FEELING THOUGHT:

Literature and the Material Imagination

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Abstract

This dissertation addresses two fundamental questions about the relation of perception to mental, and particularly imaginative, processes: why do modern and contemporary authors turn to unruly matter to describe mental activity? What forms do imagery and description take when writers stage perceptual contingency through material contingency? In answering these questions, I provide fresh approaches to Vladimir Nabokov, Elizabeth Bowen, and A.S. Byatt, who, I conclude, use shape-shifting matter to evoke the mind-body connection. Studies of ekphrasis and perception to date do not give sustained assessments of the role of the mind-body problem in literary description; they also do not attend to the potential of shape-shifting phenomena like shadows and weather states to disrupt binaries between mind and matter.

Literature that links fluid matter with fluid cognition, I contend, invites an increasingly sympathetic encounter between human and inhuman nature; it does so by broadening the possibilities of mental mediation – how the mind channels the living world – while enforcing the limits of possession.

I begin by demonstrating that Nabokov’s unconventional treatment of shadows, which in his texts signals creative activity, stems from how the author perceived “shadow” as a synesthete not subject to strict sensory divisions. Combining art historical scholarship, studies of synesthesia, and the writings of Leonardo da Vinci, I focus on The Gift to show how Nabokov reinterprets the light-shadow binary by transforming shadow into a dual signpost for the attempt to describe perception and knowledge that it can only be described figuratively. Next, I place together Bowen and Woolf’s essays on cinema and draw on playwright Maurice Maeterlinck to distinguish Bowen’s approach to communicating unruly consciousness. I then turn to The Death of the Heart to analyze how the author relocates mental action in atmospheric realities. The
dissertation culminates in a chapter on A.S. Byatt. In it, I trace how Byatt looks to Romantic and Metaphysical poetry, neuroscience’s metamorphic metaphors for cognition, and mythologies about shape-shifting to destabilize gender and mind-body categories. I argue that *Possession* uses the elements and metamorphosis to stage ongoing thought as a felt process, which language translates imperfectly.
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I dedicate this to my family, who brought me to this country. May what I do be worthy of what you have done.
INTRODUCTION

Wallace Stevens, “The Man with the Blue Guitar”¹

Imagine flowers unfurling. No, not painted flowers: Rilke’s language-flowers. “See the flowers, so faithful to Earth.”² The tentacles of the mind extend outward to greet the image as a touch.


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“Were they to grieve for their wilting, that grief would be ours to feel.” Before we grasp their lovely forms, before we verbalize beauty or frailty or inconstancy, the image has already begun to dissolve. We feel dissolution. We grieve what we have grasped, along with what we cannot. Now look at Picasso’s *The Old Guitarist*. One might think grief is a bony shoulder protruding humplike, insistently tearing through and beyond cloth. Perhaps it is an image of music without a tune, a hand suspended mid-play, a singing mouth mutely agape, all tinged by decidedly less cheerful blues than Degas’ perpetual dancers.

Rather than describing the image, as I just did to model one type of ekphrasis, Stevens goes beyond it, modeling instead how the unstable mind with its paradoxical will and wiles tries to make lasting images of itself in a world that resists such stabilization. Stevens’ meditation on “nature” resembles Rilke’s metaphor for imagination. The poet’s flowers – whose fate we know and share – are *thought* unfurling; they also represent the limits of the life of the mind, which we artificially extend, try to transform into matter, by “pressing ourselves into everything, obsessed by weight.”

Grief resides not only in the textured brushstroke, but also at the heart of the word, the material and medium these poets rely on to express thought and feeling. Stevens is especially invested in enacting through language how the mind fixes wave and wind, makes “here” its instrument and reflection by “inhaling” and speaking it.

This dissertation proposes a new model of aesthetic attention that foregrounds process-based phenomena – shadows, weather states, metamorphosis, and oneiric experience – as images, metaphors, and analogues of mental and perceptual activity in the novel after 1900. The phenomena that I trace not only describe processes of nature, but also signal something more:

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3 Ibid. “There’s a lightness in things. Only *we* move forever burdened, / pressing ourselves into everything, obsessed by weight.”
they are drawn into the repertoire of images describing human imagination and creative endeavor, and stand for the ongoing mental construction involved in making, a process that the authors central to my inquiry integrate into the resulting written image. Read, these written images are meant to trigger an opposite feedback loop, the transformation of words into living imagery to be contemplated and felt. Because I am concerned with authors who concern themselves with the processes underlying image-formation, a traditional study of ekphrasis or images in the visual sense is not sufficient. My project is a contribution to how we think about and work with image-

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4 The definition of “ekphrasis” is as broad as a well is deep. It has become conventional to use the term to refer to the verbal description of a work of visual art. In antiquity, this definition did not necessarily obtain. Leonard Barkan persuasively argues that any description of visual experience might have been ekphrastic. Philostratus’ “Eikones” introduce unseen sense experience into imagery; Ovidian metamorphosis seizes/ceases time through metaphor in a way images cannot; Cicero uses Zeuxis’ composite painting to provide a model for verbal and visual art; and Pope Gregory I refers to pictures, which the illiterate “read” as substitutes for texts. We might also define ekphrasis in relation to Paul Ricoeur’s discussion of metaphor as the iconic moment of language that combines meaning and the sensible and relies on incompatibility; it becomes “stuff” to be looked at and through, triggering “seeing as.” Ekphrasis is an experience, act, and intuitive process. It creates new meanings while remaining based in illusion. Michael Baxandall argues that, rather than translating images into language, ekphrastic passages express how we think about and interpret them. We bring personal and cultural knowledge to our interaction with and evaluation of art; Ernst Gombrich calls this the “ beholder’s share” in Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1960). See: Barkan, Mute Poetry, Speaking Pictures (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013); Ricoeur, The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary studies of the creation of meaning in language, trans. Robert Czerny et al (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1975); W.J.T. Mitchell, Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); Mitchell, Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); and Baxandall, Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985).

5 Studies of aesthetics have traditionally privileged vision. In Downcast Eyes (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), for instance, Martin Jay’s “eye” remains trained on sight even as he discusses vision’s denigration. The precise and brilliant Objectivity by Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison (New York: Zone Books, 2007) turns to images narrowly construed to make an argument about how “objective” scientific knowledge and judgment are, albeit evasively, tied to individual and collective observation. I treat imagery more broadly, as multisensory and connected to affect and reward. Echoing William James’ discussion of consciousness as a flow of images, neurobiologist Antonio Damasio confirms that imagery of various sensory modes overlaps and that images are not static; The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Consciousness (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1999), esp. 318. Aural imagery can be visual, smell and taste “are closely related,” the imagery of touch “draws on representations of texture, temperature, and movement, as well as sight,” and visual imagery can “call on motor activity by invoking the gaze”; Gabrielle Starr, Feeling Beauty: The Neuroscience of Aesthetic Experience (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013), 79-80. Alva Noe and Kevin O’Regan note that sight has less to do with visual representation than with learning the relation between sense and motion; “A
language, as well as how we critically engage the mind-body problem, which has occupied thinkers and artists of all stripes from Plato and Aristotle onward, including philosophers of mind, psychologists, and, more recently, neuroscientists.⁶

Although my thinking is informed by ideas about mind and matter across disciplines, I approach the mind-body relation primarily from a literary, aesthetic-theoretical perspective. What does it mean, I ask, for writers to think an image, perceive its vivacity, and try to communicate this perception to readers?⁷ How do they use imagery to simulate how they think thought forms and feels, and to consider with what organ(s) one must approach imagery? And how do certain kinds of literary images evoke the possibilities and limits of imagining and describing how mind and body intersect? I endeavor to answer these questions by turning to Russian-American, Anglo-Irish, and English literature, using Vladimir Nabokov, Elizabeth Bowen, and A.S. Byatt as case studies. The three authors come together in their idiosyncratic uses of imagery to explore the mind-body problem. I also place these specific writers in dialogue


⁶ In the long study of the mind-body relation, especially in the philosophy of mind, thinkers have tended toward either dualism or monism. Briefly, whereas Buddha and Aristotle thought that mind and matter intersect, Descartes distinguishes between mind and body as substances. Bodies, according to him, are incapable of feeling or thought. Plato believed in higher forms, differentiating between the soul, a higher Form, and the body, of the material world, in which the soul temporarily lodges. Neuroscience bridges the divide between mind and body, but is arguably a long way from explaining the nature of consciousness. There are also views on consciousness ranging from epiphenomenalism to panpsychism. The scope of this project does not permit me to analyze the above in any great depth. I focus instead on paradoxes at the heart of thinking about thinking, as well as problems of describing thought through matter, by looking at specific authors’ relationships to writing, reading, and readers.

⁷ Elaine Scarry’s discussion of how written images acquire imagined, perceptual vivacity guides my inquiry; see *Dreaming by the Book* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999).
because of the similar ways in which they have imagery refract the contingencies and urgency of form, not to mention their proclivity for the “poetic,” which, as I demonstrate throughout, is a term they believe to be equally applicable to prose narrative. By trying to think the mind’s mindfulness through matter, these authors write themselves into a long line of inquiry. Their contribution is also unique, finding its footing in unstable phenomena that are material yet ungraspable, such as weather, yet whose nuances frequently go unnoticed. These phenomena stand for the slippery nature of thought—it is not material but may feel thinglike because of its accompanying sensory activity—and emphasize the permeable boundary between the literal and figurative in written and spoken language; they also stand for the difficulty of translating thought into the letter, the literary,\(^8\) which literally stabilizes what is otherwise unstable and can only be evoked figuratively. My authors’ intervention falls neither into dualism nor entirely into monism, residing somewhere in between.

In “Phases of Fiction,” Virginia Woolf observes that, unlike Dickens with his overpoweringly “malignant” faces, Henry James “illumine[s] the mind within, rather than the world without”: he “has to find an equivalent for the processes of the mind, to make concrete a mental state.”\(^9\) Woolf is right. James frequently turns to air and atmosphere to better describe thought and perception, especially in *The Golden Bowl.*\(^{10}\) Woolf exercises this tendency herself, consistently privileging sensing to just seeing. James and Woolf take the ability to find external,

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8. If we attend to the etymology of “letter,” we find that it not only means sign, symbol, or character, from old French lettre, but also navigates between literal and figurative meanings as it moves from singular to plural, evoking writing, culture, and instruction (“to instruct,” from mid-15\(^{\text{th}}\) c.).


10. Henry James, *The Golden Bowl (Oxford World Classics)* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 112: “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 in which he saw her take in exactly what had occurred in her absence”; “The air, however, had suggestions enough” (180).
stabilizing analogues for perception more for granted, rightly seeing this strategy as an avenue to being original writers. Bowen was half-wary of and half-partial to James, and Woolf told her to beware of his influence.  

Byatt is more than tolerant, having praised James’ imagery and written a redemptive introduction to the less-than-favorably received *The Bostonians*. Nabokov, with his characteristic snobbery, called him a “pale porpoise”; this assessment may have to do with his insistence on writerly originality, which he felt James lacked (he was “a complete fake” and “impotent”). Regardless of how our authors feel about James, they do something more.  

The authors I look at operate at a meta-level. Their images are analogues for thought’s instability, as well as verbal markers for the impossible desire to find material equivalents for mental and perceptual processes; they attend to the pull to close the “unclosable gap between world and thought.” Their phase-changing images are the battleground of immaterial, unstable thought and the consolations of form, speaking to Frank Kermode’s claim that “the humanizing of the world’s contingency cannot be achieved without a representation of that contingency”; this representation models “shapelessness,” which must be “humanized” and “occurs simultaneously

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with the as if, the act of form.” In spite of form’s stabilizing tendency, they cannot take its stability for granted. Their images of mental and perceptual activity are also images of a shifting natural world independent of that activity. Just as this activity evades our grasp and our language, so does nature, in spite of our anthropocentric inclinations.

The authors I analyze are not interested in proving that thought is material or immaterial. They understand that it is not a thing. What is primary for them is the attempt to communicate how mental processes involve the body. While their image-based strategies refract desire to think mind as matter, they know that these strategies rely on metaphor and analogy or, in Nabokov’s case, transform the literal evocation of synaesthetic perception into figurative description for non-synaesthetes. All three want thought to be thinglike in language to relay the physiological counterpart of thinking to readers, the sensory perception tied to imagining and linguistically describing images. These processes precede the product, the written line that readers read. Yet the product ideally stimulates not only perceptual, imaginative activity but also sustained reflection on the joint mental and physiological activity that led to its materialization.

As many scholars point out, writers aware of scientific developments and changing standards of knowledge after 1900 begin injecting narrative with the instability of the external and internal worlds. While Nabokov, Bowen, and Byatt are influenced by their historical

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16 Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction with a New Epilogue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966; 2000), 145. Jean-Paul Sartre’s *La Nausée* provides the context for Kermode’s analysis; “This recognition, that form must not regress into myth, and that contingency must be formalized, makes *La Nausée* something of a model of the conflicts in the modern theory of the novel” (145); “The form of *La Nausée* is an instructive dissonance between humanity and contingency; it discovers a new way of establishing a concord between the human mind and things as they are” (150).

17 Ibid., 144: “The imagination, we recall, is a form-giving power, an esemplastic power; it may require, to use Simone Weil’s words, to be preceded by a ‘decreative’ act, but it is certainly a maker of orders and concords. We apply it to all forces which satisfy the variety of human needs that are met by apparently gratuitous forms. These forms console; if they mitigate our existential anguish it is because we weakly collaborate with them, as we collaborate with language in order to communicate.” I would wager that problems of thought and form were particularly irksome for Nabokov the synaesthete.
moment, what came before it, and what exceeds it, it is not my intention to show how they fit into either a teleological development or any one tradition. What I find intellectually exciting and provocative about them is that they do not; indeed, and we may say this especially of the ever-overemphatic Nabokov, they try not to. This dissertation attends to how these authors develop new strategies irrespective of literary styles and categories with which to expand imagery’s forms and potential. They transform material phenomena that rely on phase-change into concrete signposts. They inject imagery with the paradoxes, nuances, and ambiguities central to the act of making and to the dynamic mental, perceptual operations that come before it. Process-based, or “medial,” imagery in Nabokov, Bowen, and Byatt signals the attempt to conceptualize and describe mind as matter, as well as thought and perception’s imperfect materialization in language, wherein product overshadows process.

“Medial” Imagery

...I have seen it over and over, the same sea, the same, slightly, indifferently swinging above the stones, icily free above the stones, above the stones and then the world.

If you should dip your hand in, your wrist would ache immediately, your bones would begin to ache and your hand would burn as if the water were a transmutation of fire that feeds on stones and burns with a dark gray flame.

If you tasted it, it would first taste bitter, then briny, then surely burn your tongue. It is like what we imagine knowledge to be: dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free, drawn from the cold hard mouth of the world, derived from the rocky breasts forever, flowing and drawn, and since our knowledge is historical, flowing, and flown.
Elizabeth Bishop gets at the heart of knowledge’s paradoxes with tactile metaphors that simulate metamorphosis and continuity. She accomplishes this specifically through shape-shifting elements, likened to body parts and linked with sensory perception and imagination. We are asked to form the same image, the sea, “over and over.” Words mimic its slight swinging, its lapping waves, facilitating the transformation of language-sea into “seen,” sensed, and “same”: into mental imagery, which, at least habitually, cues knowing. We imagine stones’ solidity, the world’s solidity, through the sea’s fluidity. The sea – the phase-changing mind – covers stones, floats “free” above too-solid constraints; it is also drawn from them, extracted as though stones (“rocky breasts”) spawn thought and language. Bishop facilitates sympathetic encounter with imagery by asking us to imagine touching it, dipping our hand in. Paradox helps her keep crafting this grammar of bodily imagination. The water is so cold that it “burns” to the bones, which are like stones, in turn like bodies covered by thought as by flesh. Knowledge, then, is an ache of recognition, a cold fire internally felt, a flame that feeds off of curiosity and may burn the agile tongue. The elements flow together as water mentally transmutes into fire into earth into flesh into thought through perceptual mimesis. These metamorphoses also reverse how thought flows out into the ungraspable natural world; they tame thought, albeit wishfully, by having the outer world shape the inner one to show how they are mutually constitutive.

Knowledge-images are vividly thought and felt because they remain unstable, occupy intermediate material states, do not settle into a single solid thing. Such images recall Mikhail Bakhtin’s observation that: “It is an unfortunate misunderstanding (a legacy of rationalism) to think that truth [pravda] can only be the truth [istina] that is composed of universal moments;

that the truth of a situation is precisely that which is repeatable and constant about it.”¹⁹ Pravda inheres in everything remaining contingent, even the extended metaphor of sea-as-mind, through “if,” “as if,” and “like.” The poet’s knowledge-image is powerful because of its fluidity and felt durability in mind and body. Readers perceive shifting knowledge, a concept, through images that imitate it, in spite of the immovable written line. Language simulates “what we imagine knowledge to be” in the only way that we can imagine it, indirectly – through simile, metonym, and metaphor – as “dark, salt, clear, moving, utterly free.” The elements behave as a body birthing thought, which transforms into “mother” earth. Nature encounters thought in the “birth” of knowledge, which is also the word, drawn “from the cold hard mouth of the [mute] world,” and from the “rocky breasts” from which it “forever” flows. “Cold hard” knowledge, so-called fact linguistically expressed, becomes our world, the reservoir of images and meaning. Nature simultaneously resists such imposition and behaves as the source of bodily, cognitive, and linguistic being. And we feel our thought because of Bishop’s self-reflexive anthropomorphism, which allows us to perceive what thought might feel like in metamorphic perpetuity, without allowing us to fully grasp either thought or matter. This impossibility of possessing is also the cause of imaginative freedom.

Bishop’s reference to knowledge as “historical” is serious and ironic. In spite of being “free,” imagination inflects and pins history down. And in spite of this, history, like knowledge, is not linear, objective, or knowable; yet we continue to rely on both, although they are “forever, flowing and drawn.” The poem’s last word, “flown,” represents this conflict. Knowledge escapes us, in spite of continually flowing out of imagination, which compels us to keep picturing what it

¹⁹ M.M. Bakhtin, *Towards a Philosophy of the Act* [1920-1924], trans. Vadim Liapunov (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1993), 37. This claim ties into Bakhtin’s observation, which begins the essay, that “Aesthetic activity…is powerless to take possession of that moment of Being which is constituted by the transitiveness and open event-ness of Being.”
might be like, and naming these likenesses “knowledge.” The poem ends by enacting its flowing, fleeting subject. “Flown” is the past participle of flow, from Old English *flowan* (“to flow, stream, issue; become liquid, melt; abound, overflow”); it means “decorated with colors that have been fluidly blended,” as in ceramic ware, and its archaic meaning was “filled to excess”; it refers to atmosphere, to floating on air, as in flight. “Fly” also means rapid, unexpected change from one state or position to another, and stands for flight *from* (to flee, escape). The etymology of “flown” ties in neatly with “nuance,” which similarly refers to changing color and substance.

My reading of Bishop’s poem fleshes out the ways in which I will be using the term “medial” for imagery of phase-changing phenomena. The poet draws on transitional matter to meditate on the “strong exhilaration of / what we feel from what we think, of thought / Beating in the heart, as if blood newly came.”

In this way, she attempts to have thought materialize and get readers to imagine imagination materially. “Medial” images of substances evoke transitional mental states, including mental imagery’s metamorphoses, and trigger affective response by getting us to imagine ongoing making. Such imagery helps readers better conceptualize how mind and body are linked in thought by asking them to consider it as neither entirely abstract nor entirely concrete, but as a process and felt phenomenon. Bishop also models the feedback loop between feeling thought and thinking feeling by representing the curious phenomenon of “knowing” what something feels like by thinking it. The mental anticipation of a physical reaction to external stimuli, achieved through metaphorical simulation, is the “as if” of drawing the hand through water, of bitter cold transmuting into heat and flame; this “as if” becomes the *as is* feeling of thought.

Media theorist John Durham Peters demonstrates how media not only mediates communication but is also the bedrock of systems of meaning and order. “Media,” he writes,

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“are ensembles of natural element and human craft.”

My proposal of a process-based aesthetics of reading is informed by the understanding that image-language “media” simulating the connection between thinking and feeling is natural and crafted; it is natural because it uses nature to communicate our ambivalent, historically unethical, yet vital connection with nature more ethically. This is also why it is crafted, in addition to the fact that it is expressed through words, which appropriate and arrest at the same time as process-based description tries to balance out this tendency. I sometimes use “medial” and “liminal” interchangeably, as liminality indicates a sensory threshold, something “barely perceptible” and in an intermediate state. Making something liminal increasingly perceptible relies, I argue, on orienting sensory attention through medial means. I use “medial” more frequently because of its connection with “media,” which means “an intermediate layer, especially in the wall of a blood vessel.” This definition evokes materiality, providing a cyclical life-sustaining image similar to Bishop’s sea for being in between spaces and states.

Philosopher Gernot Böhme discusses atmosphere as a critical term for aesthetic discourse that concerns itself with “environmental qualities and human states.” Atmosphere, he writes:

is in a certain sense indeterminate, diffuse but precisely not indeterminate in relation to its character. On the contrary, we have at our disposal a rich vocabulary with which to characterize atmospheres…Atmospheres are indeterminate above all as regards their ontological status. We are not sure whether we should attribute them to the objects of environments from which they proceed or to the subjects who experience them. We are also unsure where they are. They seem to fill the space with a certain tone or feeling like a haze…Atmospheres can only become a concept…if we succeed in accounting for the peculiar intermediary status of atmospheres between subject and object.

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21 John Durham Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds: Towards a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 3; see also *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); especially valuable is Peters’ emphasis that there is “something historical and contingent” about what may also be “transhistorical and given.”


23 Ibid.
Böhme returns to the older definition of aesthetics as “sensuous experience”; this definition was overtaken by a Kantian ethics of judgment and led to a hierarchical understanding of taste. Atmosphere is the “in-between by means of which environmental qualities and states are related.” He revisits Benjamin’s definition of “aura,” which contains materiality – it is a “strange tissue of space and time” – and sensory participation: one “breathes” in nature’s aura while “following a mountain chain on the horizon or a branch, which throws its shadow on the person at rest.”

Benjamin’s description “impl[ies] a bodily tendency to privatize experience”; “to perceive aura is to absorb it into one’s own bodily state of being. What is perceived is an indeterminate spatially extended quality of feeling.” In other words, perception relies on sympathy, on imaginative and bodily reception and response.

Against Kantian determinism, and as a corrective to Hermann Schmitz’s notion that atmosphere can only be experienced in bodily proximity to things – which, according to Schmitz, do not produce atmospheres on their own terms but absorb them – Böhme suggests extension and form, atmospheric qualities, as thinglike and spatial. Atmospheres are “‘tinctured’ through the presence of things, of persons or environmental constellations. They are themselves spheres of the presence of something, their reality in space.” Atmosphere is the “common reality of the perceiver and the perceived,” which “particular forms of speech describing it” legitimate. Atmospheric perception is primary to aesthetic experience, which involves body, affect, and “analytic regard.”

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25 Ibid.
26 Ibid., 121. We might concede that those blind and/or deaf know this intimately, whereas those of us with a surfeit of senses more often either overlook or doubt it.
27 Ibid., 122.
28 Ibid., 125.
Böhme’s reflections may be extended to process-based aesthetics. Process-based images are atmospheres, displaying the qualities above, and produce atmospheres. Medial imagery described in words – the medium and barrier for atmosphere – is “diffuse” and determinate in character and function. Process-based phenomena are not quite objective or subjective, but both, exhibiting characteristics of the natural world and “built” environment. These phenomena, including shadow, weather, metamorphosis, and oneiric experience (described using them), are materially diffuse in nature, simulate the diffuse nature of thought and perception, and “materialize” as words that feed back into imagination. Transitional matter absorbs tensions between thinking and describing thought, feeling and describing feeling, imagining and describing imagining. Materializing in art, such matter embodies the tensions of representation.

**Feeling Thought: The Obstacles**

This dissertation takes its title from A.S. Byatt’s essay on John Donne and the embodied mind. In it, Byatt asks: “What precisely does it mean, to ‘feel your thought’?”29 What ensues tells us much about her thinking about sensuous imagery in poetry. Yet we learn even more about her thinking about thinking. Byatt discusses how particular kinds of images, often consisting of complex metaphors, combine sensation and thought to evoke dynamic processes preceding language, processes by means of which literary images are first formed in the imagining mind. Tennyson’s “musical chain of closed balladic verses”30 in *In Memoriam*, Wallace Stevens’ mental maps in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” Donne’s conceptual, geometric, and linguistic play in poems ranging from “Air and Angels” to “A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning” to “The Crosse” – these image-based strategies of evocation target something beyond primary

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30 Ibid.
perception; these strategies, according to Byatt, make the reader feel “the peculiar excitement and pleasure of mental activity itself.”31 Readers experience bodily sympathy, Byatt insists, because the writers in question “describe not images, but image-making, not sensations but the process of sensing, not concepts but the idea of the relations of concepts.”32

Byatt uses “concept” as defined by Jean-Pierre Changeux in Neuronal Man, where he discusses it as part of a “complex sequence of mental objects.”33 In this context, the term refers to spontaneous combinations of neurons within a kind of mental object “algebra.” She goes on to say that Changeux describes language as a “vehicle for the communication of concepts in a society,” whereas the language of thought consists of “concepts derived from images derived from concepts.” We see how both Changeux and Byatt turn to something concrete (“objects”) to describe something abstract (“concepts”). We come up against the impossibility of imagining or thinking “concepts” on their own terms. The neurons of which mental objects consist are material; the material aspect also resides in the process through which the product, images and concepts, is formed. But the problem remains that thought does not “precisely” map onto either matter or language. Neurons may be objects, but concepts and ideas are not. We need material

31 Ibid., 248.
32 Ibid., 249.
33 Jean-Pierre Changeux, Neuronal Man: The Biology of Mind, trans. Dr. Laurence Garey (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985). Byatt includes Changeux’s description of neuronal activity and mental objects in “Feeling Thought,” 249-250: “a) The primary percept is a mental object whose graph and activity are constructed by direct contact with the external world; b) The image is an object of the memory, “autonome et fugace” [autonomous and fleeting] whose evocation requires no contact with the environment. It can only exist autonomously if there exists a “couplage” [a linking together] of neurones in the graph which is stable in time and already exists before it is evoked. (Called up?); c) The concept, like the image, is a memory object, but has only a weak or even no sensory content. It is the result of the recruitment of neurones present in areas of association with multiple sensory or motor specificities. The passage from image to concept follows two distinct and complementary paths – the “élagage” [pruning, or excising] or the sensory component, and the enrichment due to the combinations resulting from the way mental objects are linked; d) The associative properties of mental objects allow them to link themselves spontaneously and autonomously. They are constrained by the wiring structures of the mental machine, which in fact imposes its own ‘grammar’ on the linking of mental objects.”
metaphors and analogies to describe the latter indirectly, not to mention that “concepts” in social language are not, according to Changeux, “concepts” in thought-language to begin with.

When Byatt describes Donne and Stevens’ approaches, in the case of “images” and “sensations,” she focuses on process, not product. When she gets to “concepts,” however, she runs up against the dilemma noted above: she uses a concept (“idea”) to refer to the conceptual, a tautology framed neither in terms of process nor in terms of the relation between thought and sensation. Here, we cannot feel her thought “as immediately as the odour of a rose,” whereas prior to this, we have likely been able to imagine “image-making” and “the process of sensing” images as they form and shape-shift in our minds. Byatt is right, I am convinced, that we can perceive Donne’s tree netting the “fibres” of the “dreamless head,” its roots “wrapping [my emphasis] about the bones.” We feel these images because such material descriptions evoking “extreme [mental] activity” involve the body and remain process-based in spite of being written.

Byatt’s pitfall of using “ideas,” which arrest thought and are not images, to refer to “concepts,” which are abstract and immobile, is not exclusive to her. She arguably repeats the mistake of anyone who has ever tried to think about thinking without a material (verbal) foothold. Nabokov, Bowen, and Byatt grapple with what it “precisely” means to feel thought, and attendant dilemmas of representation. How can writers effectively use images to describe the process of thinking about thinking, and the process of feeling thought, without arresting readers’ thought and perception through abstract concepts about them? We lack the words with which to describe something that is not a “thing.” However, mobile material imagery that encourages us to imagine imagery’s materiality, because it mimics perceptual processes tied to cognitive

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34 Byatt takes this expression from T.S. Eliot, which he uses to refer to the “dissociation of sensibility” since the metaphysical poets (“Feeling Thought,” 247). Eliot writes, “Tennyson and Browning are poets and they think; but they do not feel their thought as immediately as the odour of a rose”; see Eliot, “The Metaphysical Poets,” The Annotated Waste Land with Eliot’s Contemporary Prose, ed. Lawrence Rainey (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 198.
processes, facilitates greater mental activity. The feeling of thought can only be described indirectly through images of phase change, which evoke it more directly. The authors discussed in this dissertation use such image-based strategies to try to find a shape for the otherwise indescribable.

**Material Imagination**

My understanding and use of “material imagination” is informed by Gaston Bachelard’s reflections on the alchemy of poetic imagination, which combine science, psychology, philosophy, and literature, and rely on paradox and ambivalence. Living thought not bound to reduction is, for Bachelard, characterized by “shifting character.” He is interested in how we experience and express poetic images, not in stabilizing definitions of imagery and imagination. His monographs on the four elements link thought with “material reverie” and demonstrate that poetic language creates new dynamic images by revealing tensions in matter. Bachelard calls matter the “very principle that can dissociate itself from forms”: it “remains itself despite all distortion and division.” He does not dismiss the pull toward form. Rather, he acknowledges the power of objective epistemologies, which metamorphic material imagination challenges.

My project explores how language “used to translate material images becomes a veritable incantation to the forces of energy”; how literary images “engaged with the mystery of matter...suggest rather than describe”; and how “figurative meanings retain a certain sensory

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density.” Nabokov, Bowen, and Byatt use images resembling Bachelard’s to create an image-based language of attention to the possibilities and limits of language. Believing that imagination precedes linguistic expression, they still, inevitably, turn to language to suggest extra-linguistic processes. Unlike them, Bachelard emphasizes language’s primacy: “One would not be able to meditate in a zone that preceded language.” For him, we exist through images that emerge as renewed metaphors in words: “I can only know man through reading, wonderful reading, which allows me to judge man by what he writes.” Admittedly, Bachelard is not always consistent. Reducing an image to either a psychological or physical reality arrests its possibility; “a stable and completely realized image clips the wings of the imagination.” Yet when images are described as living and dynamic in writing, the written line has the dual function of arresting imagination, even if reading reactivates it.

Bachelard’s focus on contradictions in matter, the “mirror” of our energy, feeds into paradoxes in his thinking, which he would endorse over essentializing tendencies in aesthetics and ontologies. “A formal, a dynamic, and a material intention,” he writes, “are simultaneously necessary to capture the object in its force, in its resistance, and its matter”; “A doctrine of imagined qualities must not only achieve the Baudelairian synthesis by adding to it the deepest organic aspects of consciousness, it must also emphasize a daring, proliferating sensuousness,
intoxicated with inexactitude.”

If his consideration of material imagination is unstable, this is because Bachelard uses language to try to render thought in new shapes and ethically explore imagination’s potential freedom in a world we cannot help but humanize but also cannot possess. The “poem of the mind,” as Stevens puts it, “has to be living, to learn the speech of the place” and “of the time”:

...It has
To construct a new stage...
And, like an insatiable actor, slowly and
With meditation, speak words that in the ear,
In the delicatest ear of the mind, repeat,
Exactly, that which it wants to hear, at the sound
Of which, an invisible audience listens
...to itself, expressed
In an emotion as of two people, as of two
Emotions becoming one.

Imagination, expressed through phase-changing material imagery, is that “poem of the act of the mind,” singular and shared. This “act of the mind,” my case studies would agree, feeds into a broader history and is also particular to its moment.

Bachelard is more of an idealist than a realist. Nabokov, Bowen, and Byatt’s strategies hew to Bachelard’s philosophy, including his proclivity for the poetic. However, they take a more empirical approach, reflecting on how language facilitates and weighs down dynamic material images and metaphors. The medium for expressing thought processes also turns these processes into products. They emphasize the psychological and physiological elements of writing and reading – how bodies and minds are involved in aesthetic experience – and how this relation is necessary for sympathetic encounter. For communication to occur, for “other [reading] minds”

43 Quoted in On Poetic Imagination and Reverie, xxxiii.
to imagine images, writers must first imagine those images themselves, an activity that Nabokov, Bowen, and Byatt think begins outside of language.

Matter and Form

In the course of this dissertation, I analyze how all three writers integrate actual poetry into their prose or, in Bowen’s case, call for prose to build in poetic principles.\textsuperscript{45} This faith in the poetic is not random and, as I will show, feeds into the descriptive grammar\textsuperscript{46} that they create to convey more directly how they think thought-images “materialize” in the mind. These images pull the senses along with them and pull thought out into what it makes: language-art. Long before the advent of prose, poetry was taken for granted as the space of “truer,” sometimes unmediated, self and collective expression; it was considered a living form of storytelling, often orally communicated, and was either sung or accompanied by music. The earliest written poetry was in cuneiform, picture-language carved using a blunt reed into clay tablets, an arguably more sensorially involved system for describing and inscribing images, as well as how they form. This desire to find in poetry a closer equivalent to thought and perception points us to the persistent tension between living form and the necessarily limiting possibilities of representation, no matter the genre.

\textsuperscript{45} Elizabeth Bowen, “The Poetic Element in Fiction,” \textit{Listening In: Broadcasts, Speeches, and Interviews by Elizabeth Bowen} ed. Allan Hepburn (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010); I analyze this lecture at length in Chapter Two.

\textsuperscript{46} Elaine Scarry differentiates between the possibilities of prose versus poetry for perceptual mimesis. The three writers in question think that narrative may be injected with poetry’s possibilities. Here is Scarry on the subject (\textit{Dreaming by the Book}, 10): “Both narrative prose and poetry devote themselves centrally to mimetic perception, but poetry retains a strong engagement with delayed perception, the second category: like the musical score, its sequence of printed signs contains a set of instructions for the production of actual sound; the page does not itself sing but exists forever on the verge of song. Poetry – again unlike narrative – even has immediate sensory content, since the visual disposition of the lines and stanzas provides an at once apprehensible visual rhythm that is a prelude to, or rehearsal for, or promise of, the beautiful regulation of sound to come.”
Contemporary poet Eleanor Wilner refers to the origins of written poetry in the *Gilgamesh* epic in “Cuneiform: Meditation on a Line.” The:

…blunt stylus on a blank
tablet, make[s] the signs, wedged-shaped
like the bones of the wrist, as the hand moves
across the wet clay, incising over and over
…the three strokes that mean *man*,
and the long wavering line that means
what must follow, and that from which we descend.47

Poetry metamorphoses picture-language into “man,” image into flesh, thought into line. Line is also lineage (blood, bone, and poetry), as well as thought made material through clay, *our* mythic origins. The poem performs desire for the written line to behave as thought’s embodied extraction, a moving, breathing picture of imagination that does not end with the individual poet’s representation. Isobel Armstrong’s inspiring study, *Language as Living Form in Nineteenth Century Poetry*, originates from her contention that: “Idealist language assumes that the object is known as a category of mind…an aspect of consciousness.”48 That Nabokov, Bowen, and Byatt turn to poetry as part of their literary strategy directs attention to how that strategy incorporates idealism. In spite of living and writing during a time – the first half of the twentieth century and after two World Wars – when, as scholars emphasize, all systems of knowledge and belief were questioned, they try to get language to behave as an accurate reflection of thought and feeling, a representation of how the self flows into things, a *mirror* of the mind’s transformative force and power. They do not disentangle themselves from literary traditions. Rather, they expand on the “lineage” of storytelling in the European novel and World literature, treating them in terms of continuity, not rupture.

These authors’ idealism, in spite of or because of their empiricist leanings, directly informs their belief in the power of naming, a creative and appropriative urge that leads language and indifferent matter to take on the life and meaning that aesthetic forms bestow. As Nabokov, Bowen, and Byatt “name” natural phenomena as stand-ins for mental and perceptual activity, we might conclude that they are unabashed anthropomorphists. Yet we would be overly hasty to draw this conclusion without adding an important coda: they intentionally use anthropomorphism to cultivate an ethics of sympathetic encounter between writer and reader and word, to contemplate “nature” broadly construed while understanding the boundary between what is ours temporarily (our minds, our bodies) and what becomes ours temporarily, and only metaphorically, when we use it to express the otherwise inexpressible. This ethics of fleeting encounter between mind, body, and world can only be communicated through image-language that evokes the instability, the impossibility, of possession. In this, our idealists are also realistic. Because all three authors were either trained in, taught, or wrote about visual art, they readily recognize that form is made, not a given; it is dynamic, metaphoric, and metamorphic in spite of language’s arresting tendency, in spite of fiction’s tendency to assert its own reality.

Well-versed in color and light and weight, Nabokov, Bowen, and Byatt recognize and capitalize on how, in art historian Henri Focillon’s words, “matter imposes its own form on form.” Matter is a destabilizing and creative force. Yet Focillon is emphatic: “Unless and until it actually exists in matter, form is little better than a vista of the mind, a mere speculation on a
space that has been reduced to geometrical intelligibility.” Thought is not actually material.

Words are not exactly things. Nevertheless, both can be made to behave as such, be perceived as if they are. This requires the suspension of disbelief; it requires a willing, sometimes willful, act of readerly imagination in response to writerly desire and imperative. Moreover, “form” is more than the written or painted line; it is a representation of the textured physical world and our physical reaction to its materiality; it is an expression of umwelt, or built environment. As Gaston Bachelard would put it, the mind shapes the world and is shaped by it in turn.

My case studies treat thought as matter because they, against or irrespective of a philosophical tradition that was adamant about the separation of mind and body, matter and form – more in line with what contemporary science and psychology tell us – believe that the body is implicated in the mind’s movements. Their mobile material images are metaphors and analogues for how they register consciousness and perception. Nabokov not only claimed to think in images – he famously said that novels form as images in his mind, where the finished product is “illumined” like a painting perceived wholly – but was also a synaesthete with eidetic memory. Bowen was extremely shortsighted and stammered. A.S. Byatt visualizes novels as geometric structures and “thinks novels out” with her “fingers.” While I do not intend to dwell on biographical details, constitutional factors influence how writers write, and the aforementioned

\[51\] Ibid., 95.
\[53\] “I don’t know how much is known about the difference between those who think with mental imagery and those who don’t. I very much do – I see any projected piece of writing or work as a geometric structure: various colours and patterns. I see other people’s metaphors – if there is an iconic content to a metaphor I will ‘see’ a visual image on some inner mental screen, which can then be contemplated more precisely, described discursively”; Passions of the Mind: Selected Writings (London: Chatto & Windus, 1991).
are no exception. In interviews and essays, they assert the particularity of their perceptual experience, which they aim to share.

In part because of these constitutional factors, their image-based descriptive strategies complicate the already problematic boundary between literal and figurative language, a boundary artificially drawn not unlike the written and painted line. Phase-changing substances and states highlight the metamorphic quality of form, which may be superficially stable, but also:

…prolongs and diffuses itself…throughout our dreams and fancies: we regard it, as it were, as a kind of fissure through which crowds of images aspiring to birth may be introduced into some indefinite realm – a realm which is neither that of physical extent nor that of pure thought.

All three authors are concerned with metamorphosis, which they model through matter in transit, and which Marina Warner identifies as the dynamic principle of creation intrinsic to all nature. Process-based phenomena help them describe how consciousness and perception seep into narrative, and are verbal materializations of the need to share how ongoing thought feels, albeit in a stabilizing form: word art. Art gives things, as Frank Kermode puts it in his famous monograph of that name, a “sense of an ending” that we evade in life moving toward death. Even Scheherazade’s stories, which she tells to survive, must cease sometime, somewhere. The authors in question are aware of how we are driven by narrative impulses described above. They use destabilizing image forms to explore these impulses while grappling with them themselves,

56 Focillon, The Life of Forms in Art, 34-35.
and proceed through contradiction. Their thought-images highlight barriers to cultivating a language of process in language that, in general, aims at some result (message, meaning, naming, ending).

Philosopher and psychologist John Dewey emphasizes that because art, the “product” of experience, is often regarded as separate from the qualities of experience that brought it into being, it “is not favorable to understanding”\(^58\); the “task is to restore continuity between the refined and intensified experience” of art and “everyday” experience.\(^59\) Dewey describes experience as the “interaction of live creature and environing conditions.”\(^60\) The most significant of his observations pertains to thinking and making:

Thinking goes on in trains of ideas, but the ideas form a train only because they are much more than what an analytic psychology calls ideas. They are phases, emotionally and practically distinguished, of a developing underlying quality; they are its moving variations, not separate and independent like Locke’s and Hume’s so-called ideas and impressions, but are subtle shadings of a pervading and developing hue…art denotes a process of doing or making…Every art does something with some physical material, the body or something outside the body, with or without the use of intervening tools, and with a view to production of something visible, audible, or tangible. So marked is the active or ‘doing’ phase of art, that the dictionaries usually define it in terms of skilled action, ability in execution.\(^61\)

Thinking, then, is characterized by phase-change and nuance. Making, an extraction of thinking, is also defined through action: the action of shaping thought into matter. By verbally transforming transitional images into figurative markers for thought, feeling, and their materialization, my case studies try to retrain readerly attention and perception and illuminate overlooked aspects of our everyday interaction with our environment. They want us to dwell on difficult-to-attend-to phenomena characterized by unruliness with respect to form (shadows, weather, metamorphosis, oneiric states), and create a material grammar that cues readers to

\(^{59}\) Ibid.  
\(^{60}\) Ibid., 35.  
\(^{61}\) Ibid., 37.
imagine more vividly than they otherwise would through intentionally stabilized imagery. Half successful forms of mental, perceptual mimesis, used to facilitate greater sympathy between reader and text, mitigate frustrated authorly desire to express how thought-images form and feel.

