Reading Volumes: The Book, the Body and the Mediation of Modernism

By

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Abstract

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This dissertation examines the way the novels of the early twentieth century, written in the midst of a media revolution precipitated by the rise of film and the invention of phonographic recording, enrich our understanding of the book’s status and various functions as a phenomenal object. By showing how the novels of three major modernist writers – Marcel Proust, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf – draw attention to the books that transmit their texts, I develop an understanding of literature as a specific form of “mediation,” a concept whose dual sense as a process of transmission and as a procedure by which two separate parties come into relationship, moves beyond, even as it encompasses, the critical framework of “representation.”

I begin my argument by providing an alternative understanding of T. S. Eliot’s statement that “the poet has, not a ‘personality’ to express, but a particular medium.” If standard accounts of modernism follow Eliot’s emphasis on the poem rather than the poet by focusing primarily on the textual or linguistic features of the period’s literary works, I resuscitate the status of the “particular medium” of the book for works like Ulysses and Jacob’s Room, whose extreme experimentalism not only investigates the medium of written language but also renews our attention to the sensuous object on which the transmission of that writing relies. For these novels, the book does not vanish but rather comes quite obviously into view. Indeed, as I draw out how the reading practices afforded by these experimental novels establish a relationship between the body of the reader and the object of the book, I complicate claims for the period’s exclusive interest in subjectivity and explore how these novels interrogate the relationship between subject and object that reveals the subject’s fundamental entanglement with the object world. In doing so, I show how they create a mode of intimacy between subject and object that depends on mutual embodiment and belongingness to the same phenomenal world.

In Chapter 1, “Sleeping with the Books of the Recherche,” I discuss how the Proustian narrator’s most peculiar instance of “involuntary memory,” namely his discovery of George Sand’s François le Champi at the end of the novel, betrays a sensory and affective relationship with the “book in a red binding” and the “grain of a particular paper” rather than an intellectual relationship with the narrative of its text. Indeed, Proust’s own compositional methods – the “paperoles” which he created by pasting pieces of paper onto the edge of his manuscript notebooks – demonstrate how a similar kind of material awareness supplements his linguistic creation. This addition of material sensation to intellectual cognition takes on a larger significance as it comes to condition the narrator’s relationship with Albertine, particularly in the
scenes when she is asleep, and affords a kind of intimacy based less on the desire for possession and capture than on acquiescence to her ultimate impenetrability.

This impenetrability is a main facet of the book’s function as an object which my subsequent chapters refine in more particular ways. In Chapter 2, “The Embodied Reader of Ulysses,” I juxtapose Stephen Dedalus’ overly intellectualized mode of reading in “Proteus” with Leopold Bloom’s emphasis on the physical aspects of reading in “Calypso” and argue that Ulysses works to bring these two poles together. Not only does it describe scenes of embodied reading, such as Bloom perusing the Titbits magazine in the outhouse, but Ulysses also enjoins its own reader to use the body in the act of deciphering its text, most notably in the “musical” Sirens episode, as we see and try to pronounce the quasi-onomatopoetic phonemes that pepper this middle section of the novel. In so doing, Joyce’s novel fleshes out the limits which the reader’s physical body places on the mental act of reading.

In Chapter 3, “The Dark Print of Finnegans Wake,” I argue that the impenetrability of the work’s multi-lingual puns and portmanteaux – along with its intermittent typographical play – highlights the agency of its “dark print.” Darkness, long a figurative framework for critics approaching the Wake, here becomes “literal” in the black shapes on the white page. By examining the famously obscure geometry lesson that Shem gives his brother Shaun, I develop the way these dark letters also function as the bodies of its main “characters,” especially HCE and his son Shem. In doing so, I show how they facilitate a quasi-interpersonal acquaintance with its print that recasts reading in communal or social terms, as an act done with other people and mediated by a common experience of the object of the book.

Chapter 4, “The Pages in Jacob’s Room,” focuses on the function of the page itself. I explore how the large gaps that separate Woolf’s short narrative vignettes both recondition our notion of reading and contribute to the novel’s investigation of knowing another person. By putting the experimental page layout into conversation with Woolf’s contemporaneous work at the Hogarth Press and larger object-centered currents in the visual aesthetics of early Bloomsbury, I highlight the agency of visual perception in reading and show how the blank spaces on the page subtly develop a relationship between reader and book based on sensation. As I examine the occurrence of the page spacing at key moments of connection for the characters, I elaborate a non-penetrative model of intimacy that functions as an alternative to the narrator’s unsuccessful attempts to penetrate into the personality of the main character Jacob Flanders. I ultimately suggest that the novel extends this non-penetrative mode of intimacy beyond the strictly intersubjective to an exploration of our relationship with the larger, non-human world.

