A Superficial Reading of Henry James: Preoccupations with the Material World*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2006.

Pascal, Roy. *The Dual Voice: Free Indirect Speech and Its Functioning in the Nineteenth Century Novel*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1977.

Pippett, Aileen. *The Moth and the Star: A Biography of Virginia Woolf*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1953.

Porter, Theodore M. "The Death of the Object: *Fin de siècle* Philosophy of Physics." In *Modernist Impulses in the Human Sciences 1870–1930*. Ed. Dorothy Ross. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994. 128–151.

Potts, Alex. "Disparities Between Part and Whole in Description of Works of Art." In *Regimes of Description*. Eds. John Bender and Michael Marrinan.

Proust, Marcel. *À la recherche du temps perdu*. 4 Vols. Ed. Jean-Yves Tadié. Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1989.

---. *Contre Sainte-Beuve. Précédé de Pastiches et mélanges et suivi de Essais et articles*. Ed. Pierre Clarac with Yves Sandre. Paris: Bibliothèque de la Pléiade, 1971.

---. *Correspondance*, 21 Vols, ed. Philip Kolb. Paris: Plon, 1970–.

Reed, Edward S. *From Soul to Mind: the Emergence of Psychology, from Erasmus Darwin to William James*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998.

Reynolds, Joshua. *The Works of Sir Joshua Reynolds*. 3 Vols. London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1798.

Richards, I. A. *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1950.

Richardson, Joan. *A Natural History of Pragmatism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Richter, Harvena. *Virginia Woolf: The Inward Voyage*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970.

Ricoeur, Paul. *Freud and Philosophy*. Trans. Denis Savage. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970.

Rilke, Rainer Maria, *Briefe,* 2 Vols, ed. Karl Altheim. Wiebaden: Insel-Verlag, 1950; *Letters*. 2 Vols. Trans. Jane Bannard Greene and M. D. Herter Norton. New York: W. W. Norton, 1947–1948.

Ronen, Ruth. "Description, Narrative, and Representation," *Narrative*, 5.3 (Oct., 1997): 274-286.

Rooney, Ellen. "Live Free or Describe: the Reading Effect and the Persistence of Form," *differences: a Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 21.5 (2010): 112–139.

Rosenbaum, S. P. "The Philosophical Realism of Virginia Woolf." *English Literature and British Philosophy*. Ed. S. P. Rosenbaum. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972.

Rosenman, Ellen Bayuk. *The Invisible Presence: Virginia Woolf and the Mother Daughter Relationship*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986.

Russell, Bertrand. *An Analysis of Mind*. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1921.

---. *Autobiography of Bertrand Russell 1872–1914*. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1967.

---. *An Outline of Philosophy*. New York: Routledge, 2009.

---. *Human Knowledge*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1948.

---. *An Inquiry into Meaning and Truth*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1940.

---. *History of Western Philosophy*. London: Routledge, 2004.

---. *Logic and Knowledge*. Ed. Robert Charles Marsh. London: Allen & Unwin, 1956.

---. *My Philosophical Development*. London: Routledge, 1997.

---. *Problems of Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1912.

Sarraute, Nathalie. *L'ère du soupcon: essais sur le roman.* Paris: Gallimard, 1956.

Scarry, Elaine. *Dreaming by the Book.* New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1999.

Schor, Naomi *Reading in Detail.* New York: Methuen, 1987.

Schwartz, Sanford. *The Matrix of Modernism: Pound, Eliot, and Early Twentieth Century Thought.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985.

Scott, William C. *The Artistry of the Homeric Simile.* Lebanon, NH: Dartmouth College Press, 2009.

Searle, John. "Proper Names," *Mind 67* (1958): 166-173.

Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *The Weather in Proust*, ed. Jonathan Goldberg. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011.

Seltzer, Mark. *Henry James and the Art of Power.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1984.

Serres, Michel, with Bruno Latour. *Conversations about Science, Culture, and Time.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995.