The debate about the nature of consciousness, perception, and mental imagery continues to expand and grow more nuanced. Current neuroscience research, for example, focuses on embodied-experiential aesthetic response to determine how art creates new hedonic, or pleasure-based, value relations for observers.\(^{62}\) Scholars in other disciplines have teamed up with neuroscientists to explore aesthetic “value” as something cognitive, sensory, emotional, dynamic, and contingent.\(^ {63}\) Responses to multisensory imagery and imagery of motion, it turns out, involve

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\(^{63}\) Paul B. Armstrong, for example, discusses how the brain’s visual word form area, located in the lower left occipital region and involved in visual recognition of objects and graphic signs, is also involved in reading. Drawing on the work of phenomenological and reception theorists including Hans Gadamer and Wolfgang Iser, he reinforces the relation of the brain’s “to and fro movements of interpretation” with unpredictability and play; *How Literature Plays With the Brain: The Neuroscience of Reading and Art* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), esp. 26. In *Feeling Beauty*, Gabrielle Starr defines aesthetic experiences as events, connecting them with dynamism and temporality; this allows her to
enhanced rewards processing, reevaluation, and knowledge formation. Neuroscience also has its skeptics. American novelist Marilynne Robinson, for example, criticizes the discipline for its reductivist treatment of the mind and the “substance of reality,” its inattentiveness to “sciences that address ontology”\textsuperscript{64}; “if this most intricate and vital object [the brain] could be translated into an effective simplicity for which the living world seems to provide no analogy, this indeed would be one of nature’s wonders.” Hers is a plea to find a balance between the physical, “as elusive as anything to which a name can be given,” and metaphysical. Religious stance aside, Robinson is right to ask us to consider the unknowable aspects of knowledge and being: any essentializing claims about them are counterbalanced by their mystery. Science and psychology inform my study, but only to a degree. The authors I focus on bring their awareness of science’s findings to a larger exploration of the mysteries of mind through the mysteries of matter, and search for imperfect analogies for self in the “living world.”\textsuperscript{65}

The Chapters

I begin by analyzing the image of “shadow” in Vladimir Nabokov’s work in general and in \textit{The Gift} in particular. It is a curious phenomenon, I suggest, that shadow appears as often as it does in Nabokov; equally curious is that, in spite of this, readers and critics continue to overlook the unique presence and meaning of shadows in his writing. Nabokov’s unconventional treatment of foreground the non-static nature of sensory perceptions, emotions, and ideas at the heart of aesthetic pleasure and discuss how these things are related at the neural level.\textsuperscript{64} Marilynne Robinson, “Humanism, Science, and the Radical Expansion of the Possible: Why we shouldn’t let neuroscience banish mystery from human life,” \textit{The Nation} (22 October, 2015).

\textsuperscript{65} While interested in cognitive science, I treat cognition at the crossroads of aesthetics and narrative, mind and body, metaphysics and ideation. What I find fascinating is the use of material metaphors of phase-change across disciplines to make meta-arguments about thinking as a felt process. Scientists and humanists describe the operations of the mind by writing about thought as mobile matter. So, we observe that Focillon and Warner’s observations about material instability resemble the imagery and terminology that Changeux uses to describe the structure, organization, and interaction of neurons in the brain. Changeux’s metaphors for mental activity facilitate Byatt’s reflections on what she values in poetry. Science’s metaphors migrate into mythopoetics, helping her think about the play of imagery and perception, the necessity of figurative language.
shadows and our tendency to overlook them stems, I argue, from how Nabokov perceived them as a synaesthete not subject to strict sensory divisions. I first trace Nabokov’s preoccupation with shadows across his lectures, poetry, and novels, placing especial emphasis on his artistic training and reinterpretation of the light-shadow binary using the writings of Leonardo da Vinci. In Nabokov, we discern a conflict between the attempt to describe perceptual processes (and prowess) through a specific image – a code word for consistent cross-sensory coupling and the insistently creative mind – and knowledge that this singular perception cannot be shared through language, which arrests what it evokes, transforms literal perception into figurative description.

Hence shadow’s “medial” status. Not only does shadow as a material phenomenon never settle, shifting in time and space, but in Nabokov this image also remains caught between metaphor and description of actual perception, “embodied” mind and word, making it difficult to pin down even by the discerning but non-synaesthete reader. We see how shadow functions literally and figuratively especially in The Gift, Nabokov’s last Russian novel about an aspiring poet-émigré longing to communicate his craft. We find that shadow is a twofold metaphor for how thought extends beyond the written line, shadow-thought, and for how language arrests thought and perception, shadow-line. My reading offers a new approach to Nabokov and directs attention to this vital phenomenon in his oeuvre. This interpretation also expands our vocabulary for talking about images and the mind-body relation by demonstrating how Nabokov broadens imagery’s possibilities and perceptual range.

I then turn to Anglo-Irish author Elizabeth Bowen. Analyzing her at first puzzling lecture “The Poetic Element in Fiction,” I show how it is vital to understanding Bowen’s aesthetics and proposes a new form of image-based description in prose. The lecture allows her to suggest that prose narrative incorporate “poetic” images – images standing in more directly for ongoing
thought and perception – that ask us to attend to how “internal scenery” materializes imperfectly in language. “Internal scenery” linguistically staged calls forth how perception and imagination operate extra-linguistically by juxtaposing descriptions of them with social language, which limits how feeling and thought are expressed. Unable to materialize in spoken and written words, thought, feeling, and the relation of consciousnesses “materialize” instead in overlooked process-based imagery of weather, atmosphere, and semiconscious modes such as daydreaming, descriptions of which are tied to intermediate spaces between nature and social structures.

Bowen turns to “what cannot be precise,” the elemental and medial, which turns out to be a more precise, if idealized, way of trying to empirically describe the life of images and imagination. I move from The House in Paris to a comparative analysis of Bowen and friend and contemporary Virginia Woolf to a consideration of Bowen’s poetic “element” and dramatic “action” in the context of playwright-symbolist Maurice Maeterlinck’s essay “The Tragical in Daily Life.” An in-depth reading of The Death of the Heart follows. Bowen develops a process-based vocabulary of attention for thought, a vocabulary that relies on desire to think about thinking through transitional matter.

Image-based descriptive passages in the novel attempt to broaden readerly perception and sympathy, whereas other forms of language (letters, dialogues, Portia’s diary) reinforce the limits of communication, relaying less adequately mental and perceptual processes, as well as the nuanced relation between bodies and minds regulated by social codes. Medial substances and states described in transitional times and spaces – seasons, manmade and natural environments, sections of the novel – also orient attention to the literal and figurative functions of “interior” and “exterior,” the boundary between which Bowen’s imagery blurs. Bowen was no synaesthete, yet her imagery requires a similar imaginative leap as Nabokov’s shadows. On the one hand, phase-
changing material images provide a sturdier medium between word and “embodied” mind. On
the other hand, we run into similar problems of representation as in Nabokov because of the
difficulty and draw of describing mental processes materially.

My analysis culminates in a chapter on A.S. Byatt. Neuroscientist Jean-Pierre
Changeux’s metaphor for “mental objects,” which rest “between crystal and smoke,” transforms
in Byatt into mythopoetics, informing her use of image-based metaphor and analogy to describe
more “precisely” how thought feels. Elements and metamorphosis in Possession: A Romance
train readerly attention on thought’s materialization in language, at the same time as this imagery
reinforces the impossibility of grasping thought through material means. Phase change in Byatt
stages the imperfect meeting of writerly and readerly minds, Victorian and contemporary; it also
indicates the slipperiness of thought in gendered writing that first tries to stand in for and then
tips into bodily encounter. The stakes are different and transform language differently for Byatt’s
male and female characters. Process-based imagery indicates the limits and dangers of socialized
language as it collides with thought and bodily desire; it also stands for narrative’s shape-shifting
and historical continuity. I move from a reading of Robert Browning’s “Sludge: The Medium,”
which prefaces the novel, to a discussion of how Byatt rewrites the metamorphic, elemental
imagery of Scandinavian and Breton myth, to a reading of how letters and poetry in Possession
illuminate material imagination and the confrontation of mind and body.

My authors exercise magical thinking by self-reflexively making the world, as Steven
Connor puts it, “a substrate for thought.” Thought constitutes itself through material means.

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Connor distills this tendency thus: “Thinking of thinking is a magical operation, in that it requires a
subject to constitute itself as an object, while not surrendering its subjective privileges. For thinking to
make of itself an object, it seems to need a material substrate, which may be defined as that which
underlies, or provides a ground or foundation for, an otherwise immaterial thing...Like thought, the air
has power without presence. It is invisible, but has visible effects. Oddly, then, in serving as the substrate
for thought, the air succeeds precisely to the degree that it does not in fact function as a substance, but
Made more tangible, it becomes a figurative marker for what we cannot touch. And we need and crave for thought to act as though it is material as we need and crave air. Air and quasi-substances like it are paradoxically more “solid” figurative devices that, similar to thought, are “next to nothing.” Such “substrate[s] for that which has no evident substrate” are not just “imagined or imaginary; they are materializations of the power of imagination itself.”

We long to make thought materialize, I contend, because of often unquantifiable but palpable bodily, affective responses accompanying thinking. Few novelists consistently reflect on the tendency to give thought materiality through process-based imagery that simultaneously directs us to lacunas in thought’s linguistic expression. Nabokov, Bowen, and Byatt stage their theories about how images and ideas first form in the mind, while asking us to attend to the relation between our ability to conceive of fiction and the mythologies on which linguistic denotation is based.

rather as a quasi-substance, a substance that, like thought itself, is next to nothing, not quite there. Air is a thought-form”; The Matter of Air: Science and the Art of the Ethereal (London: Reaktion Books, 2010), 119.

67 Ibid., 105. Whereas Connor’s perceptive analysis feeds into a historical argument about changing attitudes toward and advances in air-forms – pneumatic therapeutics, gas, foam, draughts, atmospherics, etc. – I am interested in and convinced by his observations about how air behaves as a “thought-form.” We may expand on these observations. Just as air is an apt quasi-substance for thought to latch onto and be described in terms of, other inconstant substances and states will do just as well. Imagery I analyze in depth includes, but does not end with, air. See also Leo Spitzer, “Milieu and Ambiance: An Essay in Historical Semantics,” Philosophy and Phenomenology 3:1 (Sep., 1942). For a fascinating reading of the figurative functions of air, as well as the feedback loop between atmosphere and economy in Dickens, see George Yeats, “ ‘Dirty Air’: Little Dorrit’s Atmosphere,” Nineteenth-Century Literature 66:3 (2011).

CHAPTER ONE

Nabokov’s Shadow-Line

No, I have as yet said nothing, or, rather, said only bookish words...there is something I know, there is something I know, there is something...I knew without knowing, I knew without wonder, I knew as one knows oneself, I knew what it was impossible to know...

Nabokov, Invitation to a Beheading

Нет, я еще ничего не сказал или сказал только книжное...кое-что знаю, кое-что знаю, кое-что...я знал без узнавания, я знал без удивления, я знал, как знаешь себя, я знал то, что знать невозможно...

Набоков, Приглашение на казнь

Introduction

Nabokov’s writing is full of shadows. Let us recall the shadow lingering on an uneven wall in Invitation to a Beheading, leading Cincinnatus to reflect that, “brought up into the air, the word bursts, as burst those spherical fishes that breathe and blaze only in the compressed murk of the depths when brought up in the net” (“Слово, извлеченное на воздух, лопается, как лопаются в сетях те шарообразные рыбы, которые дышат и блистают только на темной, сдавленной

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глубине”). In Ada, “thoughts are much more faintly remembered than shadows or colors.” In Pnin, Nabokov emphasizes Victor’s ability to distinguish the colors of shadows and describes shades that approach the point beyond “human perception.” Nor can we omit Pale Fire’s waxwing, whose shadow flies on reduplicated in Shade’s sky: “I was the shadow of the waxwing slain / By the false azure in the windowpane; / I was the smudge of ashen fluff – and I / Lived on, flew on, in the reflected sky.” Shade’s word choice suggests that a particular form of thought extends beyond the written line, a communicative tool and artistic cage whose mimetic capacity is deceptive, imperfect.

Nabokov admires writers who dwell on shadow’s materiality and detail. He attributes a “colored shadow” to each character in Bleak House. He pauses over a shadow outside young Marcel’s window that is “denser and more concrete than the object” and notes Tolstoy’s “foreglimpse” of Proust through his “close association of the visible and the heard, of shadow light and shadow sound, of ear and eye.” He asserts that “the man who prefers the monsters of the deep to the sunshades on the beach, will find in [Gogol’s] The Overcoat shadows linking our state of existence to those other states and modes which we dimly apprehend in our rare

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75 Nabokov, Lectures on Literature, ed. Fredson Bowers (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981), 68. Michael Wood observes that Nabokov “distinguishes categorically, not between the person and the writer but between their precise shadows...The same person, Nabokov is suggesting, can be historian and judge, biographer and critic”; see The Magician’s Doubts: Nabokov and the Risks of Fiction (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 13. Writing about Nabokov late fiction, Wood again uses shadow to pinpoint resemblances and multiple identities; see “Nabokov’s Late Fiction,” The Cambridge Companion to Nabokov, ed. Julian W. Connelly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), esp. 200-202. Wood is quite right about the individual’s/author’s multiple roles in terms of shadows cast. We can expand on these observations. For Nabokov, shadow is the primary image of the author (and of his ideal reader). In The Gift, he projects the writer’s shadow into the future, making the writer his ideal reader: “The real writer should ignore all readers but one, that of the future, who in his turn is merely the author reflected in time” (TG, 340).
76 Quoted in Nabokov, Lectures on Literature, 219.
77 Ibid., 220.
moments of irrational perception.” Nabokov’s fourth dimension contains what thrives in patterned darkness, art that intimates the “secret depth of the human soul where the shadows of other worlds pass like the shadows of nameless and soundless ships.” These other worlds are here. They move alongside our everyday existence like souls clinging to bodies, like shadows clinging to ships in water, and are only dimly accessible to regular perception and attention. Nabokov consistently connects shadows with perception and presence. We also discern a tension between the attempt to share perception and knowledge that this perception is singular.

Nabokov treats shadow unconventionally. He does so, I contend, because of how he perceived shadows as a synaesthete not subject to strict sensory divisions. Besides circulating in Nabokov’s writings as process-based material phenomena, shadows signal his relationship to memory, language, and writing, as well as to his audience, whose perceptual attention differs from his. Shadow resides at the fore of Nabokov’s aesthetics and must be attended to as a conceptual and linguistic marker of his synaesthesia at work. I first lay the groundwork for this proposition and then turn to The Gift to further demonstrate it. The Gift especially fleshes out Nabokov relation to shadow and outlines the problems involved in communicating this relation, in describing idiosyncratic perceptual processes for non-synaesthete readers. In the novel, “shadow” is a twofold metaphor for thought’s extension beyond the line (shadow-thought) and language’s finitude (shadow-line). Shadow is also, as it happens, an unstable material phenomenon, shifting in time and space. We find that, in Nabokov, it indicates the permeable boundary between figurative description and literal perception, mind and body, and mind and word/world. Shadow is a “medial” image, metaphor, and analogue for the insistently creative “embodied” mind, as well as for the limits of communication. My reading of the different

78 Ibid., 58.
functions of shadow in Nabokov complicates the stakes for how we encounter his work and redirects our attention to this overlooked phenomenon in his oeuvre; it also contributes to the dialogue about literary imagery by showing how Nabokov uses shadow to broaden imagery’s narrative possibilities and perceptual range.  

II

I was the shadow of the waxwing slain
By the false azure in the windowpane;
I was the smudge of ashen fluff – and I
Lived on, flew on, in the reflected sky. ...

Nabokov was trained in drawing and painting from a young age and consistently refers to and describes visual art in his writing. His texts display his familiarity with painterly conventions and cultural mythologies about light and shadow, the inheritance of a tradition of Western

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80 Gabrielle Starr summarizes the difference between created and inadvertently perceived imagery in a footnote on synaesthesia: “neurological concepts of synesthesia and what individuals with synesthesia experience differ greatly from the blending of sensory imagery in metaphor and art.” Gabrielle Starr, *Feeling Beauty: The Neuroscience of Aesthetic Experience*, 197. This chapter explores how Nabokov’s literary imagery negotiates and pushes this boundary between the created and perceived.
representation in which shadow was often considered negatively.\textsuperscript{81} Plato’s cave parable, we remember, is a tale about imprisoned vision that pits shadows, false reality, against sunlight, which bestows truth and knowledge\textsuperscript{82}; the unfortunate Narcissus “loves an unsubstantial hope and thinks that substance which is only shadow.”\textsuperscript{83} Nabokov approaches shadow differently. He places shadows at the origin of cognition and treats the perception of them as an overlooked way of looking, rather than rendering them as insubstantial projections or deceptions.

We may not always heed the importance of shadows to creating the illusion of reality in two-dimensional drawings of three-dimensional objects. Nabokov attends to how shadow gives form and definition to drawn and painted things and to its figurative potential. He would endorse Pliny the Elder’s assertion that painting “began with tracing an outline around a man’s shadow.”\textsuperscript{84} Pliny tells the story of Butades, “a potter of Sicyon, at Corinth,” whose modeling of clay portraits was inspired by his daughter’s outline of her leaving lover’s shadow on a wall.\textsuperscript{85} He aligns shadow with several artistic forms and hints that painting began as a represented representation, “an image of the shadow.”\textsuperscript{86} Teasing out the ambiguities of Pliny’s fable, Stoichita shows how Pliny writes a portrait of the (male) artist – the father gives his daughter’s outline of a shadow consistency – and through his “clay likeness” symbolically evokes Cicero’s topos of the body as container for the soul, or double.\textsuperscript{87} Stoichita goes on to claim that Pliny’s myth recounts the true story of the surrogate image that began in Egypt, where there were two

\textsuperscript{81} Victor Stoichita, \textit{A Short History of the Shadow} (London: Reaktion Books, 1997), esp. 132.  
\textsuperscript{84} Quoted in Stoichita, \textit{A Short History of the Shadow}, 11.  
\textsuperscript{86} Stoichita, \textit{Shadow}, 12.  
\textsuperscript{87} Ibid., 18.
kinds of shadow. The shadow-soul, or ka, was a clear “coloured projection, but aerial to the
individual, reproducing all his features” that took over the function of the double in death,
whereas the black shadow was the externalization of being emitted by living bodies.\textsuperscript{88}

In what may be Nabokov’s tipping of the hat to Pliny, the written line in \textit{The Gift} is the
more conventionally understood “shadow” of thought, or thought’s imperfect outline. Yet
shadow in Nabokov has a more complex function. He juxtaposes its definitions in opposition to
light with “shadow” as light source, aligning ideas in the mind, often considered immaterial
shadows until externalized, with ongoing creativity, enlightenment, and knowledge. Nabokov
perceived actual shadows differently and through multiple senses. His writing about them
questions the distinction between material and immaterial things. He performs sensory and
definitional substitution, describing shadows as seen, sensed, remembered things.

Let us revisit Nabokov’s claim that images of his novels breed in his mind, which
accumulates “known materials for unknown structures.”\textsuperscript{89} The finished product is “illumined in
one’s mind” as a painting perceived wholly.\textsuperscript{90} He then fills gaps on paper while selectively

\textsuperscript{88} Ibid., 19.
\textsuperscript{90} There are striking similarities between Nabokov’s description of how novels form in his mind and
William Hazlitt’s discussion of how ideas materialize in \textit{Table Talk: Essays on Men and Manners}, ed.
Hazlitt (London: George Bell and Sons, 1878). “The ideas we cherish most exist best in a kind of
shadowy abstraction” (3), Hazlitt writes, indicating that linguistic expression diminishes ideas’ purity.
Contrasting the painter’s innocent pleasures – he resigns himself to nature – with the writer’s trickery,
which falls “far short of the mark,” he implies that painting, “observ[ing]…what passes in the world” (1-2), is a more faithful mode of transcription than language. Nabokov seems to have been familiar with
Hazlitt’s dictums and assimilates them into his vision of how literature can approximate painting. He
introduces \textit{Lectures on Literature} by outlining how rereading somewhat mitigates the impingement of
time and space on our encounter with a text, which, unlike a painting (encountered as a “whole picture”
and then appreciated for “details”) the eye cannot internalize as a whole. Unlike Hazlitt, who writes that
“from repetition, the words convey no distinct meaning to the mind – are mere idle sounds” (8), Nabokov
calls for readers to reread texts to train themselves to encounter them like paintings. Yet he differentiates
between the eye and mind; the “mind…is, or should be, the only instrument used upon a book” (4).
Hazlitt and Nabokov admit that literature is deceptive. Yet, whereas Hazlitt discusses nature’s sincerity,
Nabokov claims that literature takes its cue from nature’s “system of spells and wiles” (5). We encounter
a similar formulation in \textit{Strong Opinions}, 11: “all art is deception and so is nature; all is deception in that
directing his “flashlight,” resulting in an imperfect copy with “vacant lots.” Revisiting Nabokov’s suggestion in *Lectures on Literature* that we reread texts until they come to approximate paintings, we note that his process of translating book-paintings into words makes it impossible to see all of the original’s details. His suggestion seems like a plea for readers to try to bridge a perceptual barrier. He appears to want to ignore the difference between his perception and a non-synaesthete’s, as well as the difference between a text and an image that is the foundation of countless debates about the sister arts.

In fact, he acknowledges in *Lectures* that writing and painting as symbolic systems, means of representation, and modes of perception are different. Nabokov also gestures toward debates about perceptual activity and ekphrasis from Horace’s *ut pictura poesis* to Lessing’s spatial and temporal corrective in *Laocoön* onward through Auerbach. Yet these critics do not account for how synaesthesia changes the stakes for perception and, resultantly, for diegetic and mimetic literary description. In spite of the impossibility of Nabokov’s advice for us to read a text as if it were a painting – although he invites us to imagine their affinities – we can concede that, for Nabokov specifically, painting is more faithful to the world than language, with a difference: it occurs in the mind’s eye, not on canvas. He seems to want contrary things, to share perception and withhold it. He wants to affirm what we would like to take for granted about imagery, and what is not the case: it is there to be perceived all at once, it is “transparent.” Yet Nabokov knows that the selective perception implicit in how he writes an image makes his imagery not wholly available to the reader’s knowledge. His withholding is purposeful because Nabokov chooses what he writes and inadvertent because he cannot choose how he first perceives as a

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92 “I don’t think in any language. I think in images”; Ibid., 14.
Nabokov’s reading instructions follow snippets from rejected notecards for *Pale Fire*. One says: “We think not in words but in shadows of words. James Joyce’s mistake in those otherwise marvelous mental soliloquies of his consists in that he gives too much verbal body to thoughts.” Excessive *verbal* body. What might he mean? And why would he fault Joyce’s attempt to give thought matter, agency, and life through words? It is tempting to attribute Nabokov’s observation about how “we” think to wishful thinking, to see it as an expression of desire to share a thought-form more embodied and perceptually weighted than verbal expression. Joyce’s language, he implies, is at times too wordy, giving a false impression of materiality that words, unlike thought, do not have. Nabokov points to moments of unsuccessful thought mimesis in Joyce’s otherwise more impressive verbal suggestions of thought as it unfurls and is felt. Here, Nabokov uses shadows as markers of the particular. His way of putting things recalls his assertion that he thinks in images, a process he generalizes to include “us.” This, coupled with his obsession with the detail, suggests that for Nabokov “shadows of words” are thought’s illuminated images, whereas select instances of Joyce’s “verbal body” dim thought-imagery, thinning its substance and artificially demarcating its boundaries.

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94 As Kevin Dann notes in his comprehensive study on the subject, synaesthesia is “involuntary and insuppressible.” Synaesthetic percepts remain stable and “synaesthetic images are perceived by the synaesthete as projected externally.” In other words, synaesthetic perception is, for the perceiver, objective. Kevin T. Dann, *Bright Colors Falsely Seen: Synaesthesia and the Search for Transcendental Knowledge* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 5-6. While the scope of this project does not permit me to deal with neuroscience in any great depth, let it be noted that a number of neuroscientists, including V.S. Ramachandran, E.M. Hubbard, and Karl Pribram, confirm this connection between synaesthesia and inadvertent, consistent cross-sensory coupling.


96 Ibid., 14.

97 Ibid., 7: “As an artist and scholar I prefer the specific detail to the generalization, images to ideas, obscure facts to clear symbols, and the discovered wild fruit to the synthetic jam.”
Nabokov inverts the light-shadow dichotomy, reintroducing shadows as unadulterated images and embodied objects residing and uniformly illuminated in the mind, where they have greater, ongoing durability and range. Words become shadowy, terminable extensions of their ideal, adulterated by light. Mental images literally produce more light for Nabokov than words, dark shadows cast by their originals radiating incommunicable color and detail in the mind’s eye. We begin to understand how Nabokov’s verbal process-based image of himself directing his “flashlight,” or pen, might be ironic, an irony compounded by our inability to visualize anything beyond that image, and our inability not to conflate literal perception with a metaphor for writing. Gerard de Vries’ “impression that Nabokov tried to recompose existing paintings” affirms the author’s aim.98

Nabokov’s complex formulations about his method are tied to synaesthesia, combined with what commentators rarely address: Nabokov’s ability to recall imagery eidetically. Eideticism, sometimes referred to as hyperthymesia, or autobiographical memory, is characterized by the particularly vivid experience of subjective visual images. The “eidetic image is ‘seen’ inside the mind and is accompanied by bodily engagement with the image (including a sense of its ‘felt meaning’).”99 Those thought to have photographic memory are often eidetics and their images mostly originate in remembered scenes. As in synaesthesia, these “images” are not just of a visual nature but may occur in “nonvisual sensory modalities – hearing, taste, smell, and touch.”100 This may explain why in Speak, Memory, Nabokov writes that the “act of vividly recalling a patch of the past is something that I seem to have been performing with the utmost zest all my life, and I have reason to believe that this almost pathological keenness of the

98 Gerard de Vries and Donald Barton Johnson, Nabokov and the Art of Painting (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 26.
99 Dann, Bright Colors Falsely Seen, 105.
100 Ibid., 106.
retrospective faculty is a hereditary trait,” or why *Pale Fire’s* Shade observes that “My eyes were such that literally they / Took photographs.” Nabokov’s painterly impulse has attracted much attention. Yet when he discusses word pictures, he may be referring to verbal portraits that better approximate image-formations in his head, the original affect-laden shadows of imperfect linguistic copies. He uses shadow as a term and object that stands in for an embodied form of thought and as a verbal tool with which to express idiosyncratic perception more accurately, albeit imperfectly.

Nabokov’s education in shadow was considerable, including his artistic training. He was also familiar with da Vinci who, as De Vries and Johnson note, was “the artist Nabokov probably admired most” and on whom, according to Brian Boyd, he lectured to Italian students in 1942. Da Vinci had a lifelong interest in shadows. Nabokov would have found his observations worth pondering and revising. Da Vinci affirms the light-shadow dichotomy yet attributes greater strength to shadows: “shadows share the nature of universal things, which are all more powerful at their beginning and become enfeebled towards their end.” This statement would have resonated with Nabokov, whose literature melds “the precision of poetry and the intuition of science.” He affirms light and shadow’s mutual dependence yet rejects shadow’s dark nature, making his characters see and observe the color and light adhering to individual shadows. Nabokov reconfigures shadow as light source: shadow signals inspiration and concrete

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103 De Vries and Johnson’s book is a sustained study of this impulse.  
image-ideas. Images are “enfeeled” in language, only approximating their original intensity. Nabokov thereby adapts da Vinci’s insights to suit his perception, privileging scientific intuition over accuracy.

Da Vinci mistakenly thought that “every definite light is, or seems to be, derived from a point.”108 De Vries and Johnson have demonstrated Nabokov’s familiarity with da Vinci’s writing.109 While likely aware of da Vinci’s error, Nabokov installs the point source of light at the center of his schema, the difference being that his point source is shadow. In Invitation, Cincinnatus writes, “Not only are my eyes different, and my hearing and my sense of taste…but, most important, I have the capacity to conjoin all of this in one point” (“Не только мои глаза другие, и слух, и вкус...но главное: дар сочетать все это в одной точке”).110 Cincinnatus’ assertion precedes the blue shadow that prompts his remark that part of his “thoughts is always crowding around the invisible umbilical cord that joins this world to something” (“всегда часть моих мыслей теснится около невидимой пуповины, соединяющей мир с чем-то”).111 That “something” is Nabokov’s otherworld, only it is not “other” really, and does not necessarily conform to what scholars have opined to date.112 “Otherworld” is a metaphor for another way of seeing this one: it is its shadow extension, constituting colorful multilayered images converging in one point, the mind. The ability to discern this otherworld implies a perceptual superiority.

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109 De Vries and Johnson do an excellent job of identifying and analyzing references to da Vinci’s Treatise and allusions to specific paintings including The Last Supper and Mona Lisa in Nabokov’s novels; see Nabokov and the Art of Painting, 87-89.
110 Nabokov, Invitation, 52. Набоков, “Приглашение на казнь,” 263. This statement brings to mind Nabokov’s desire for the reader to “at a second, or third, or fourth reading...in a sense, behave towards a book as we do towards a painting,” to see texts all at once in the mind’s eye and feel them with the “tingling spine.” According to him, that is how he saw and felt at least his own; Nabokov, Lectures on Literature, 3-4.
111 Ibid., 53; Ibid., 264.
Accordingly, whole images are broken apart into words and cast a diluted shadow upon being textualized. Da Vinci’s notion is objectively inaccurate. Yet if we broach shadow figuratively and literally as Nabokov’s light source, we understand how da Vinci’s description may have been suggestive for the author, whose idiosyncratic vision was almost impossible to communicate except, perhaps, as and through a specific word-image and figurative device.¹¹³

Nabokov may have used “shadow” as a metaphor for his perception because: it resists communication, is considered secondary, is negatively related to knowledge, is thought of as immaterial, and, finally, because of our tendency to associate it with things uncanny. Thomas Kaufmann indicates that “differences in perception, ambiguities in interpretation” and “questions of consistency” all inhibit shadow perception. This perception also “requires a special effort of attention, and the right conditions of illumination.”¹¹⁴ Kaufmann’s point about attention is crucial. Why do we not attend sufficiently to Nabokov’s attention to shadows? Perhaps Nabokov used a word-metaphor for a concrete phenomenon to underscore something that consistently escapes attention, thereby underlining attention’s poverty and the incommunicability of a way of seeing and sensing? Perhaps what we cannot see and he can, what he ironically stresses in spite of awareness we will not notice it, is the thingness of shadows, which are detailed, worth observing, and more than immaterial extensions of objects. Like Diderot, Nabokov shows that “shadows have their colours too.”¹¹⁵

¹¹³ Also of note, and Dann discusses this, is that synaesthetes’ vision not only differs from that of non-synaesthetes but also differs amongst themselves.


¹¹⁵ Quoted in Michael Baxandall, Shadows and Enlightenment (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 111. The following quote from Pnin goes a long way toward affirming this: “At six, Victor already distinguished what so many adults never learn to see – the colors of shadows, the difference in tint between the shadow of an orange and that of a plum or of an avocado pear”; Nabokov, Pnin, 90.
Michael Baxandall refers to “shadow perception” as “evolutionarily primitive,” wondering “whether we do attend to individual shadows in normal variously directed perception of the world;” “in some uninteresting senses we clearly do not do so…and in other senses we possibly might, but cannot say, if the question is posed in terms of attention.”

A shadow “is a real material fact, a physical hole in light, but it has neither stable form nor continuity of existence”; it undergoes “determinate” metamorphoses and can “recur.” Similar to color, it lacks “molecularly denominated” territory but “its domain is three-dimensional and within this domain anything is subject to it.” With these attributes in mind, we might see why Nabokov emphasized shadows as sources of ongoing sense-experience and visual knowledge that escapes the average consciousness, and why he would use individual shadows as process-based images for synaesthesia, which is multisensory, not just visual.

Nabokov may use shadow as a dual signpost for non-synaesthetic vision’s inattentiveness as well as synaesthetic vision’s attention. Yet this strategy seems futile precisely because we cannot perceive shadow like Nabokov. Indeed, from Fyodor’s description of his *audition colorée* in *The Gift*, we learn that “a” shifts in tinge between languages, resembling “different sorts of wood,” and can discern the narrator’s physical and affective relation to “radiant ‘s’” through his longing to affect understanding by pouring his mother’s sapphires directly into our palms. In *Speak, Memory*, sound and shape inform Nabokov’s subsumption of “o” under whites, “[d]ull green” mixed with violet accounts for w, d is creamy yellow, and in brown we find “the drab

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117 Ibid., 128.
118 Ibid., 144.
shoelace of *h.* Importantly, he mentions that “[a]djacent tints do not merge.”

Considering the abovementioned, along with Nabokov’s word for rainbow in his “private language” – the “hardly pronounceable” *kzxpygv* – we see how “shadow” in this language is anything but light’s privation. It arguably evokes color combinations, physiological reactions, and affective associations that are nothing like what we might see and imagine when confronting shadow: either a “dark patch” if we do see it, or negative figurative valences if we rely on its traditional associations in Western literature and culture with secrecy, surveillance, concealment, deception, evil, and so forth.

While shadow’s negative associations evolved throughout history, perceptual differences between synaesthetes and non-synaesthetes tie into how they think about light and shadow and use them in language. These differences make shadow’s longstanding associations difficult to reverse because of the imaginative leap that such a reversal would require for non-synaesthetes.

Crucial to the way non-synaesthetes construe “light” and “shadow” is their perception of vowels “almost universally…along a bright-dark continuum,” where “front vowels” like *I* and *E* are seen as “relatively bright” while “back vowels” like *O* and *U* appear dark. Conversely, for Nabokov the word “shadow” apparently evokes a plethora of distinguishable, individualized colors that comingle with subjective images of actual objects. This perception would have been inadvertent and informs his figurative associations, associations which themselves may have been difficult to convey except as and through an image-based metaphor. Synaesthesia, combined with what Kevin Dann argues was Nabokov’s eidetic memory, stipulated the author’s sensitivity to shadows and allowed him to recall vivid shadows from his past.

In spite of numerous theories of the phenomenon, synaesthesia still lacks widely accepted

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120 Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*, 34-35.
121 Dann, *Bright Colors Falsely Seen*, 10.
Dann also notes its resistance to linguistic expression and its “ineffability, both for…synaesthetes…and for nonsynaesthetic observers.” He classifies “all forms of synaesthesia” as mental images related to eidetic imagery, which – although it does not depend on external objects – is also mentally visualized as though from without and accompanied by affective perceptions. Nabokov’s assignment of “personality” to letters informs Dann’s claim in his chapter on the author about his “fuller suite of physiognomic perceptions.” And he considers Nabokov’s use of “I see” and “reproduce” rather than “remember” as extensions of his eidetic imagery. This is likely what Nabokov means when he aligns memory with “direct rays deliberately trained.” The most significant of Dann’s observations relates to the following excerpt from Shade’s poem in *Pale Fire*:

Where are you? In the garden. I can see  
Part of your shadow near the shagbark tree. …  
A dark Vanessa with a crimson band  
Wheels in the low sun, settles on the sand  
And shows its ink-blue wingtips flecked with white.  
And through the flowing shade and ebbing light  
A man, unheedful of the butterfly –  
Some neighbor’s gardener, I guess – goes by  
Trundling an empty barrow up the lane.

Dann argues that “prosaic, commonplace memory, the sort no doubt possessed by philistines like the barrow-trundling gardener who fails to note the resplendent Vanessa, would never register shadows, yet Nabokov / Shade is supremely attentive to them.” He goes on to point out “shadow” or “shade” as “an apt term for the eidetic image – a noncorporeal reflection cast by

122 Ibid., 5.  
123 Ibid., 8.  
124 Ibid., 12.  
125 Ibid., 124.  
126 Ibid., 135.  
corporeal objects.” Dann is right and wrong. As I have been suggesting, shadow may be a kind of code word circulating in Nabokov’s texts that subsumes the partnership of synaesthesia and eidetic perception. Because of this, Nabokov experiences the vividness of shadows differently from non-synaesthetes. Dann therefore incorrectly dismisses shadows’ material reality. In doing so, he confirms Baxandall’s point about inattention and introduces irony into his analysis.

In his writing, Nabokov treats shadow as the corporeal object and it becomes an active metaphor for the operations of vision and memory. While there is no “conclusive evidence” as to what Nabokov had in mind when intimating an other world, Dann’s contention that, “instead of pointing to the spiritual world, his art points only to itself, and to Nabokov’s subjective inner world,” is probable. The “otherworld” connected with Nabokov’s spiritual guests and ghosts is more likely the world of his synaesthesia and eidetic memory, which language aspires to but cannot contain. This is why in Invitation Cincinnatus consoles himself, invoking the ax’s shadow whose “downward vigorous grunt” he will heed “with the ear of a different world” (“Ведь для меня это уже будет лишь тень топора, и низвергающееся ‘ать’ не этим слухом услышу”). At the same time, he laments his inability to communicate the source of his consolation:

I myself picture all this so clearly, but you are not I, and therein lies the irreparable calamity. Not knowing how to write but sensing with my criminal intuition how words are combined, what one must do for a commonplace word to come alive and to share its neighbor’s sheen, heat, shadow, while reflecting itself in its neighbor and renewing the neighboring word in the process, so that the whole line is live iridescence; while I sense the nature of this kind of word propinquity, I am nevertheless unable to achieve it, yet that is what is indispensable to me for my task, a task of not now and not here.  

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130 Ibid., 133.
131 Ibid., 121.
133 Ibid., 93. Cincinnatus rejects “here” (the physical world, the written line) for the “there” of internal perception. Struggling to communicate thought, he writes: “Not here! The horrible ‘here,’ the dark dungeon…this ‘here’ holds and constricts me. But what gleams shine through at night, and what –. It exists, my dream world, it must exist, since, surely there must be an original of the clumsy copy…It is as
His “irreparable calamity” (“непоправимое несчастье”) is the perceptual wall between “you” (“вы”) and “I” (“я”), reader and author. Cincinnatus contrasts knowledge with “criminal intuition” (“преступное чуть”) – which in fact stands for sense in the sense of perception and feeling for language – thereby implying that sensing word combinations is, for him as for his creator, not learned but felt. Implicit in this contrast is self-questioning. Although Cincinnatus feels gifted with intuition, this intuition contains something dishonest in it, dishonest because it is

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if you are lying supine, with eyes closed, on an overcast day, and suddenly the gloom stirs under your eyelids, and slowly becomes first a languorous smile, then a warm feeling of contentment, and you know that the sun has come out from behind the clouds. With just such a feeling my world begins: the misty air gradually clears, and it is suffused with such radiant, tremulous kindness, and my soul expands so feely if you are lying supine, with eyes closed, on an overcast day, and suddenly the gloom stirs. But then what, then what? Yes, that is the line beyond which I lose control…

He get similar descriptions of time in *Ada*, 537: “I delight sensually in Time, in its stuff and spread, in the fall of its folds, in the very impalpability of its grayish gauze, in the coolness of its continuum. I wish to do something about it; to indulge in a simulacrum of possession.” This leads me to believe that Nabokov’s conceptualization of time relates to his synaesthesia and eidetic memory.

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134 Ibid., 286.
involuntary and does not necessarily require one to hone one’s craft. Language is a barrier and bridge. Cincinnatus clearly pictures “word propinquity” (“соседство слов”) and seems to understand how only in relation to one another “commonplace” (“обыкновенные”) words come alive and, like bodies, share their “sheen, heat, shadow.” He alludes to language’s erotic nature, recalling Barthes’s idea of readerly pleasure derived from words lined with “flesh.”\(^{135}\) Yet Barthes speaks figuratively, whereas for Cincinnatus and Nabokov the synaesthete, word propinquity is literal. While we might imagine what Cincinnatus means through his descriptions of it, language, the only way of communicating word propinquity in the mind, is also the space where the perceptual barrier reinstates itself. Whereas word-images share their colored shadows in Cincinnatus’ world, where “the whole line is live iridescence” (“вся строка – живой перелив”), he cannot communicate his shadow-perception through the very thing that is the locus of this perception.