Finally, in Chapter 5, “The Binding of The Waves,” I examine how Woolf’s most experimental novel underscores the passing of readerly time by appealing to the turning of the book’s pages. I argue that the suggestion of a bounded moment created by the narrative form – the use of the pure present tense and the interludes that describe the progress of the sun over a deserted seascape – functions as a temporal version of the way the book’s material binding brings the sequence of its pages together to form an object in extended space. As such, The Waves offers the most explicit investment in the object world whose persistence undergirds – and exceeds – the subjective experience dramatized in the novel’s six intertwined monologues. In The Waves, however, what persists is precisely the passing of time itself, a transience that impinges on subject and object alike and serves as the ground for a form of community that includes them both.
With their explorations of reader, print, page and binding, these chapters offer a description of “reading volumes,” an account of the way we cannot ignore the three-dimensionality to which these novels call attention. Indeed, if current discussions of the book typically proceed by textualizing its material features, my readings of twentieth-century novels show how we might also materialize the book’s textual features. I thus develop an approach to literature from within the conceptual framework of “mediation,” a perspective which, according to John Guillory’s recent argument, the rise of other media forms in the late nineteenth century opened up. In doing so, I offer an expanded account of the modernist novel’s entanglement with its historical moment that goes beyond a consideration of its contemporaneous publication practices. Additionally, I bridge the divide between literary studies and media studies more generally and map axes along which we might bring the book into conversation with other forms of mediation, both historical and contemporary. Ultimately, in explaining how a consideration of the book can provide new understandings of intimacy and community, I show how this “old” medium is still highly relevant in an increasingly technologized world that seems to contain no end of “new” things.
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And so it went, over the semesters, as I got to know the thinkers who would become so central to my project. John Bishop continued in his role of enthusiast and Joyce-mentor – and continues today even if he is far away from the Berkeley campus, rehabilitating himself from a severe stroke. Kaja Silverman walked me through the intricacies of phenomenology in a way that nuanced the poststructuralism that had informed my thinking up to that point. More than this, as her student and research assistant, I learned that her friendship was as encouragingly touching as her intellect was initially intimidating. From the background position that he had occupied as an informal interlocutor, D. A. Miller stepped in when my committee seemed to be falling apart – despite his assertion that he was “not John Bishop.” It was his signature savoir faire, however, that helped me find the secret of my own developing style. And lastly, as my dissertation chair, Elizabeth Abel shepherded me from insecure admitted student to successful PhD by knowing just how to balance the demanding critical engagement that I wanted with the well-nigh maternal encouragement that I needed. I can think of no better guide to the joys and challenges of intellectual endeavor than the careful work Elizabeth put in to helping me accept and repair my lost objects.

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“You know that we are living in a material world…”
   – Madonna

“…look, look. Look where your hands are. Now.”
   – Toni Morrison, Jazz
I. OPENING THE BOOK

In the August 3, 2009 issue of *The New Yorker*, Nicholson Baker recounts his experience with Amazon.com’s newest and most highly advertised gadget, the Kindle 2. Baker’s account is extensive: among other things, he describes the hype surrounding the invention, the descriptions of it as “an alpenhorn blast of post-Gutenberian revalorization” (24); the business and technology behind the components that make up the Kindle; his initial disappointment at the device, “the screen was gray. And it wasn’t just gray; it was a greenish, sickly gray. A post-mortem gray” (25); and, finally, the mildly successful experience of reading Michael Connelly’s mystery novel *The Lincoln Lawyer* after his familiarization with the device. What is so off-putting for Baker about the Kindle is the difficulty he had in looking past the device itself. This is exactly the quality about books which, according to Jeff Bezos, founder and CEO of Amazon.com, the Kindle is designed to simulate. Baker quotes and paraphrases Bezos’ explanation for the limited public interest in e-books that resulted in low initial sales of the Kindle: “It’s because books are so good,” according to Bezos. And they’re good, he explained, because they disappear when you read them: ‘You go into a flow state’” (28). And the Kindle does accomplish this in its own way: Baker writes how, with such a device, “there is no clutter, no pile of paperbacks next to the couch. A Kindle book arrives wirelessly: it’s untouchable; it exists on a higher, purer plane” (27). Bezos’ description of a “flow state” is familiar to anyone who has been swept up in a mystery novel or a love story, but what his account of the (traditional) book leaves out is exactly what Baker’s dissatisfaction with the Kindle reveals: the fact that this flow state is not constant nor even consistent. Baker’s experience with the device – and his description of the complaints about the Kindle 1’s ill-design – suggests the extent to which reading is a profoundly (if mostly unconsciously) sensory experience. What if, instead of asking the Kindle to make the sensory dependence of reading disappear, we took the advent of the Kindle as an opportunity to wonder more explicitly about this sensory dependence? After all, books might disappear more easily than the Kindle, but they nonetheless do not dematerialize. We are, in the end, left with that pile of paperbacks next to our couch.