Sheppard, Richard. "The Problematics of European Modernism." In *Theorizing Modernism: Essays in Critical Theory*. Ed. Steve Giles. London: Routledge, 1993.

Shusterman, Richard. "Remembering T. E. Hulme: A Neglected Philosopher-Critic-Poet." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 46.4 (1985): 559-576.

Singy, Patrick. "Huber's Eyes: the Art of Scientific Observation Before the Emergence of Positivism," *Representations* 95:1 (2006): 54–75.

Sloterdijk, Peter. "Against Gravity." Interview with Bettina Funcke. *Bookforum*, Febrary/March 2005. < http://www.bookforum.com/archive/feb_05/funcke.html >

Sotirova, Violeta. "The Roots of a Literary Style: Joyce's Presentation of Consciousness in Ulysses." *Language and Literature* 19.2 (2010): 131–149.

Spilka, Mark. "Henry James and Walter Besant: "The Art of Fiction" Controversy," *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction* 6:2 (1973): 101–119.

Stalnaker, Joanna. *The unfinished Enlightenment: Description in the Age of the Encyclopedia.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010.

Stein, Gertrude. *Writings 1903–1932.* New York: Library of America, 1998.

Stewart, Susan. *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993.

Trotter, David. *Cinema and Modernism.* Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2007.

Valéry, Paul. "Degas, Dance, Drawing." In *Degas, Manet, Morisot.* Trans. David Paul. New York, Pantheon Books, 1960.

---. "Centenaire de la photographie." In *Vues.* Paris: Table Ronde, 1948.

Virtanen, Reino, "Proust's Metaphors from the Natural and the Exact Sciences," *PMLA*, 69.5 (1954): 1038–1059.

Wall, Cynthia. *The Prose of Things: Transformations of Description in the Eighteenth Century.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.

Wallace, Jeff. "Modernists on the Art of Fiction." *Cambridge Companion to the Modernist Novel.* Ed. Morag Schiach. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.

Westling, Louise. "Virginia Woolf and the Flesh of the World," *New Literary History* 30.4 (Autumn, 1999): 855-875.

Whitehead, A. N. *An Enquiry into the Principles of Natural Knowledge.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1919.

Wilde, Oscar. *Intentions.* New York: Brentano's, 1905.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations.* Trans. G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell, 2001.

---. *Zettel.* Eds. G. E. M. Anscombe and G. H. von Wright. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970.

Wood, Joanne. "Lighthouse Bodies: the Neutral Monism of Virginia Woolf and Bertrand Russell." *Journal of the History of Ideas* 55.3 (1994): 483–502.

Woolf, Virginia. *Between the Acts.* New York: Harcourt, 1941.

---. *The Diary of Virginia Woolf.* 5 Vols. Ed. Anne Olivier Bell. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1977-1984.

---. *The Essays of Virginia Woolf.* 6 Vols. Ed. Andrew McNeillie. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986 –.

---. *Jacob's Room.* New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1950.

---. *The Letters of Virgina Woolf.* 6 Vols. Eds. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975–1982.

---. *Mrs. Dalloway*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985.

---. *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

---. *Moments of Being*. Ed. Jeanne Schulkind. San Diego: Harcourt Inc., 1985.

---. *To the Lighthouse*. New York: Harcourt Inc., 1981.

---. *The Waves*. New York: Harcourt Inc., 1959.

---. *The Years*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1965.

Yates, Frances. *The Art of Memory*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966.

Yeats, George. "Dirty Air: *Little Dorrit*'s Atmosphere," *Nineteenth Century Literature* 66.3 (2011): 328–354.

Yeazell, Ruth. *The Art of the Everyday: Dutch painting and the Realist Novel*. Princeton: Princeton University, 2009.

Zumthor, Peter. *Atmospheres: Architectural Environments, Surrounding Objects* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2006).