We encounter the failure of description. Language, the space of “now and here” (“тут” и “сегодня” / “здесь”) evokes imagined imagery but is not the original picture, which, upon being described – flattened, stabilized, robbed of its colored shadow – in writing becomes the “then” and “there.” The key word is not only “picture” (“представлять,” which also means to imagine) but also “sense” (“чутьё” / “чувствовать,” which also means to feel). We readers might picture a version of what is described, only we cannot sense it explicitly. The ethical and aesthetic dilemma here is the frustration of authorly desire to establish the kind of relation with the reader through image-based literary description that words in his mind effortlessly have with one another. Arguably, this is the dilemma of every writer. Yet for a synaesthete, the stakes for communicating inadvertent cross-sensory perception (what Cincinnatus explicitly calls his

“dream world,” which can be discerned with “eyes closed”) are of a different ilk because of the distinction between figurative interpretation, imagined perception, and literal sensing. The “irreparable calamity” turns the “here” into “there,” presence into absence, lighted shadow into dark shadow, even as language means to make present, material, visible.

As I have been arguing, this is why actual shadows show up in Nabokov’s writing as examples of vivid memories of felt imagery. “Shadow” also becomes a code word for the untranslatability of synaesthetic and eidetic perception, as well as for how this perception enters language; it turns into a metaphor for the attempt to describe, remaining figurative because we can only indirectly, imaginatively at best, perceive it as Nabokov does. “Irreparable calamity” recalls the moment in Speak, Memory when Nabokov calls the attempt to describe “tedious and pretentious” as he proceeds to do so: “The confessions of a synesthete must sound tedious and pretentious to those who are protected from such leakings and drafts by more solid walls than mine are.” He is being ironic, refiguring “wall” as protection from inadvertent perception while simultaneously waxing lyrical about his gift. The “tragedy,” if we adopt Cincinnatus’ melodramatic tone, is that he cannot communicate that gift except through mediation, which is also the only means for its materialization and, ironically, the very space of idiosyncratic sensation. We also see how “intuition” is perceptual, subjective knowing, truer and more accurate than the empirical, objective word “knowledge.” Language standardizes meaning. Synaesthesia does the opposite.

Cincinnatus’ vision also intersects with the material world: it augments his way of looking at it and makes him long to share his gaze. Fyodor concedes as much in The Gift – “The other world surrounds us always” – and has Delalande ventriloquize his dream of the “liberation of the soul from the eye-sockets of the flesh and our transformation into one complete and free eye,

136 Nabokov, Speak Memory, 35.
which can simultaneously see in all directions, or to put it differently: a supersensory insight into
the world accompanied by our inner participation” (TG, 310) (“освобождение духа из глазниц
плоти и превращение наше в одно свободное сплошное око, зараз видящее все стороны
света, или, иначе говоря: сверхчувственное прозрение мира при нашем внутреннем
участии”) (Д, 396). ¹³⁷ This distinction between the physical eye (body) and the embodied
mind’s eye (soul) supports my argument that text, the false simulacrum of his fuller perception,
is a diminished shadow-line whose lighted shadow has infinite extension in Nabokov’s mind but
finite extension on paper.

Desire to affirm the infinitude of thought-images informs The Gift’s conclusion: “the
shadows of my world extend beyond the skyline of the page, blue as tomorrow’s morning haze –
nor does this terminate the phrase. The End” (TG, 366) (“и для ума внимательного нет
границы – там, где поставил точку я: продленный призрак бытия синеет за чертой
страницы, как завтрашие облака, – и не кончается строка”) (Д, 472). ¹³⁸ This reads like a
reformulation of da Vinci’s instructions to his painter: “make your shadow darker close to its
origin, and at its end show it being transformed into light, that is to say, so that it appears to have
no termination.”¹³⁹ The statement follows his claim about shadow’s greater intensity, an
assertion that ties into an analogy with the oak, “strongest at the point at which it arises from the
earth.”¹⁴⁰ Nabokov’s shadow-images are indeed stronger at their origin. The novel’s last lines

¹³⁷ This passage has Nabokov drawing on Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and other Symbolists who helped
further the belief at the end of the nineteenth century about synaesthesia as a form of transcendental
knowledge, freedom from the material world, and dream of unity, a view either supported or detracted
from by psychological and scientific studies at the time.
¹³⁸ Nabokov’s translated version somewhat differs from the original; the original is in poem form and
may be translated as follows: “there is no boundary for the attentive mind – there, where I put a period:
the extended shade of being shimmers blue beyond the page’s limit, like tomorrow’s clouds, – and the
line does not end.”
¹³⁹ Da Vinci, Leonardo on Painting, 98.
¹⁴⁰ Ibid.
express how his shadows extend beyond the page while underlining the finitude of the line itself. Nabokov refers to *The Gift* as “the longest, I think the best, and the most nostalgic of my Russian novels.” In it, his reflection on and invocation of shadows is the most sustained. *The Gift* is Nabokov’s attempt to develop a vocabulary of writerly and readerly attention for synaesthesia and supports my contention that Nabokov’s vision has his conceptualization of shadows at its center.

**III**

The novel opens with a yellow moving van along the side of which runs “the name of the moving company in yard blue letters, each of which (including a square dot) was shaded laterally with black paint: a dishonest attempt to climb into the next dimension” (TG, 3) (“название перевозчикской фирмы синими аршинными литерами, каждая из коих (включая и квадратную точку) была слева оттенена черной краской: недобросовестная попытка пролезть в следующее по классу измерение”) (Д, 7). Fyodor notes the “blind” sun on the van’s roof: “slender shadows of linden branches hastened headlong toward substantiation, but dissolved without having materialized” (TG, 7) (“на серой кругловатой крыше фургона, страшно скоро стремились к бытию, но недовоплотившись растворялись тонкие тени липовых ветвей”) (Д, 12). The letters and period are painted shadows that cannot extend to Fyodor’s colorful vision. Nabokov converts the *moving* van, a manmade thing, into the site of confrontation between the named and arrested, and the linden’s shadows, extensions of Nature, free and boundless.

This opposition between material things and shadows, which are also material and represent process-based mental images, informs Fyodor’s writing and indicates the difference

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between his published poems and others in the text. The former are *too* final, casting the same false shadows as the van’s lettering. The latter, simulating incompleteness – which stems from their unfinished, interruptive, and spontaneous quality – more faithfully intimate thought’s continuation beyond the lines.\(^{142}\) In his mock review of his collection, Fyodor attempts to fulfill authorly desire to be understood by writing his own praise while simultaneously analyzing his poetry. Besides stating things like “[e]ach of his poems iridesces with harlequin colors” ("Каждый его стих переливается арлекином") and “we can nevertheless clearly picture” ("мы зато ясно воображаем") (Д, 36), he wonders:

Can it be true that all the enchantingly throbbing things of which I have dreamt and still dream through my poems have not been lost in them and have been noticed by the reader whose review I shall see before the day is over? Can it really be that he has understood everything in them, understood that besides the good old “picturesqueness” they also contain special poetic meaning…? As he read them, did he read them not only as words but as chinks between words, as one should do when reading poetry? (TG, 28)

Неждю и вправду все очаровательно дрожащее, что снисьо и снится мне сквозь мои стихи, удержалось в них и замечено читателем, чей отзыв я еще сегодня узнаю? Неужели действительно он все понял в них, понял, что кроме пресловутой “живописности” есть в них еще тот особый поэтический смысл…? Читал ли он их по скважинам, как надобно читать стихи? (Д, 37)

Sensing that we will likely not notice the “chinks between words” (“скважины”) or understand poetry’s music, Fyodor takes on the role of reader, artificially enlivening the poems and trying to give them the embodiment and continuity they had in his mind through descriptive, interpretive, and rhetorical means. Nabokov parodies and abides by Romantic evocations of synaesthesia as inner vision in French Symbolist verse, wherein color was associated with music, which in turn

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\(^{142}\) Nabokov is loath to differentiate between poetry and prose, writing in *Strong Opinions*, 44: “I have never been able to see any generic difference between poetry and artistic prose. As a matter of fact, I would be inclined to define a good poem of any length as a concentrate of good prose, with or without the addition of recurrent rhythm and rhyme.”
was associated with material dissolution. Playing the critic, Fyodor advocates a synaesthetic mode of reading that the non-synaesthete cannot abide by except imaginatively. His rhetoric contains awareness that his written poems fall short of the mark, do not realize his gift, are figuratively and literally dark shadow-versions of vividly perceived and remembered shadows.

While signing Zina’s copy of his book, Fyodor observes: “it’s not the real thing, the poems are bad, I mean, they’re not all bad, but generally speaking” (TG, 180) (“это не то, это плохие стихи, то есть не все плохо, но в общем”) (Д, 232). In another conversation, Zina says that, as much as she likes Fyodor’s poems, “they are never quite up to your measure, all the words are one size smaller than your real words” (TG, 194) (“они всегда не совсем по твоему росту, все слова на номер меньше, чем твои настоящие слова”) (Д, 250). Nabokov establishes degrees of lyricism, solidifying the contrast between the poetry we encounter at the beginning, the weaker abstraction of mind imagery, and other poems that better approximate these images. Reviewing his poem about the lost ball, Fyodor notes that the “quivering darkness” (“трепещущая темнота”) (Д, 16) of the text does not satisfy him although, in memory, the room indeed quivered. He concedes that memories of shadows are “the ones closest to the original source…that reverse nothingness” (TG, 11) (“самые близкие к подлиннику…обратное ничто”) (Д, 16) toward which his thought often turns but cannot quite broach. This “reverse nothingness” (“обратное ничто”) of primal shadows, he implies, is more substantial than movement away from it; “I strain my memory to the very limit so as to taste of that darkness and use its lessons to prepare myself for the darkness to come” (TG, 11) (“я напрягаю память до

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143 Dann, *Bright Colors Falsely Seen*, 26. I say parodies because the poets in question were not synaesthetes, and their poems, such as Rimbaud’s “Voyelles” and Baudelaire’s “Correspondences,” were not descriptions of genuine synaesthetic perception as experienced by the writer; they were either invented or drawn from medical literature. Dann talks about this especially in the first chapter of his book.
последней крайности, чтобы вкусить этой тьмы и воспользоваться ее уроками ко вступлению во тьму будущую”) (Д, 16-17).

Fyodor mentions the “boundless terror” (“беспредельный ужас”) of the “positive end” (“положительная кончина”) (Д, 17) that actual shadows caused by a receding candle in his childhood bedroom trigger. These shadows “assume their accustomed places…And in their corners grow brazen / Bearing only a casual likeness / To their natural models” (TG, 11) (“одни и те же места…и по углам наглеют ночью, / своим законным образцам / лишь подражая между прочим”) (Д, 17). The poem emphasizes the mind’s shadows as the lighted origin of their verbal counterparts. “Reverse nothingness” is the multilayered dimension of somethings.

Fyodor’s review moves between parody and sober analysis. In it, he implies that he can resurrect objects from his childhood as images in his mind’s eye. Yet these images are separated from their context. Exact picture-memories do not retain their past meanings, dictated by objects outside his former line of sight. Fyodor faults his poems for enacting holes in memory, critiquing them, too, for their formal accuracy, which robs them of impressions of life by arresting them within “harmony’s ice” (TG, 18) (“во льду гармонии”) (Д, 26) and converts remembered images into content-less clichés, false shadows.

The novel privileges shadows of objects to objects casting them. The “transparent shadow” of a bicycle is “more perfect in shape” (TG, 174) (“но еще совершеннее его самого была его прозрачная тень на стене”) (Д, 224); the “exaggerated shadow of leaves” (“преувеличенные тени листьев”) (Д, 227) falls in perfect order on a senselessly reassembled fence (TG, 176). The shadowy spaces of Fyodor and Zina’s meetings approximate the illuminated conditions of creativity in Fyodor’s mind. The manner of Zina’s appearance emphasizes that she is an extension of his infinitely richer shadow-world. By day, she becomes
the shadow of her real self, inaccessible to his colorful imagination. Within Nabokov’s blank verse, Zina emerges “unexpectedly from the darkness, like a shadow leaving its kindred element,” wearing a summer dress “of night’s own color, the color of streetlights and the shadows, of tree trunks and the shining pavement” (TG, 177) (“Из темноты, для глаз всегда нежданно, она как тень внезапно появлялась, от родственной стихии отделясь…в коротком летнем платье ночной цвета – цвета фонарей, теней, стволов, лоснящейся панели”) (Д, 227).

We confront this same image repeatedly in Nabokov’s 1920s poetry. In “Vstrecha” (“Встреча”) a woman similarly emerges from the night; “Ja pomnju v pljushevoj oprave” (“Я помню в плюшевой оправе”) conflates woman with black dress and contains the line “in this fantastic world of shadows and light we are alone” (“И в этом мире небывалом теней и света мы одни”); and “Kuby’s” (“Кубы”) addressee also wears a black dress. That Zina is associated with poetic inspiration and the “presence of poetry,” as Paul Morris contends, is indisputable. Rather than thinking of Zina as the prototypical female muse, however, we might consider her as an image in the artist’s inner eye whose extraction instantiates language’s more successful attempt to relay mental imagery. She is part of Fyodor’s vision and he loves her for her “perfect understanding,” the “absolute pitch of her instinct for what he himself loved” (“совершенная понятливость, абсолютность слуха по отношению ко всему, что он сам любил”); “both of them, forming a single shadow, were made to measure of something not quite comprehensible, but wonderful and benevolent and continuously surrounding them” (TG, 177) (“оба они, образуя одну тень, были созданы по мерке чего-то не совсем понятного, но дивного и благожелательного, бессменно окружающего их”) (Д, 228). This “something” is

145 Ibid., esp. 464; see generally Morris’ Vladimir Nabokov: Poetry and the Lyric Voice (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), which employs similar argumentation.
Fyodor’s shadow-thought, which, it is implied, Zina shares; similar to Nabokov and Véra, they are synaesthetes. In *The Gift*, shadows grant freedom to “win a world from the night” (TG, 157) (“чтоб целый мир у ночи отыграть!”) (Д, 201). Toying with dualistic images and metaphors, Fyodor says that, “light in comparison with darkness is a void” (TG, 193) (“Свет по сравнению с темнотой пустота”) (Д, 249).

Strengthening the suggestion that his lovers share perception, Nabokov’s description of their propinquity of thought not only recalls Cincinnatus’ discussion of word propinquity but also gestures toward moments in *Madame Bovary*, which Nabokov lectured on and stylistically compared to prose operating poetically. Rodolphe poses to Emma: “why did we come to know one another? What chance willed it? It was because across the infinite, like two streams that flow but to unite, our special bents of mind had driven us towards each other.” In Nabokov’s *Lectures*, we alight on Flaubert’s passage about the lovers’ night meeting:

> The stars glistened through the leafless jasmine branches…Masses of shadows here and there loomed out in the darkness, and sometimes quivering with one movement, they rose up and swayed like immense black waves pressing forward to engulf them…the sighs of their lips seemed to them deeper; their eyes, that they could hardly see, larger; and in the midst of the silence low words were spoken that fell on their souls sonorous, crystalline, and that reverberated in multiplied repetitions.

In his version in *The Gift*, Nabokov converts ominous shadows into process-based images accompanying and ensuring the mergence of kindred minds. Nabokov’s lovers see more clearly by night, as this instance in which Zina and Fyodor meet in a dark hallway attests to:

> Through the glass the ashen light from the street fell on both of them and the shadow of the iron design on the door undulated over her and continued obliquely over him, like a shoulder-belt…And, as often happened with him…Fyodor suddenly felt – in this glassy darkness – the strangeness of life, the strangeness of its magic, as if a corner of it had been turned back for an instant and he had glimpsed its unusual lining. Close to his face there was her soft cinereous cheek cut across by a shadow, and when Zina

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147 Quoted in Ibid., 158.
148 Ibid., 174.
Suddenly…turned toward him and the shadow lay across her lips, oddly changing her, he took advantage of the absolute freedom in this world of shadows to take her by her ghostly elbows; but she slipped out of the pattern and with a quick jab of her finger restored the light. (TG, 183)

Сквозь стекла пепельный свет с улицы обливал их обоих, и тень железного узора на двери изгибалась через нее и продолжалась на нем нанизь, как портупей…И, как часто бывало с ним…Федор Константинович внезапно почувствовал — в этой стеклянной тьме — странность жизни, странность ее волшебства, будто на миг она завернулась, и он увидел ее необыкновенную подкладку. У самого его лица была нежно-пепельная щека, перерезанная тенью, и когда Зина вдруг…повернулась к нему, а тень легла поперек губ, странно ее меняв, он воспользовался совершенной свободой в этом мире теней, чтобы взять ее за призрачные локти; но она выскользнула из узора и быстрым толчком пальца включила свет. (Д, 235)

Shadows intensify Zina and Fyodor’s encounter. They enhance sensuous experience and promote a glimpse of what underlies the everyday. Nabokov emphasizes shadow-vision’s detailed embodiment, privileging this form of embodiment to the uniformly lighted superficial detail. Reemergence into light destroys patterned relations, denuding things of their “unusual lining” (“необыкновенная подкладка”). The passage reinforces Fyodor and Zina’s love as the locus of a freedom-granting shadow world, a love complicated by everyday strictures yet resplendent in “glassy darkness” (“стеклянная тьма”), which reproduces more accurately the conditions of mental activity. This occasion recalls Fyodor’s earlier poetic proclamation of love for the “fanciful and rare” (“что редкостно и мнимо”) and for “what from the distance of a dream steals through” (TG, 156) (“что крадется окраинами сна”) (Д, 200).

The shadow-light contrast builds into the contrast between the poetry in Fyodor’s collection – printed, bound, and released – and other poetry in the novel. Some of Fyodor’s poetic fragments in The Gift are not published and are, I suggest, not “written” but thought: they are his textual simulation of ongoing ideas, as well as his process of formulating thought-pictures as partial word-pictures, shadows robbed of their original color and sound. Fyodor’s poem to Zina unfurls in his head and signifies the work-in-progress. He mentions his intention to write it
after we have encountered the majority of it, appending: “somehow it hasn’t quite cleared up yet” (TG, 192) (“но они как-то еще не очистились”) (Д, 247). His comment leads into the following exchange (appropriate speaker indicated by me):

Z: …can all this be true – this fence and that blurry star? When I was little I didn’t like drawing anything that didn’t finish, so I didn’t draw fences because they don’t finish on paper; you can’t imagine a fence that finishes, but I always did something complete, a pyramid, or a house on a hill.

F: And I liked horizons most of all, and diminishing dashes beneath it – to represent the wake of the sun setting beyond the sea. And the greatest childhood torment of all was an unsharpened or broken crayon pencil.

Z: But then the sharpened ones…Do you remember the white one? Always the longest – not like the red and blue ones – because it didn’t do much work, do you remember?

F: But how much it wanted to please! The drama of the albino. L’inutile beauté. Anyhow, later I let it have its fill. Precisely because it drew the invisible and one could imagine lots of things. In general there await us unlimited possibilities. …

F: Do you want me to tell you why moths fly toward the light? No one knows that.

Z: And you know? F: …Light in comparison with darkness is a void. (TG, 192-193)

Stephen Blackwell asserts that the novel undermines boundaries to “create a space for personal and artistic freedom in a world of hostile limitation,” advancing that Zina is the “ideal

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We may expand on his observations. The dialogue textually replicates an internal monologue that echoes Fyodor’s imagined conversations with poet Koncheyev. In it, Zina alludes to Fyodor’s *unwritten* poem embedded in Nabokov’s text, which simulates the creation of thought-images, invoking “yon star” that “sheds on Pulkovo its beam” (“та звезда над Пулковом висит”) as well as the fence constituting part of the lovers’ “poor nocturnal property” (TG, 156) (“Ночные наши, бедные владения”) (Д, 201). While Blackwell argues that Zina “can bring herself to violate neither the represented boundary nor the boundary of the page,” and contrasts her timidity with Fyodor’s flouting of boundaries, this gendered reading somewhat undermines Nabokov’s emphasis on the kinship of minds and skims over Zina’s invocation of Fyodor’s mental conceptualization of a poem she has not read, a poem never finalized. The white pencil is the invisible bridge between different lines of thought and allows imagination to stage the conflict between external, material limitations and thought’s boundlessness. The conversation demonstrates how Zina’s thought is an extension of Fyodor’s. Her existence here relies on the artist, who performs this dialogue in his head. If anything, their exchange instances the mind’s movement between enclosure within the delineated physical world and the written line, and the colorful shadow-line of that world in the mind.

The novel stresses light and shadow’s mutual dependence, as when Fyodor feels he is becoming “transparent” (“прозрачным”) while basking nude: “My personal I, the one that wrote books, the one that loved words, colors, mental fireworks, Russia, chocolate and Zina – had somehow disintegrated and dissolved” (TG, 333-334) (“Собственное же мое я, то, которое писал книги, любило слова, цвета, игру мысли, Россию, шоколад, Зину, – как-то

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150 Ibid., 607; see also Blackwell’s “Zina’s Paradox: The Figured Reader in Nabokov’s Gift,” *Middlebury Studies in Russian Language and Literature* 23 (New York: Peter Lang, 2000), which contains additional discussion of boundaries.

разошлось и растворилось”) (Д, 428). Pure light depersonalizes, while shadow patterns caused by it intensify thought’s freedom while indicating its finitude in writing. Koncheyev observes the detrimental effects of Fyodor’s sun exposure on his mental state, continuing: “thought likes curtains and the camera obscura. Sunlight is good in the degree that it heightens the value of shade. A jail with no jailer and a garden with no gardener – that is I think the ideal arrangement” (TG, 338) (“А мысль любит занавеску, камеру обскуру. Солнце хорошо, поскольку при нем повышается ценность тени. Тюрьма без тюремщика и сад без садовника – вот по- моему, идеал”) (Д, 435).\(^{152}\) Associating corporeality, accentuated by sunlight, with the dimming of thought, Koncheyev rearticulates Fyodor’s alignment of “light” with “void.” He also makes clear that the “value of shade” relies on its contrast with and dependence on sunlight. His next sentence contains longing for shadow to be its own light source and mean independently.

\(^{152}\) Koncheyev pits corporeality, which indicates vision’s confinement to the physical world (“jail”), against the materiality of imagination, which has no “jailer,” except perhaps thought itself. The passage echoes the conversation between Rosencrantz, Guildenstern, and Hamlet, where the last calls Denmark a prison for the ambitious mind. Only, the ambitious mind is also its own prison, caught in “bad dreams.” Dreams, which Hamlet calls “shadows,” eat away at one’s substance because they are untenable. See: William Shakespeare, *The Tragedy of Hamlet Prince of Denmark*, The Harvard Classics 46:2, ed. Charles W. Eliot (New York: P.F. Collier & Son, 1909–14), II, ii, 220-231. Commentators have addressed Shakespeare’s influence on Nabokov in general and on *The Gift* in particular. See, for example, Polina Barskova, “Filial Feelings and Paternal Patterns: Transformations of Hamlet in The Gift,” *Nabokov Studies* 9 (2005), esp. 202. Barskova is mistaken, I think, about the sun/light as a source of creative illumination. She mentions *The Gift*’s reference to *Hamlet*: Fyodor’s natural element is “as water to Ophelia” (TG, 125).

Nabokov’s translated fragments of *Hamlet* were published in 1930. Hamlet’s claim that the (external) material world is a prison for the mind likely struck a chord. Fyodor’s poem to Zina, however, aligns dreams with greater substance than the material world, which limits imagination, urging one to: “Love only what is fanciful and rare; what from the distance of a dream steals through; what knaves condemn to death and fools can’t bear. To fiction be as to your country true” (TG, 156) (“Люби лишь то, что редкостно и мимо, что крадется окраинами сна, что злит глупцов, что смердами казнит; как родине, будь вымыслу верна”) (Д, 200). Again: “Oh, swear to me to put in dreams your trust, and to believe in fantasy alone, and never let your soul in prison rust, nor stretch your arm and say: a wall of stone” (TG, 177) (“О, поклянись, что веришь в небылицу, что будешь только вымыслу верна, что не запрещь души своей в темницу, не скажешь, руку протянув: стена”) (Д, 227). Playing with Shakespeare’s invocation of dreams and shadows, Nabokov shows how ambition derives substance from the mind’s shadow world, the “infinite space” of which is more real than “airy and light” reality, which is the shadow’s shadow. *Invitation* also echoes *Hamlet*. Cincinnatus contrasts the liveliness of dreams, “captivatingly majestic, free and ethereal” with the oppressive “dust of this painted life” and calls “here” a “dungeon.”
But what is a jail without a jailer? A garden with no gardener? The text signals the problematic marriage of language and culture, which operate through binaries that give one term positive value at the expense of another. The “ideal [идеал] arrangement” bypasses both, colliding with purer vision. For those not gifted with Nabokov’s perception, which conflates shadow with light source, this literal relation is difficult to imagine without metaphor, without language. Yet the way Nabokov treats the process-based phenomenon of shadow allows us to appreciate how he situates shadows as representatives of embodied perception and its sustained attention to the overlooked.
CHAPTER TWO

Between Word and Mouth: Elizabeth Bowen’s Atmospheres

Introduction

“It compels us to feel what we perceive and to imagine that which we know.”

Bowen concludes her 1950 lecture, “The Poetic Element in Fiction,” with this line by Percy

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153 Wallace Stevens, “The Man with the Blue Guitar,” 166.

154 Percy Bysshe Shelley, “A Defence of Poetry” [1821], Essays: Letters from Abroad, Translations and Fragments, ed. Mrs. Shelley, Vol. I (London: Edward Moxon, 1840), 51. Shelley implicitly rebuts allegations that poetry has become valueless in an age of scientific and technological inquiry. Whereas reason processes “the relations of things simply as relations,” without regard for unity, imagination is “mental action” upon thoughts, the faculty that perceives value in similitudes (2). He uses the analogy of an “ever-changing wind” moving over an Aeolian lyre: “man” is the instrument that, once wind-struck, produces not just “ever-changing melody,” but also harmony, prolonging “a consciousness of the cause” (2-3). He pulls the material world into his descriptions of mental action, evoking the process through which thought expresses itself upon forms. For him, poetry has an ethical function: in addition to mental enlargement, it defamiliarizes what we take for granted and brings us into contact with the other. “Moral good” resides in the power to imagine a world outside of ourselves. He also weds the shifting mind to malleable matter, tying poetic imagination to replenishment (assimilating new thoughts as “fresh food”)
Bysshe Shelley about poetry’s power to restructure and enhance perception, otherwise “blunted” by everyday life’s repetitive impressions. In the lecture, Bowen sets out to make a case for how fiction can and must learn from the “imagery of the poetic language.”155 Her dictum throughout seems frustratingly vague; at no point does she venture a precise definition of that “poetic element” which prose requires. However, if we attend less to the word “poetic” and more to the word “element,” we begin to discern what she means. The rational novel of “plain, straight, comprehensible fact” begins to engage with poetic “necessity,” Bowen argues, in Flaubert, James, and Proust, who home in on the felt and sensed. Their interventions, while a step forward, still fall short of Bowen’s vision for twentieth-century prose. The short story gets closer, for it is “expressioned, it is an imaginative act, and an imaginative conception of action.”156 Yet in addition to short fiction, Bowen wrote many novels. Her prescription for language to move toward the poetic element applies to prose in general.

In a statement that at first appears to point to her modernist sensibility, Bowen emphasizes that we can no longer rely on any “exterior, charming circumstance” to express “ordinary” action, emotion, and thought. Comparing contemporary life to a stage divested of the “outwardly attractive to the fancy, and delightful to the sentiments, and riveting to the eye,” and us to actors surrounded by abstract shadowy forms, she says that we must now depend on “the

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156 Ibid., 157.
internal scenery, the sensation, the imaginative thought, and the continuous emotion”\textsuperscript{157}; again, a seemingly modernist formulation of the formal, stylistic move from exteriority to interiority. Only Bowen tempers focus on the internal with the need for “outward action” and “movement and the impact of the passion upon the passion.” She rejects the “solitary consciousness reflecting on everything else,” emphasizing how consciousnesses act on one another.\textsuperscript{158} Bowen ties action to ongoing thought, to internal operations, while reflecting on the manner of thought’s externalization. Her preferred imagery − “internal scenery” linguistically staged − refracts how thoughts collide in the extra-linguistic space between words (the social script), the space of the active body-mind. Thought, imagination, and the conflict between consciousnesses materialize therein. Bowen advocates turning to those abstract shadowy forms surrounding us to better express internal life. She is interested in the non-static gap between words and the mouths emitting them, the “element” before, between, and beyond language – thought, perception, imagination – that language nevertheless must attempt to materially stage.

This chapter argues that, similar to Nabokov and Byatt, Bowen develops a liminal vocabulary of attention for how thought and feeling enter language. This vocabulary, located in process-based description, aims to broaden readerly perception, whereas other forms of written and spoken language (letters, dialogue, diaries) reinforce the limits of linguistic expression. The latter less adequately convey how consciousness operates in fraught relation with other minds and bodies hemmed in by social codes. To direct attention to how thought and feeling materialize, and to the literal and figurative functions of interior and exterior, Bowen turns to medial substances and states, specifically weather, atmosphere, and elements,\textsuperscript{159} often described in

\textsuperscript{157} Ibid., 159.  
\textsuperscript{158} Ibid., 160.  
\textsuperscript{159} Bowen was, as her preoccupation with Shelley evidences, well-versed in Romantic poetry’s weather-based images and metaphors for thought and imagination. She adapts them to suit her own
transitional spaces, and to semi-conscious modes, namely dreams and daydreams. She draws on the material natural world, on meteorological realities, to get at the unnatural state in which we operate socially and linguistically, as well as at what palpably goes on beneath the polished surface. Whereas Nabokov uses imagery to try to communicate how a singular consciousness moves through the world and perceives it, Bowen uses it to convey how consciousness moves within a socialized sphere threatening to crack. In *The Death of the Heart*, individual consciousnesses are perceived, or misperceived and harmed, by an “innocent” who either cannot or will not read social codes but must operate within them, must bend to their force or be broken.

As our other two authors, Bowen navigates the crossroads of literal and figurative language, the boundary between which liminal imagery blurs. Injecting paradox into imagery has broader implications for how we think of categories in general. Bowen’s image-based strategy, which privileges ambiguity, directs us to larger problems of categorizing authors and their styles. Bowen was no synaesthete, yet she weds multisensory imagery to psychological processes to explore how the body-mind moves through the world. Her medial metaphors and images provide a sturdier medium between the written word and embodied mind, interiority and its externalization. The first part of this chapter focuses on Bowen’s views on language and “poetic” purposes. For a fascinating study of the relationship between changeable weather, metaphor, affect, and political identity in Romantic poetry, see Mary A. Favret, “War in the Air,” *Modern Language Quarterly* 65:4 (2004). For additional studies of our historical and literary relationship with meteorology, albeit largely in the English context, see Arden Reed, *Romantic Weather: The Climates of Coleridge and Baudelaire* (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1983); Vladimir Jankovic, *Reading the Skies: A Cultural History of English Weather, 1650-1820* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000); Katharine Anderson, *Predicting the Weather: Victorians and the Science of Meteorology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); and Alexandra Harris, *Weatherland: Writers & Artists Under English Skies* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2015).

160 Calling Bowen a modernist, as some do, or A.S. Byatt a postmodernist, or Nabokov any one thing, is an oversimplification. All three authors occupy the liminal space that their image-based strategies allow them to create for themselves. This space facilitates greater linguistic and writerly freedom from unhelpful categories, even as imagery reflects on our tendency to operate through binaries.
imagery more generally. I then turn to *The Death of the Heart* to demonstrate how Bowen directs attention to thought and feeling’s materialization through medial means.

**Something in the Air: Bowen’s Fiction and the Material Imagination**

*Just as my fingers on these keys
Make music, so the self-same sounds
On my spirit make a music, too.
Music is feeling, then, not sound;
And thus it is that what I feel,
Here in this room, desiring you,
Thinking of your blue-shadowed silk,
Is music. ...*

Wallace Stevens, “Peter Quince at the Clavier”

In “The Poetic Element in Fiction,” Bowen distinguishes between approaches to image-based literary description, preferring non-static imagery that attends to, dwells on, the overlooked. Her treatment of language here and elsewhere evidences her preoccupation with imagination’s material operations, as well as with how thought and perception may be expressed more accurately, with how they are, as she puts it, “expressioned.” To become “expressioned,” prose must be infused with “what cannot be precise”; steeped in this elemental, uncertain mode and mood, its imagery becomes more precise, motive, and alive. Bowen discusses contemporary fiction’s attempt to “fuse” meaning and sound, its “aim...for what is apparently inharmonious”:

> We take words with our roughness, for their unacceptability just as much as for their smoothness or their grace. Our idea of style, when we write or we tell a story, is not purely suppleness and surface for its own sake. It is something of a muscularity and strength, but it is also a style which should be capable of being luminous and transparent.

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161 See Woolf, “Modern Fiction,” *The Essays of Virginia Woolf. Volume 4: 1925-1928*, ed. Andrew McNeille (London: The Hogarth Press, 1984) for another formulation by a contemporary of how novelists should depart from convention and aim to more closely approach inner life. Woolf has little regard for what she calls “materialism,” which for her has to do with dwelling on trivialities. Her thinking is also clearly influenced by Russian literature (Tolstoy and Dostoevsky), which made its way to England in translation at the time. Woolf’s essay explicitly privileges inner life, whereas Bowen expresses interest in how interiority seeps into the exterior, in how consciousness is not self-contained.
Poetry has a transparency of glass; prose, according to its value, can have anything up from the heavy, unresounding opaqueness of earthiness.\textsuperscript{162}

Trained in visual art like Nabokov, Bowen seems to look back to William Gilpin’s meditations on picturesque beauty and landscape painting\textsuperscript{163} while anticipating William Empson’s discussion of the “muscular image,”\textsuperscript{164} not to mention her allusion to Edmund Burke’s aesthetics of beauty and sublimity.\textsuperscript{165} Importantly, by focusing on the “apparently inharmonious,” on “roughness” that refracts our roughness, she zeros in on language’s potential to more successfully convey sensation, to layer the thought and felt to make them increasingly palpable for readers. Such linguistic and figurative layering relies on stylistic imperfections, on dissonance that paradoxically feels like harmony. She appears to use “sound” as a metaphor for extra-linguistic operations, for mobile imagination, which language that foregoes “suppleness and surface for its own sake” better conveys. Sound for Bowen was also literally a point of interest and contention.\textsuperscript{166} She read for radio and notes in an essay on the Third Programme: “Language can put out a majesty in its sheer sound, even apart from sense: in poetry and, at its greatest, prose, this becomes apparent.”\textsuperscript{167} As it happens, Bowen stammered,\textsuperscript{168} which may partly explain her focus on the “inharmonious” even in syntax that curates sound. This so-called speech

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{162} Bowen, “Poetic Element,” 161.
\textsuperscript{165} Edmund Burke, \textit{A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful [1757] and Other Pre-Revolutionary Writings} (London: Penguin, 1998).
\textsuperscript{166} Nabokov was also fascinated by sound. He refers to it as “harmony,” simultaneously aural and visual. In my paper, “‘All that we see or seem’: Nabokov’s Dream-Theater of the Senses and his Visual Music,” presented at the annual ASEEES conference in 2013, I analyze the relation between dream and theater in his work, positing that Nabokov’s theater is that of the senses, resembling Nikolai Evreinov’s theatrical instinct. His “harmony,” conditioned by colored hearing, contrasts with actual music, which inhibits the senses. By considering Nabokov’s visual “music,” we get a better understanding of the difference between his sensual theater and conventional theatrical performance.
\textsuperscript{167} Quoted in “Introduction,” \textit{Listening In}, 12.
\textsuperscript{168} Allan Hepburn notes that: “Bowen’s stammer caused headaches for producers and editors. To reduce or eliminate awkward hesitations, they had to cut tape by tiny fractions”; \textit{Listening In}, 6-7.
\end{footnotesize}
impediment informed and enriched her descriptive strategy. Bowen frequently expresses herself through ambiguity and paradox. These very means of expression allow her to dwell on words’ texture, to line language with Barthesian “flesh” and give it force to body forth meaning and matter. Written words, specifically those comprising imagery, project themselves as mattered and three-dimensional, mattering more to us readers and perceivers. She refocuses attention on language’s felt quality, its ability to stir and touch minds connected to bodies, even when, especially when, concrete meaning remains unclear.169

Bowen’s interest in communicating truths about interiority through ambiguity has as much to do with figurative strategy as with her actual eyesight. In conversation with fellow author Jocelyn Brooke, Bowen connects her preoccupation with light and lighting to the “purely physical fact” that she “tend[s] to see everything at a first glance either as a sort of dazzling blur or in a mass of shadows.”170 In her biography of Bowen, Victoria Glendinning mentions that she “responded to…the general effect of light, colour and form; and she fully focused on the nearby detail, which thus acquired a disproportionate significance.” Glendinning goes on to provide a delicious anecdote of Bowen, who preferred not to wear glasses, walking “straight into a hedge, 169 What do we make of Bowen’s pronouncement that language with materiality and force must be “luminous and transparent”? Her use of “transparency” is characteristically paradoxical. She does not mean that images should be made to be looked through like glass, for they are then too untransparent and solid. Language with more materiality is more illuminating and “poetic” in that it offers more to stir imagination; it is more truthful because more pleasurable because more perceptible to the body-mind. We come out more knowing for having experienced imagery more intensely, rather than simply having beheld it at a distance as a smooth unyielding surface, a “window” beyond which the world is clearly laid out before us. Bowen inverts verbal categories, refiguring glass as mobile material “portal” and, recalling Wallace Stevens’ “Peter Quince at the Clavier,” makes feeling musical. “Unresounding opaqueness” indicates imagery emptied of matter: flat, silent, and static. Confounding at first, Bowen’s paradoxes and wordplay make good sense if she seeks to transform imagery into a vehicle for material imagination. Bowen also recalls how making, moving, and metaphor are at the root of poiesis, which has a long history in philosophical thought ranging from Aristotle and Plato to Heidegger and Ricoeur. Bowen’s poetics, which treat imagery as event, demand attention to materiality. Her images describing transitional spaces and states provide a sturdier bridge between words and a wordless body-brain consciousness with an imaginative-intuitive strain.

170 “A Conversation between Elizabeth Bowen and Jocelyn Brooke,” Listening In, 280.
talking hard” and “unconcernedly” backing out, “like a bus (according to Stuart Hampshire) still
talking hard.”171 Bowen connects how she perceives light with Ireland, where it “is always
changing and it conditions everything it changes.”172 She was originally trained as a painter and
notes that she brings that same “concentration of vision” to writing.173

Bowen’s views on mobile material imagery also have moral stakes. In Notes on Writing a
Novel, she asserts that the “presence, and action, of the poetic truth is the motive (or motor)
morality of the novel.”174 A writer’s moral stance, his or her articulation of truth through action,
will be impersonal. Bowen’s morality seems to draw its pith from the philosophy of friend and
contemporary Iris Murdoch, who calls for new ways of picturing the “substance of our being,” a
“new vocabulary of attention” that recuperates life’s “density,” and for prose to recover
“eloquence” to “attempt to speak the truth.”175 Similar to Murdoch, Bowen aligns truth with how
words can simulate the density of consciousness. She explicitly dwells on the materialization of
characters and scene. Characters must “have a palpable physical reality. They must be not only
see-able (visualisable); they must be to be felt…Hopelessness of categoric ‘description.’ Why?
Because this is static. Physical personality belongs to action.”176 Character and scene must also
be composites of collected matter, often supplied by pictures, photographs, film, and dreams.177

The Death of the Heart indeed foregoes “categoric” description. Rather, mobile atmospheric and
weather-based descriptions, as well as oneiric experience, often “speak” more truthfully for
characters’ feelings, thoughts, and interactions than their bodies and words do. Rarely are we

171 Victoria Glendinning, Elizabeth Bowen: Portrait of a Writer, 35.
172 “A Conversation between Elizabeth Bowen and Jocelyn Brooke,” 280.
173 Ibid., 281.
174 Bowen, “Notes on Writing a Novel,” Pictures and Conversations: chapters of an autobiography
with other collected writings (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1975), 186.
175 Iris Murdoch, “Against Dryness,” Existentialists and Mystics: Writings on Philosophy and
176 Bowen, “Notes on Writing a Novel,” 175.
177 Ibid., 178.
explicitly asked to picture what characters look like. We learn about them through gesture or external natural occurrences. The evocation of feelings and thoughts takes precedence over appearances. Yet the former are never “categorically” described: they are refracted through medial imagery.

We would be remiss not to note the connection between Bowen’s moving pictures and cinema. The author was an avid cinemagoer and wrote on film. Novels and short stories including The Death of the Heart and “Dead Mabelle” explore the medium’s potential to interface with and alter the written word and world. Bowen states explicitly that the novelist should learn from camerawork, which can provide “the completest possible surrounding of the subject,” comparing the novelist with a film director. While commentators focus on her cinematic impulse, this impulse informs but does not define Bowen’s work. Her idea of perceiving and interacting with imagery involves significantly more than circling the object or subject in question. Her imagery demands that we treat what is represented akin to William Hogarth’s shell, whose inner contents have been scooped out so that we enter the thing or person represented and perceive it or them from within and without, so that inside and outside “coincide.” Traversing the permeable boundary between inside and outside may be thought of as the mental movement needed to imagine the psychologies contained by bodies. Yet in Bowen the interaction of interior and exterior is even more complex. She scoops the stuff of consciousness out of the human shell and has descriptions of the shifting natural world absorb it. The unseen materializes as the unstable “stuff” that it is, demanding the work of imagination to

178 Bowen, “Why I go to the Cinema,” Listening In.
179 Bowen, “Notes on Writing a Novel,” 184.
180 See, for example, Karen Schaller, “‘I know it to be synthetic but it affects me strongly’: ‘Dead Mabelle’ and Bowen’s Emotion Pictures,” Textual Practice 27:1 (2013); see generally Shama Rangwala, Elizabeth Bowen and Cinema (McGill University, 2008).
align it with the shell’s content. The implications of this kind of depth perception transcend cinema’s capacity to represent and to move.