This dissertation is thus, in part, an attempt to enrich our understanding of the status of the book-object by developing an account of the book as a specific form of mediation that neither the history of the book, on the one hand, nor the textual analysis of traditional literary studies, on the other, has accounted for on their own. Whereas book history and bibliographical studies elide the act of reading in their attempt to trace the material influences on and macro-historical effects of the book as an object, I consider the way the book’s materiality plays a role in transmitting a literary text to an individual reader. By using the framework of “mediation,” a concept with a dual sense as a process of conveyance or transmission and as a procedure by which two separate parties come into relationship, I offer an expanded account of reading that moves beyond, even as it encompasses, the process of linguistic deciphering by which we traditionally understand our engagement with literature. We will see how the comprehension of words’ meanings is only one part of the practice of reading, which also includes the sensory perception of the book on which this comprehension is based. This expanded understanding of

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1 See, for example, Adrian Johns’ *The Nature of the Book: Print and Knowledge in the Making* as well as Leah Price’s comment regarding the recent interest in bibliographic studies that “One way to describe ‘the way we read now’ is to say that we don’t read at all” (120).
reading thus complicates literary studies’ exclusive interest in the text and counters the general disregard of the book’s transmissive function by recasting the relationship between reader and book as one that depends on their mutual embodiment. As my argument combines meditations on the object of the book, the act of reading and the forms of relationality which they afford, it ultimately stakes out a place for the book that resists the privilege accorded to new media by current discussions in media studies.

Our current cultural moment provides the impetus if not exactly the resources to reconsider the book since our almost constant confrontation with new forms of mediation such as Kindles, iPhones, text messages and web pages calls the status of the book into question. As these new media forms rub up against this old one, the “friction” they produce highlights the facets and characteristics that usually go unnoticed in our drive to get at the “message” which media always transmit. Indeed, one of the founding fathers of media studies, Marshall McLuhan, writes that “the moment of the meeting of media is a moment of freedom and release from the ordinary trance and numbness imposed by them on our senses” (55). Similarly, in Radiant Textuality: Literature After the World Wide Web, Jerome McGann discusses the relationship between the humanities and digital culture and observes that “the critical possibilities of digital environments require that we revisit what we know, or what we think we know, about the formal and material properties of the codex” (19). Yet, McGann’s study subordinates the medium of print – and the book in general – to the digital revolution: he writes of the way digital tools “exposed the critical deficiencies of the paper-based medium as such” (171; italics added). In McGann’s argument these deficiencies have less to do with the book’s ability to transmit a text (indeed, this is precisely where technological advances like e-books and online texts seem to lag behind the book) than with their “storing and accessing” functions, the way digital forms of textuality opens up new ways to archive and search through texts. Although he claims that “we have much to learn from those older, more highly evolved forms of textuality that are now being joined and modified by our new media” to conclude that “not since the first period of its emergence has the study of the book been a more imperative need,” his calls are completely in the service of a better understanding of digital media (171). Like contemporary media theorists N. Katherine Hayles and Mark B. N. Hansen, McGann considers print and the book through the lens of “new media” rather than trying to articulate them in their own terms. If, however, we are to counter contemporary pronouncements of the “death of the book,” so often repeated as to be cliché, then a meditation on the unique experience of the book as itself a form of mediation is in order.