Virginia Woolf hits upon film’s potential to express emotion in the absence of people in “The Cinema.” She connects a tadpole-shaped shadow quivering on the screen with the wordless representation of the phases of fear, rendered through the shadow’s movement; it “burgeons, bulges, quivers, disappears.” Film may visualize the shape of emotion and suggest interiority. It nevertheless remains the case, Woolf would have to concede, that film’s focus on the visual might take away from the potential fullness of what is left to imagination in medial imagery describing an unstable “tadpole-shaped shadow.” Substance-based word imagery is figuratively dense, can invoke all of the senses, and, importantly, is not there to be seen. While Bowen was fascinated by and invested in cinema’s potential, her own visual perception – as mentioned, she was extremely shortsighted – likely, even necessarily, feeds into her idea of moving beyond the surface. Bowen’s imagery might draw on what Woolf finds fascinating about film, and what Woolf consciously integrates into her own writing. However, in her essay on the subject, Bowen points out that what “falls short in aesthetic experience may do as human experience.” Cinema may approximate everyday experience, but writing requires a different set of tools to feel real.

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183 Woolf’s affective assessment and interpretation of shadow, I might add, is directly shaped by the film in question, The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari, a silent 1920 horror feature about the brutality of authority that needs no shadows to elicit fear. Moreover, shadows are historically considered ominous. Woolf does not go against the interpretive grain in this context.
184 Bowen, “Why I go to the Cinema,” 194.
Although light and motion figure prominently in Bowen’s work, what merits further attention is how her imagery formally and figuratively refracts the “dazzling blurs” and “masses of shadow” that affected not only how she saw but, surely, how she felt (in the multisensory sense), reflected on, and intellectualized what she saw. In *The House in Paris,* which Bowen thought of as her strongest novel, we encounter a passage that follows a flashback to Karen’s conversation with her mother, Mrs. Michaelis, about Max’s upcoming marriage to Naomi. Mrs. Michaelis’s neat, tactful summing up of Max’s character – which translates into the mobile material metaphor of him “melt[ing] into thin air” – leads into the contrast between clear-cut vision and that which dwells on the *je ne sais quoi* quality of things and people. Karen sits beside Max looking at her “clasped hands” while her mind races. Their hands will shortly touch, but for now Karen reflects on what her mother said at tea about Max’s “touchiness,” which he just corroborated. “All the same,” Karen thinks:

…her well-lit explanations of people were like photographs taken when the camera could not lie; they stunned your imagination by being exact. Would those unmysterious views in a railway carriage make you visit a place, even in dreams? You could not fall in love with the subject of an Edwardian camera-portrait, with polished shoulders, coiffure and curved throat. The lake showing every ripple, the wood showing every leaf, or the stately neck with pearls are too deadeningly clear. It is more than colour they lack. Without their indistinctness things do not exist; you cannot desire them. Blurs and important wrong shapes, ridgy lights, crater darkness making a face unhuman as a map of the moon, Mrs. Michaelis, like the camera of her day, denied. She saw what she knew was there. Like the classic camera, she was blind to those accidents that make a face that face, a scene that scene, and float the object, alive, in your desire and ignorance.” (HP, 125-126)

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The camera works negatively here, artificially stunning the subject or object, as well as imagination, into immobility. It robs the thing represented of its multi-dimensionality and creates distance between viewer and subject-object, as well as between the thing pictured and the thing apprehended. The too-clear lake and wood and neck are “colourless” not because they lack color, but because their crispness figuratively discolors them by pressing them “flat like a flower in a book” (HP, 126).\textsuperscript{187} Indistinct perception fuels desire, which invests the thing desired with the medial, shifting qualities that it tends to take on in dream and reverie. Bowen reiterates the qualities of thick images discussed in “The Poetic Element in Fiction”: such images cannot and should not be either “clear” or “exact.” Blurs, wrong shapes, “ridgy lights,” “crater darknesses.” Bowen emphasizes material qualities that extend like limbs from and cling to things thought about, sensed more fully. The nature simile is telling, for seeing the “unhumanity” of a face entails a movement from without to within, and vice versa, a distancing effect that more accurately registers the possibility of proximity to what cannot be completely known. Trying to map the face is like mapping the moon. We find its “unhumanness” in its contingency, and in the contingency of what lies beyond it. Mrs. Michaelis is “blind” because, unlike Bowen, she has 20/20 vision: she sees what is clearly “there” in front of her, needing to look no further. She becomes more inhuman because she conflates the “I” with the technological eye. She views the external world coldly and thinks she can know someone or something as a camera knows. In fact, images are most alive when they are desirable, and they are most desirable when imperfectly pictured within, by what we like to call the mind’s eye, which fills out and inhabits an image mentally and bodily by being partly ignorant as to its form, content, and intention.

\textsuperscript{187} At first, we might note a contrast between Bowen’s attitude toward photography and Nabokov’s, who compares his mind’s eye to a photographic memory-device. Only, we soon find that his \textit{mind} becomes the technology par excellence with which reality and the past are captured, exceeding the powers of photography. Cameras are, therefore, inadequate for both writers.
Karen cites modern photography, arguably Bowen’s analogy for experimental fiction, as “no more than an effort to apprehend.” Mrs. Michaelis finds this kind of photography “exaggerated and woolly.” She connects too much “mystery” with “artiness.” Karen continues:

Nothing annoyed her more than to be told that the personality is mysterious; it made her think of Maeterlinck, people in green dresses winding through a blue wood. It is inexcusable not to be clear, she said. She preferred to think of people in terms of character. Karen enjoyed her mother’s anti-romanticism. God forbid, indeed, that one should have cloudy ideas, or impart to objects one’s own shifting moodiness. But the exercise of any sense, sight most, starts up emotion. You cannot debunk everything. Karen’s mother was so far right: no object is mysterious. The mystery is your eye. (HP, 126)

At first, it seems that she privileges the eye as the source of mystery. But the eye is also material; it is a physical organ that translates what is seen into sense impressions. The surface registers light in order to activate feeling and thought. What Bowen actually privileges is the felt quality of the senses “exercised.” That is the purpose of art: to engage thought and feeling. Bowen aligns cloudiness with “ideas” and “moodiness” with matter, granting perception phenomenological and ideational status. Perception is also granted its anthropomorphic tendency, the basis, she affirms, of figurative language. The mystery resides in the eye because it is a barrier and portal at once. In Bowen’s case, it was only so reliable. This passage casts doubt on arguments concerning the author’s object-oriented aesthetics. Although her objects undoubtedly register feeling, Bowen focuses on the human here. Maud Ellmann contrasts Woolf’s objects, which serve to illuminate the prominence of mind (consciousness) over matter – “Woolf treats the object as a grain of sand to be surrounded in a pearl of thought” – with Bowen’s, which “behave like thoughts and thoughts like things.” While elegant and convincing, this contrast seems too neat.

At the beginning of “Time Passes” in To the Lighthouse, Woolf writes that, “Not only was furniture confounded; there was scarcely anything left of body or mind by which one could

\[188\] Maud Ellmann, Elizabeth Bowen, 5-6.
say, ‘This is he’ or ‘This is she.’”¹⁸⁹ In this section, narrative plays on indifferent natural forces, air and wind, that operate un-witnessed, albeit like phantasmagoric conscious actors wearing down the agency of objects, bodies, and minds.¹⁹⁰ They are seeing and unseen. They move yet cannot feel human feeling and are relentless. “Nothing, it seemed, could survive the flood,” only “loveliness and stillness” that the narrating, anthropomorphizing mind still has “clasp hands.”¹⁹¹ The uncanny halfway materiality of Woolf’s elements, the unsettled kind that unsettles, usurps mind and matter far more than Bowen’s objects, which not only absorb but also project bits and pieces of consciousness and embodied feeling outward. However, Ellmann thinks that Bowen’s materiality is oppressive, that her objects are Freudian fetishes, and that, in her work, consciousness “escapes into the object, leaving human beings as vacant as the landscapes that

¹⁹⁰ There is a striking contrast between Woolf’s more “modern” use of the elements to refract temporal movement and historical change and weather’s treatment by Victorian realists such as Hardy, whose land-bound characters become attuned to the natural world’s minute shifts by observing the instincts of animals. Compare the following passages. Orlando: A Biography [1928] (Annotated), ed. Mark Hussey (Orlando, FL: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2006), 164-165: “the first stroke of midnight sounded. Orlando then for the first time noticed a small cloud gathering behind the dome of St Paul’s. As the strokes sounded, the cloud increased, and she saw it darken and spread with extraordinary speed…As the ninth, tenth, and eleventh strokes struck, a huge blackness sprawled over the whole of London. With the twelfth stroke of midnight, the darkness was complete. A turbulent welter of cloud covered the city. All was darkness; all was doubt; all was confusion. The Eighteenth century was over; the Nineteenth century had begun.”

In Far from the Madding Crowd (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1874), 286, Oak reads the weather the old-fashioned way, adhering to Virgil’s suggestions in Georgics 1:374-76 (“rain need never take us unawares…high-flying cranes will have flown to valley bottoms…or else a calf has looked up at the sky and snuffed the wind”): “When he struck a light indoors there appeared upon the table a thin glistening streak, as if a brush of varnish had been lightly dragged across it. Oak’s eyes followed the serpentine sheen to the other side, where it led up to a huge brown garden-slug, which had come indoors to-night for reasons of its own. It was Nature’s second way of hinting to him that he was to prepare for foul weather…two black spiders, of the kind common in thatched houses, promenaded the ceiling, ultimately dropping to the floor. This reminded him that if there was one class of manifestation on this matter that he thoroughly understood, it was the instincts of sheep…they were all grouped in such a way that their tails, without a single exception, were towards that half of the horizon from which the storm threatened.” See also Georgics (Oxford World’s Classics), trans. Peter Fallon (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006).
¹⁹¹ Woolf, To the Lighthouse, 151.
threaten to devour them.” I will be arguing the contrary. Bowen’s weathery landscapes, far more than static objects, refract elements of consciousness that cannot otherwise be expressed. We should, I contend, focus on her descriptions of shifting natural forces and medial states, which refract the nuances of consciousness in ways that objects do not.

Bowen mentions “mystery” alongside playwright Maurice Maeterlinck, who contributed to Symbolism and was characterized by “poetic fancy” and ability to stir imagination. In “Notes on Writing a Novel,” we find significant parallels to Maeterlinck, including concern with sparser dialogue and characters driven by inexorable forces (a la Schopenhauer); Bowen borrows Maeterlinck’s term “marionettes” from his essay “The Tragical in Daily Life.” For him, the “tragic” transcends the material and psychological, linking up with wonder. What he calls “static” drama should minimize action and bring us closer to the infinite and eternal through “simple images” that add to “our consciousness of life.” He privileges psychological to material action, yet still thinks that it should be reduced in favor of the individual “face to face with the universe.” Bowen’s philosophy of writing, unlike Maeterlinck’s, centers on action: “plot must not cease to move forward,” “It is the indivisibility of the act from the actor, and the inevitability of that act on the part of that actor, that gives action verisimilitude,” scenes “give the happening the desired force,” and dialogue is “something happening,” or what characters do to each other. Bowen’s formulations are admittedly contradictory and difficult to parse. But if we look elsewhere in “Notes on Writing a Novel,” we see that she means to complicate action by

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192 Ellmann, Bowen, 6.
194 Ibid., 102. He uses the example of an old man seated in an armchair, unaware of all of the forces of the universe buzzing and circulating around him, as an example of the playwright (aligned with poet) attending to a deeper reality; Ibid., 105.
195 Ibid., 108.
attending to active principles either underlying or existing independently of “action” in the superficial or ordinary sense.

Influenced by Maeterlinck, Bowen acknowledges that plot is primary, with this difference: she relocates psychological action in material processes.\(^{197}\) In spite of this departure, Maeterlinck’s observations, such as the following, inform her thinking about language as a living force:

…it is not in the action but in the words that are found the beauty and greatness of tragedies that are truly beautiful and great; and this not solely in the words that accompany and explain the action, for there must perforce be another dialogue besides the one which is superficially necessary. And indeed the only words that count in the play are those that at first seemed useless, for it is therein that the essence lies…these are words that conform to a deeper truth, and one that lies incomparably nearer to the invisible soul by which the poem is upheld. One may even affirm that a poem draws the nearer to beauty and loftier truth in the measure that it eliminates words that merely explain the action…\(^{198}\)

Locating action in imagery, Bowen tips her hat to Maeterlinck and simultaneously tries to infuse prose with the dynamic “poetic element” of her lecture. The playwright’s alignment of more truthful words with those that “at first seemed useless,” with “another dialogue besides the one which is superficially necessary,” merits attention; his metamorphic image pertaining to this neatly tips into Bowen’s descriptive strategy. He writes: “Let but the chemist pour a few mysterious drops into a vessel that seems to contain the purest water, and at once masses of

\(^{197}\) Bowen defines plot as “Action of language, language of action” in “Notes on Writing a Novel,” 170. She locates the ultimate motive principle of narrative in language’s lateral simulation of consciousness’ operations, in how those operations collide with the external world. This simulation is less obviously, and more vitally, tied to bodies and minds. And, lest the reader think I flirt with post-structuralism, the author is still director, and language if anything is made more thingly by this kind of refocusing of attention on what the author can do to it, what it can accomplish in itself, and what it does to us as readers. Bowen privileges language that attends to psychological action, as well as to the “dramatic possibilities of character” through larger forces (“A Conversation between Elizabeth Bowen and Jocelyn Brooke,” 275). We should by no means disregard Bowen’s emphasis on dialogue as confrontation. The nature of this confrontation, however, is never transparent. Dialogue may express character, but as socialized language suppresses feeling and thought, and happens to be the medium through which characters express themselves, “character” only ever comes off ambiguously. Bowen states in “Notes” that dialogue’s key feature is “ambiguity (speaker not sure, himself, what he means).”

crystals will rise to the surface, thus revealing to us all that lay in abeyance there where nothing was visible before to our incomplete eyes.” Maeterlinck’s metaphor figures playwright-author as chemist experimenting on malleable, apparently “transparent” matter. His chosen element sustains life in the first place. He uses the word “mystery,” returning us to Bowen’s passage in *The House in Paris*. He, too, contrasts two forms of perception: our incomplete eyes see what “seems” to be the “purest water,” but a few drops of mystery actually reveal more than the eye under ordinary, non-experimental conditions can perceive.

The metamorphic metaphor of solid growing out of liquid “reveals” the material quality of full-bodied imagination in action, which begins with visualizing but does not end there; it brings together surface and depth and uses image-based description to make us imagine something vividly by focusing on the active material aspect of what we are asked to see. Mystery resides in the eye, Maeterlinck confirms, because the eye sees incompletely. And how we think of vision requires a dose of mystery to intellectually and imaginatively build on and transform the merely seen, including words on a page. To stimulate and simulate imagination more fully, language must capitalize on uncertainty; it must challenge us and give us as readers more to desire, making reading more pleasurable, more imaginatively charged.

Process-based material imagery in *The Death of the Heart* – which Bowen intriguingly insisted was a “study…not of death so much as of a death sleep,” where “the function of Portia…is to be the awake one” – simulates the precarious nature of feeling and thought; it also allows us to attend to language as an approximation of both. Emotional atrophy (“death sleep,” which is also a form of inattention) leads language to atrophy. Indeed, the Quaynes are Bowen’s primary example of how external appearances are a poor substitute for affective sympathy. The

\[199\] Ibid.
\[200\] “A Conversation between Elizabeth Bowen and Jocelyn Brooke,” 279.
Quaynes’ superficial family model facilitates perceptual deadness and emotional impasses. Bowen also “wanted to show people in extremity, working on one another’s characters and fates all the more violently because they worked by chance.” She gives imagery physical, psychic weight by capitalizing on its chancy qualities. Infused with mystery, imagery in the novel is more accurate because it behaves as the unstable stuff of thought and feeling, moving plot forward even as and when characters are still. Overlooked outward phenomena in Bowen register inner life even when, especially when, characters fail to perceive their surroundings. She strategically aligns social relations with the brittle cracked ice (body, exterior, language) beneath which unstable currents (thoughts, feelings, emotions, the unspoken) flow and wax and wane. Bowen explores the instability underlying socialized language, as well as how bodies connected to intently reflective, albeit self-suppressing, minds exhibit and perform what words cannot. Bowen’s imagery fills perceptual gaps for us as readers, highlighting us and the novel’s characters as socialized “animals.”

At the same time as it partly encompasses human relations, language in the novel delimits their full range. Image-based descriptions interrupt or bookend other written forms, such as letters and Portia’s diary, as well as dialogue, directing us to how everyday linguistic communication oversimplifies rather than refines feelings and thought processes. As I will show, medial psychological states – dreams and daydreams – that briefly take us out of social relations similarly demonstrate how the external natural world in Bowen refracts the perpetually changing internal world of thought and perception. This world, she emphasizes, is touched by other thinking, feeling minds and bodies. We may think of Bowen’s images as actors: they “speak” and perform for people when what they say and write elides the meat of the matter. That “matter” is the often imprecise and paradoxical nature of interpersonal relations, mediated by socialized

201 Ibid., 283.
Language filtered through writing and conversation constantly threatens to break apart, to expose the more indeterminate “truth” under the too-subtle denuding pretty phrase and decorated interior.

**Taking the Air: Weather, Mood, and Matter**

In *The Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin ties weather to mood to our tendency to take this connection for granted in idle conversation. “Nothing is more characteristic,” he observes, “than that precisely this most intimate and mysterious affair, the working of the weather on humans, should have become the theme of their emptiest chatter. Nothing bores the ordinary man more than the cosmos.” He pinpoints the relation of weather, mood, and language, where the last registers the weather-mood link yet skims over its import. There has recently been growing interest in the scholarly community, especially among theorists of affect, in more closely investigating “mood,” how it shapes the world and our place in it. Introducing *New Literary History*’s issue on the subject, Rita Felski and Susan Fraiman write that moods “are usually described as ambient, vague, diffuse, hazy, and intangible, rather than intense, and they are often contrasted to emotions in having a longer duration. Instead of flowing, a mood lingers, tarries, settles in, accumulates, sticks around.”

They describe mood as “background” and “atmosphere.” “Mood is like the weather”; it “seems larger than we are” and “comes to us from elsewhere”; it “muddies the distinction between subjective and objective” and is “shared, collective and social, shaping our experience

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204 Ibid.
205 Ibid., vii.
of being with others.”  

René Rosefort and Giovanni Stanghellini, meanwhile, discuss moods as “unfocused and nonintentional. They do not possess directedness and aboutness…Moods often manifest themselves as prolonged feeling-states.” They home in on the still prevalent tendency to separate feeling from thought, sensation (body) from emotion (mind), physiology from cognition, motivated by a tradition of philosophical inquiry since the end of the nineteenth century. This tradition led to the “bifurcation in our conception of emotional experience as either the expression of mere physiology or the result of sophisticated rational dispositions.” They suggest mood, which “does not lend itself to either a physiological or rational explanation” as an “ambivalent phenomenon that brings out ‘how’ we feel what we feel, and…helps us to appreciate…the attitude involved in our feeling and thinking about what we feel.”

These descriptions merit close consideration, for they demarcate the more impersonal, ongoing state of mood while distinguishing between this state and the apparently more intimate, clearly delineated space and time of emotion. Scholars treat mood as a process-based phenomenon that shows us the shifting but constant interrelation of feeling and thought, mind and body, self and other. Aligning mood with weather – which we either ignore or trivialize while paradoxically drawing on it – they begin developing a fuller material vocabulary with which to explore the permeable boundary between literal and figurative, subjective and objective, realms. However, they sacrifice emotion’s ambiguity to mood’s ambiguity. At times, they also conflate these categories, indicating how language tends to reinstate boundaries we try to complicate using it. The definitional distinction between mood and emotion only holds to a

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206 Ibid.
209 Ibid., 396.
degree. Just as emotion may be ongoing and imprecise, so mood can be short-lived and extremely specific. This need to distinguish between mood and emotion to define the former accurately, even while categorizing mood as more ambiguous, reiterates the false philosophical binary between mind and body that scholars mean to problematize. Even as mood navigates between feeling and emotion, its indeterminacy is highlighted at their expense.

Elizabeth Bowen’s imagery of atmosphere and weather goes a long way towards avoiding such definitional pitfalls. She develops a grammar of attention to feeling states in general, all of which reside at the porous boundary between within and without, mind and body, self and other, thought and its linguistic, physiological expression. While current discussions of mood inform my argument, I do not dwell on essential differences between “mood” and “emotion.” Instead, I focus on how Bowen relocates feeling and thought in weather, elements, and oneiric modes to get language to more accurately express perception and its materialization. She ties feeling and thinking to shifting atmospheric states, which artificially stabilized polite language, unlike medial language, does not account for as fully.

The novel features many passages where characters walk outside. Nothing seems to be happening. Indeed, Bowen often writes or has characters observe that “nothing happens.”210 Looking closely at imagery, however, we see how she relocates event in it. This relocation informs the shape of the book as a whole: plot, style, dialogue, and characterization. The Death of the Heart211 begins with the following description of weather in a park:

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210 Besides consistent references to “nothing happening” throughout the novel, or instances where characters wait for “something” to happen, Portia explicitly writes this in her diary. For example: “Tomorrow is Saturday, but nothing will happen”; “I was quite right in saying nothing would happen” (DH, 145); Portia observes to Eddie: “In a way, at Anna’s nothing does happen – though of course I might not know if it did” (DH, 249); hell-bent on being contrarian, Eddie claims: “it isn’t till I behave that I know quite how I feel. You see, my life depends entirely on what happens.”

That morning’s ice, no more than a brittle film, had cracked and was now floating in segments. These tapped together or, parting, left channels of dark water, down which swans in slow indignation swam. The island stood in frozen woody brown dusk: it was now between three and four in the afternoon. A sort of breath from the clay, from the city outside the park, condensing, made the air unclear; through this, the trees round the lake soared frigidly up. Bronze cold of January bound the sky and the landscape; the sky was shut to the sun – but the swans, the rims of the ice, the pallid withdrawn Regency terraces had an unnatural burnish, as though cold were light. There is something momentous about the height of winter. Steps rang on the bridges, and along the back walks. This weather had set in; it would freeze harder tonight. (DH, 3)

Ice, a medial image that moves and morphs from solid to liquid as day moves and temperature shifts, facilitates the passing of time. Cracked ice floating and melting stands for morning becoming afternoon. Yet we are not given an exact time. Like ice, which cracked sometime and now floats, we are suspended in narrative time, a liminal “now between three and four.” Her juxtaposition of movement with stasis anticipates our encounter with two characters arrested amidst afternoon traffic on a footbridge. Aligning ice with cracking and tapping and floating, Bowen refocuses attention from the purely visual imagination, having imagery absorb and home in on the aural and tactile. Dwelling on details beyond the immediately visible, she begins developing an image-based vocabulary for what we do not typically notice: the phases of ice melting, phases of character, the meaning between lines spoken and written.

Ice’s brittleness points us to the image’s precarity as a thought image, to the precarity of mental images in general, which perpetually shift; this in turn gestures toward the precariousness of language, which imperfectly translates thought and feeling, stabilizes them artificially. The literally unstable image of ice cracking and melting is quite sturdy figuratively: it stages and foreshadows confrontation between characters’ psyches alongside and in dialogue. From the get-go, Bowen’s description operates medially. At the same time as imagery is highly specific, it is intentionally liminal, never fully accessible to perception. For Bowen, it must be imprecise, transitory, to be perceived more precisely, truthfully. Material imagery functions as an attempt to
describe the state of what cannot be fully described or accessed; it transforms in-betweenness into the linguistic and extra-linguistic space wherein readerly perception must and does ordinarily dwell.212

Bowen’s elemental states are a vital precursor to human confrontation in the intermediate space between nature and society in which these states are described, a park inside of a city. The “island,” whose description also refracts the shifting nature of thought-images, inhabits a murky element, “dusk.” Water remains “dark” even as it is specified by a string of adjectives, “frozen woody brown.” Bowen then combines two material images, a “sort of breath” and “clay,” both initially located elsewhere. One element (earth) releases, transforms into, another (air). A “sort of breath” is itself un-visualizable, emitted outside the space on which we as readers are asked to train our perception, Regent’s Park. This breath “condenses” to make air, a semi-concrete shifting element, “unclear.” We are then asked to see trees through and in spite of this. As language works to veil, it paradoxically facilitates vivid body-mind perception, for we are still asked to inhabit this space and try to picture it. We are requested to see through and into medial language and arguably do see and feel these surroundings more clearly for being given more room to imaginatively “clear” the invented “air.” Bowen simulates the conditions of image-formation in the mind, where imagery is never stable or precise. Her imagery linguistically approximates what precedes and lies beyond words.

212 While many authors use nature as a metaphor and link it with psychological states, Bowen’s “atmospheric” language is unique. Romantic descriptions of nature, for example, more smoothly describe “man’s” mental and physical condition; they more seamlessly endeavor to reflect mood’s turbulence through weather’s turbulence, the sunny state of the soul through the sunny state of the sky. Her imagery also departs from that of Victorian writers. Whereas Dickens and Hardy’s nature-based descriptions are more utilitarian, more obviously symbolic, Bowen purposely sacrifices precision to ambiguity. Arguably, this makes her a modernist. Yet she occupies a more complicated space. Her imagery aims for a kind of “universality” of mood, even as that mood can never be pegged, refuses to be. Indeterminacy is the universal, yet this does not make Bowen a postmodernist either. Just as her imagery intentionally avoids neat categories, so does our author.
Bowen keeps introducing liminal images that rely on paradox. Cold is made “bronze” to materially and verbally bind sky to landscape. Cold is also not light: it is unseen except as and through breath. Nevertheless, the image retrains perception by transposing cold’s felt qualities onto light’s seen qualities. We are asked to imagine the “what if” of cold behaving like light and to feel the unclearly seen, which intensifies cold’s metamorphosis into a multisensory image that derives strength from not being a clearly observable phenomenon, from being in a medial material state. Cold interfaces with, becomes, light in shifting air. The image is powerful: “pallid withdrawn” terraces are “unnaturally” lit by cold, whose lit quality Bowen naturalizes through adjectives that obscure, not reveal. We also imagine bridges and back walks, first and foremost, aurally. They form in our minds through disembodied steps ringing. The text bodies forth imagery as it points to that imagery’s visual instability yet felt durability.

Only afterward does Bowen state that it is the “height of winter.” She uses the unquantifiable noun “something,” together with the seemingly purposeful adjective “momentous,” to tie imprecise weather to a precise season. Descriptive language refracts the limits of description. We know not what “something” is. We also know that it is the most important thing. “This weather had set in,” Bowen writes. The words “something” and “this,” encountered right before we meet two characters on a footbridge, set the tone for their vague interaction. Whereas language has so far been more precise for being medial – we feel the fullness of “something,” of “this,” the weather or a mood, without feeling hard-pressed to pin it down – socialized language robs “something” and “this” of materiality and nuance.

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213 Imagery negates its visual characteristics as it takes shape, working the imagination, which struggles to produce what it is asked to see by way of trying to visualize cold, first and foremost, as something felt. Both mind and body are thus engaged. While blotting out light, Bowen introduces simile to catalyze the imaginative transformation of one thing into another, light into cold. Yet the “as though” signals impossibility.
The Death of the Heart contains a number of such descriptions. All of them are purposeful. At the same time as they interrupt plot, they deal with overlooked phenomena that mirror the complexity of psychological states beyond the superficial, evasive language of society; “polite” language is a communicative code and recipe for misunderstanding. Weather more accurately projects states of thought and mood onto the novel’s “atmosphere.” Imagery has to turn to medial matter, Bowen indicates, to simulate more adequately the inadequacy of language, as well as the ways in which perception enters the written and spoken word. Weather, we may concede, is a liminal phenomenon, moving and shifting alongside our everyday lives. It is apropos, therefore, that Bowen dwells on weather-states to show how they reflect feeling, thinking, and their externalization. She also directs attention to how both are difficult to notice in the first place: they are never stable, always in transit. As mentioned, Bowen’s characters often (ironically) observe that nothing is “happening”; these liminal states and spaces are where Bowen locates event and action. She needs characters to remain heedless of these phenomena in order to make them puppet-like and un-free in society and fiction; this also allows us to notice their artificial roles, in perpetual tension with the reality of mood and weather.

Medial language, which gives Bowen’s imagery its semantic and imaginative fullness, and which anticipates her juxtaposition of self-enforced affective atrophy with emotional life, informs characters’ representation, as the passage following on the heels of the one just discussed demonstrates:

On a footbridge between an island and the mainland a man and a woman stood talking, leaning on the rail. In the intense cold, which made everyone hurry, they had chosen to make this long summerlike pause. Their oblivious stillness made them look like lovers – actually, their elbows were some inches apart: they were riveted not to each other but to what she said. Their thick coats made their figures sexless and stiff as chessmen: they were well-to-do, inside bulwarks of fur and cloth their bodies generated a steady warmth; they could only see the cold – or, if they felt it, they only felt it at their extremities. Now and then he stamped on the bridge, or she brought her muff up to her face. Ice pushed
down the channel under the bridge, so that while they talked their reflections were constantly broken up. (DH, 3-4)

Bowen’s characters also occupy a liminal space, a bridge linking two points. This intermediary space is generally passed over. However, whereas others rush, they pause in the middle. We encounter them in this arrested state. Bowen arrests them to describe everything “happening” around them. She gives words material weight by having characters attend to language instead of to bodies rushing by. Their bodies are at a distance yet words keep them bodily proximate to one another. At the same time as Bowen gestures toward language’s materiality through imagery, another kind of language, spoken language, becomes immaterial by virtue of its (lack of) content. We attend to them attending without knowing what they attend to. To get at language’s materiality beyond vision, Bowen de-privileges the gaze: we do not see their faces. Words take on almost visible presence at the same time as the people producing them remain faceless and inhuman, “sexless and stiff as chessmen.” Yet we are also given the imperative to occupy the space of their bodies, to feel them radiate “steady warmth” outward. We are arguably asked to do this in order to occupy language more fully as the source of imaginative mimesis. The kind of language that gets us to do so is the language of weather-states and atmosphere, not language naming and describing the subjects in question. The cold, itself unseen, becomes visible-because-first-felt by way of words. Cold makes words alive and material in the moment that we imagine them being emitted together with and as breath. Characters are thereby physically suspended in language. Their stillness and un-clarity becomes a precise event: this event resides in felt imagery, and in our anticipation of what they are actually saying. Ice reenters the picture, only the individuals in question do not notice it. Ice breaking up also breaks them up, reproducing psychological distance even as it builds affective density.
The reader is circuitously asked to attend to what is being said before having heard it. That characters do not heed the phenomena around them (weather) – phenomena that make them and their words viable – is indicative. Their attention to what is spoken is paradoxically a form of inattention to what underlies what is said. Failure to note nuances of weather gestures toward the two kinds of language (atmospheric and dialogic, in the non-Bakhtinian sense) that we are simultaneously being introduced to. Their word choice circumambulates the subject in question, refuses to broach things directly. Bowen transforms language robbed of nuance into something immaterial, inconsequential, whereas another ambivalent language, that of image-based description, behaves as its foil and necessary counterpart. An understanding of one illuminates what is purposefully withheld in the other. Imagery prepares us for the actual dialogue:

He said: “You were mad ever to touch the thing.”
“All the same, I feel sure you would have, St. Quentin.”
“No, I doubt that. I never do want to know, really, what anyone thinks.” (DH, 4)

We get a reference to an unknown thing, which acquires imagined material density, behaves as an image, in spite of our inability to picture it. St. Quentin, a family friend and novelist, and Anna, Portia’s sister-in-law, are talking about sixteen-year-old Portia’s diary, which Anna has been reading, and which sums her up in a way she dislikes. Touching, reading, thinking, and knowing come together around something unnamed, something hovering between material and immaterial because we have yet to verbally greet it. This novel is full of writers and writing. By juxtaposing different kinds of language – dialogue, diary, letters, diegesis with its accompanying narration and description – Bowen engages the ways in which language expresses and withholds information about inner life. She treats forms of language as good and bad spaces wherein inner life is either stifled or variously projected outward to meet the inner lives of others.
From the atmospheric description above, we see how Bowen invests phase-changing imagery with power to give people and things definition, at the same time as spoken and written language distort and travesty by being either too evasive or too exact. More “truthful” language, she seems to say, resides somewhere in the middle. St. Quentin’s observation that he would rather not know “what anyone thinks” is vital. Tension between the socially motivated need to withhold thought and feeling at all costs and people’s keen observation of one another thinking and feeling – their way of either driving out or playing on these things – drives this novel. Thought overspills social boundaries, says a lot more about its own complex operations, when tied to natural phenomena and, as we shall see later, to semiconscious states.

Anna and St. Quentin’s dialogue introduces us to the kinds of dialogue we find in this novel in general. Their conversation is practically all negatives and double negatives: “I’ve seldom been more upset”; “I should far rather not know”; “One may never reproduce the same muddle exactly, but she would never know”; “You didn't say so”; “That diary could not be worse than it is”; “No, not meant to be that”; “Surely not”; “Nothing arrives on paper as it started, and so much arrives that never started at all” (DH, 4-8). Bowen purposely injects vagueness into conversation, which performs people’s obstinate lack of intimacy and commitment to words they emit. This dialogue is both expressive and evasive, engaging liminality unproductively. A good way into their discussion, which, as we remember, takes place in an intermediate space, Anna observes: “There does not seem to be a single thing that she misses, and there’s certainly not a thing that she does not misconstrue” (DH, 9). Anna uses imprecise language to deplore Portia’s precise language, also imprecise because it oversimplifies. The latter boxes her in, pins her down, makes her afraid of and discomfited by how she is perceived from without. The diary is too exact and therefore not accurate enough. Portia accurately records the facts of people’s behavior, yet
does not record the motivations or moods behind them; this is because she does not understand them. She is too forthright and does not operate with social codes in mind. Such innocence, we are told later, is “ruthless” for how it touches the socialized.

Bowen often compares characters in this novel to creatures at once cruel and blindly striving, unsure. To begin with, Anna says Portia is “more like an animal,” Anna’s expression reminds St. Quentin of “a sardonic bland white duck” (DH, 5), and St. Quentin calls Portia a “little monster” (DH, 9). Indeed, Bowen’s characters act on one another like animals hemmed in, their instincts threatening to overspill their cage. They use language on one another like monsters. They are driven apart yet held together by a medium for communication that becomes a physical, psychic weapon. Bowen continually asks us to attend to language’s shifting states (atmospheric, autobiographical, dialogic) and intentionally introduces ambiguity into image-based description to elaborate its possibilities as a more truthful approximation of thought and perception, as well as how both are linguistically expressed. These things are not, as she shows, grounded in language’s construction of a crisp mental picture, but rather in its status as an approximation.

The novel consists of three sections – “The World,” “The Flesh,” and “The Devil” – each of which is bookended by descriptions of characters either simultaneously walking in or actively conversing in the liminal space of Regent’s Park. We may think of the park as liminal because it is located in the middle of the city, is manmade while simulating “nature,” marks the intersection of city and country without being quite either, and allows people to somewhat air themselves out from rarified social norms while still adhering to them. Bowen uses atmospheric description to contrast the perpetually shifting air outside with the dead stale air of the interior, especially the Quaynes’ mercilessly “aired” out house. Throughout the novel, the word “air” crops up staggeringly often and has a dual function: it refers to actual, material air circulating in, filling, or
invading a space, as well as to people’s social behavior, their “air.” Bowen connects air, which shifts and changes temperature depending on its environment, to how people’s psychic lives operate or come off to others outside of spoken and written language, the palpable je ne sais qui beneath or between what they say that words cannot enlarge or define. Air, breath, and language remain inextricably tied even as Bowen highlights their difference, their incompatibility within a particular social order and mode of expression.

The contrast between actual “air” and someone behaving with a certain “air” maps onto the complex relation of inner and outer life that Bowen’s atmospheric descriptions explore. Each encounter in Regent’s Park is followed by reentry into the house, into stunted emotional life. The following description opens the section “The Flesh” and leads into a meditation on Anna and Portia’s divergent reactions to the unfolding season, spring:

In fact, it is about five o’clock in an evening that the first hour of spring strikes – autumn arrives in the early morning, but spring at the close of a winter day. The air, about to darken, quickens and is run through with mysterious white light; the curtain of darkness is suspended, as though for some unprecedented event. There is perhaps no sunset, the trees are not yet budding – but the senses receive an intimation, an intimation so fine, yet striking in so directly, that this appears a movement in one’s own spirit. This exalts whatever feeling is in the heart. No moment in human experience approaches in its intensity this experience of the solitary earth’s. The later phases of spring, when her foot

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214 I discuss examples of actual air throughout the chapter. Figurative examples include: “Anna switched lamps on and off with a strung-up air” (DH, 53); “She let them in with a rather hoity-toity air” (DH, 171); “Daphne sucked her cheeks in at once sternly and hardly, with the air of someone who could say a good deal more” (DH, 185); “She thought Anna gave herself airs” (DH, 186); “She thrust her cup forward for more coffee, and, with an air of turning to happier subjects, said” (DH, 187); “Daphne blew the dust off a center-piece of Cape gooseberries with an exasperatedly calm air” (DH, 206); “It was clear that Daphne added, and knew that she added, cachet to Smoots’ by her air of barely condoning the traffic that went on there” (DH, 239); “the books in her keeping had a well-groomed air” (DH, 240); “After inside upheavals, it is important to fix on imperturbable things. Their imperturbableness, their air that nothing has happened renews our guarantee” (DH, 270); “Her [Matchett’s] air became more non-committal than ever” (DH, 306); Matchett sarcastically observes: “And I daresay the sea air suited Mr. Eddie?” (DH, 307); “He [Eddie] said: ‘Well, here we are,’ with an air of solemn alarm” (DH, 382); “With a quite new – matter-of-fact air of possessing the room, she made small arrangements for comfort” (DH, 388); “The air immediately tightened, like the air of a court” (DH, 395); “With a gigantic air of starting to ease himself, Thomas said” (DH, 401); the novel ends with Matchett being sent to fetch Portia from Major Brutt’s hotel. The last line is: “Ignoring the bell, because this place was public, she pushed on the brass knob with an air of authority” (DH, 418).
is in at the door, are met with a conventional gaiety. But her first unavowed presence is disconcerting… (DH, 157)

This description again pertains to Regent’s Park, in which we met Anna and St. Quentin on a footbridge. Bowen returns to this space to have us inhabit the undefined yet tangible moment between seasons, the interlude between winter’s departure and spring’s arrival. As in the first passage, where we are dropped into an imprecise time “between three and four in the afternoon,” so here it is “about,” not exactly, five o-clock when the season commences. Bowen binds the seasons, ushered in by felt atmospheric change, to a time we inhabit yet cannot pinpoint, a time out of carefully monitored time on the brink of some change in feeling. She describes how air and light interact in a way that recalls cold behaving as light. We occupy a space between two times and seasons, as well as a medial material state tied to an element: air is “about to darken.” Even as it darkens, air remains “suspended” in anticipation of something “mysterious” and “unprecedented,” an unquantifiable something that in Bowen stands in for a fullness of thought and perception that exact, static description cannot account for. Language enacts the “senses receiv[ing] an intimation,” intimating how this intimation feels extra-linguistically in our bones and brain when we experience changing light and atmosphere.

Even as this phenomenon is “solitary,” out there, Bowen also locates it within. She does this to reinstate a paradox. At the same time as mood and matter are not quite separate, are tied to weather, human experience and “this experience of the solitary earth’s” are not the same. How are we to navigate the porous boundary between them? And what is “this” experience if not that of perpetual transition? The coming of spring, before “her foot is in at the door,” is a moment of truth, Bowen indicates, when people feel their connection with and separation from nature. They sense concretely what they cannot define, a stirring in the body and mind that matches vibrations stringing the air as beads. Yet even as they feel this animal-like stirring, they remain socialized.
The boundary between nature and society reinstates itself even as it temporarily dissolves. This brief dissolution, when social norms and behaviors threaten to break down, is precisely the moment when spring’s “first unavowed presence becomes disconcerting”:

…silences fall in company – the wish to be either alone or with a lover is avowed by some look or some spontaneous movement…even buildings take such feeling of depth that the streets might be rides cut through a wood. What is happening is only acknowledged between strangers, by looks, or between lovers. Unwritten poetry twists the hearts of people in their thirties. To the person out walking that first evening of spring, nothing appears inanimate, nothing not sentient: darkening chimneys, viaducts, villas, glass-and-steel factories, chain stores seem to strike as deep as natural rocks, seem not only to exist but to dream. Atoms of light quiver between the branches of stretching-up black trees. It is in this unearthly first hour of spring twilight that earth’s most agonised livingness is most felt. This hour is so dreadful to some people that they hurry indoors and turn on the lights – they are pursued by the scent of violets sold on the kerb.

(DH, 158)

Bowen turns this transitional time into the space in which words fail. One wishes to escape polite “company,” to be either alone or with someone with whom one needn’t speak. The body – “some look or some spontaneous movement” – rather than language enacts the mind’s uncertain strivings and desires. Only “strangers” wordlessly “acknowledge” the ongoing event, even as this event prompts writing that nevertheless remains “unwritten.” Bowen returns to negatives and double negatives (“nothing appears inanimate, nothing not sentient”). At the same time as description is extremely specific, word choice enacts language’s negation, inspired by this transitional moment between seasons. Atmospheric change begins invading manmade things, enlivening structures otherwise dead to feeling. Nature (“what is happening”; what is felt and meant) briefly threatens to overpower civilization (chimneys, viaducts, villas, factories, stores; what is said and elided). Yet we never tip into the former. The latter presses us to the wall and reinstates its tyranny.

Bowen’s comparison of this temporal, spatial, atmospheric, and affective state to dreaming is apropos. As we shall see later, oneirism similarly allows characters to dwell in a
medial state, a more truthful way of being in the world. Bowen keeps introducing paradox. Spring’s beginning is “unearthly” at the same time as it makes “earth’s most agonised livingness…most felt.” Atmospheric change is “unearthly” because it is too apparent for the socialized, threatening to break down carefully constructed physical, mental, and linguistic boundaries. Yet this breaking down is also most natural, making us behave more alive than we otherwise would on a daily basis. This intermediate state, a glimpse of freedom, is also “dreadful”: “some people hurry indoors and turn on the lights” to block out natural light. They prefer to “talk” about weather as a substitute for deeper feeling rather than face it wordlessly as something impacting mood, something separate but undeniably connected to what and how we are.

In the midst of this atmospheric description, we alight on Anna and Portia, “both, though not together” walking in Regent’s Park. Bowen explores different forms of perceptual attention. Whereas Anna’s perception is colored by society, Portia, between girlhood and womanhood, has yet to understand society’s rules and expectations. Their divergent encounters with nature in this space allow Bowen to keep building the connection between weather, atmosphere, consciousness, and perception’s variegated expression:

This was Portia’s first spring in England: very young people are true but not resounding instruments. Their senses are tuned to the earth, like the senses of animals; they feel, but without conflict or pain. Portia was not like Anna, already half-way through a woman’s checked, puzzled life, a life to which the intelligence only gives a further distorted pattern. With Anna, feeling was by now unwilling, but she had more resonance. Memory enlarged and enlarged inside her an echoing, not often visited cave…She did not know half she remembered till a sensation touched her; she forgot to look back till these first evenings of spring. (DH, 158)

Whereas the preceding passage introduces us to how adults are touched and threatened by changing seasons, this one differentiates between “social” animals and youth, unsocialized “animals” who still feel without consequence, express themselves when precedent is beside the
point. Two kinds of “animal” are in question. Anna is an animal well-versed in the social order, resigned to occupying her “proper” place within it. Her social intelligence does not allow her feelings free reign. She checks herself for fear of being checked by others from without. This moment is a threat, as she feels “unwillingly” yet more deeply because inadvertently. Portia is an animal that primarily feels, as her social intelligence is underdeveloped. This medial space in which seasons change allows for a comparison between the innocent and socialized that remains sustained throughout the novel: both are a danger to one another and neither ever quite know where they stand. Bowen’s nature analogy again extends to manmade things: her animals, old and young, are also “instruments,” one less “resounding” than the other. The more resounding instrument is the one more worked upon, more practiced. Here, resonance is not necessarily good. However, it indicates depth, the layers underlying any given behavior. Portia is less complicated and therefore unresounding. “Nature” plays upon her more directly because she does not know better, does not resist. Anna and Portia perceive the same things but do not register them the same way: At different moments, they both crossed different bridges over the lake, and saw swans folded, dark-white cyphers on the white water, in an immortal dream. They both viewed the Cytherean twisting reaches at the ends of the lake, both looked up and saw pigeons cluttering the transparent trees. They saw crocuses staining the dusk purple or yellow, flames with no power. They heard silence, then horns, cries, an oar on the lake, silence striking again, the thrush fluting so beautifully. Anna kept pausing, then walking quickly past the couples against the railings: walking alone in her elegant black she drew glances…But Portia almost ran, with her joy in her own charge, like a child bowling a hoop. (DH, 159) Bowen’s “different bridges” crossed at “different moments” mark the crossing points between phases of thought and feeling. We first encounter Anna and St. Quentin arrested on a bridge together, complicit in their inattention to their surroundings. The act of crossing separately allows Bowen to suspend her characters on a manmade structure over water to direct us to
varying degrees of perceptual attention at this material intersection of nature and society, separated and united by “air” (atmosphere). At the same time as the lake and swans are nature, Bowen makes them figurative markers for perception’s mysterious workings. This gesture recognizes how imagery is retrospectively created: it is the mental abstraction from “cyphers” on white, writing on paper. Portia and Anna’s confrontations with nature directly relate to their disparate understanding of social codes and the ways in which they function in language. Words are “dark-white cyphers” that reveal and conceal. They create an unreal aura, an “immortal dream,” a myth around what we think and feel more truthfully outside of language.

Bowen’s reference to Cytherea, another name for Aphrodite, plunges us straight into the world of myth and alludes to the novel’s title. Cythera is also the island where Aphrodite alights after arising from sea foam (aphros). Regent’s Park, an “island” suspended in the middle of London, is the “unearthly” dreamlike place where nature and society push against one another, where shifting moods mingle with shifting air. The social veneer somewhat breaks when weather makes people inadvertently feel with the heart what their “intelligence” quickly suppresses. At the same time, this mythic place and phase-changing imagery in it gesture toward other mythologies: language and social “myths” regulating how one should behave and be seen. These myths curb sense perception and its outward manifestations. Whereas Anna pauses to collect herself, knowing that even here society’s eyes are trained on her, Portia runs unknowingly, “her joy in her own charge.” Seasons in transit, which allow Bowen to evoke images in transit – in the mind, from the mind into language – facilitate her meditation on what “kills” the heart. Because people in this novel impose self-unawareness onto what they think and feel, this makes them inattentive to feelings and thoughts in others. Characters constantly deny verbally that they can “know” what others feel and think. They also deny that they think, whereas Portia notes in
her diary that she can “feel” others thinking by the “sort of look[s]” they give her. When they “say” nothing, people are thinking more fully and stifle it. In contrast, Anna and others use “ideas” to stand in for a socialized form of thought, wondering how Portia has none.

Instances of confrontation between the polished “exterior” (literally, the home interior) and with what lies beyond or beneath the composed face and barebones phrase (the weather, someone’s “air”) map onto the contrast between the atmosphere inside Windsor Terrace and outside in Regent’s park. “The Devil” opens in the Quaynes’ home and ends in a transitional space, the crosswalk between house and park. Portia has returned from being unwillingly sent to Seale, and Thomas and Anna have yet to get back from abroad. The chapter begins with a description of Windsor Terrace after Matchett’s “thorough” spring cleaning:

> Everything was ready for them to come back and live. That Friday morning, 2 Windsor Terrace was lanced through by dazzling spokes of sun, which moved unseen, hotly, over the waxed floors. Vacantly overlooking the bright lake, chestnuts in leaf, the house offered that ideal mould for living into which life seldom pours itself. The clocks, set and wound, ticked the hours away in immaculate emptiness…The spring cleaning had been thorough. Each washed and polished object stood roundly in the unseeing air. The marbles glittered like white sugar; the ivory paint was smoother than ivory. Blue spirit had removed the winter film from the mirrors: now their jet-sharp reflections hurt the eye; they seemed to contain reality…Crisp from the laundry, the inner net curtains stirred over windows reluctantly left open to let in the April air with its faint surcharge of soot. Yes, already, with every breath that passed through the house, pollution was beginning. The heating was turned off. Up the staircase stood a shaft of neutral air, which, upon any door or window being opened, received a tremor of spring… (DH, 301-302)

Bowen’s recently aired out interior, a lifeless house full of dead air, contrasts with descriptions of air circulating. Whereas the elements outdoors are lively, in transit, here air and sun are still yet threatening, containing a different kind of charged “atmosphere”: that of an interior, literal (house) and figurative (interiority), violently cleaned out of feeling. Its owners are absent. Yet the house may as well be unoccupied while they are present, for they have chosen to blind themselves to nuance, to shut the windows against breeze, to comment on weather, on everything
emptily rather than meaningfully. They cultivate inattention to survive and live in a state of what Bowen refers to as “living death.” The sun hotly “lances” an unfeeling interior; the house “vacantly” overlooks the “bright lake”; time ticks away in “immaculate emptiness”; objects are surrounded by “unseeing air”; ivory paint is “smoother” than ivory itself; reflections are “jet-sharp” to the point of pain; “neutral air” is unnatural air, whereas living breath and “April air,” not “immaculate,” constitute “pollution.” Breath and soot invade neutrality and begin to work on it. “Living death” is only so sustainable. Dust and film inevitably gather. Pollution is the “reality” of social relations, the complexity of interpersonal communication as well as internal processes. The jet-sharp reflection in the mirror *seems* to “contain reality,” but is an illusion, a polished deception.

The “tremor of spring” is already beginning to invade this house, in spite of its owners’ attempt to shut “natural” life out. Portia, who moves about the house invisibly observing and breathing into its clean deadness, always feeling intently, is like that tremor of spring. Her searching temperament, and her “innocent” language reading into behavior without ascertaining its motive, inadvertently touch those who try to remain impervious. We are, I contend, meant to read the above passage alongside Bowen’s descriptions of weather and seasonal change. Bowen juxtaposes interior with exterior again in the following passage, where Thomas and Portia walk through Regent’s Park once he and Anna return:

After tea, Thomas and Portia dodged two lines of traffic, successfully crossed the road and went into the park. They crossed the bridge to the far side of the lake. Here stood the tulips just ready to flower: still grey and pointed, but brilliantly veined with the crimsons, mauves, yellows they were to be…The water was animated: light ran off the blades of oars or struck through the coloured or white sails that shivered passing the islands…The etherealisation of the early morning had lifted from the long narrow wooded islands, upon which nobody was allowed to land, and which showed swans’ nests at the edge of their mystery. Light struck into the islands’ unvisited hearts; the silvery willow branches just shifted apart to let light glitter through. Reflections of trees, of sails made the water coloured and deep, and water birds lanced it with long ripples. Thomas and Portia turned
their alike profiles in the direction from which the breeze came. Portia thought how inland the air smelled. Looking unmoved up at the turquoise sky above the trees burning thinly yellow-green, Thomas said he felt the weather would change… (DH, 318-319)

Bowen stages multiple “crossings.” First, crossing from the house and polite society to the park, where society loosens up, by way of a road; then, crossing over a bridge, moving further away from the socialized world within a space still circumscribed by it. She again invokes nature at the point of seasonal change. Tulips “just ready” to flower already exhibit nuances of color. As we have seen, light and air inside the house are still and unseeing, “neutral.” Here, the elements are in perpetual motion and loosen inhibitions, leading people to look “into each other’s faces boldly, as though they felt they should know each other.” Water is “animated” by light, which “runs” like water off of material surfaces. Bowen uses the verb “etherealisation” to invoke air and light’s movement throughout the day. Her word choice consistently transforms language into an actor. “Etherealisation” itself “lifts” while revealing islands, uninhabited yet visible spaces at the “edge of mystery” where swans nest. Light “strikes” and “glitters” through. These islands are physically inaccessible but may be seen. They are like the human heart “struck” by light and weather. Feelings and thoughts are momentarily externalized, worn on the face and body. Only they remain mysterious because they are never crisp or static. In this space of natural air and light, they are only worn on the sleeve by those more willingly swayed, more willing to wordlessly, temporarily, shed conventions. Unlike the mirror’s too-crisp surface, here, reflections ripple, making the surface producing them “coloured and deep.” Air is anything but neutral.

We encounter two “alike profiles” that register weather, specifically “breeze” – an air current whose strength varies depending on temperature and location – differently based on their either yielding or unyielding inner states. Portia, who just spent time at the seaside, thinks about air’s nuances, recognizing the distinct smell of “inland air.” Bowen ties “air” to mood,
personality, and demeanor. Actual air figuratively signals feeling-states, for we learn that people are more open with feelings by the sea than they are in London, their freer “air” bound up with sea air. Thomas, who in fact has crossed the sea recently, remains oblivious to air’s distinctions, to layers of feeling. He looks “unmoved” at the moving “turquoise sky” and “burning trees” and says he feels the weather will change. His is an empty statement, a superficial pronouncement substituting for deeper thought and feeling. What he says is a placeholder for what he will not say. His language empties weather of meaning, signals inattention to the topic invoked. The dialogue below confirms this. Portia uses flowers’ transitional state as an invitation to broach family history. Thomas resists. Following his superficial weather comment, Portia responds directly and too literally, considering that Thomas does not mean what he says:

“I hope not before these tulips are out. These are the tulips father told me about.”
“Tulips – what do you mean? When did he see them?”
“The day he walked past your house.”
“Did he walk past our house? When?”
“One day, once. He said it had been painted…”

…Thomas’ face went slowly set and heavy, as though he felt the weight of his father’s solitary years as well as his own. He looked at Portia, at their father’s eyebrows marking, here, a more delicate line. His look made it clear he would not speak… (DH, 319-320)

Portia ties tulips flowering to narrative to her father’s nostalgic behavior after being exiled from “society” by his family following his affair with Portia’s mother. His actions were, and continue to be, treated as an “aberration”; Anna thinks of Portia in these terms as well. Portia grew up abroad moving between hotels, liminal spaces in which people dwell temporarily and come and go at will. Even there Portia’s “family” did not belong. They always took back rooms to remain hidden from more civilized eyes. By mentioning her father, Portia stirs up sentiments in Thomas that he has trained himself to ignore. Along with the rest of his social class, he actively skims over anything unseemly, pretending that what “happened,” namely adultery, never happened, never happens. Facing Portia, his flesh and blood and the product of the unspeakable, as well as
her verbal appeal to a memory he does not possess, his “unmoved” expression breaks. Silence spells intellectual and affective refusal. Whereas his look unwittingly “speaks” for him when language will not. Portia sees that he will not speak and, in this rare moment, discerns something of what he feels before he shuts himself off again. He characteristically does so through empty language resembling his weather observation, saying that they paint the house “every four years.”

What happens next affirms how the social and natural worlds, inner and outer life, collide in medial spaces and states in this novel. As Thomas and Portia exit the park and find themselves at the crosswalk, Portia looks up to see Anna looking at them through the drawing room window. Distracted, Portia stops “half way across the road” to wave and almost gets hit by a car. Thomas warns, “Look out!” Anna quickly withdraws, embarrassed at being seen looking. Portia has no qualms about acting and feeling impulsively. She has yet to learn to act and feel otherwise. To Thomas’s query “What’s the matter?” she replies, “There was Anna, up there. She’s gone now.” He counters: “If you don't take better care in the traffic, I don’t think you ought to go out alone.” His chastisement extends beyond the event at hand, for he essentially rebukes her for inattention to social cues. As mentioned, Portia grew up in back rooms hidden from “proper” society. She does not understand that looking and being looked at are never innocent acts. Her forthright demeanor is literally becoming a danger to her and others. That she almost gets hit while crossing this space between exterior and interior is properly suggestive. Anna’s reflection on being seen unguarded from without while holding a letter within follows:

She knew how foolish a person looking out of a window appears from the outside of a house – as though waiting for something to happen that does not happen, as though wanting something from the outside world. A face at a window for no reason is a face that should have a thumb in its mouth: there is something only-childish about it. Or, if the face is not foolish it is threatening – blotted white by the darkness inside the room it suggests a malignant indoor power… (DH, 321)
Anna contrasts exterior and interior while reflecting on society’s fear of their collision by way of a “transparent” medium facilitating their superficial contact. Like the mirror with its too-sharp reflection, the window is not an accurate medium: it exposes the surface while leaving one to wonder what the expression betrays or conceals, what that letter contains. Unlike medial substances and states, windows and mirrors in Bowen are too transparent, too clear, and therefore deceptive. Portia’s gaze and wave are invitations to mutual recognition and affection. This expectant look, refracted by her diary, which Anna keeps reading, is what scares Anna most. Being seen looking makes Anna suspect that others suspect her of “spying.” And in fact she is, by reading the diary, although Portia does not know this yet. Anna feels seen through and judged, “foolish” and “only-childish” for daring to look for no “reason.” She extends Portia’s gaze to society. This has less to do with being literally seen, and more to do with fear of being seen feeling, seen wanting something to “happen” to startle one out of one’s aired out neutral life.

Bowen adds that a face in a window suggests a “malignant indoor power.” That power is real. We have seen how the Quaynes’ household is malignant, how they purposely kill emotional life to survive domestically and socially. Standing by the window, the thin barrier between inside and outside, Anna allows herself a rare moment of unguarded reflection, prompted by rereading the letters of former lover Pidgeon, whose “falseness” she compares to Eddie’s. Anna conflates Portia’s gaze with Portia’s diary, which she thinks places her in a false position, at the same time as it exposes her to herself and others. While Anna’s emotional asides in this novel are rare – unlike her always vague, guarded pronouncements – when we encounter them, they are tied to Portia’s diary and letters: tools for communication and miscommunication. Here, she searches Pidgeon’s deceptive romantic language to ascertain her own emotional inadequacy, her falseness, which she connects with how she thinks Portia perceives her:
Everything in her life, she could see now, had taken the same turn – as for love, she often puzzled and puzzled, without ever allowing herself to be fully sad, as to what could be wrong with the formula. It does not work, she thought…There seemed to be some way she did not know of by which people managed to understand each other…Anybody as superficially wounded, but at the same time as deeply nonplussed as Anna seems to himself to be a forlorn hope. This is what one gets for being so nicely nonchalant, for saving people’s faces, for not losing one’s hair…Everything she does to me is unconscious; if it were conscious it would not hurt. She makes me feel like a tap that won’t turn on. She crowds me into an unreal position, till even St. Quentin asks why do I over-act? (DH, 321-323)

Actual puzzles in Bowen signal puzzlement by feelings and social codes, as well as the attempt to put them together.\(^{215}\) Anna refers directly to being “puzzled” by life. Even as she thinks about feeling, puzzling over her inability to feel adequately, she does not “allow” herself to feel fully. We gain insight into Anna that puts her on the same playing field as Portia. Whereas Portia cannot piece together social codes or operate within them, Anna is too well-integrated to ever operate entirely outside of them, even in private. They are both at a disadvantage, social and emotional, and therefore liable to misunderstand one another through language, which refracts their respective positions. Even as Anna mechanically suppresses feeling, she pities herself for the compromised position that life has forced upon her. She is less affected by those who play the game and understand the rules. Portia affects her precisely because she unconsciously pins people down without understanding the reasons for their behavior. She expects things of them that they no longer know how to give. She makes Anna feel “unreal” because she perceives her reality. As Anna cannot explain why she is the way she is without allowing herself to feel more, she can only “over-act,” play her part consciously and unnaturally. Before Portia came, before she read her diary, Anna took these things for granted.

\(^{215}\) Puzzles are omnipresent in the novel and allude to assembling images, which are like codes to be solved; they are tied to language, which puzzles and checks. Major Brutt, another “innocent” in the novel – he is a war veteran who cannot find his place in post-war society and clings to illusions about the Quaynes’ household as to a beautiful dream – sends Portia puzzles that she dutifully assembles.
Prior to turning to the second half of this chapter on oneiric experience, we must attend to a passage that marks a transition between what I have been discussing – weather phenomena and spaces that allow us to attend to the nuanced relation of interior and exterior – and medial states of consciousness whose associated imagery Bowen treats the same way as atmospheric conditions. Having arrived at Waikiki, Portia stands looking out to sea. This moment facilitates Bowen’s sustained reflection on the role of the senses in image-formation. She describes Seale sea front from several angles: the east horizon, heavily populated by Southstone’s major hotels and tourists, a “forcible concrete seawall” separating inland from sea that stretches from Seale to Southstone, and west of Seale, which is nothing but marsh. There “you see the world void, the world suspended, forgotten, like a past phase of thought. Light’s shining shifting slants and veils and own interposing shadows make a world of its own…Along this stretch of the coast, the shingle has given place to water-flat sands: the most furious seas only slide in flatly to meet the Martello towers” (DH, 189). This description of the coastline coincides with Bowen’s literary strategy: it lets her continue reinforcing the interplay of interior and exterior, “nature” and society. Bowen’s “concrete” seawall artificially separates the socialized sphere with its hotels and trippers from the unpopulated coast. She distinguishes between the world (Le Monde) and that other mobile world of water, shadow, and light linked with thought, feeling, and perception, the current running underneath and away from external relations.

Portia stands precisely “midway between these two distances, hands knotted behind her back,” looking out:

The skyline was drawn taught across the long shallow bow of the bay. Three steamers’ smoke hung in curls on the clear air – the polished sea looked like steel: amazing to think that a propeller could cut it. The edge of foam on the beach was tremulous, lacy, but the horizon looked like a blade. A little later this morning, that blade would have cut off Thomas and Anna. They would drop behind the horizon, leaving behind them, for only a minute longer, a little curl of smoke…To look at the sea the day someone is crossing is to
accept the finality of the defined line. For the senses bound our feeling world: there is an abrupt break where their power stops – when the door closes, the train disappears round the curve, the plane’s droning becomes inaudible, the ship enters the mist or drops over the line of sea. The heart may think it knows better: the senses know that absence blots people out…We desert those who desert us; we cannot afford to suffer; we must live how we can. Happily the senses are not easy to trick – or, at least, to trick often. They fix, and fix us with them, on what is possessable. They are ruthless in their living infidelity.

(DH, 190-191)

Bowen places her heroine between unchecked thought/perception (nature) and society. Portia is not quite wild and not quite socialized, no longer a child and not yet an adult, extremely accurate yet also extremely occluding in her written and vocal observations about others’ behavior. Bowen again uses the process of “crossing” to train our thought on the shifting elements; they refract the paradoxical nature of thought and feeling, how they materialize imperfectly by being arrested. Smoke hangs on the “clear air”; the “polished sea” looks like “steel”; the horizon is akin to a “blade.” These cold, threatening images allude to the factory, to mechanical production (smoke, steel, blades), and map onto an otherwise tranquil environment. The resulting mood is disconcerting. As we recall, words like “clear” and “polished” in Bowen stand not for truth or accuracy but their opposite. Imagery evokes the violence done to perception when it comes in contact with manmade things – objects, language, social structures, etc. – not to mention with our “nature,” our need to fix and define. The too-clear horizon looks like but is not steel, can easily turn to “tremulous” foam. Yet the former appears to be more “final,” more “defined.” Bowen invocation of the “line” is not coincidental, for it allows her to extend her analogy to language: the way in which perception is externalized in the written line, which similarly “bound[s] our feeling world” as readers, even as it invites us to feel and reflect.

Bowen uses the cut-off senses, a concept we are invited to picture through an otherwise changeable element, water – converted into things and words, or solid “blades” – to try to get us to perceive what we cannot perceive, namely, the limits of perception. She arrests mobile
imagery to gesture toward our tendency to arrest ambiguity and paradox, which would otherwise overwhelm us in the artificially simplified world we inhabit. The senses’ “power” stops when it crosses the “horizon” between the internal and external. Their limit is linked to manmade things: built structures such as houses and means of transport (train, plane, ship).

Bowen joins feeling with thinking we know, and sensing with actual knowing. Yet this latter knowing is knowledge we cannot tap into because the stoppage of sense, connected with self-preservation, indicates knowledge’s limit. Feeling, sensing, and knowing are all somewhat dishonest because of how they are filtered through needs, instincts, and desires. They are connected with self-deception, the means by which we survive and deal with the unbearable.

This passage is Bowen’s lament for perception’s boundaries, as well as the boundaries of linguistic description. Unlike passages that use medial imagery to direct attention to the “truer” nature of feeling and perception, this one performs how language re-imposes limits on the thought and felt. Consistent with her thinking, Bowen treats the too-clear, static line as a bad thing, as what curtails imagination and understanding, even as she acknowledges that line’s necessity, the necessity and mercilessness of forgetting.

She aligns the senses’ limits with our limited ability to connect with and remember others. We do not exist in a vacuum but in relation. Literal absence dulls sentiment, makes mental pictures fade; it leads to a vacancy that the present begins to fill. We instinctively self-deceive to survive, but the senses are even more “ruthless” in what is true about them, true in the partial sense: they only let us “fix” on “what is possessable.” Thus their “living infidelity.” Whereas Bowen uses phase-changing material imagery to try to grasp what is not clear-cut, here she wrestles with the impossibility of grasping. She tackles the nuances of thought and feeling in
description that refracts rather than surmounts these problems. Bowen turns to Portia’s relation with Thomas and Anna:

…But the absence, the utter dissolution, in space of Thomas and Anna should have been against nature: they were her Everyday. That Portia was not more sorry, that she would not miss them, faced her this morning like the steel expanse of the sea…They had all three worked at their parts of the same necessary pattern. They had passed on the same stairs, grasped the same door handles, listened to the strokes of the same clocks. Behind the doors at Windsor Terrace, they had heard each other’s voices, like the continuous murmur inside the whorls of a shell…To the outside world, she smelled of Thomas and Anna. But something that should have been going on had not gone on: something had not happened. They had sat round a painted, not a burning, fire, at which you tried in vain to warm your hands… (DH, 191-192)

The “unnatural living” (DH, 101) in the Quaynes’ household, as their maid Matchett calls it, leads to the suspension of nature, the feelings good and bad running through a family. Representing the upper class, a social order and way of being, the Quaynes stifle feeling, denying Portia’s unspoken pleas for affection. They are the reason she stands looking out to sea trying to imagine them crossing. They ship her off to Anna’s former governess, Mrs. Heccomb, and her unruly children and go abroad to escape her emotional demands. Physical absence cuts them off like a cold blade. Portia cannot “miss” them because they have only ever been unresponsive, dead to emotional and perceptual “resonance.” Bowen again puts interior and exterior into dialogue, showing how the latter does and does not reflect the former. Portia is superficially tied to Thomas and Anna through Windsor Terrace, where they “act” out their “parts of the same necessary pattern” and come in contact with the same objects. Outward behavior indicates self-imposed internal vacancy rather than affective cohabitation. Bowen ties the nonevent to mechanical, senseless relations: “something had not happened.” As I have been demonstrating, something not “happening” signals the failure of interpersonal communication. As with water, which becomes a steel blade, Bowen arrests the fire element in paint to gesture toward untruths
underlying the quaint domestic scene. The Quaynes present a picture of what family looks like, only are not the real thing. “Painted fire” represents heat while leaving hands cold.

Bowen goes further, describing Portia’s attempt to construct a mental image:

She tried to make a picture of Thomas and Anna leaning over the rail of the ship, both looking the same way. The picture was just real enough, for the moment, to make her want to expunge from their faces a certain betraying look. For they looked like refugees, not people travelling for pleasure. Thomas – who had said he always wore a cap on a ship – wore the cap pulled downed, while Anna held her fur collar plaintively to her chin. Their nearness – for they stood with their elbows touching – was part of their driven look: they were one in flight. But already their faces were far less substantial than the faces of Daphne and Dickie Heccomb…Then Portia remembered they would not be aboard yet: in fact, they would hardly have left London. And the moment they were aboard, Anna would lie down: she was a bad sailor; she never looked at the sea. (DH, 192-193)

This description directs us to the inconstant nature of mental images as they form and are felt. Portia’s romanticized picture reflects her desire to see her relatives in a certain light and is unstable: it immediately begins to shift. Whereas Anna and Thomas frame their trip as one for “pleasure,” Portia senses that they travel to escape the inadvertent pressure she places on them as their ward, as well as the unseemly family history that she embodies. Thomas wears his cap “pulled down” and Anna holds her collar “plaintively.” Their bodies and gestures betray escapism, while their faces, recalling the passage with Anna and St. Quentin, remain out of view. The image is both accurate and betraying, for neither we nor Portia can access them. The faces of Mrs. Heccomb’s children are more “substantial” not only because they are there to be grasped, but also because they are more expressive to begin with. Bowen explicitly states that “feelings” are aired more openly at Waikiki, where the atmosphere is more relaxed (different social class) than at Windsor Terrace. While spoken language remains coded, people at Waikiki betray their thoughts and feelings more readily through gesture and intonation.

Portia attempts to construct a mental image only to disqualify it. She knows that Thomas and Anna have yet to leave. Changing temporal register, Bowen adds a detail outside of Portia’s
imaginative and perceptual range. Anna will “lie down,” for she is a “bad sailor” and never looks at the sea. Not only does Portia’s image immediately begin to unravel; the reader is then informed that it is wholly untrue. We are told what does happen and our resulting mental image destroys and replaces Portia’s. We are also reminded of Anna’s inattention to the elements. Looking out to sea signals romantic contemplation, being in touch with feeling. For Anna, such a moment would be too deliberate and sentimental. This description, facilitated by the process-based image of crossing the sea – imagined by someone who herself occupies a liminal space – allows Bowen to comment on mental imagery’s conscious construction. The following section explores unstable mental imagery in the novel through medial states of consciousness.

**Castles in the Air: Oneiric Imagery and Interiority**

As we have seen, Bowen turns to atmosphere and weather to indicate pockets of “happening.” She transforms image-based description into the space of ongoing event. Imagery thereby refracts interiority’s fraught relation with its linguistic, behavioral externalization, a relation that characters caught up in “living death” overlook. In addition to atmospheric imagery, the novel includes dreams and daydreams. Their combination of remembered and imagined imagery is similarly liminal and ties materiality to thought. Bowen attends to these phenomena – which are imprecise but feel precise perceptually – to reflect on how mental and perceptual states may be more precise than something externally apprehended, such as behavior and what people say.

Daydreaming first occurs during a dialogue between Thomas and Portia in his study, punctuated by unbearable silences. Thomas feels invaded, a sense of “pressure” induced by someone “expecting something.” “He liked best, at this time of evening, to allow his face to drop into blank lines. Someone there made him feel bound to give some account of himself, to put on some expression or other. Actually, between six and seven o’clock he thought or felt very little”
(DH, 35). Not knowing what to say, not wanting Portia there, he characteristically turns to weather: “‘It’s freezing,’ he unwillingly said at last. ‘It bites your face off, out there.’” Bowen compares his demeanor in conversation to an “animal being offered something it does not like.” When Thomas refers to Portia’s mother’s death in empty vague language, “It was rotten about your mother – things like that should not happen,” Portia looks away in “overcome silence.” She looks back at him as he looks elsewhere, superficially attending. He pretends to read and then rings Anna. Meanwhile, Portia loses herself in a vivid, composite memory-image involving her mother. The passage begins right after Thomas finally looks at his half-sister:

But she only looked through him, and Thomas felt the force of not being seen…What she did see was the pension on the crag in Switzerland, that had been wrapped in rain the whole afternoon. Swiss summer rain is dark, and makes a tent for the mind. At the foot of the precipice, beyond the paling, the lake made black wounds in the white mist. Precarious high-upness had been an element in their life up there, which had been the end of their life together. That night they came back from Lucerne on the late steamer, they had looked up, seen the village lights at star-level through the rain, and felt that that was their dear home. They went up, arm-in-arm in the dark, up the steep zigzag, pressing each other’s elbows, hearing the night rain sough down through the pines: they were not frightened at all… (DH, 38-39)

Thomas’ inattention and linguistic evasiveness direct Portia’s attention to the very things he avoids. Bowen activates the imagination rather than the eye, having the person looked at physically register “not being seen.” Whereas Thomas cannot blot Portia’s presence out, the moment she looks at and through him, he ceases to exist. He busily suppresses thought and feeling, whereas Portia inadvertently succumbs. The imagery of daydream is qualitatively similar to atmospheric imagery in Regent’s Park and serves the same purpose: it juxtaposes exterior and interior and gets at nuanced feeling states through mobile yet precise description. Bowen uses daydreaming to differentiate between dulled external perception and the fullness of internal apprehension. Thomas is literally there to be seen and felt. Yet his unresponsiveness makes him less “real” than Portia’s internal world. Her remembered images are so vivid, albeit questionably
reliable, that she loses all awareness of her immediate surroundings. Portia’s senses are transported to another time and place, a mental space built of atmosphere and weather.

This space is and is not “real”: it is an imagined, composite reconstruction that is nevertheless more “accurate” to interiority than an interior occupied bodily. Along with Portia, we visualize internally an exterior shaped by weather, “wrapped in rain.” Atmospheric imagery uses paradox and ambiguity to get us to attend to the vivacity of mental images. Rain is unstable, cloaking its surroundings. We see a lake as “dark wounds” through “white mist” and “village lights” through dark and rain. Elemental imagery works readerly imagination, asks us to invent and dwell in a murky space that “makes a tent for the mind,” that is, essentially, the space of another mind recalling. Bowen tries to get us to sympathize with Portia and her mother, and with narrative, through affective, mental cohabitation. Inhabiting Portia’s internal state leads us to understand a relation – the polar opposite of the Quaynes’ – based in mutual recognition and empathy openly expressed. “Precarious high-upness,” signaling dislocation, is explicitly called an “element.”

Similar to descriptions in the park, daydream draws on shifting weather and atmosphere: imprecise imagery gets us to accurately perceive Portia and Irene’s fellow feeling. Mist-covered dark images of a pension on a precipice by a river, and a village studded by rain and light, seem separate and sublime. Only Bowen reconfigures exterior as interior, transforming it into “dear home.” As we know, mother and daughter have no defined home: they move from hotel to hotel up to Irene’s death. Homelessness, or “precarious high-upness,” becomes “home.” And home is a rain-drenched, fog-wrapped place; it is lights viewed from afar while ascending “arm-in-arm in the dark”; it is a mental space, not a specific location; it is the space of the other, a state of being and feeling. Faced with the dark yet in touch, Portia and Irene are “not frightened at all” in spite

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216 This description recalls Elaine Scarry’s section on “Radiant Ignition” in *Dreaming by the Book.*
of their physical and social displacement. Home is the space their bodies share, the physical externalization of mental empathy.

Portia’s memory-image “makes a tent for the mind” by directing, limiting, and amplifying perception in the now of the then, by erasing temporal and spatial distance even as the imagined environment remains foggy. Imagery tells the story of shared, charged perception free of social codes, and – as we see when Bowen’s description moves from exterior to interior – contrasts with Portia’s current environment, steeped in them. This contrast maps onto the additional implied contrast between externally regulated perception and perception signaling total absorption:

They always stayed in places before the season, when the funicular was not working yet. …Their room, though it was a back room facing into the pinewoods, had a balcony; they would run away from the salon and spend the long wet afternoons there. They would lie down covered with coats, leaving the window open, smelling the wet woodwork, hearing the gutters run. Turn abouts, they would read aloud to each other…They ate, in alternate mouthfuls, block chocolate and brioches. Postcards they liked, and Irene’s and Portia’s sketches were pinned to the pine walls…Between five and six the rain quite often stopped, wet light crept down the trunks of the pines…They drove down in a fly, down the familiar zigzag, Irene moaning and clutching Portia’s hand…she used to think of it while she waited at the Lucerne clinic, where Irene had the operation and died: she died at six in the evening, which had always been their happiest hour. (DH, 38-39)

The difference between the Quaynes’ home, across from the park but shut off from weather, and this “back room facing into the pinewoods” is marked. The Quaynes’ interior is essentially “salon,” an extension of the social stage occupied by actors. The “back room” signals makeshift living and is an extension of “dear home,” which is everywhere and nowhere, may be made anywhere. Portia and Irene “run away from the salon.” Rather than talking about weather, a placeholder for the unsaid, they attend to it wordlessly. Rejecting social codes, they open themselves up to nature, “leaving the window open” to hear and smell rain. Reading out loud is equally significant. Unlike other characters, who use language evasively, here, reading is shared
experience. Mother and daughter are surrounded by images either chosen or drawn together; these stand for a jointly created environment, a world of shared imagery that Bowen shares with us as readers. Her strategy contains the ethical imperative to imagine in language a world outside of coded expression, to inhabit phase-changing mental imagery rather than divisive, stabilized communication. Characteristically, this imagery is tied to intermediate time: “between five and six.” Descent from “precarious high-upness” and Irene’s death at six demarcates the “end of their life together.” Precise, manmade time is the razor edge cutting off memory.

Portia’s daydream ends with a “whir from Thomas’s clock – it was just going to strike six. Six, but not six in June…Thomas sits so fallen-in…that his clock makes the only sound in the room” (DH, 40). Returning to the present, still somewhat in the past, Portia uses weather to appeal to mutual experience: “The lake was frozen this morning.” Thomas only responds, “Yes, so I saw.” Portia continues: “But it broke up this afternoon; there were swans on it…I suppose it will freeze again.” Unlike Anna and St. Quentin, who did not notice the ice breaking up on the lake, and Thomas, who was not in the park that day, Portia notes nuances of weather, of ice, which breaks up and reforms the way that mental imagery does. Thomas does not reply. Instead, he picks up his newspaper again and “play[s] at reading it.” Bowen stages an attempt at shared language, attending to thought and feeling’s materialization through weather. To show the difference between atmospheric and social language, to reinstate barriers to “real” communication, she must have this attempt fail. Characters consistently refuse to understand one another through the very medium whose possibilities she uses imagery to expand. Portia may have been daydreaming. Yet her oneiric state underscores her as the “awake” one who nevertheless cannot linguistically communicate her attention.
Dreaming and daydreaming in the novel are bound up, and often juxtaposed, with reading and writing. This dynamic informs the materialization of feeling and thought under either medial (descriptive, unspoken) or verbalized conditions. At Waikiki, Portia’s dream follows her comparison of the place she currently occupies to Windsor Terrace. She thinks: “I am not there.” Her senses fasten on things, which become “monuments” to love in a house otherwise bereft of feeling. Bowen observes: “Only in a house where one has learnt to be lonely does one have this solicitude for things.” She connects tenderness not with “exalted feelings” but with “habit” and “sentiment,” both of which lead us to “unconsciously” latch on to “familiarity” and “build the necessary home.” Habit is pervasive, necessary, and somewhat dubious: “when one remembers habit, it seems to have been happiness.” This aside precedes Mrs. Heccomb’s ironic comment prior to leaving Portia’s bedroom: “And you’ve got a picture of Anna…So you won’t be lonely” (DH, 180). This picture is of Anna aged twelve with satin bows in her hair holding a kitten: “The tender incompetence of the drawing had given the face…a spiritual look.” Contemplating this romantic image while “the sea fill[s] the darkness with its approaching sighing,” Portia drifts off:

Portia dreamed she was sharing a book with a little girl. The tips of Anna’s long fair hair brushed on the page: they sat up high in a window, waiting till something happened. The worst of all would be if the bell rang, and their best hope was to read to a certain point in the book. But Portia found she no longer knew how to read – she did not dare tell Anna, who kept turning pages over. She knew they must both read – so the fall of Anna’s hair filled her with despair, pity, for what would have to come. The forest (there was a forest under the window) was being varnished all over: it left no way of escape. Then the terrible end, the rushing-in, the roaring and gurgling started – Portia started up from where they were with a cry – (DH, 181)

Bowen contrasts Portia’s memory of reading with Irene, where words elicit fellow feeling, with “reading” silently with an inaccessible Anna without access to words. This dream is Portia’s attempt to recover Anna’s innocence; it is her unconscious search for understanding before the “bell” rings and, as in her previous oneiric experience, “real” (manmade) time sets in. The “fall
of Anna’s hair” symbolizes impending loss of innocence: “what would have to come.” They share a book, “waiting until something happen[s].” This futile search for a shared language in stopped time mirrors Anna and Portia’s non-relation in actual time, in which Portia observes in her diary that “nothing happens.” Anna seems to understand the social script, keeps “turning pages over.” Portia cannot “read” but knows she “must.” The book between them is the literal and figurative space they share (Bowen’s novel, Windsor Terrace, familial and social obligation), needing to “read to a certain point.” While they share this book, its content estranges them. Ironically, we know that Anna keeps reading Portia’s diary. Just as Portia’s reading of Anna in it is partial, so Anna’s reading (of the diary, Portia’s reading of her, and of Portia) reinforces mutual misunderstanding.

Bowen again juxtaposes interior – the girls sit “high in a window” – with exterior, forest. Ordinarily an “escape,” nature is being “varnished.” Whereas in Portia’s daydream involving Irene, phase-changing imagery stands for shared thought and feeling free of social constraints, here, the opposite is true. A shiny veneer artificially arrests “nature.” Bowen’s imagery recalls the passage about crossing the sea; it gestures toward how we stifle feeling and thought, which are transitory and mobile by nature. We trap them under “varnish,” using language to enforce separation, not sympathy. Nature’s “rushing-in” signals awakening, only Portia wakes up from one kind of “death sleep” into another. Hearing her cry out, Mrs. Heccomb comforts Portia with words perpetuating the problem: “Nothing has happened…sleep with no dreams, like a good girl.”

This leads into Portia’s reflection on mutual misunderstanding:

Perhaps it was Portia’s sense that by having started awake she had not been a good girl that now kept her in the haunted outer court of the dream. She had not been kind to Anna; she had never been kind. She had lived in that house with her with an opposed heart…That kitten, for instance – had it died? Anna never spoke of it. Had Anna felt small at day school? When had they cut her hair off? In the electric light, that hair in the portrait had been mimosa yellow. Did Anna also, sometimes, not know what to do next?
Because she knew what to do next, because she knew what to laugh at, what to say, did it follow that she knew where to turn? Inside everyone, is there an anxious person who stands to hesitate in an empty room? … (DH, 182)

Portia blames herself for inadvertently feeling and dreaming, both natural. Bowen underscores liminal dream states as threats to the polished exterior at the same time as she has Portia sense her own emotional injustice: she demands affection but withholds “kindness” because of Anna’s superficial behavior. Her guilt resides in not sympathizing with Anna’s interiority, which she cannot access, and which Anna is trained not to display. Her position is impossible. Yet we may concede that sharing a book with someone automatically turning pages does not mean that the person “reads” and understands it. Perhaps they turn pages out of necessity. Portia’s dream makes her see that Anna is equally unfree. She mourns Anna’s lost childhood, her forced emotional death. In spite of being separate, people, she recognizes, are held together by a thread of unknowing. They inhabit a narrative written for them (Bowen’s narrative, for one), a fate they must yield to. Because Anna acts as though she knows in company does not mean that inside matches outside; Portia’s “awakening” cannot reconcile the two in a world that adamantly keeps them separate.

Portia’s oneiric experiences stand for an attention to interiority that others in the novel do not indulge. Whereas everyone else remains stubbornly riveted on outside, Portia drifts elsewhere. Drifting consciousness operates like weather and elements, as a medium for mental and affective states “happening” beneath the surface. Bowen discusses Portia’s attention, which goes hand in hand with social inattention, in relation to her classes at Miss Paullie’s, a socialite teaching girls from wealthy families not particularly interested in learning. These classes have less to do with internalizing facts and more with internalizing rules of social comportment: how
to conduct oneself as though one is always being watched and judged. Bowen’s description of Miss Paullie’s interior contrasts superficial attention with attention’s alternate form, represented by weather imagery and prone to wander:

The cloakroom, which had a stained-glass window, smelt of fog and Vinolia, the billiard room (or school) room of carpet, radiators and fog – this room had no windows: a big domed skylight told the state of the weather, went leaden with fog, crepitated when it was raining, or dropped a great square glare on to the table when the sun shone. At the end of the afternoon, in winter, a blue-black glazed blind was run across from a roller to cover the skylight, when the electric lights had been turned on. Ventilation was not the room’s strong point – which may have been why Portia drooped like a plant the moment she got in. She was not a success here, for she failed to concentrate, or even to seem to concentrate like the other girls. She could not keep her thoughts at face-and-table level; they would go soaring up through the glass dome. One professor would stop, glare and drum the edge of the table; another would say: “Miss Quayne, please, please. Are we here to look at the sky?” For sometimes her inattention reached the point of bad manners, or, which was worse, began to distract the others. (DH, 63-64)

The windowless schoolroom is arguably the materialization of purposeful inattention to nuance. Looking skyward, attending to “the state of the weather,” is socially inappropriate, too obviously introspective. The schoolroom where young ladies are trained to behave in society is sealed off from nature: the skylight is often covered, the electric lights are on, and “ventilation”

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217 “Back in the billiardroom, the girls’ brush-glossed heads were bent steadily over their books again. These silent sessions in Miss Paullie’s presence were, in point of fact (and well most of them knew it) lessons in the deportment of staying still, of feeling yourself watched without turning a hair. Only Portia could have imagined for a moment that Miss Paullie’s eye was off what any girl did” (DH, 67).


219 Phase-changing images refract states of thought and feeling, whereas this environment’s “silent sessions” are “lessons in the deportment of staying still”; “Anxious not to attract attention,” Portia learns “how to rivet, even to hypnotise the most angry professor by an unmoving regard – of his lips while he spoke, of the air over his head.” Her gaze remains steady while her thoughts travel. Portia naively believes she can avoid notice. She reads Eddie’s letter, itself socially inappropriate, under her desk and is schooled for misbehaving: reading a letter in public under a table, keeping her handbag with her (“a hotel habit”), etc. Whereas the “others” understand what they are there for, to learn how to act, Portia is too straightforward to act. She is “untaught.” She and her mother “seldom…faced up to society – when they did, Irene did the wrong thing, then cried.” Portia senses her inability to understand and adhere to “proper” codes of communication. She writes in her diary: “I cannot say anything even in this diary. Perhaps it is better not to say anything ever. I must try not to say anything more to Eddie, when I have said things it has always been a mistake” (DH, 297). The circumstances of her birth and upbringing, ironically forced upon her by “society,” are why Portia is a poor learner. Feeling spontaneously and expressing it, she suffers and inadvertently makes others suffer for their inability to unfix their fixed natures.
is poor. Whereas other girls appear to concentrate, Portia, unversed in social conduct, inadvertently daydreams. Her thoughts drift like weather. Weather imagery more accurately refracts the active state of interiority, which others actively suppress. Portia’s inattention, actually deeper attention, is considered “bad manners,” an unconventional way of looking at the world that “distract[s] the others.” This attention, filtered through oneiric states, gives Bowen’s invented world its fullness, its “poetic element.”

Attention and inattention in the novel are bound up with letters, whose appearance and reading coincides with medial description; as I have been contending, this allows Bowen to juxtapose forms of linguistic communication. Writing more often obfuscates than reveals, whereas unstable imagery, “natural” and extra-linguistic (although admittedly mediated by language), reveals what social communication conceals. Letters, which seem to facilitate communication between Portia and Eddie – the other person in this novel who fails to adhere to social expectations yet is a liar, cad, and self-styled victim known for “black moods” – are means of deception. They allow Eddie, as revenge against Anna’s sexual slights and smug sense of social justice,²²⁰ to seduce Portia’s mind and heart by appealing to their commonality as outsiders. He writes: “You and I are two rather alone people – with you that is just chance, with me, I expect, it is partly my bad nature” (DH, 66). Matchett, the Quaynes’ housekeeper and the keeper of family history, sees what Eddie is. Discovering his letter under Portia’s pillow, she smells danger. Her interference has much to do with protecting Portia’s propriety; but she puts her emotional wellbeing first, warning her about Eddie’s “bad nature.” Bowen describes Matchett’s material treatment of the letter: “Matchett sat with the captured letter in the trough of her lap. Meanwhile, her spatulate fingers bent and injured, with unknowing sensuous cruelty,

²²⁰ Anna and Eddie sustain a kind of flirtation and Anna, in a fit of condescension, gets him a job at Thomas’ firm. They do not have an affair, yet thrive on mutual emotional manipulation. Both betray Portia emotionally (they discuss her diary).
like a child’s, the corners of the blue envelope. She pinched at the letter inside’s fullness, but did
not take it out. ‘You’d be wrong to trust him,’ she said” (DH, 106).

Letters are false stand-ins for the bodies and minds of senders. Matchett’s fingers cruelly
pinch the outside, as though it were Eddie, blindly wondering what the “inside’s fullness,” his
mind put to paper, contains. Unlike letters in Byatt’s Possession, which also stand in for mind
and body, letters in Bowen do not give us or their recipients access to what people think and feel.
They do not communicate motivations clearly. Matchett “reads” Eddie accurately without
reading his letter – “I know that Eddie’s never not up to something. And he makes free. You
don’t know” – yet lacks explicit words to warn Portia, who does not understand sex, obfuscating
language, or subtle deceptions implicit in adult relations. This encounter in Portia’s bedroom
contains another key oneiric experience, occurring while Matchett holds the unopened letter:

Safe for the minute, sealed down under her eyelids, Portia lay and saw herself with Eddie.
She saw a continent in the late sunset, in rolls and ridges of shadow like the sea. Light
that was dark yellow lay on trees, and penetrated their dark hearts. Like a struck glass, the
continent rang with silence. The country, with its slow tense dusk-drowned ripple, rose to
their feet where they sat: she and Eddie sat in the door of a hut. She felt the hut, with
content of dark, behind them. The unearthly level light streamed in their faces; she saw it
touch his cheekbones, the tips of his eyelashes, while he turned her way his eyeballs blind
with gold. She saw his hands hanging down between his knees, and her hands hanging
down peacefully beside him as they sat together on the step of the hut. She felt the touch
of calmness and similarity: he and she were one without any touch but this. What was in
the hut behind she did not know: this light was eternal; they would be here for ever.
(DH, 106)

Oneirism willfully exercised provides false safety, is a false image akin to Portia’s shifting (and
shifty) picture of Anna and Thomas’ crossing. She imagines an extra-linguistic home for two like
minds, deceived into creating this romantic image by written words about likeness. Bowen’s
movement via mental imagery from stifling dark interior and dialogue about writing to dreamlike
descriptions of nature allows her and us to laterally broach what Portia feels and thinks more
accurately. She builds a fantasy of sameness removed from the city, indeed, from reality: they sit
in the country and, not unlike Portia and Irene, are two people out of place at home with one
another. They occupy the medial space of daydream and the boundary between interior and
exterior, “the door of a hut.” This threshold signals the state and process of oneirism.
Consciousness temporarily disconnects from society. At the same time, oneirism’s point of
departure is socially motivated. Blinded, Portia feels the hut’s “content of dark” behind them
without seeing it or knowing what is in it. Light and dark shift and intermingle in nature, whereas
the light staining Eddie’s eyeballs is “unearthly level light.” Portia escapes into interiority to feel
wordlessly and keenly. Her daydream, meant to remove her to a “safe” space outside of society,
is nevertheless a lie motivated by Eddie’s written declaration of fellow feeling; it simulates yet is
not the composite memory-daydream involving Irene. Portia and Eddie’s liminal position points
to the uncertainty of their relation, not to its transparency. Portia is blinded by “unearthly light,”
by what she thinks Eddie is based off of what she sees, hears, and reads. She does not face,
cannot intuit, what resides within.

Daydreams and dreams in the novel provide insight into interiority that actual interiors
and people’s words do not. In this case, oneirism conceals interiority, perpetuating romanticized
notions about “nature.”221 Portia and Eddie are accomplices in their inability to understand what
society wants and expects. Nevertheless, how they are cruel differs. Portia’s innocence is cruel
because it demands too much from others. Inconsistent and embittered, albeit “not a fake,” Eddie
purposely presents an unpredictable face to the world, thinking that others demand too much
from him.222 He turns out to be “in league” with the rest, an actor in his own right.223 Their

221 Eddie claims to be real and spontaneous, but his literal interior gives no indication of his interiority.
He puts on an act even at home: “Only a subtler mind, with stores of notes to refer to, could have learned
much from Eddie’s interior... Eddie’s work of presenting himself to the world did not, in fact, stop when
he came back here” (DH, 364).
222 Disillusioned by his “impossible image” of her, Eddie tells Portia: “How can I keep on feeling
something I once felt when there are so many things one can feel? People who say they always feel as
dialogues compound the inability to relay feeling and thought through the socialized language that afflicts everyone in *The Death of the Heart*. As this section has demonstrated, medial states of consciousness counteract the inadequacy of social communication. They also operate through ambiguity, thereby enhancing readerly perception.

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they did simply fake themselves up. I may be a crook but I’m not a fake – that is an entirely different thing” (DH, 260).

Eddie is aware that Anna reads Portia’s diary (they joke about it in private). He also treats Portia as a nonentity that nevertheless validates his unpremeditated, yet usually rotten, actions. The following makes his narcissism, his ability to take advantage of Portia’s social innocence without remorse, clear: “No presence could be less insistent than hers. He treated her like an element (air, for instance) or a condition (darkness): these touch one with their equality and lightness where one could endure no human touch. He looked right through her, without a flicker of seeing, without being made shamefully conscious of the vacuum there must be in his eyes” (DH, 248). This description of Portia as an element, considering her idiosyncratic attention to the elements, is apropos.

See especially DH, 122-137, 276-283. While it seems that their conversations are more straightforward, Portia’s understanding of Eddie is extra-linguistic. She tells him, “I feel I shall always understand what you feel. Does it matter if I don’t sometimes understand what you say?” (DH, 125).
Clearing the Air: Concluding Thoughts on Anthropomorphism

She sang beyond the genius of the sea.
The water never formed to mind or voice,
Like a body wholly body, fluttering
Its empty sleeves; and yet its mimic motion
Made constant cry, caused constantly a cry,
That was not ours although we understood,
Inhuman, of the veritable ocean.

Wallace Stevens, “The Idea of Order at Key West”

This chapter explored Bowen’s use of the unstable natural world and oneiric states to simulate the materialization of thought and feeling. Looking at Bowen’s imagery, we may indeed call her strategy “anthropomorphic.” And Stevens is quite right: the “rage to order the words of the sea” does not translate into sea-sound becoming song-sound, although it certainly seems this way.

The “singer” becomes “the single artificer of the world / In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea, / Whatever self it had, became the self / That was her song, for she was the maker.”

Water’s instability and formlessness are “like” and are not either the physical body or the “body” of language. We “portion out” and “fix” the external world to give our lives form and meaning. Nature mimics human veritably yet remains inhuman, unverifiable.

While Bowen is somewhat guilty of anthropomorphizing, her anthropomorphic imagery — her use of atmosphere, seasons, and weather to express nuances of feeling and thought stifled by socialized language and behavior — enables her and us to productively engage ambiguity and has ethical stakes. Largely thanks to Ruskin, we have come to understand the pathetic fallacy as a defining feature of bad poetry, a weakness inflicted upon art by “a mind and body in some sort too weak to deal fully with what is before them or upon them,” carried away into untruth by

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excessive feeling.\textsuperscript{226} Shaped by Victorian attitudes towards gender and women’s writing, this definition nevertheless continues to inform aesthetics driven by Kantian judgment of the complete work of art. At the same time, we have come to take the pathetic fallacy, absorbed by the larger problem of anthropomorphism, for granted as antithetical to an aesthetically and ethically valuable product.

Bowen takes the aforementioned, as well as our tendency toward artifice, toward separating ourselves from nature, to task. She draws on nature not to stabilize but to more truthfully relay the instability of nature, human and inhuman. Process-based imagery enhances our understanding of how self and other function in proximity and questions essential distinctions between us and the external world – which we use and deplete to enrich ourselves and our language without acknowledging it – as well as timeworn distinctions between mood and matter, mind and body. In keeping with Bowen’s inclination toward paradox, \textit{The Death of the Heart}, similar to “The Idea of Order at Key West,” is both an ode to and a tragedy about nature. Her image-based descriptions, like Stevens’ poetry, engage the material imagination through uncertainty and encourage us to think feelingly.

The “glassy lights” of Stevens’ “town” arrange, deepen, and enchant night. “If it was only” the “voice” of sea or sky, “however clear,” he writes, then “it would have been deep air, / The heaving speech of air” and nothing more. Considering our desiring nature, accepting meaninglessness is impossible. \textit{How} we carve out meaning using nature, however, is within our grasp. Bowen’s imagery destabilizes meaning; it allows her to develop a liminal vocabulary of attention to overlooked aspects of “nature” in both senses. Her nature is more than air made deep by human sound putting on airs, and more than mere human sound bypassed by indifferent air.

Air gains depth as it drifts from the page, becoming damp with cold, becoming cloud becoming image becoming idea becoming real, always becoming in the mind and returning to the world outside it, dust to dust. Air materializes as breath, yet is not what it seems. The word, the world, transforms into something living, imperfect, transitory, and vivid: it is but also never is us.

Bowen’s anthropomorphism, reliant on medial imagery, merits attention because it is an “idea of order” based in order’s dismantling; it merits attention for its exploration of the shapes feeling and thought take “when the crust of shape has been destroyed.”
CHAPTER THREE

Feeling Thought: A.S. Byatt’s Material Imagination

We move between these points:
From that ever-early candor to its late plural
And the candor of them is the strong exhilaration
Of what we feel from what we think, of thought
Beating in the heart, as if blood newly came,
An elixir, an excitation, a pure power.

“Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction,” Wallace Stevens

Introduction

A.S. Byatt, who became a writer to “think as fast as possible, in as complex a way as possible, and put the thinking into verbal forms,” turns to neuroscience to describe what is both exciting and pleasing about language that deals with “the constantly changing matter of mind.” And when she does, we find that she is most fascinated by the discipline’s use of metaphor and analogy to describe the actions of neurons in the brain when we think. Dense verbal and

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228 Byatt, “Feeling thought,” 249.
conceptual constructions such as nets and webs feed into her synopsis of the building of a mental object, which is “a physical state created by the activation (correlated and transitory) of a large number of neurones from different areas of the brain.” In “Feeling thought: Donne and the embodied mind,” Byatt summarizes Jean-Pierre Changeux’s discussion of mental activity in *Neuronal Man* that it will benefit us to look at in the original:

> One characteristic of the neuronal graph of a mental object is that it is both local and “delocalized.” The mental object rests, to use S. Atlan’s expression of 1979, “between crystal and the vapor.” Neurons interact in a cooperative manner, as in a crystal, but are dispersed like vapors throughout multiple parts of the cortex, with no simple geometrical relationship. This tentacle-like organization of mental objects suggests a form of thinking that could serve as an outreach for the cooperative recruitment of new assemblies. It also allows for the large diversification of the assemblies in the human cerebral cortex.²²⁹

Byatt translates “entre le crystal et la fumée” as “between crystal and smoke,” and attributes the expression to Changeux. More vital is that her fascination with language’s simulation of thought processes in the brain draws its pith from this image of active thought formation as a medial material state, one of perpetual transition that rests, at least conceptually, on a paradox. If faithful to neuroscience’s metaphorical image for it, thought is a material but liminal thing. Its metaphoric state of existence between solid and gas is also metamorphic, and links the actual and figurative. Thought’s materiality is, in other words, exceedingly difficult to grasp and describe except as and through shifting matter. Byatt is drawn to language that uses substantial mimesis, to borrow Gaston Bachelard’s term,²³⁰ and that attends to the connection between substances and pattern making to simulate thought as mobile and metamorphic. The author uses analogies from

²²⁹ Changeux, *Neuronal Man*, 140.
²³⁰ While this term pertains to the majority of Bachelard’s writings on the elements, see esp. *Water and Dreams*, where he differentiates between formal and material imagination yet goes on to say that they may and often do cooperate. Byatt does not refer to Henri Bergson explicitly. His discussion of the relation of imagery, memory, energy, and matter is nevertheless likely at the back of her mind. She may be navigating between Bergson’s temporal view and Aristotle’s spatial definition of memory and matter, spirit and body, as substances. See *Matter and Memory* (“Essay on the relation of body and spirit”), trans. N.M. Paul and W.S. Palmer (New York: Zone Books, 1991).
science to speculate along with neuroscientists like V.S. Ramachandran about the possibilities of internalizing “the bodily – and mental? – states of other humans. We have neurons that feel with the mind what we see others feel with their fingers or tongues.”231 She ties her argument about sympathy and Donne’s “appeal to mirror neurones” through “parts of speech evoking a sensuous graph” to Elaine Scarry’s aesthetic categories in Dreaming by the Book, which, as Byatt puts it, describe “a kind of grammar or algebra of the instructions by which a writer causes a mental image to be constructed in the mind of a reader.”232

These connections between neuroscience, aesthetic experience, and hedonic value are currently being explored by a number of scientists and literary scholars, including Gabrielle Starr, who in her recent book Feeling Beauty: The Neuroscience of Aesthetic Experience discusses the partnership of sensory modes and ties vivid readerly response to motor activity.233 What I am interested in, however, is not neuroscience per se, but how the medial substantial metaphors of neuroscience provide the language for Byatt’s literary strategy; this strategy involves directing attention to the “intellectual-bodily imagination,”234 to thought’s felt qualities, through imagery of substances, such as the elements, and the process of metamorphosis. Medial imagery in Byatt provides the guiding metaphor and conceptual framework for material imagination; it is an aesthetic tool or “grammar” that the author uses to try to get the reader to imagine not only motion in the body, but to connect motion with emotion and with the process of thinking, forming concepts, and translating those concepts into language.

231 Byatt, “Feeling thought,” 256.
232 Ibid., 251. See Elaine Scarry, Dreaming by the Book.
233 See Gabrielle Starr, Feeling Beauty.
In a brilliant rhetorical turn, Marina Warner characterizes shapeshifting as “the principle of organic vitality as well as the pulse in the body of art.”235 She goes on to say that, as a “literary figure,” metamorphosis “refuses to settle between the states of metaphorical evocation to actual description and embodies the condition of writing itself.”236 Warner traces the evolution and uses of metamorphosis in mythic and scientific discourse: while initially signaling linear progress, and correspondence between inner and outer forms, it begins to stand for “continuity within formal change.”237 This latter paradox-based definition of metamorphosis, and its alignment with making and materialization, is consistent not only with Byatt’s thinking about thinking but also with her ideas about narrative continuity and fascination with the life of old stories in new forms.238 Metamorphosis in Byatt is a metaphor for both thought and storytelling, a transmittable, mutable thought form. Beyond serving as an aesthetic tool, shape shifting in Byatt provides an avenue for exploring a particular kind of “mythology”; by this I mean mythology as discussed by Ernst Cassirer, for whom “linguistic denotation” becomes a source of myth.239 Cassirer quotes Max Müller, who also defines myth through language, which imperfectly translates thought:

Mythology is inevitable, it is natural, it is an inherent necessity of language, if we recognize in language the outward form and manifestation of thought; it is in fact the dark shadow which language throws upon thought, and which can never disappear till language becomes entirely commensurate with thought, which it never will…Mythology, in the highest sense, is the power exercised by language on thought in every possible sphere of mental activity.240

235 Marina Warner, Fantastic Metamorphoses, Other Worlds, 2.
236 Ibid., 16.
237 Ibid., 83.
240 Ibid., 5.
This view of language as “myth” provides the counterbalance, and a corrective, for the very vocabulary of attention that Byatt develops to relay thought forms more accurately.

Byatt’s preoccupation with substances and metamorphosis as mediators of material imagination in literary forms extends across the majority of her writing. Evidence of this preoccupation ranges from extensive reflections on how the mind makes metaphors through a plum in *Still Life*, to Stephanie Potter’s sense of the biological rhythms of language, inspired by Keats and Wordsworth in *The Virgin in the Garden*, to writer Olive’s meditations on word and thought made flesh in *The Children’s Book*, to actual bodies shapeshifting whose minds think cold or stony thoughts in tandem in short fiction such as “Cold” and “A Stone Woman.”

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244 Byatt, *The Children’s Book* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2009). The novel explores the relationship between language, interiority, and substance through matter, especially pottery. Byatt’s descendants were potters from the five towns (Stoke-on-Trent) and the family of her Frederica Quartet is named “Potter.” Byatt is preoccupied with the paradoxical properties of clay, discussing the subject in a number of articles including those on Edmund de Waal (Spectator, 2015; Guardian, 2014), the ceramics galleries in the V&A (Guardian, 2009), and Henri Fantin-Latour’s “White cup and saucer” (The Fitzwilliam Museum, 2008). Pottery also comes up in “Racine and the Tablecloth,” *Sugar and Other Stories* (New York: Vintage, 1992).

Byatt’s concern with shifting matter and interiority is related to her love of Proust, who deals with substances at length. Of note are his passages describing interiority through clay and glass, which Elaine Scarry drew my attention to in her lecture “Glass and Clay: Proust and Gallé.” In *The Shadow of Young Girls in Flower*: “They are malleable, a soft flow of substances kneaded by every passing impression that possesses them. Each of them looks like a brief succession of little statuettes.” Benedict Fludd arrests the interiority of his wife and daughters precisely in this way in *The Children’s Book* by making a “succession” of nude vases. *Swann’s Way*, trans. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 237: “I enjoyed watching the glass jars which the village boys used to lower into the Vivonne…at once ‘containers’ whose transparent sides were like solidified water and ‘contents’ plunged into a still larger container of liquid, flowing crystal…perpetually in flight between the impalpable water in which my hands could not grasp it and the insoluble glass in which my palate could not enjoy it.” See also Isobel Armstrong’s rigorous, far-ranging study of the history of glassmaking in
This chapter shows how Byatt uses substances and metamorphosis as an aesthetic tool and instructive category in *Possession: A Romance* \(^{246}\) to hone readerly perception and direct attention toward thought’s materialization, as well as to deal with thought’s unquantifiable, ungraspable aspects in language, which she explicitly makes the medium through which “mind” is metaphorized. I argue that Byatt’s images of substances and shapeshifting simulate thought’s materialization and stage the imperfect meeting of minds – of reader and author, and of characters – in a way that stands in for the erotic meeting of bodies. At the same time, these images indicate the limits and dangers of socialized language as it collides with the language of thought and the body’s desires. My discussion moves from a more general introduction to medial imagery in the novel to a more detailed reading of the role played by matter and material imagination in the confrontation of mind and body. \(^{247}\)

Medium and Metaphor

Many of *Possession*’s central metaphors are images of elements and shifting matter. They are meant to call up in the reader, by way of bodily sympathetic, the “shifting matter of mind” and contribute to Byatt’s consideration of language as a living form. *Possession* begins with an

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\(^{247}\) Byatt and Nabokov’s strategies are similar. Both authors develop aesthetic tools with which to think about thinking and its translation into language. They use overlooked substances as images and metaphors to represent thought in action and pinpoint language as an abstraction of thought. Both are concerned with mental mapping and find ways to relay thinking more accurately, ways intimately tied to pattern making and pleasure. Byatt names Nabokov as a direct influence, connecting the possibilities of literature to “excite people’s senses” with Lolita. She says: “I met Lolita even before I became an undergraduate…I was excited by the language…here is somebody who with language has done something perfectly…and the language carries everything he wanted to say in a perfect shape…and the other thing I felt about it was I got sort of sensuously drunk on it…here is something brilliantly colored.” See *My Most Difficult Book – The Story of ‘Lolita,’* dir. Christopher Sykes, interviewees Martin Amis, Edmund White, A.S. Byatt, et al. (London: BBC-1 “Omnibus,” 1989). Documentary.
excerpt from Robert Browning’s “Sludge, ‘the Medium.’” While scholars have analyzed spiritualism in Byatt, as well as the relation between truth and fiction in her novels and short stories, what strikes me as equally relevant to her choice of Browning’s poem are the definitions of “medium” in addition to its supernatural connotations: “the intervening substance through which impressions are conveyed to the senses or a force acts on objects at a distance”; “a middle state or condition”; “about halfway between extremes.” And it is no coincidence that, in the chosen excerpt, the aptly named Sludge compares his shady activities to a writer’s using substances:

And if at whiles the bubble, blown too thin,
Seems nigh on bursting – if you nearly see
The real world through the false, - what do you see? …
Why, he’s at worst your poet who sings how Greeks
That never were, in Troy which never was,
Did this or the other impossible great thing! …
But why do I mount to poets? Take plain prose - …
All as the author wants it. Such a scribe
You pay and praise for putting life in stones,
Fire into fog, making the past your world.
There’s plenty of “How did you contrive to grasp
The thread which led you through this labyrinth?
How build such solid fabric out of air? …

Browning’s Sludge uses the image of a bubble – a body of air or gas contained in a liquid and a metaphor for, paradoxically, the lack of substance, an illusion – to defend himself against accusations of deceit. His next question is rhetorical, for a substance like a bubble is a bit like glass, to be looked at and through. We cannot differentiate between “real” and “false,” for the

“bubble” before us – solid, liquid, gas, all and none of these at once – is both barrier and medium. The rhetoric also turns on ambiguity, for we wonder which world he imagines is more real: the world beyond the bubble, the world contained within the bubble, or the bubble’s surface? This move allows Sludge, a false and immoral medium, to frame his lies as “portly truths,” which they are not, because his lies are not literary fictions but brazen deceptions. The discerning reader notes that this medium’s bubble burst even before being “blown.”

What is important is that he frames his argument of giving life to what is not living in terms of elements. In the bubble that is language, here fiction, which is and is not “substantial,” a writer may animate inanimate things, transform “fire into fog,” and build “solid fabric out of air” to mediate ideas, which are and are not there to be grasped. To have us as readers or witnesses see and grasp his argument about intermediate truths Sludge turns to medial metaphors. Fire, fog, fabric out of air: these are all peculiar for their qualities of being there and somehow not there, concrete yet not solid or constant. Language – that “thread” leading one through a “labyrinth” – presses them down and makes metaphors of them for us to attend to their inconstancy. Byatt begins with this poem because it draws our attention to what we are about to be given as readers, to what other commentators have noted – a fictionalized rewriting of the past, a lie founded on partial truths, a work about the simultaneous impossibility and power of possessing another, the past, and language – but also because for Byatt, who has expressed interest in things like glass for their medial states, substances and mediums are the best metaphors for what thought and imagination are and what writing does and can do with them; these substances also stand in for language’s, and the writer’s, limitations as mediums. Substances in transit are Byatt’s way of trying to express more accurately through figurative language what she believes, as evidenced by her essay on Donne, is the actual condition of mental activity.

250 See “Ice, Snow, Glass,” On Histories and Stories.
We especially see Byatt’s preoccupation with mind and matter in the correspondence of Possession’s Victorian poets Randolph Henry Ash and Christabel LaMotte, as well as in their actual poetry, which Byatt embeds into the novel. Ash’s name already contains a clue. It evokes Yggdrasil, the world-tree of Norse mythology that gives life and connects the nine worlds; the shape-shifting god Odin, one of whose many names is Ygg(r), and who sacrificed himself to himself on the tree once; and, finally, Askeladden, the “Ash Lad” or everyman of Norwegian folktale who is often compared to another shape-shifting god, Loki, as both are said to originate from a fire Vaettir, a nature spirit associated with that element. Interestingly, Loki spars with Odin through metamorphosis, and both take on female forms. The myriad nature of the (male) poet’s name signals the root, or origin, of life at the same time as it points to the contradictory means by which that life is sustained. Ash’s writings speak directly to his name. In one of the first excerpts that we encounter, he writes: “A man is the history of his breaths and thoughts…a single flame which in every way obeys the laws that pertain to Fire itself, and yet is lit and put out from one moment to the next, and can never be relumed in the whole waste of time to come” (P, 12). We are told that this excerpt comes from the time when Ash was rewriting the myth of Ragnarök, “which some saw as a Christianizing of the Norse myth and some trounced as atheistic and diabolically despairing” (P, 12). While the fire metaphor is a common one, if we approach Ash’s use of it in relation to how it simultaneously evokes apocalyptic thought and the

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252 For example, see Peter Christen Asbjørnsen and Jørgen Moe, East of the Sun and West of the Moon: Old Tales from the North (New York: George H. Doran, 1920).
253 In the novel, Byatt has Crabb Robinson compare Ash with Donne by way of Coleridge: “When I read Ash, I think of the younger Coleridge, reciting with gusto his epigram upon Donne: ‘With Donne whose muse on dromedary trots / Wreathe iron pokers into true-love knots’” (P, 28).
254 This apocalyptic event appears in both the Prose and Poetic Eddas. Byatt rewrites the myth through the lens of historical fiction in Ragnarök: The End of the Gods (Edinburgh: Canongate Books, 2011).
metamorphic, life-giving nature of the poet’s name, we see that what at first seems “despairing” of the individual’s death also contains its opposite, hope of renewal in time, in history.

Noteworthy, too, is that the poem’s representation of the conflict between creationism and evolution sways Victorian readers’ contrary interpretations, both of which, as well as neither, quite apply. Roland, the contemporary scholar studying Ash, pinpoints the paradox, calling the poet’s material metaphor “satisfactorily evasive.”

Christabel LaMotte’s writings draw our attention to how Byatt also has the poetess’ language refract material imagination. We are meant to see her as the female version of her lover, Ash, as well as his opposite, a comparison strengthened by her sustained use of the elements. Ellen Ash, the poet’s wife, records her reaction to LaMotte’s fairy poem *Melusina*, which is about a shape-shifting elemental:

> It is truly original, although the general public may have trouble in recognising its genius, because it makes no concession to vulgar frailties of imagination, and because its virtues are so far removed in some ways at least from those expected of the weaker sex. Here is no swooning sentiment, no timid purity, no softly gloved lady-like patting of the reader’s sensibility, but lively imagination, but force and vigour…It is like a huge, intricately embroidered tapestry in a shadowed stone hall, on which all sorts of strange birds and beasts and elves and demons creep in and out of thickets of thorny trees and occasional blossoming glades. Fine patches of gold stand out in the gloom, sunlight and starlight, the sparkle of jewels or human hair or serpents’ scales. Firelight flickers, fountains catch light. All the elements are in perpetual motion, fire consuming, water running, air alive and the earth turning. …

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256 Although *Possession* was published beforehand, this passage is uncannily similar to Elaine Scarry’s description of the palm tree motif in Matisse’s “Seated Woman with a Book” in *On Beauty and Being Just*, 27: “Like silver threads appearing and disappearing behind the cross threads of a weaving – not a finished weaving but one whose making is just now under way – the silver jumps of our eyes trip in unison across the stripes, appearing and disappearing beneath the latticing of the guide threads. It is as though white sea-lanes have been drawn on the surface of the ocean and across them Nereids dive in and
Ellen includes an excerpt from LaMotte’s poem where the knight Raimondin of Jean D’Arras’ tale spies on the transformed Melusina bathing through a keyhole:\(^{257}\)

The sinuous muscle of her monster tail  
Beating the lambent bath to diamond-fine  
Refracting lines of spray, a dancing veil  
Of heavier water on the breathless air

How lovely-white her skin her Lord well knew,  
The tracery of blue veins across the snow. …  
But could not see the beauty in the sheen  
Or argent scale and slate-blue coiling fin. … (P, 134-135)

Ellen’s assessment is important for many reasons, the first of which is that it praises the “force and vigour” of LaMotte’s imagination with vocabulary that provides the meat of the argument of Possession’s feminist scholars Leonora Stern and Maud Bailey about liminal femininity; essentially, that the woman writer’s assertive writing draws on “male” language and terminology to express so-called independence. I will say more about this relation between liminality, material imagination, and how it implicates the body in due course. For now, what we see is how Ellen’s analogy between the language of the poem and a living embroidery leads into what seems like metonymy and then into the invocation of the “perpetual motion” of the elements. This reversal, or what we might call a deconstructive process involving linking and abstraction from the particular, is meant to simulate language’s return to the dynamic form and material of the imagining mind. Ellen’s language-based deconstruction recalls Byatt description of how she reconstructs memorized texts in “Feeling thought”:


\(^{257}\) In the novel, Roland and Maud (often comically) reenact the actions of the poets and/or the subjects of their poetry. One notable example is when Roland stands in for Raimondin as he looks through the bathroom keyhole while Maud bathes: “he went down on one knee on the putative drugget and put his eye to the huge keyhole which glinted at him and disconcertingly vanished as the door swung back and he smelled wet, freshness, steam in cold air” (P, 162).
I have noticed that if I try to remember verse – or even prose – I have known by heart – what comes back first into the mind is the rhythm, the beat of iamb or trochee, or the break of regularity. Then I seem to remember the connecting words – participles, prepositions, conjunctions – followed by the verbs. The nouns come last, or proper names, which should be the most particular, are curiously elusive. It seems to me possible that this searching for the remembered piece of language (concept, image, idea) finds first the deepest and strongest neuronal reinforced links, where the firing of the cells is surest, most frequent, and steadiest. And if this is so, it is a possible reason why Donne’s games with grammar (and complicated rhythms) are primitive as well as difficult. They are the feeling of thought.258

Looked at in conjunction, these passages show how Byatt explicitly connects the elements with material imagination. As mentioned, Byatt’s argument in “Feeling thought” is bound up with Scarry’s aesthetic categories in Dreaming by the Book, especially with her sections on “Addition and Subtraction” and “Radiant Ignition.” The former relates the description of motion through a “sequence of stills” to “the arrival of a picture in the imaginer’s mind”; Scarry actually discusses Donne’s “Going to Bed” and the imperative for the reader to imagine “roving hands,” by way of abstracted body parts, to be moving over a woman’s whole body.259 The latter has to do with the calling up of brief bright lights, not particular things, which first focuses imagination and then gets us to see a specific scene.

Returning to Ellen’s assessment and to the poem excerpt that follows, we see this very strategy being employed: “patches of gold stand out in the gloom, sunlight and starlight, the sparkle of jewels or human hair or serpents’ scales. Firelight flickers, fountains catch light.” And LaMotte’s poem is the source of Ellen, the reader’s, radiant ignition, for the poem aims to get the reader to see and sense “diamond-fine-lines of spray,” which are refracted lines of light that form “a dancing veil / Of heavier water on the breathless air”; her “Lord” is blind to the “sheen” of her tail, as he is blind to the “beauty” of her metamorphic form, although her human half he “knows” and sees well through what we nevertheless imagine is steam. Christabel’s writing is gendered

259 Scarry, Dreaming by the Book, 106.
and subversive at once; it is myriad and contradictory in the same way as “heavier water,” “breathless air,” and the elemental being in question. This strategic use of medial matter not only facilitates Byatt’s construction of complex metaphors but also allows her to simulate the work of material imagination, and prompts us to do imaginative work as readers in the same way as Ellen does. Using the matter of mind, Byatt aims to simulate the manner in which individual minds strive toward and influence one another.

**When Minds Aim to Meet**

Turning to the correspondence between Ash and LaMotte, and to Roland’s encounter with it as a reader, we see how Byatt uses language as an adequate and inadequate medium through which to stage this meeting of minds. Roland contrasts his experience of “predictive familiarity” with Ash’s writing for a general readership with his experience of reading Ash’s letters to a particular addressee. In the former, Roland feels that he knows “the workings of the other man’s mind…His mind could leap ahead and hear the rhythm of the unread as though he were the writer, hearing in his brain the ghost-rhythms of the as yet unwritten” (P, 144-145). Roland’s “predictive familiarity” stems from his ability, or so he thinks, to feel Ash’s thought as “ghost-rhythms” preceding language, recalling Byatt’s mental reconstruction of verse and prose through remembered rhythms associated with authors and poets. Roland finds it “difficult to fix this creature [the letters] in his scheme of things. He asked for clarification and was answered, it appeared, with riddles.” There are several reasons for why Roland thinks he cannot feel Ash’s thought, the first being that he cannot “fix” the author’s affective state; the reader’s “mounting sense of stress” relates to the writer’s, “confused by the object and recipient of his attentions.” The letters also disturb Roland because letters, he observes, “are a form of narrative that

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260 At this point, he lacks access to LaMotte’s half of the correspondence, which Maud Bailey is busy analyzing across the table.
envisages no outcome, no closure…Letters tell no story, because they do not know, from line to line, where they are going” (P, 145).

Now it would seem that letters are closer to thought, which is unpredictable and inconstant, closer than the more intentional, fixed narrative forms that make Roland feel less at sea. Roland nevertheless thinks that letters “exclude not only the reader as co-writer, or predictor, or guesser, but they exclude the reader as reader; they are written, if they are true letters, for a reader.” Roland’s discomfort stems from his knowledge that these letters are not meant for him, but also from the limitations of his training as a literary critic in possession of certain formulas for reading. He wants a formula with which to characterize this writing and cannot find one. Yet Maud’s compartmentalizing approach across the table, her “silent industry and irritating deliberation,” also does not please him. Through Roland Byatt dramatizes our longing for a sense of an ending and our need to impose patterns on thought, something that Frank Kermode discusses at length in relation to biological time and death.261 Byatt has Ash ventriloquize this (biological) desire for “consummation” in a poem, ironically, and not in a letter, which we encounter toward the end of the novel:

In certain moods we eat our lives away
In fast successive greed; we must have more
Although that more depletes our little stock
Of time and peace remaining. We are driven
By endings as by hunger. We must know
How it comes out, the shape o’ the whole, the thread
Whose links are weak or solid, intricate

261 Kermode’s sustained discussion of apocalyptic thought and desire for narrative closure may be found in The Sense of an Ending. Byatt admires and often mentions Kermode, most memorably in her Paris Review interview with fellow author Philip Hensher (No. 168; 2001). Speaking about feeling excluded from English fiction being published at the time she started writing, Byatt says: “But I was saved, in fact. I was saved, in the sense of feeling there might be something I belonged to, by two people, one of whom was Iris Murdoch…And the other was Frank Kermode, who, when I discovered him, was writing criticism about a literature that one might hope to add things to”; later: “I took a university job in 1972 partly out of admiration for Frank Kermode, whose department I went into.” Kermode also appears in Byatt’s Passions of the Mind.
Or boldly welded in great clumsy loops
Of primitive workmanship. We feel our way
Along the links and we cannot let go
Of this bright chain of curiosity
Which is become our fetter. So it drags
Us through our time – “And then, and then, and then,”
Towards our figured consummation.
And we must have the knife, the dart, the noose,
The last embrace, the golden wedding ring,
The trump of battle or the deathbed rasp,
Although we know and must know, they’re all one,
Finis, The End, the one consummate shock
That ends all shocks and us. Do we desire
We prancing, cogitating, nervous selves
Movement’s cessation or a maw crammed full
Of sweetest certainty, though with that bliss
We cease as in his thrilling bridal dance
The male wasp finds the bliss and swift surcease
Of his small time i’ the air. (P, 517)

Byatt uses tactile metaphors to show how our longing to physically grasp and stabilize thought turns on primitive “hunger” for certainty, a perverse hunger that relies as much on life as it does on “Thanatos,” what Freud discusses as the death drive.262 Roland and Maud will eventually realize that their quest for familiarity only gets them so far, that the pleasure of the text stems from the encounter with the unpredictable life of thought, which does not privilege any one form. Even if we sense closure, any narrative can be deceptive as to its ending. Indeed, Byatt provides us as readers with “privileged” information that the letters do not contain and that Roland and Maud never learn, including Ash’s meeting with his daughter. Just as they are deceptive, endings are also truthful “in a way” because they give us a sense of our biological time as a reader; they draw the line from birth to death. Finally, any narrative, not just letters, may be intended for a particular, rather than a general, reader. Many of the poems that Roland feels he can trace back to the rhythms of Ash’s thought are actually written for, or somehow refer

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to, LaMotte. They just do not name her directly. In other words, the feeling of thought precedes
and is more truthful in its lack of closure than particular narrative forms. There are nevertheless
ways in which language may simulate thought’s shifting form, stage thought’s fluidity, in spite
of our need to impose order. Narratives must somehow abandon “predictive familiarity” even as
they create patterns, perhaps in a similar vein as *A Thousand and One Nights*, where storytelling
relies on a lack of closure, on stories that Scheherazade keeps weaving to evade death. Byatt
implies that to more closely approach and reflect on thought’s immediacy and uncertainty,
language must attempt to find forms that approximate how thought feels as it unfolds and moves.

Beatrice Nest, who works in Roland’s department and whose career was stifled in no
small part by male supervisors, makes an interesting observation about the kinship of minds in
Ash’s writing. In her Finals paper, Beatrice writes:

> There are poets…whose love poems seem to be concerned neither with praise nor with
> blame of some distant lady, but with true conversation between men and women. Such is
> John Donne, though he may also revile the whole sex in certain moods. Such might have
> been Meredith if circumstances had been happier. A brief attempt to think of other ‘love’
> poets who expect reciprocity of intelligence must persuade us of the pre-eminence of
> Randolph Henry Ash, whose ‘Ask and Embla’ poems present every phase of intimacy,
> opposition and failure of communication, but always convince the reader of the real
> thinking and feeling presence of her to whom they are addressed. (P, 126-127)

It is informative to read Beatrice’s observation knowing how much the other feminist scholars in
the novel, Maud and Leonora Stern, “revile” Ash for what they see as his sexism. While Beatrice
“hates” writing, her interpretation is closer to the mark and subtler than the one-sided
interpretations of other more conventionally successful male and female scholars. Unlike Roland,
who notes instability in the letters but not the poems, and who at least initially needs to feel
privileged as a reader, Beatrice intuits before even knowing of the letters how Ash’s poetry is the

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same; it tries to communicate the feeling of thought, the “presence” of another living mind and 
body, by tracing the successes and failures of communication. Beatrice in fact wanted to write 
her doctoral dissertation on Ash’s *Ask to Embla*, but was instead encouraged to write about “the 
daily lives of wives of genius.” Her subsequent teaching and research on Ash’s wife, Ellen, is as 
much motivated by legitimate historical injustices toward women and distrust of male colleagues 
as by her perverse dislike of the feminine (specifically, her own) body and suspicion toward 
other women, insecurities intimately related to the feminist movement’s internal contradictions, 
which Beatrice quite literally embodies.

*Ask to Embla* is Ash’s rewriting of the Norse myth about the gods’ creation of the first 
man and woman, of living and thinking beings from senseless forms, trees on a beach. “Askr” in 
Old Norse means “ash tree,” whereas “Embla” is thought to mean “vine” or “elder” and may also 
refer to a “busy woman” and assiduous labor. We see again how Ash’s poetry speaks to his name. 
The purported etymology of “Embla” hints at LaMotte’s complex beliefs about the life of a 
(female) writer, which she thinks necessitates keeping mind and body separate, and which she 
cannot do. Finally, the subject matter of Ash’s poetry speaks to the continuity of tales in other 
forms. Looking at the following fragment from *Ask and Embla*, we notice how Byatt continues 
using shifting matter and metamorphosis as metaphors for the nature of thought and storytelling:

They say that women change: ‘tis so: but you  
Are ever-constant in your changefulness,  
Like that still thread of falling river, one  
From source to last embrace in the still pool  
Ever-renewed and ever-moving on  
From first to last a myriad water-drops  
And you – I love you for it – are the *force*  
That moves and holds the form. (P, 285)

We may read this as a declaration of love from a man to a woman made of the same material and 
intellectual “stuff.” And his use of “myriad” is not coincidental, as it also appears in the letters.
Ask’s declaration to Embla is Ash’s to LaMotte, whose name as it happens contains “mot,” word, and “motte,” a mound of earth, natural or manmade. Ash’s rewriting of Norse myth in a poem about the constancy of love in spite of material change uses the elements and shape-shifting to point to the constancy of stories retold in new ways, as well as to thought’s transformation into language. He compares the changing female body to a “still thread of falling water” in a “still pool,” directing our attention to the paradoxical nature of stillness. The eye may not be able to perceive movement, yet water is never still, always being disturbed and shaped by the other elements in time and space. We may also connect this element with eternal return, or circularity, for which the symbol of the Ouroboros (tail-devouring snake) is apropos; it recalls LaMotte’s “epic” poem about the shape-shifting elemental Melusina, to whom LaMotte compares herself explicitly, and in which she uses elemental metaphors abundantly. Ash ties the shifting female body to shifting matter to shifting thought through language, which he thereby turns into the very “force” that “moves and holds the form.” We see thought embodied in a “still thread,” the material line that traces the path “from source to last embrace is the still pool.” This thread is also language, which only seems still, but is actually always shifting in time, space, and perception. He also aligns desire for a body with the desire to possess another mind by imposing form on thought. This is where the difficulty arises. In the first place, language captures thought imperfectly.

Turning to an excerpt from Ash’s Ragnarök, we see the poet continuing to employ linguistic tools to make language simulate thought and show how words are thought-matter artificially stilled (because of the need for and inevitability of form). Ash retells the Norse creation myth and how the Gods of Asgard find the soon-to-be Ask and Embla:

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264 Doris Lessing’s The Golden Notebook and Iris Murdoch’s The Sea, The Sea similarly reflect on the need to impose form on language. Italo Calvino’s self-reflexive descriptions of image-making through
…They came down to the shore
Where the salt breakers fell on the new sand
With roar unheard, and curling crest unseen
Like nothing else, for no man-mind was there
To name, or liken them, in any way.
Theys were themselves alone, and rose and fell
Changing-eternal, new, not knowing time
Which their succession measures for the mind.

And these three Ases were the sons of Bor
Who slew the Giant Ymir in his rage
And made of him the elements of earth,
Body and sweat and bones and curly hair,
Made soil and sea and hills and waving trees,
And his grey brains wandered the heavens as clouds.
These three were Odin, Father of the Gods,
Honir, his brother, also called the Bright,
The Wise and Thoughtful, and that third, the hot
Loki, the hearth-god, whose consuming fire
First warmed the world, then grown beyond the bounds
Of home and hearthstone, flamed in boundless greed
To turn the world, and Heav’n, to sifting ash. … (P, 260-261)

Ash ties perception and language to mental activity through the negatives “unheard” and “unseen.” Only mental activity, he suggests, measures time’s succession and imposes meaning through naming and differentiation. Ash uses the paradox of “changing-eternal” to point to timelessness as the precursor of human time, the latter of which the mind invented to give thought and perception external form, molding nature to biology as well (anthropomorphism).

“Changing-eternal” first refers to the time before man following creation. Ash then introduces another paradox: transformation affected through violence points to that same “changing-eternal” exchange between body and natural world. In a mythic, material reversal the gods first slew substances at the beginning of If on a Winter’s Night a Traveler, trans. William Weaver (London: Harcourt, 1981), are also worth revisiting, esp. 10: “The novel begins in a railway station, a locomotive huffs, steam from a piston covers the opening of the chapter, a cloud of smoke hides part of the first paragraph…The pages of the book are clouded like the windows of an old train, the cloud of smoke rests on the sentences.” He seems to be playing with Dickens’ descriptions of fog, gas, and smoke at the beginning of Bleak House: “Fog everywhere. Fog up the river, where it flows among green aits and meadows; fog down the river. …”
Ymir, who is not a god, and then created the elements: body becomes “soil and sea and hills and waving trees.” Themselves shape-shifters, the gods then change the elements back into flesh, activating another reversal and return, this time from dust to dust. Bor’s three sons discover Ask and Embla as “senseless forms” of “ash and elder” at the “tide’s edge,” rising and falling “with motion not their own,” one element moved by another. Ash returns to time’s circularity by referring to the circles in their trunks: “(Circles of years not lived by the new wood / But sempiternal years, a present past / Stirred into being by the hand of time / As lines of water spired in the new pools.)” Ash activates time through substance, which is and is not timeless: he evokes the dual nature of time through “simple” material forms prior to and after they are gifted with sense. “Allfather,” feeling the new sun’s heat as “his own force,” authorizes the gods to mold matter into human form. They then name Ask and Embla for “their woody origins.”

Metamorphosis is enacted through a combination of “the word,” or performative utterance, and material gesture:

Bright Honir said: if these could move and feel
And see and hear, the lines of leaping light
Would speak to ears and eyes. The garden’s fruits
Would render life to life. This lovely world
Would be both known and loved, and so would live
An endless life in theirs, and they should hear
And speak its beauties, then first beautiful
When known to be so.
Last he spoke, the dark
God of the hidden flames. He said, "Hot blood
I give them, to make bright their countenance,
To move in them the passionate motion
Which draws them to each other…

…Odin breathed in the soul, and bright Honir
Gave sense and understanding and the power
To stand and move. The quick-dark Loki last
Knitted the veins of circulating blood
And blew the spark of vital heat, as smiths
Stir fire with the bellows. So a sharp
And burning pain of apprehension
Stirred life in those who had been logs of peace
And thrilled along new channels, till it roared
In new-forged brain and ventricles of blood
And curling membranes of the ear and nose
And last, opened new eyes on a new world. … (P, 261-262)\textsuperscript{265}

The gods, and shape-shifting Loki in particular, are as responsible for giving (mortal) life as they are for Ragnarök, the poem’s name signaling the end of the world by fire, or “sifting ash.” Ash the poet, who fashions language out of thought, draws an explicit analogy between divine and mortal creators and destroyers, both artists in their own way, and directs our attention as readers to his role in relation to LaMotte, who he destroys by “fire,” through passion which gives and takes bodily and mental life. As we shall see, LaMotte uses the fire element in this same way in the letters, which stage what happens when one willful mind, inevitably connected to a body and its desires, encounters another.

\textbf{When Mind Meets Body}

We alight on Byatt’s mediated reflection on the difficulty of staging the feeling of thought and longing to facilitate the meeting of minds in one of Ash’s letters to LaMotte, the same letter that triggers Roland’s readerly uncertainty. Ash writes:

\begin{quote}
...your intelligence, your marvellous quick wit – so that I may write to you as I write when I am alone, when I write my true writing, which is for everyone and no one – so that in me which has never addressed any private creature, feels at home with you. I say “at home” – what extraordinary folly – when you take pleasure in making me feel most unheimlich, as the Germans have it, least of all at home, but always on edge, always apprehensive of failure, always certain that I cannot appreciate your next striking thought or glancing shaft of wit. …Nevertheless I reiterate – because you will not bridle
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{265} Byatt has Ovid in mind throughout. \textit{Metamorphoses} begins thus: “My intention is to tell of bodies changed / To different forms; the gods, who made the changes, / Will help me – or I hope so – with a poem / That runs from the world’s beginning to our own days…Before the ocean was, or earth, or heaven, / Nature was all alike, a shapelessness, / Chaos, so-called, all rude and lumpy matter…substance forever changing, / Forever at war: within a single body / Heat fought with cold, wet fought with dry, the hard / Fought with the soft”; see \textit{Metamorphoses}, trans. Rolfe Humphries (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 3.
at my strictures on either manly devotion to a female ideal – or on the duplicity of Poets –
but will look at it with your own Poet’s eye – askance and most wisely – I write to you as
I write when I am alone, with that in me – how else to put it? you will know, I trust you
know – with that which makes, which is the Maker. (P, 146-147)

Ash’s struggle as a poet and a man immediately comes to the fore, for he does several things at
once. He displaces his desire for LaMotte onto her letters, treating language as the material
manifestation of the thought of an equal, a poet in her own right. Through this very gesture, he
commits the classic folly of a would-be lover by conflating text with body, making language into
a substitute for the beloved. What is important is the way in which Ash tries to grasp LaMotte’s
thought in words, to possess another mind that has him in its thrall because of its unavailability,
an unavailability tied to the physical unavailability of the recipient. First, he genuinely praises
LaMotte’s intelligence and “marvellous quick wit,” which he establishes in relation to himself. A
string of paradoxes follows. He claims that he writes to her in the same way as he does when
“alone, when I write my true writing, which is for everyone and no one – so that in me which has
never addressed any private creature, feels at home with you.” Roland’s readerly insecurity at
first appears ill-founded, for Ash writes that he writes to LaMotte as he does when he writes “for
everyone and no one” in particular. Only he is writing to her in particular, and trying to reach her
essential self, a self he believes inheres in her thought, which he thinks resembles his. Ash claims
contradictory things: he is always writing his “true writing” and his writing is more true when
addressed to LaMotte, who he sees as a second self. Only we know that Ash has addressed
another “private creature” before, in his love letters to Ellen prior to their marriage, when she
was also physically unavailable. She, too, is a particular reader of a particular lover’s discourse.

Ash acknowledges his uncertainty about reaching the mind of his addressee through
verbs – striking thought or glancing shaft of wit – that give LaMotte’s thought materiality,
mobility, (masculine) power, the potential for violence, and a sexual edge. On the one hand,
these verbs try to physically pin thought down much like a body. On the other hand, they say nothing specific about that thought. The more Ash tries to possess LaMotte’s mind through language, the more that task evades him, even as, especially as, his language becomes more concrete and gendered. What are we to make, then, of Ash’s turn to the demonstrative “that” when he reiterates his statement? It would seem that “that” names the unnamable quality of thought, which collides with language’s expressive boundaries. Yet “that,” the mind, is also the necessary origin of poetry. Ash begs LaMotte to meet him in the space beyond or before linguistic expression. He also equates this space, as is appropriate for a doubting Victorian and artist acquainted with Darwin and the bible, with “the word’s” ambiguous origin. The “Maker” may be the creative imagination, nature, god, or all of these and none. He goes on:

_I should add that my poems do not, I think, spring from the Lyric Impulse – but from something restless and myriad-minded and partial and observing and analytic and curious, my dear...What makes me a Poet, and not a novelist – is to do with the singing of Language itself. ...And you for the revelation to mere humans of some strange unguessed-at other world, is that not so? The City of Is, the reverse of Par-is, the towers in the water not the air, the drowned roses and flying fish and other paradoxical elementals – you see – I come to know you – I shall feel my way into your thought – as a hand into a glove – to steal your metaphor and torture it cruelly. But if you wish – you may keep your gloves clean and scented and folded away – you may – only write to me, write to me, I love to see the hop and skip and sudden starts of your ink..._ (P, 147)

Ash’s more abstract turn of thought translates into his more abstract turn of phrase. His language turns away from the Lyric Impulse, often discussed in the same breath as a gift from god and form of divine inspiration, toward the more heretical, less quantifiable source of Poetry, expressed as a substantial, materially weighted, yet uncertain “something.” We know from other parts of the novel that “believers” including LaMotte and Ellen question Ash’s religious stance. Ash’s line of thought is therefore unsurprising; it is also vital because of how he describes thought itself: not his or LaMotte’s, necessarily, but thought in general (non-gendered) with language less specific and therefore more successfully descriptive. His and her poetry spring
“from something restless and myriad-minded and partial and observing and analytic and curious.” By acknowledging how thought cannot be pinned down in language using nondescript, evasive adjectives (“restless,” “myriad-minded,” “partial”), Ash gets closer to the mark. He admires and relates to LaMotte’s poetry because of her use of slippery language and paradox to express thought’s restlessness and myriad-mindedness.

Ash is drawn to LaMotte’s “strange unguessed-at other world” of Is because of how it confounds human, natural, and linguistic categories through wordplay and reversal using “paradoxical elementals.” The City of Is is also suggestive not only or necessarily because it is “the reverse of Par-is,” a real manmade place, but also in the same way as Ash’s “something.” “Is” searches for appropriate language with which to name a purer nonlinguistic space of thought and being, “something,” somewhere that just is. Ash pinpoints LaMotte’s use of matter and elements (often in states of transit), something that I have been arguing is characteristic of his writing as well. Both poets adopt linguistic strategies to better express the feeling of thought. These strategies using medial material metaphors and substances are rather successful. Yet both also only partially succeed, for language just as easily reverts or refers to gender and twists unnamable thought into a socialized “creature.”

Whereas Ash first frames his proposition that they are alike in thought as tentative – “is that not so?” – he then rephrases his interpretation as an assertion – “you see – I come to know you” – coupled with (it is difficult to call it anything else) a blatantly sexual metaphor – “I shall feel my way into your thought – as a hand into a glove” – followed by a corrective that circumambulates propriety and female chastity – “But if you wish – you may keep your gloves clean and scented and folded away – you may” – and a more innocent plea to continue correspondence as a material substitute for sexual activity – “only write to me, write to me, I love
to see the hop and skip and sudden starts of your ink.” Although his efforts are valiant, and he genuinely means what he says, Ash ends in the same way as he begins: with language that expresses particular, rather than general, desire for a body that happens to be connected to a mind. Yet it is also, we must acknowledge, impossible to uncouple these desires, as it is impossible to uncouple the mind and body, as it is impossible to express the feeling of thought in anything but language.

In The Drowned City, the poetess captures material imagination, as Ash observes. Similar to Ash, she also reverts to gendered conventions due to the socialized language she must describe with, and feminist critics including Maud home in on this problem only to reenact it by studying LaMotte’s poetry in terms of liminal femininity. When Roland inquires about the City of Is, Maud explains that, “It’s a Breton legend. It was drowned in the sea for its wickedness. It was ruled by Queen Dahud, the sorceress, daughter of King Gradlond. The women there were transparent, according to some versions” (P, 148). This is a partial account, and Leonora Stern’s “prefatory note” is also incomplete owning to her too-simple dichotomies: “two types of civilization, the Indo-European patriarchy of Gradlond and the more primitive, instinctive, earthly paganism of his sorceress daughter, Dahud”; the “women’s world of the underwater city is the obverse of the male-dominated technological industrial world of Paris or Par-is, as the Bretons have it. They say that Is will come to the surface when Paris is drowned for its sins” (P, 148).

According to Breton legend, Is is drowned for “sin” or, to be more exact, Dahud’s encouragement of sexual license and tendency to murder her lovers, recalling those other cities destroyed through divine (or natural) intervention, Sodom and Gomorrah and Atlantis.²⁶⁶ In one

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²⁶⁶ There are a number of versions, including that which appears in Pierre Le Baud, Cronicques et ystoires des Bretons; Albert Le Grand, Vie des Saintcs de la Bretagne Armorique (17th century); T.
version, the devil disguised as a knight arrives in Is and Dahud encourages him to spend the night. A storm rages and, although the city is protected by its gates, the knight tells Dahud to steal the only key from her sleeping father. With the waters unleashed, King Gradlond and his daughter mount a magical horse to escape. But Saint Winwaloe, who warned of God’s punishment, convinces the father to push the “demon” (Dahud) into the sea. Swallowed by the sea, she transforms into a mermaid. The legend is more complicated than Maud and Leonora’s accounts allow for. Sin takes male and female forms; punishment is either dispensed by god, as the saint claims, or is a natural consequence of opening the gates (different versions say that either the devil or a drunk Dahud opens them); finally, the male and female characters of the story literally embody indeterminacy, or narrative’s tendency to take on different guises, as both the devil and Dahud shape-shift. Needless to say, these ambiguities are not lost on Christabel, who uses material metaphors such as “transparency” to bring out narrative’s paradoxes:

There are none blush on earth, y-wis  
As do dames of the Town of Is.  
The red blood runs beneath their skin  
And feels its way and flows within,  
And men can see, as through a glass  
Each twisty turn, each crossing pass  
Of threaded vein and artery  
From heart to throat, from mouth to eye.  
This spun-glass skin, like spider-thread  
Is silver water, woven with red.  
For their excessive wickedness  
In days of old, was this distress  
Come on them, of transparency  
And openness to every eye.  
But still they’re proud, their haughty brows  
Circled with gold. … (P, 148-149)

Hersart de la Villemarqué, “Livaden Geris” (“The Submersion of Ker-Is”), Barzaz Breiz (“Ballads of Brittany”) compiled from oral tradition (1839); and “Keris” in Emile Souvestre, Le Foyer Breton.
Christabel begins with a physiological image of shame: the blush. Yet shame is not written on the dames’ faces: it is one with unstable matter, with the transparent body, and with the circulation of the blood, which we are meant to visualize and feel as it “feels its way and flows within.” This image seems to provide access to thought through the thing (body), rendering a particular thought or, better yet, a particular feeling, “transparent.” Affect and body are visibly conjoined for the sake of male voyeurism: “men” not only see the female body but can peer beyond its surface and purportedly know it from inside out. At the same time as matter evokes the feeling of thought, it is also evasive, for this kind of seeing is likened to looking “through a glass,” recalling Browning’s “bubble” and his unreliable medium. Vision becomes a false route to knowledge. Although we see “each twisty turn, each crossing pass” and our mind stiches together images of heart, throat, mouth, and eye by means of moving matter, we cannot access the mind beyond the “spun-glass skin.” The latter is likened to a web and to water, which are, like glass, complex metaphors and distorting mediums open and closed “to every eye.” The metamorphic, cyclical image of blood becomes the medium that carries shame and conceals its source. Metamorphosis into a transparent thing is punishment for “excessive wickedness.” Yet this wickedness is never named. We are therefore meant to question whether their pride is “haughty” or a form of superficial defense written on the brow against (male) judgment. We may take these material metaphors further still, for the circulation of the blood and the shifty nature of

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267 For a fascinating analysis of technologies for observing and recording the blush, which shift their focus from feeling to seeing while still internalizing prior “models and modes” of studying emotion and physiological response, see Otniel E. Dror, “Seeing the Blush: Feeling Emotions,” Histories of Scientific Observation, eds. Lorraine Daston and Elizabeth Lunbeck (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011). Dror emphasizes that, in the earlier phase, “male-scientific observer(s)” feminized this form of knowledge. Gustave Fachner, for example, associated the blush with “a feminine mood of mind.” The contrast between a “feminine-embodied mode of observing and a scientific machine-mediated mode of observing reflected the shift in the paradigm for scientifically observing emotions,” allowing (male) scientists to distinguish between “looking, embodying, and self-observation” (331). This approach at first helped them maintain the distinction between mind and body. However, “machines for measuring emotions would amalgamate and confuse these different modes of observing.”
transparency refer us to the unstable nature of narrative. “Narration is as much a part of human
nature as breath and the circulation of the blood,” Byatt writes. The author explicitly aligns
unstable matter with storytelling, with Browning’s “thread” leading one through a labyrinth, and
with the difficulty of accessing thought through language. While various conceits about the
difficulty of communicating thought and feeling through language are common, Byatt’s
approach is uncommon. She adopts strategies to stage the material imagination at work even as
her complex metaphors reflect the difficulty of doing so. LaMotte goes on:

Deep in the silence of drowned Is
Beneath the wavering precipice
The church-spire in the thickened green
Points to the trembling surface sheen
From which descends a glossy cone
A mirror-spire that mocks its own.
Between these two the mackerel sails
As did the swallow in the vales
Of summer air, and he too sees
His mirrored self amongst the trees
That hang to meet themselves, for here
All things are doubled, and the clear
Thick element is doubled too
Finite and limited the view
As though the world of roofs and rocks
Were stored inside a glassy box.
And damned and drowned transparent things
Hold silent commerce. … (P, 149)

LaMotte uses language to construct a space outside of or beyond language where medial matter –
here, the water element – makes “finite” truths known. She writes poetry that refracts the limits
of communication, not to mention the limitations of female self-expression. The underwater city
is one of doubles and deceptions, suspended in a “clear, thick element” that is “doubled too.”
LaMotte substitution of one element, water, for another, air, leads to additional analogies with
glass, all of which exhibit paradoxes and incongruities. Inconsistencies inherent in images of

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268 Byatt, On Histories and Stories, 166.
matter in turn point to the inconsistencies of manmade concepts, such as ideologies. While the submerged church spire “points to the trembling surface sheen,” that unstable surface reflects its opposite, a “glossy cone,” an unwavering mirrored double that “mocks” its original. LaMotte subtly takes aim at religion, a manmade myth, which dispenses judgment as to who is “damned” (women) and who is saved (men). These purposeful doubles destabilize binaries even as they point to how binaries are constructed, to our inescapable tendency to construct them. Water equals air equals glass. All three exist somewhere in between and are mediums, mirrors, and barriers at once. This underwater world and its “transparent things” robbed of speech exist in a kind of “glass box,” or purgatory, where they are and are not seen for what they are and contain. The idea remains the same: seeing through something does not equal perceiving or accessing what it is in its entirety. Seeing through a body does not equal seeing into a mind. Yet submersion also silences, leaving only the body to “speak.”

These female beings are meant to be seen – from the male-dominated world above, be it heaven or earth – and not heard. The “clear, thick element,” which is also language, affects the artificial separation of (female) mind and body, and of the genders, yet this medium, the Victorian poetess indicates, is not unlike air. Things are not much changed underwater: female “commerce” – legal, political, economic, social, cultural – is silenced. Maud and Leonora’s readings are justified, yet they are also incomplete because they reestablish the binaries (male v. female) that they wish to subvert. LaMotte cleverly uses language that shows up these binaries for what they are (artificial) through “natural” means while getting the reader to imagine her constructed world more vividly. The poem goes on, yet we need not read on to already observe how these language-based strategies, even as they point to the difficulty of accessing the mind, reinforce the essential connection between mind and body, feeling and thought, and punishment
for bodily pleasure suffered by women (indecency, “transparency,” pregnancy, etc.) and the repression of what women think and feel.

**When Mind Meets Body (Part II)**

In *Neuronal Man*, Changeux differentiates between social language and “langage de la pensée,” the language of thought. He aligns the latter with the complex geometric relationship of neurons within neuronal graphs of mental objects in a turn that turns description into the metaphor encountered at the beginning of this chapter – “entre le crystal et la fumée” – a figurative turn at once exact and imprecise. Changeux believes that this “language of thought,” intimately connected with the layout and organization of the cerebral cortex, is “permanently in contact with reality” and “will be much less arbitrary than the language of words.” His, albeit idealistic, suggestion that this medial state characterizing the construction of concepts from images from percepts is more “real” than those concepts once spoken and written is nevertheless what Byatt’s language-play in *Possession* hinges on. That socialized language tends to be inexact is a common complaint. Because it is limiting, it sometimes flattens rather than enriches what we think and feel. Yet sometimes, showing up language for its limitations in particular ways also gives it a richness that allows us to begin wrapping our minds around its perhaps richer, because ultimately unquantifiable, wordless origins.

In turning to the continually changing matter of mind, Byatt capitalizes on language’s inexactitude; she consequently approaches in language what she senses as the word’s felt and thought beginnings. Byatt’s poets do the same thing in their correspondence. At the same time as the author develops strategies for activating vivid readerly sensing – perceptual attention made possible, I believe, because of how Byatt evokes the deep structure of the brain – she also stages

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269 Changeux, *Neuronal Man*, 140.
the difficulties of making thought felt in written language, a socialized creature. As I have shown through LaMotte’s poetry, social language, which is also gendered, curtails material imagination. It encroaches upon and destabilizes independently felt thought. The letters, which make Roland uncomfortable because of their uncertainty, are truer than the poems because of how they more explicitly attempt to connect two disparate yet similarly curious, productive minds. Yet they also play out the essential relation and tension between mind and body. They demonstrate how both come up against not only language, but convention, not only desire to “feel” one’s way into another’s thought, but biological desire to touch and own. This latter desire is one toward which the poets’ language begins to bend.

Let us revisit Ash’s ardent, uncanny, sex-laced pronouncement: “I shall feel my way into your thought – as a hand into a glove.” It is a portentous one. While his task initially seems impossible, he does end up rousing LaMotte’s body by tapping into her mind. He thereafter succeeds both mentally and physically. Turning to the correspondence, we see how it turns on this process of feeling one’s way into another’s thought and flesh. The letters enact thought’s medial state between the concrete and abstract through thick metaphors, even as thought collides with language’s limitations. The feeling mind collides with the feeling body for both genders, only the consequences are worse for women. Byatt draws on Donne throughout. Replying to Ash’s missive about feeling one’s way into thought, LaMotte constructs an elaborate riddle that rides completely on thought-matter and metaphor:

*Here is a Riddle, Sir, an old Riddle, an easy Riddle – hardly worth your thinking about – a fragile Riddle, in white and Gold with life in the middle of it. There is a gold, soft cushion, whose gloss you may only paradoxically imagine with your eyes closed tight – see it feelingly, let it slip through your mind’s fingers. And this gold cushion is enclosed in its own crystalline casket, a casket translucent and endless in its circularity, for there are no sharp corners to it, no protrusions, only a milky moonstone clarity that deceives. And these are wrapped in silk, fine as thistledown, tough as steel, and the silk lies inside Alabaster, which you may think of as a funerary Urn – only with no inscription, for there*
are as yet no Ashes...all is sealed and smooth. There may come a day when you may lift the lid with impunity – or rather, when it may be lifted from within – for that way, life may come – whereas your way – you will discover – only Congealing and Mortality...An Egg is my answer...I am my own riddle. Oh, Sir, you must not kindly seek to ameliorate or steal away my solitude. (P, 151-152) 

As mentioned, feminist scholars in the novel treat LaMotte’s writing as “liminal.” And it is, only not in the highly theoretical, Lacan-inflected way that they discuss. If LaMotte’s writing is liminal, then this has more to do with what I have been discussing in terms of the (gender-neutral) matter of mind, which is in language colored by sexuality shaped by a particular time and place. LaMotte disparages her riddle – which turns out to be her very self, her mind – even as she elaborates it. She triggers readerly imagination through medial matter at the same time as she conventionally belittles the female imagination’s worth. Her description brings to mind eighteenth century debates about aesthetics, which asked whether the formation of taste and judgment of beauty were primarily intellectual or material (perceptual) activities. In some ways, LaMotte’s riddle enacts Addison’s theory of taste: he identifies taste with imaginative pleasure and distinguishes between primary (objects available to vision) and secondary (objects unavailable to vision yet present in the mind as images) pleasures. In particular, we note LaMotte’s way of getting the reader to imagine the unseen inside of the egg, the living layered

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270 Ash’s poem about Jan Swammerdam refers to the “egg” as well, mostly in scientific and religious terms, as well as in metaphors that combine the two. He describes the “bare white cell” in which Swammerdam is dying as “chalky-plain as any egg’s inside.” Ash also has his subject refer to shedding the body as “hatching,” and to the body as a “shrunk shelly membrane” housing the soul (P, 221). While Swammerdam’s scientific pursuits were always tied to spirituality, he eventually renounced scientific study in 1675. This decision is at times attributed to his correspondence with French-Flemish mystic Antoinette Bourignon, who told him that his research was “Amusements de Satan.” Indeed, Ash wryly has Swammerdam refer to Bourignon as the one “Who spoke to me, when I despaired, of God’s / Timeless and spaceless point of Infinite Love” (P, 222). See, for example, G.A. Lindeboom, “Antoinette Bourignon’s First Letter to Jan Swammerdam,” Janus 61 (1975), 183-199. Ash’s skepticism about spiritualism, which LaMotte turns to especially after their affair, pervades the novel.

271 Although it is very obviously influenced by women’s status in Victorian society.

272 According to Joseph Addison, “pleasures of the imagination...arise from visible Objects, either when we have them actually in our View, or when we call up their ideas into our Minds by Paintings, Statues, Descriptions, or any the like Occasion”; Addison, The Spectator, 3: 536-537.
kernel of imagination itself, which is in fact also the mind (the soul, even) clothed by the breakable penetrable body. Her imperative to the reader (Ash) is to imagine – to see “feelingly.” Her denial of access is at once an erotic invitation for Ash to slip “as a hand into a glove”: “let it slip through your mind’s fingers.” The problem is that slipping into the language of thought, which LaMotte facilitates through material analogies and metaphors (gold, silk, thistledown, crystal, steel, alabaster) becomes – through social language – conflated with slipping into the body, as well as generation.273

The image also evokes William Hogarth’s The Analysis of Beauty, where he describes how, in order to imagine an object from within we must scoop out its contents and enter it as though it were a shell.274 Read together with LaMotte’s egg riddle, we see how this sort of forced entry may violate the beautiful object or idea in question. Byatt directs our attention toward the double-edged sword of metaphor and the irony of description, both of which hinge on anthropomorphism. Whereas LaMotte facilitates the generation of beautiful mind-images through an intellectual exercise, the riddle, these descriptions slip into talk of a generation of another sort, recalling Elaine Scarry’s discussion of how aesthetic judgment may and does err.275

Mind and body clash in socialized language as LaMotte begins conflating creative and physical generation. She shows how intellectual descriptions of beauty readily and regularly collapse into the material. Not only is the egg an aptly chosen image for aesthetic contemplation, but it also brings the “circularity” of the translation of thought into written, socialized language to the fore.

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273 See Scarry, On Beauty and Being Just; she discusses how the perception of beauty leads to material and metaphorical generation.
274 “Let every object under our consideration, be imagined to have its inward contents scoop’d out so nicely, as to have nothing of it left but a thin shell, exactly corresponding both in its inner and outer surface, to the shape of the object itself: and let us likewise suppose this thin shell to be made up of very fine threads, closely connected together, and equally perceptible, whether the eye is supposed to observe them from without, or within; and we shall find the ideas of the two surfaces of this shell will naturally coincide”; William Hogarth, The Analysis of Beauty.
We see how body is also grave and how LaMotte aligns sexuality with one kind of generation at the expense of the other: physical generation (pregnancy) displaces creative generation. Her pronouncement, like Ash’s, is also portentous, for she does become pregnant and gives birth. Actual touch displaces the original attempt at the kinship of minds through written correspondence. That LaMotte invokes Ash’s name metaphorically also brings us full circle, for she names her destroyer. As we shall see, throughout the correspondence, the poets invoke medial matter to facilitate the mergence of minds while simultaneously providing metaphorical warnings (at least in LaMotte’s case) about the mergence of bodies. LaMotte’s analogy lets her construct a complex binary: if she allows the lid to her mind to be lifted, or lifts it from within, then “that way, life may come,” whereas only “Congealing and Mortality” arise through physical force. The problem is that not only Ash, but also LaMotte herself finds it impossible to separate sharing the mind from sharing the body, even as Ash eggs her on.

The Correspondence Revisited

This groping of minds toward one another as bodies start striving to meet drives the elemental language of the correspondence, which turns increasingly toward medial matter as a way of displacing and enacting desire. Besides consistent references to both poets’ metamorphic epics – Ash’s “Swammerdam” and LaMotte’s “Fairy Melusina”276 – the correspondence broaches shape-shifting, material spiritualism,277 and the life of language. We encounter LaMotte’s poem

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276 While this chapter does not permit me to analyze their respective epics at length, let it be noted that Ash and LaMotte’s “epics” take somewhat different, unavoidably gendered, approaches to metamorphosis. They also have a good deal in common. Both Ash and LaMotte discuss substances and shape-shifting through a combination of science and religion. Ash’s “Swammerdam” is about a man’s microscopic study of living matter, a man conquered by a female spiritualist. LaMotte’s “Melusina” is about liminal femininity, a half-woman half-serpent who first conquers a man with her human beauty yet who is ultimately marginalized by “rational” men as a monstrosity.

277 Spiritualism is a presence throughout the novel. Whereas LaMotte is drawn to it, Ash looks on it unfavorably and writes a denunciatory poem called “Mummy Possest,” which clearly draws on
“Metamorphosis” in a letter mentioning that she has many more poems on the subject, “one of the problems of our time – and all Times, rightly known”:278

Does the ruffled Silken Flyer  
Pause to recall how she – began –  
Her soft cramped crawling Origins –  
Does man  
In all his puffed and sparkling Glory  
Cast back a Thought  
To the Speck of Flesh the Story  
Began with, from Naught?

But both, in their Creator’s terrible keen sight  
Lay curled and known through timeless Day and Night  
He Form and Life at once and always – Gave  
Is still their Animator and their Grave – (P, 177-178)279

LaMotte evokes the metamorphic life cycle of the (female) insect, which transforms from egg to larva to pupa, finally becoming a butterfly. At the same time as she subtly stages the debate between Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* and design, science and belief, she constructs a comparison between “man” and animal kingdom that shows up the binary current at the time between men, reasonable creatures with souls, and the soulless, irrational insect world (here, also the female world). LaMotte conflates man and insect while simultaneously juxtaposing conventional understandings of men and women, also directing attention to how thought is in the

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278 Browning’s “Sludge” (P, 438). Ash writes, “There is a masterly lack of logic in accusing an Age of Materialism and then invoking a wholly material spirituality – is there not?” (P, 188). He is more liable to believe in Paracelsus’ account of “minor spirits doomed to inhabit the regions of the air who wander the earth perpetually and whom we might, from time to time, exceptionally, hear or see, when the wind, or the trick of the light, is right.” He quotes Paracelsus’ relation of Melusinas to specters, evil spirits with irrational souls, and to the elements. His poem compares artistic and spirit mediums as well.

279 LaMotte also includes a poem called “Psyche,” which, as Ash rightly points out in his reply, juxtaposes Eros (bad) with Agape (good). Here is Ash’s Swammerdam: “The More the Many were revealed to me / The more I pressed my hunt to find the One – / Prima Materia, Nature’s shifting shape / Still constant in her metamorphoses. / I found her Law in the successive Forms / Of ant and butterfly, beetle and bee” (P, 226).

278 Metamorphosis, Lepidoptera, religious doubt, and Darwin are also the subjects of Byatt’s novella “Morpho Eugenia,” *Angels and Insects: Two Novellas* (New York: Vintage, 1994), in which we encounter a tale by Matty Crompton called “Things Are Not What They Seem” about the relation between shape-shifting and naming.
first place facilitated by nature, governed by the flesh’s demands. LaMotte aligns narrative line with lifeline. The “Story,” word and flesh, is the story of actual and narrative generation and change. LaMotte’s poem enacts this word to flesh, thought into body, transformation, rhetorically denying both genders reason as a purely intellectual faculty. She affirms creationism, situating man and beast as “Specks of Flesh” in the Creator’s eye, embodied images in the divine mind, in which they “lay curled and known” before narrative time. LaMotte’s fable rests on the verbal metamorphosis of mind and body into metaphors for material imagination: the origin of life and the line. This poem neatly intersects with Ash’s “Swammerdam” about the entomologist who studied insect metamorphosis, concluding that the distinction between man and beast is one of degree, not kind.

Matter works for and against men and women, and their writing, in this novel. For Ash, the more attuned his mind becomes to the body’s desires, the more calmly reflective and transcendental his elemental observations become. The passage we encountered earlier from Ask to Embla (“They say that women change”) about LaMotte, written when they traveled together during Ash’s entomological expedition – at this time he, like Swammerdam, studied Parthenogenesis\(^\text{280}\) – immediately precedes a letter to Ellen where he reflects on the relation between nature and the life of language through elements by way of Wordsworth’s

\(^{280}\) In his biography, *The Great Ventriloquist*, Byatt’s ruthless American scholar and collector, Mortimer Cropper, writes about this expedition unaware that LaMotte was there. He mentions that Ash was acquainted with French historian Jules Michelet, who wrote on the elements: *La Mer*, for example (P, 271). Cropper summarizes Michelet’s goal “to find in the sea the possibility of an eternal life which would overcome death,” a summary that plays on the book’s extended paradox of continuity in change. According to Cropper, when Michelet showed a beaker of “the mucus of the sea…this whitish, viscous element” to a chemist, the chemist replied “We know no more about the constitution of water than we do about that of blood. What is most easily discerned, in the case of the seawater mucus, is that it is simultaneously an end and a beginning.” See Michelet, *The Sea* [1861], trans. Katia Sainson (Los Angeles: Green Integer, 2012).
“Ecclesiastical Sonnets.” In his formulation, language endures beyond the men who name the places of this world. Wordsworth-like, Ash describes his rambles through the “Dale of Goathland or Godeland” in Yorkshire.

... a man might think that here, in this rough north was, if not Paradise, the original Earth – rocks, stones, trees, air, water – all so solid and immutable, apparently – and yet shifting and flowing and fleeting in the race of light and the driving cloaks of shadow, that alternately reveal and conceal, illuminate and smudge its contours...I cannot describe the air to you. It is like no other air. Our language was not designed to distinguish differences in air; it runs the risk of a meaningless lyricism or inexact metaphors – so I will not write of it in terms of wine or crystal, though both those things came into my mind. I have breathed the air of Mont Blanc – a chill light clean air that comes off the remote glaciers and has the purity of those snows, touched with the resin of pine and the hay of the high meadows. Thin air, as Shakespeare said, the air of vanishing things and refinements beyond apprehension by our senses. This Yorkshire air, the moorland air, that is, has no such glassy chill – it is all alive, on the move, like the waters that thread their way through the heath, as it does with them. It is visible air – you see it run in rivers and lines over the shoulders of bald stones – you see it rise in aery fountains and tremble over the heath where it is hot. And the scent of it – sharp, unforgettable – clean rain tossed and the ghost of ancient woodsmoke – and the cold clearness of brook water – and something fine and subtle all of its own – oh, I cannot describe this air, it expands a man’s mind in his head, I do believe, and gives him extra senses he knows nothing of, before coming on these heights and ranges. … (P, 286-287)

As elsewhere, Ash evokes permanence in change, here abstracted from the particular desired person and redirected toward a more companionable, less unsettling addressee: his wife. Yet these descriptions also enact his impassioned mental and physical state, even as they enact the contrast between outer and inner states (scientific, observing v. unsettled, ablaze), not to mention the difference between the surface of this sumptuous language, apparently about language and

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281 Specifically, XII. Monastery of Old Bangor: “Mark! how all things swerve / From their known course, or vanish like a dream / Another language spreads from coast to coast / Only perchance some melancholy Stream / And some indignant Hills old names preserve / When laws, and creeds, and people all are lost!” See William Wordsworth, Ecclesiastical Sonnets (Hamburg: Tredition Classics, 2013). This passage and others are also clearly channeling The Prelude; see Wordsworth, The Major Works: including The Prelude, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

282 During this time, Ash’s constant companion is Charles Lyell’s Principles of Geology (1830-1833), in which Lyell discusses geological change as gradual evolution over time. His account heavily influenced Darwin, who was reading Principles during the voyage of the HMS Beagle. See Lyell, Principles, ed. James A. Secord (London: Penguin, 1997).
landscape, and its inspiration, another woman.\textsuperscript{283} Ash’s is a lover’s discourse colored by the intensity of seeing and sensing. Only this lover’s discourse is tempered by being filtered through the prose of marital affection and obligation.\textsuperscript{284} In this complex state, Ash turns to the elements as a way of mediating ineffable thoughts and feelings, finding that language both serves this state well and comes up short.

Ash finds himself in the presence of beauty (LaMotte’s beauty and air’s beauty) and in his mind the experience of the latter is mediated by the erotic experience of the former. Only “inexact metaphors,” those of phase changing matter, will do to describe the indescribable more exactly. Ash’s description is actually quite successful. While claiming that language is not designed to “distinguish differences in air,” he describes those differences. In each case, air is “touched” by the matter it encircles and touches the metaphors it enlarges, even as it “expands” the mind. Air turns and returns from gas to liquid to solid – glassy chill air of hay and snow (Mont Blanc), thin air of vanishing things and unapprehending senses (literary “air”), the living flowing clean-scented air inhaled by men and women in love – Ash’s language enacts these transformations. As in LaMotte’s \textit{City of Is}, which draws on the paradoxical elements to describe the limits of communication and the operations of material imagination, so Ash’s “failure” at stabilizing description successfully enriches our perceptual encounter; it gives the reader “extra senses he knows nothing of” by tapping into the workings of the embodied mind. Air, the main

\textsuperscript{283} This passage also hints at the distinction between Ash’s formal expression through poetry/public writing and his self-expression in his letters to LaMotte.

\textsuperscript{284} Elsewhere, Ash half-diagnoses his own state, yet does not attribute the intensity of his perception to the love object. In a letter to LaMotte, he writes, “\textit{I know many poets who write only when in an exalted state of mind which they compare to being in love, when they do not simply state, that they are in love, that they seek love – for this fresh damsel, or that lively young woman – in order to find a fresh metaphor, or a new bright vision of things in themselves. And to tell you the truth, I have always believed I cd diagnose this state of being in love, which they regard as most particular...I have always believed this in love to be something of the most abstract masking itself under the particular forms of both lover and beloved. And Poet, who assumes and informs both, I wd have told you – no, I do tell you – friendship is rarer, more idiosyncratic, more individual and in every way more durable than this Love}” (P, 146).
metaphor in question, is life giving and inspirational. The excerpt also recalls Donne’s “Air and Angels,” which Byatt concludes is about “intellectual-bodily imagination of the embodied soul.”

Our encounter with Ash’s writing is accompanied by Roland and Maud’s encounter with it in the place of its composition. Being in that place with the poets’ language allows the scholars to discern connections between Ash and LaMotte’s writing that show they were in the same place at the same time feeling the same thing; these were the brief irretrievable times and spaces – outside time and convention – in which minds and bodies merged. Looking at Thomason Foss, Maud quotes to Roland the beginning of Melusina:

Three elements combined to make the fourth.
The sunlight made a pattern, through the air
(Athwart ash-saplings rooted in the sparse
Handfuls of peat in overhanging clefts)
Of tessellation in the water’s glaze:
And where the water moved and shook itself
Like rippling serpent-scales, the light ran on
Under the liquid in a molten glow
Of seeming links of chain-mail; but above
The water and the light together made
On the grey walls and the roof of the dank cave
A show of leaping flames, of creeping spires
Of tongues of light that licked the granite ledge
Cunningly flickered up along each cleft
Each refractory roughness, creeping up
Making, where shadows could have been, long threads
And tapering cones and flame-like forms of white
A fire which heated not, nor singed, nor fed
On things material, but self-renewed

285 Byatt, “Feeling thought,” 251. Byatt’s reading is rightly gendered: “Donne began by a complimentary comparison of a beloved to an angel. He ends by claiming that she is the airy sphere which clothes his purer spirit…If you are thinking in terms of mapping the concepts arising from the images arising from the percepts of bodily space, it is arguable that you are reading the ghostly – or angelic – image of a male body inside a female one.” Donne’s lover compares the beloved to a “shapeless flame” that then grows flesh in language and in the reader’s mind: “Love must not be, but take a body too.” We soon see, however, that the poem relies on the (elemental) difference “‘twixt air and angels’ purity, / ‘Twixt women’s love, and men’s.” For full poem, see John Donne, The Complete English Poems (London: Penguin, 1971), 41.
Burnt on the cold stones not to be consumed
And not consuming, made of light and stone
A fountain of cold fire stirred by the force
Of waterfall and rising spring at once
With borrowed liveliness… (P, 289-290)

As in Ash’s description, the elements embody the state of being in love and also describe the liminal state of the metamorphic being who is the subject of Christabel’s poem, a being she compares herself to. Whereas in Ash’s description the linguistic and actual shape shifting of one element, air (inspiration), becomes exemplary, here we see how all of the elements run together and threaten to consume the clarity of thought. In both cases, elemental language operates through dense paradox. Yet here one paradox quickly cycles into another as air, fire, earth, water – solid, liquid, gas – do battle for prominence. The poem enacts Byatt’s ideas about “patterns” and “links,” tied to the firing of neurons in the brain, and again brings to mind Scarry’s discussion of the writerly facilitation of readerly perception through complex imagery.

LaMotte’s epic evokes Ash, suggesting that thought and feeling are here tied to a particular person, a male.

What at first seems to be the imagery of cool bright light free and at play in shape-shifting air and water soon transforms into destructive fire and earth. This is accomplished by way of “rippling serpent scales,” an interesting image for the liminal quality of the matter it invokes, at once shifting and solid. It also references something more sinister: Satan in Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, who transforms into mist and enters the snake while it sleeps to tempt Eve.286 The

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286 Byatt’s “The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye” cites Milton’s description of the serpent, whose “circling spires…on the grass / Floated redundant.” “Floating,” as Byatt’s character Gillian Perholt observes, “was Teutonic and to do with floods, and ‘redundant’…was Latinate, and to do with overflowings.” For Gillian, the snake is “made of words and visible to the eye.” She uses the image of “floating redundant” to describe ascending in a plane: “up, up, through gray curtains of English rain, a carpet of wooly iron-grey English cloud, a world of swirling vapour”; *The Djinn in the Nightingale’s Eye: Five Fairy Stories* (New York: Random House, 1994), 96-97, 100. The story also features shape-shifting. Of note: Satan was first an Angel who then enters God’s material world in a medial form, mist; see
liquid in question now is and is not water, for water shot through with light takes on a violent "molten glow," perceptually metamorphosing into "links of chain-mail." "Leaping flames," "creeping spires," "tongues of light": these images "cunningly" flicker in the dark cave, the mind’s interior, the female body’s interior. Snaky erotic shadow-images slither into the mind’s eye, prompting the construction of an analogical picture of mind and body invaded. Process-based language enacts thought slowly being contaminated by lust and sin disguised as air and light. This elemental language becomes increasingly sexual, as the cave appears to ignite from within. Yet we are reminded that the image we see is not what it seems: it is not fire. The serpent is and is not Satan, as Ash is and is not the destroyer. This fire is cold refracted light that does not "heat," "singe" or feed on "things material." Rather, it is "self-renewed" and is neither "consumed" nor "consuming." Fire, passion, is a convincing trick of the light to whose will mind, body, and language bend.\(^{287}\)

This image is at once hopeful, for actual fire is no conceivable threat, and implies that the mind brought round to a belief in its desires has the power to self-consume, to will its own destruction. The image of the fountain, a mythic and actual description of Thomason Foss, crops

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\(^{287}\) We get a similar reference to “cold fire” in LaMotte poem about two fish at play in a frozen pool: “And in the pool two fishes play / Argent and gules they shine always / Against the green against the grey / They flash upon a summer’s day / And in the depth of wintry night / They slumber open-eyed and bright / Silver and red, a shadowed light / Ice-veiled and steadily upright / A paradox of chilly fire / Of life in death, of quenched desire / That has no force, e’en to expire / Suspended until frost retire – ” (P, 156-157). This poem, together with LaMotte’s City of Is, recalls Wordsworth’s “Fish-Women,” enfolded by the sea and explicitly compared with earthly “dames.” The poem’s tone instills fear of sinking into their watery feminine realm. See The Complete Poetical Works of William Wordsworth: 1816-1822, VII (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1919), 134.
up in both poets’ writings. Melusina is, as we remember, associated with fountains by Paracelsus
and throughout the novel. It is at the Fountain of Thirst that Raimondin encounters her in her
stunning female form. He offers marriage in return for the satisfaction of his thirst: she literally
gives him water, yet the satisfaction of sexual desire is immanent. The promise of marriage is
also the promise of a soul. LaMotte’s use of “borrowed liveliness” is telling. Not only does it
speak to language, which borrows thought’s vividness – the word makes “visible” from within,
refracting thought’s light – but also to LaMotte’s poetry. She is convinced that her language
basks in the temporary light borrowed from Ash’s mind and pen, fleeting inspiration kindled by
passion. Thus the poetess attributes the materiality and vividness of her imagination to another’s:
the male poet’s. Let us again briefly recall the image Ash uses of feeling his way into LaMotte’s
thought as into a glove. This image is also that of Satan inhabiting the serpent. Indeed, Satan
enters the serpent through the source of speech, a perverse inspiration that brings about
“knowledge,” which in turn incites carnal knowledge: “in at his Mouth / The Devil enter’d, and
his brutal sense, / In heart or head, possessing soon inspir’d / With act intelligential.”

Returning to the letters, we see the attempt to construct a language of material
imagination, as well as how “embodied conversation,” in LaMotte’s words, “unsettles” the
matter of mind, contrasting with how letters before physical contact served as neat material
substitutes for it. Ash’s language is enlivened the closer that the poets get. In a letter comparing
himself to Raimondin and LaMotte to Melusina, which stages their imagined encounter in a park
– an encounter whose description in Book I of LaMotte’s poem is uncannily similar (P, 318-323)

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288 Melusinas (half-women, half-snakes), as Paracelsus describes them, wander the regions of the air
and earth perpetually: not unlike Satan, who circles the earth prior to entering the snake.
289 Milton, Paradise Lost, Bk. 9. Importantly, Satan chooses to tempt Eve because he finds her less
intelligent and therefore a less “formidable foe” than Adam: “Then let me not let pass / Occasion which
now smiles, behold alone / The Woman, opportune to all attempts, / Her Husband, for I view far round,
not nigh, / Whose higher intellectual more I shun, / And strength, of courage hautie, and of limb / Heroic
built, though of terrestrial mould, / Foe not formidable” (479-486).
– Ash discuss thought as an embodied, shifting thing through language that, as Iris Murdoch puts it, is “a kind of thinking” related to but not “co-extensive” with thought:290 “my true thoughts have spent more time in your company than in anyone else’s, these last two or three months, and where my thoughts are, there am I, in truth, – even if, like the May, only a threshold_presence, by decree.” He talks about a ride through Richmond Park during which nature facilitates a transcendental experience. Finding himself in the presence of “fiercely brilliant” and “renewed” light like “intermittent diamond” and “increasing Quiet,” Ash feels that he moves “out of time.” He considers the “dark-dappled” path, “stretching away indifferently before and behind,” and feels taken out of himself, insignificant and at the same time fully present. His next observation leads into a comparison of the path with the written (poetic) and material (biological) line, reminding us of LaMotte’s “Metamorphosis”:

Now to me such moments are poetry. Do not misunderstand me – I do not mean missishly ‘poetical’ – but the source of the driving force of the lines – And when I write lines I mean the lines of verse indeed, but also some lines of life which run indifferently through us – from Origin to Finish. Ah, how can I tell you? And to whom but you could I even begin to describe such indescribable – such obscurely untouchable things?” (P, 199-200)

Claiming he cannot describe, as in his letter to Ellen, Ash turns to geometric metaphors and patterns to enact thought’s metamorphosis from something ungraspable into medial matter. Thought here is untouchable and liminal yet lively, thingly. He searches for ways to describe it further, asking LaMotte to “imagine an abstract sketch” in which “a fan or tunnel of lines”

290 Iris Murdoch, “Thought and Language,” Existentialists and Mystics (London: Chatto & Windus, 1997), 33, 24, 40. Murdoch emphasizes that “word experience in thinking may have various kinds of image-like character” and argues convincingly that language and thought are not “co-extensive.” Byatt admired Murdoch, was entirely aware of her moral philosophy, and wrote a monograph about her. See Byatt, Degrees of Freedom: Early Novels of Iris Murdoch [1965] (London: Vintage, 1994). In “Thought and Language,” Murdoch makes vital observations about metaphor: “we naturally use metaphors to describe states of mind, or to describe ‘thought processes’”; “metaphor is not a peripheral excrescence upon the linguistic structure, it is its living centre”; “both the actual occurrence of words in thought and our private conceptual fixing of our states of mind, is experienced in an imaging, semi-sensible mode, particular examples of which we are not unable to discuss successfully with other people.”
narrow to “Infinity” and to “then imagine these Lines embodied” by light and color, earth and leaves, “all distinct and all one.” His attempt to grasp thought and share it by asking the reader to imagine it linearly returns us to Murdoch’s profound observation that “thinking is not designating at all, but rather understanding, grasping, ‘possessing.’” This, as I have been showing, is Byatt’s aim: to make thought felt and to evoke it as a felt phenomenon in the first place. Like Raimondin, Ash sees a pool in which there appears to be a “Creature”: “It lay there so improbably, half-submerged, a veritable Canis aquaticus, a water-spirit emerging, or an earth-spirit half-submerged.” The canine image hovers between imagination and reality, thought and its externalization, prompting his comparison of it to a “solid Poem” and to Christabel’s “unearthly creatures walking the earth” (P, 201).

He refers again to “Swammerdam,” his poetic monologue in the style of Robert Browning about the scientist’s microscopic study of insect metamorphosis, continuing: “Think, my dear friend, of the variousness and the shape-shifting and the infinite extensibility of the human spirit,” concluding with an imagined image of Christabel in her “unseen room” with her head “bent over” her paper writing about the knight’s arrival at the Fountain of Thirst in Melusina. Ash stages one mind’s entry into another, shaping the other’s thoughts as they unfurl. This entry discomposes rather than consoles the recipient. Ash’s mental mapping, his precise linear exercise describing the feeling of thought, contrasts with LaMotte’s mental unraveling...

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291 Ibid., 41. In a letter to Mortimer Cropper’s ancestor, Priscilla Penn Cropper, who was involved with spiritualism, Byatt has Ash allude to Murdoch’s formulation as a way of warning her off of playing with the dead. He contrasts spiritualism, “a combination of bald fraud and a kind of communal hysteria” with writing, which nevertheless also “traffic[s] with the dead”: “there are ways and ways, as you must know...What is read and understood and contemplated and intellectually grasped is our own, madam, to live and work with. A lifetime’s study will not make accessible to us more than a fragment of our own ancestral past, let alone the aeons before our race was formed. But that fragment we must thoroughly possess and hand on” (P, 116). He also refers to LaMotte: “I have known a good soul and a clear mind, quite unhinged by such meddling, and to no good end, indeed to a bad one” (P, 117).
once they begin meeting in person, accompanied by her constant references to headaches. She writes furiously even as she feels herself losing control over language.

Submerged in longing, disconcerted by the correspondence’s destructive effect on her domestic, creative, and sexual partnership with another woman, Blanche Glover, she begins to see “strange fiery flashes before” her “drowned eyes” (P, 207). “I will think,” she writes, “there are Veils and Whirligigs of hindrances – I will think – and hope I may come up with more than – a headache” (P, 209). While LaMotte tries to end the correspondence, Ash invokes “Dame Nature” as the reason they must move forward. He likens LaMotte to his “fate” and his “Muse” – the “rhythms” of her writing sing in his “silent brain” – and, in his inspired state, reads John Donne (P, 211). Christabel’s next melodramatic yet moving letter overspills with elemental references and Ash’s namesake. This overflowing thought anticipates her body being consumed by them, by him:

Oh Sir – things flicker and shift, they are indeed all spangle and sparks and flashes. I have sat by my fireside all this long evening – on my safe stool – turning my burning cheeks towards the Aspirations of the flame and the caving-in, the ruddy mutter, the crumbling of the consumed coals to – where am I leading myself – to lifeless dust – Sir...And you also – in Ragnarok – matched Wordsworth’s fleet waters of a drowning world – with – the tongues of Surtur’s flames...Ash the sheltering World-Tree, Ash the deadly Rain / So Dust to Dust and Ash to Ash again – ...I see whole bevies of shooting stars – like gold arrows before my darkening eyes – they presage Headache...I cannot let you burn me up...I shall go up – like Straw on a Dry Day – a rushing wind – a tremor on the air...a blown smoke – and a deal of white fine powder that holds its spillikin shape only an infinitesimal amount and then is random specks – oh no I cannot...Before

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Christabel’s headaches, which disrupt lucid thinking, recall Emily’s multisensory evocation of the avoidance of “concentrated thought” in Ian McEwan’s Atonement: A Novel (New York: Anchor Books, 2003), 141: “She was not exactly waiting, she felt. No one else she knew had her knack of keeping still, without even a book in her lap, of moving gently through her thoughts, as one might explore a new garden. She had learned her patience through years of side-stepping migraine. Fretting, concentrated thought, reading, looking, wanting – all were to be avoided in favour of a slow drift of association, while the minutes accumulated like banked snow and the silence deepened around her. Sitting here now she felt the night air tickle the hem of her dress against her shin. Her childhood was as tangible as the shot silk – a taste, a sound, a smell, all of these, blended into an entity that was surely more than a mood.”
LaMotte’s choice of the fire element as her guiding metaphor is apropos, for it allows her language to take on the shape-shifting quality peculiar to her poetry, making words themselves into things that “flicker and shift” and “crumble” to dust before the reader’s internal eye. LaMotte enacts the perceptual metamorphosis of words into things by aligning matter with mind with body, all here unstable. LaMotte cycles through all of the elements, not just fire, first invoking the flood (“Wordsworth’s fleet waters”), which verbally transforms to “tongues of Surtur’s flames.” She then turns to the world-tree of Norse myth, whose branches extend into the heavens and whose roots extend into springs and wells. This tree becomes one with Ash, sustainer and destroyer, as solid turns to liquid (“deadly rain”) to dust and ashes. Referring twice to her now-frequent migraines, which enforce the tie between thought and body, through

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293 Ash provides a subtle corrective to LaMotte’s predominantly fire-based metaphors: “Did you know, speaking of dragons as we were…that the Chinese Dragon, who in Mandarin is Lung – is a creature not of the fiery but exclusively of the watery element? And thus a cousin of your mysterious Melusina in her marble tub? Which is to say, there may be cooler dragons, who may take more temperate pleasures. He appears, blue and winding, on Chinese dishes, with sprinkling mane and accompanied by what I once took to be little flakes of fire, and now know to be curlings of water” (P, 215). Ash ties elements to intellectual error, to misperception: what seems to be fire is actually water. This “Creature,” shape-shifting across cultures, contains all elements at once. Fire is also air (“Lung”), water and, transformed into clay, which is fired, earth. Of note: kaolin, the material used to make porcelain, is also used in papermaking. The themes of this passage relate to Byatt’s “A Lamia in the Cevennes,” Elementals: Stories of Fire and Ice, about Bernard, a color-obsessed painter who discovers a talking snake in his swimming pool and tries to “save” her and make her human through painting (she shape-shifts). The story is inspired by Keats’ “Lamia,” where the description of the woman-snake is extremely metaphor rich. For complete poem, see John Keats, The Complete Poems (London: Penguin, 1977), 414.

294 In her essay “Still Life” – she also has a novel of this title – Byatt writes that “words are literally things,” and that she is “afraid of, and fascinated by, theories of language as a self-referencing system of signs, which doesn’t touch the world.” In this, she is a proponent of Michel Foucault’s theory of language in The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences (New York: Random House, 1970), also evident in Byatt’s The Biographer’s Tale (London: Vintage, 2001). Byatt writes, “I see any projected piece of writing or work as a geometric structure: various colours and patterns”; see Passions of the Mind, 10, 11, 14. Equally important, in “Feeling thought,” Byatt talks about “Sir Charles Sherrington’s description of the waking brain, the ‘head mass’ as ‘an enchanted loom where millions of flashing shuttles weave a dissolving pattern, always a meaningful pattern, though never an abiding one’; Sherrington, Man on His Nature, 2nd edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1953), 178.
abstracted light-imagery (“shooting stars,” “gold arrows before my darkening eyes”) enacting Scarry’s “radiant ignition,” LaMotte describes that body burning and transforming: from earth to wind to smoke to powder that infinitesimally “holds its spillikin shape” and then disperses into “random specks.” The arrest of language – “oh no I cannot…” – immediately follows her description of bodily death. Yet she can and does go on, aligning language with madness with speech, which renews life.

Ash’s reply is characteristic. He calls her a “true poet” whose interest in “any matter” leads her to express her “ideas in metaphor”:

So what am I to make of all this scintillation? I will tell you – a Pyre from which you, my Phoenix, shall fly up renewed and unchanged...And is it an effect of Love – to set beside each of us, like a manifest emanation some mystic monstrous and inhuman self? So that it becomes easy and natural for you to write as a Creature of the burning fiery furnace, a hearth-salamander turned Firedrake of the air, and easy and natural for you to see me in both mythic readings at once of my pliable name – the World-Tree consumed to its papery remnants. You feel – as I feel – elemental in this force. All creation rushed round us out there – earth, air, fire, water, and there we were...warm and human and safe...I have the illusion that we are in touch, that is, blessed...I shall wait under the trees...and look out for a woman like a steady upright flame and a grey hound poured along the ground like smoke – ... (P, 214-215)

Whereas LaMotte’s metaphors are apocalyptic, Ash’s are life-giving, aligning the woman and her language with eternal renewal, with the shape-shifting yet constant Phoenix, bringing to mind Ask’s declaration to Embla in Ash’s poem, and Milton.295 Whereas LaMotte’s descriptions ramble, Ash executes an orderly analysis, perceiving her language’s elemental quality and its relation to his name. What is for LaMotte difficult at this time, namely thinking and feeling clearly, he describes as “easy and natural,” and turns to shape-shifting “Creatures,” with which LaMotte becomes one. Recognizing how LaMotte ties his name to the world-tree, Ash seemingly

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295 Milton describes the Phoenix as “that self-begotten bird / In the Arabian woods embossed / That no second knows nor third / And lay erwhile a holocaust, / From out her ashy womb now teemed / Revives, refloresces, / then vigorous most / When most inactive deemed / And though her body die, her fame survives / A secular bird, ages of lives.” LaMotte quotes this description in her last letter to Ash (P, 546).
acknowledges fellow feeling with the poetess, invoking the source of life and language (thought), as well as thought’s metaphorical and material externalization: the poet’s “papery-remnants.” He goes further, authoritatively claiming that she feels as he does, “elemental in this force.” He names the elements directly and contrasts their instability with the couple’s solidity in spite of, within them. He invokes religion to legitimate being “in touch,” a term that turns on inspiration and the sacred, and may also be read as sacrilegious considering the deferred “matter” in question. He ends on an elemental note. The whole missive brims with confidence that the lovers will emerge from sexual union unscathed.

After a subsequent meeting, Ash writes that he “would do all in my power that you might sparkle in your sphere as ever before – even renounce my so-much-insisted-upon claim on you” (P, 217). LaMotte replies thus:

...you take me out of myself and give me back – diminished – I am wet eyes – and touched hands – and lips am I too – a very present – famished – fragment of a woman – who has not her desire in truth – and yet has desire superabundantly... – And you say – so kind you are – “I love you. I love you.” – and I believe – but who is she – who is “you”? Is she – fine fair hair and – whatever yearns so – I was once something else – something alone and better – I was sufficient unto my self – and now I range – busily seeking with continual change. ...I read yr John Donne. / But we, by a love so much refined, / That ourselves know not what it is / Inter-assured of the mind, / Care less, eyes, lips, and hands to miss. / This is a fine phrase – “inter-assured of the mind.” Do you believe it is possible to find such – safe mooring – in the howling gale?... (P, 218)

In spite of describing her “very present” state, LaMotte does not ask Ash to renounce his claim. Indeed, the letter ends with her musing “And if we had time and space to be together...then we would be free together – whereas now – caged?” LaMotte’s metaphors again rely on paradox. She is both embodied and metonymically disembodied into parts. “Wet eyes,” “touched hands,” “and lips” are disconnected from the once independent integrated mind through having been “touched” literally and figuratively by yearning. She is all flesh with no individual thought (soul). Relating herself again to Melusina, who “ranges” the currents of the air, she ties “continual
change” to shape-shifting to unsatisfied desire: an unnatural, not natural, state. Tellingly, she turns to Donne’s “A Valediction: forbidding Mourning.”

Byatt’s “Feeling thought” discusses Donne’s poetry in terms of “remembered observed physical” conceptual images, and as the primary example of how readers take pleasure in dense “grammatical constructions”: “The mention of eyes, lips, and hands of course evokes some sort of imaginative response to these things, even as they are dismissed.” Byatt ties this particular poem to “radiant ignition,” observing how “abstract forms of geometry” allow the “male and female elements…to change places.” Donne’s “twin compasses” trigger the “mental processes of conceptualization and mapping that are somewhat remotely to do with sex and affection.” The twin compasses are the image of two lovers’ souls abstracted from the body, at once metaphysical and material; it demonstrates that the geometrical form, the skeleton of reciprocal mental affection, begs to be enfleshed. This occurs even as the poet has lovers slough off the body for love to take on a purer (Platonic) form, purer than “dull sublunary lovers’ love / (Whose soul is sense).” The latter “cannot admit / Absence because it doth remove / Those things which elemented it.” Only without the body’s desires can souls be “one,” expanding “Like gold to airy thinness beat.”

As the poet abstracts from the body, we see how abstraction turns to metaphor, remaining and eliciting something material, albeit “airy.” LaMotte wryly recognizes Donne’s “fine phrase,” yet uses this poem – which relies on matter and not purely abstract imagination – to move

296 In this last letter about their daughter, Maia, a letter he never sees but which Byatt’s contemporary scholars literally unearth, LaMotte writes: “I have been Melusina these thirty years. I have so to speak flown about and about the battlements of this stronghold crying on the wind of my need to see and feed and comfort my child, who knew me not…Me she did not love…I fill her with a sort of fear, a sort of revulsion – she feels, rightly, a too-much in my concern for her – but misreads that, which is most natural, as something unnatural” (P, 544).
298 Ibid., 252.
299 For full poem, see Donne, The Complete English Poems, 84.
beyond social and moral conventions. In discussing desire “to melt” into a single mind, Donne contradicts himself: his mentally “inter-assured” lovers also “know not what it [love] is.” As he argues for the loftiness of mind, Donne’s language turns to and arouses the body, tapping into the reader’s imagination while showing that two lovers are never too “care less” to “miss” eyes, lips, and hands.\(^{300}\)

\(^{300}\) Donne’s discussion of the twin compasses, intertwined souls, is extremely erotic: “Thy soul, the fixed foot, makes no show / To move, but doth, if the other do / And though it in the center sit, / Yet when the other far doth roam, / It leans and hearkens after it, / And grows erect, as that comes home…Thy firmness makes my circle just, / And makes me end where I begun.” Ash replies by aligning LaMotte’s “soul” with her “poetry”: “the grammar and stopping and hurrying syntax of your quick thought…your thought clothed with your words is uniquely you, came with you, would vanish if you vanished” (P, 219).
Conclusion

There was a will to change, a necessitous  
And present way, a presentation, a kind  
Of volatile world, too constant to be denied,  
The eye of a vagabond in metaphor  
That catches our own…  
The freshness of transformation is  
The freshness of a world.

Wallace Stevens, “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction”\(^{301}\)

Edmund de Waal, *A part of speech*

The cloud-blue and fog-gray pots are grouped like tentative cliques, or lovers estranged. They unevenly rise, as inverted cup bottoms, tugging at something unnamable in the mind and heart. Their cool liquid light makes me think of solid air, a sense of order sitting on clean white shelves.

In an article for *The Guardian* on artist and writer Edmund de Waal, Byatt suggests that his pieces are “a metaphor for the forms of language,” connecting “the process of making pots…both precise and uncertain” to working with words.\(^ {302}\) This is not the first time that Byatt uses clay as a metaphor for thought’s materialization. *The Children’s Book* develops the

\(^{301}\) Wallace Stevens, *The Collected Poems*, 421.

\(^{302}\) Byatt, “Porcelain ghosts: the secrets of Edmund de Waal’s studio,” *The Guardian* (May 2, 2014); the two also discuss the relation between writing and pottery in the video “Conversations on Making” (Conversations Around Choreography), Siobhan Davies Dance (November 27, 2009).
metaphor at length. Volatile potter Benedict Fludd observes to his young apprentice that, when working with clay:

You are subject to the elements…any one of the old four – earth, air, fire, water – can betray you and melt, or burst, or shatter – months of work into dust and ashes and spitting steam. You need to be a precise scientist, and you need to know how to play with what chance will do to your lovingly constructed surfaces in the heat of the kiln. ‘It’s purifying fire and demonic fire…Very dangerous, very simple, very elemental –.’

In this chapter, we have seen how Byatt uses medial metaphors and images in Possession to simulate the feeling of thought, subject to the same kinds of “elemental” chance and play. Thought is claylike in the mind’s hands, its rhythms felt along the nerves and in the blood. From the correspondence between Byatt’s male and female poets, we learn that it is also a “dangerous” thing to try and shape; it may be overwhelmed by the “heat of the kiln,” the overly ardent mind.

Byatt loves language that refracts what she considers to be the brain’s preverbal geometry. When thinking about de Waal’s pots as “concrete universals,” Byatt invokes Stevens’ meditations on the “relations between manmade forms and formlessness.” We might recall the poet’s dicta in “Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction”: it must be abstract, it must change, it must give pleasure. Stevens expresses embodied thought in language as a provisional form and medium: “It must be visible or invisible, / Invisible or visible or both: / A seeing and unseeing in the eye. / The weather and the giant of the weather, / Say the weather, the mere weather, the mere air: / An abstraction blooded, as a man by thought.” Thought’s linguistic expression

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304 Byatt, “Feeling thought,” 249: “The other poet who has the same qualities of excitement [as Donne] is Wallace Stevens. The geometry and lights that portion out and give form to the meaningless dark water in ‘The Idea of Order at Key West,’ the sections of ‘Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction’ – It Must Be Abstract, It Must Change, It Must Give Pleasure – are part of the mental mapping I am reaching for.”
uncertainly enfleshes the world. The poet’s “senseless element” for better or worse tries to make felt what the actual elements alone cannot explain. Yet the word should not be (as it often is) overconfident: it must approach elemental instability, even as it remains an abstraction of the real, an ardently believed fiction. Byatt’s novel strives for elemental truth in order to grasp the “nature” of thought more accurately, and her use of substances and shape-shifting allows her to reflect on how “possession” is a joint mind-body affair for lovers, writers, and readers alike. The end of the lovers’ mental affair indeed marks the beginning of the physical one, the consequences of which Ash and LaMotte live with, separately, thereafter. However, as I have demonstrated, one also always implicates the other.

In Possession, Byatt elaborates on reader-writer relations in a lengthy passage about the pleasure of the text. Writer and reader are not “alone.” They are together, separately – part of something “beyond the reach of any single human” (P, 512) – transplanted into and transported by the same text when that text feels “violently yet steadily alive” (P, 511). This experience is paradoxically peculiar and general. Byatt’s next aside follows her reflection on Roland’s readerly “nature,” “most alert and heady” when reading takes this dynamic form: “(What an amazing word “heady” is, en passant, suggesting both acute sensuous alertness and its opposite, the pleasure of the brain as opposed to the viscera – though each is implicated in the other, as we know very well, with both, when they are working” (P, 511). This explicit wedding of mind to matter recalls Byatt’s admission to Edmund de Waal: “I think novels out with my fingers,” which feeds into his assertion that a pot “starts with a feeling,” and not only with a “lump of

306 Having learned that she is pregnant, LaMotte cuts all contact. Maia never knows LaMotte as her mother, and the poetess spends the remainder of her life in relative isolation and unproductivity. Blanche, meanwhile, drowns herself. Ash continues his work, yet for a long time lives with the thought, instilled at a spiritualist session, that LaMotte might have killed their child (until he meets her once). Maia never learns her true parentage.
Just as a word for Byatt is thingly, so thought is bodily. She believes with Iris Murdoch that language at its best and most precise is “contingent.” Murdoch writes: “since reality is incomplete, art must not be too much afraid of incompleteness.” Stevens puts it differently, thinking of reality as an unknowable self-contained myth prior to our myths about it: “There was a muddy centre before we breathed / There was a myth before the myth began, / Venerable and articulate and complete.” Taken together, Murdoch and Stevens’ assertions speak to the paradoxes of language in Possession, as well as to this chapter’s central question: what shape do imagery and description take when language tries to stage thought’s material contingency? Stevens, to my mind, puts it best: “There’s a meditation there, in which there seems / To be an evasion, a thing not apprehended or / Not apprehended well.” The most clearheaded, vividly felt apprehension resides in what also evades us.

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307 Byatt and de Waal, “Conversations on Making.”
310 Ibid., 420.
CONCLUSION: A GRAIN OF SAND

This is how the wind shifts:
Like the thoughts of an old human,
Who still thinks eagerly
And despairingly.

The wind shifts like this:
Like a human without illusions,
Who still feels irrational things within her.

Wallace Stevens, “The Wind Shifts”311

Thought is false happiness: the idea
That merely by thinking one can,
Or may, penetrate, not may,
But can, that one is sure to be able –

Wallace Stevens, “Crude Foyer”312

Insatiable desire to incorporate the living world is buffeted by wind, buffered by age and history. Still thought withstands the forces, tames them like this, shifts like irrational things felt. The wind remains itself, indifferent and separate. Thought is “false” feeling not because it is not felt within, but because it cannot touch the world without; its willful impression upon forms expresses its hubris, not its essence.

This dissertation began by gesturing toward the limits of the life of the mind, whose impulse is to mold thought into matter and matter into the “shape” of thought: to represent itself to itself. At the heart of my project were unstable forms of imagery that, as I demonstrated, indicate the boundaries of thinking while staging the imperative to make thought materialize. Why, I asked, do authors turn to unruly matter to describe mental activity? What forms do imagery and description take when writers try to represent perceptual contingency? As I have shown, phase-changing phenomena – ranging from Nabokov’s shadows to Bowen’s weather states to Byatt’s elements – evoke the mind-body connection, the process of feeling thought. This

311 Stevens, The Collected Poems, 89.
312 Ibid., 321.
process is, as my case studies affirm, at the root of artistic making, a thought-act that refracts the need to render the immaterial tangible, to make imagination “thinglike” so that you or I can imagine grasping it.

Studies of ekphrasis and perception to date have not provided sustained assessments of the role of the mind-body problem in literary description; they also have not attended to the potential of shape-shifting phenomena like shadows and weather states to disrupt binaries between mind and matter. This dissertation responded to this omission by focusing on works in which material phase change interfaces with cognitive and perceptual phase change. Adept at pinning things down, we ironically often fail to observe the characteristics of thought, wrapped up as we are in it and in our senses. Thought is cloudy and shifts like, but is not, fog, it is metamorphic like, but is not, weather. Thought is also not material: it is a concept. Yet it is intimately connected to material, bodily processes. Nabokov, Bowen, and Byatt’s images “embody” desire to explain what thought is like by behaving as unstable matter. This imagery, which refers to the external world and acknowledges its independence from our internal one – “The palm at the end of the mind, / Beyond the last thought, rises / In the bronze décor” – also relies on analogies and metaphors that make that external world refract interiority, make the bird’s feathers “fire-fangled.”

Feeling Thought looked beyond ekphrasis and visual images to fill a gap in scholarship on the mind-body problem. With further refinement, the project also has potential to contribute to environmental studies. The pathetic fallacy and anthropomorphism continue to color our perception of works of art as either poor craft or politically suspect, and this in spite of the fact that humanizing the world by filtering it through the workings of the mind is, we have much

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cause to believe, unavoidable. We need a broader interpretive approach and vocabulary for the unstable yet mutually constitutive relation of the human and nonhuman. *Feeling Thought* offers that broader interpretation by showing how the pathetic fallacy and anthropomorphism are used in literary texts to destabilize, rather than reinforce, hierarchies between mind and body, self and other. Literature that links fluid matter with fluid cognition invites an increasingly sympathetic encounter between human and nonhuman nature; it does so by expanding the possibilities of mental mediation – how the mind channels the living world – while enforcing the limits of possession.

Marilynne Robinson’s *Housekeeping*, for instance, is about the continual making and unmaking of our affinity with nature. In it, human history bleeds into natural history, with the water element exemplifying this best. The main character, Ruth, distills the connection thus:

> What is thought, after all, what is dreaming, but swim and flow, and the images they seem to animate? …like reflections on water our thoughts will suffer no changing shock, no permanent displacement. They mock us with their seeming lightness. If they were more substantial – if they had weight and took up space – they would sink or be carried away in the general flux. But they persist, outside the brisk and ruinous energies of the world.\(^{314}\)

We forge and re-forge the world in our image and clothe it with our language. Yet water sustains no lasting imprint, just as thought remains insubstantial. Thought haunts us because of its weightlessness, its inability to have a lasting impact; it wants to flow into matter irrespective of matter’s tendency to move on without it. Thought is a burden *because* it seems light. Water may “reflect” but will not absorb it. Thought is arbitrary, and the world is contingent; they are each, in their own way, unyielding.\(^{315}\)


\(^{315}\) In Robinson’s novel, the aptly named Fingerbone lake claims many in body, yet the dead continue to feed off of the living in memory; it also floods the town regularly and, upon receding, leaves it “stripped and blackened and warped and awash in mud” (74). Thought itself is immaterial, but actions dictated by it desiccate rivers, just as rivers rise and inundate, heedless of what we think. While this
I would like to end this phase of thought with another’s:

We call it a grain of sand,
but it calls itself neither grain nor sand.
It does just fine, without a name,
whether general, particular,
permanent, passing,
incorrect, or apt.
Our glance, our touch mean nothing to it.
It doesn’t feel itself seen or touched.\footnote{Szymborska, “View with a Grain of Sand,” \textit{View with a Grain of Sand: Selected Poems}, trans. Stanislaw Barańczak and Clare Cavanagh (New York: Harcourt Brace & Company, 1995), 135. In “A Musical Instrument” (1860), Elizabeth Barrett Browning goes further. Not only does she allude to the metamorphosis of thought and will into the language of poetry, referencing poetry’s past in oral culture and cuneiform; hers is also a profound mythopoetic meditation on the lures and dangers of anthropomorphism. The “great god Pan” (read: Man) “hacked and hewed” at the reed to “make sweet music.” This “reed” was formerly Syrinx, a water nymph transformed to avoid his sexual advances. This is a story of possession: of nature (coded female) and the female mind and body by the artist. Her human voice is silenced through metamorphosis. She then transforms again into a pan flute named Syrinx, given voice through male breath. See “A Musical Instrument,” \textit{Robert and Elizabeth Barrett Browning} (New York: Everyman’s Library, 2003), 149. Byatt cites this poem in \textit{The Children’s Book}, which explores the mind’s power to incorporate a life and eat away at it through art.}

Wisława Szymborska, much like Stevens, affirms our unreciprocated need to make the world reflect the mind. This need flows through us like blood and conforms to the shape of our bones; it is the fount and flesh of our predominant metaphors. Thought will undoubtedly mock us, but this too shall pass. We may proceed without illusions. \textit{Still}, we shall call it a grain of sand…


Asbjørnsen, Peter Christen and Jørgen Moe. East of the Sun and West of the Moon; Old Tales from the North. New York: George H. Doran, 1920.


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Schaller, Karen. “‘I know it to be synthetic but it affects me strongly’: ‘Dead Mabelle’ and Bowen’s Emotion Pictures.” *Textual Practice* 27:1 (2013). Web.