In a recent article that “explores the philosophical preconditions of media discourse,” John Guillory argues that the very concept of a medium as we use it today in relation to communication technologies emerged only in the later nineteenth century as “a response to the proliferation of new technical media – such as the telegraph and phonograph – that could not be assimilated to the older system of the arts” which had previously been used to theorize communication (321). And, indeed, I find the resources for a meditation on the status of the book in the novels of the early twentieth-century, the modernist experiments that are, in part, themselves a response to the continuous technological explosion (not unlike our current situation) of their historical moment. Yet, the twentieth-century is clearly not the first historical moment to experience a media revolution, and the invention of the printing press is another obvious potential point of comparison. Though an examination of texts written during the advent of printing in the early-modern period also provides an opportunity to think about literary experience and the role of the print medium, doing so highlights the differences between
the latter and its historical “antecedents,” the manuscript and the spoken word, rather than the book as such.²

In the argument that follows, I thus treat the experimental novels of Marcel Proust, James Joyce and Virginia Woolf and trace the ways in which they draw attention to the books on which the transmission of their narratives depend. The high modernist novel provides an ideal place to investigate the medium of the book, since the literary experimentation for which this period is so famous was part of the early twentieth century’s enthusiastic exploration of media technologies that included the mass circulation of photography and the rise of film – not to mention the increasing use of telegraphy and the invention of the phonograph, the automobile and the telephone. My argument owes an obvious conceptual debt to Walter Benjamin’s essay “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility” which famously discusses the role of technology in shaping our perception of the world. For me, the media friction created by the technological developments Benjamin addresses called the cultural status of the book and the dynamics of reading into question, and we will see how the experimentalism of Proust’s, Joyce’s and Woolf’s novels allows us to investigate the role played by the book in the experience of reading.

Media historian Friedrich Kittler provides what is perhaps the most well-known account of the effect that this encounter of diverse media forms had on literature: he describes how Edison’s invention of the phonograph in 1877, his development of the kinetoscope in 1892 and the operation of the latter by the Lumière brothers in France and the Skladanowsky brothers in Germany in 1895 as the first exhibition of cinema proper “launched a two-pronged attack on …[the book’s] monopoly on the storage of serial data” (245). “The gramophone,” he elaborates, “empties out words by bypassing their imaginary aspects (signifieds) for their real aspects (the physiology of the voice),” while “film devalues words by setting their referents, the necessary, transcendent, indeed absurd reference points for discourse, right before one’s eyes” (246). In this view, the main privilege that had been accorded to imaginative literature – namely, the ability to create a vivid world in the mind of the reader – is, suddenly, transferred to the new media, a situation that leaves the writer in what seems like a newly circumscribed position.

When Kittler goes on to describe the “two options” which literature had “to counter this triumphant competition,” however, he indicates what seems to me to be the myopic perspective on which his account is based (247). On the one hand, he suggests, literature could “join” the technological media by working to produce lyrics for “phonographic hits” or screenplays for films (247), an option that opens literature up to the new dictates of mass culture. On the other hand, however, literature had the choice “to reject [the new media], along with the imaginary and real aspects of discourse to which they cater, and which have become the province of popular writers” (248), a rejection that leads, in his view, directly to the stylistic experiments of “high modernism.” Appealing to an eccentric and complex fusion of the theories of Lacan and

² My argument about the friction between the printed book and the new media of the twentieth century is preceded (in more ways than one) by two excellent treatments of media awareness in the eighteenth- and nineteenth-centuries. Kevis Goodman discusses how the eighteenth-century long poem defined itself “not only against an array of prose genres, whose material it often usurps, but also in relation to non-written means of perception and communication, whose several mystiques it often courts” (9), while Celeste Langan shows the way Romantic poetry (specifically of Walter Scott) resists conceiving of print as an “invisible, inaudible” medium (70). If Goodman and Langan show the way in which poetry and print, respectively, are themselves mediums, my treatment of the modernist novel extends this media consciousness to the book itself by considering the ways in which prose narratives also allow us to conceive of themselves and their material support as mediums.
Derrida, Kittler argues that “After 1900 high literature develops in which ‘the word’ becomes something ‘too conspicuous,’ that is, it becomes a purely differential signifier. Once imaginary effects and real inscriptions have been renounced, what remains are the rituals of the symbolic” (248). Kittler thus splits the literature of the period off into its own register, where it is defined by the embrace of and exclusive focus on a language that represents nothing but its own play: “literature became word art put together by word producers” (249). It is telling, however, to notice the way that Kittler conceives of the gramophone, film and literature only as specialized means of recording experience, each with its own specific (and exclusive) content. What his view misses is the way that, in addition to being storage technologies, they are all also technologies of transmission that work to communicate and convey as much as they store and record. We will see how, from this perspective, the period’s explosion of stylistic experimentation exceeds the “rituals of the symbolic” in which Kittler confines it and indicates an expanded awareness of literature’s mediums beyond the strict register of the verbal.

This expansion results, according to the history of media discourse that Guillory constructs, from the new ways of thinking that the proliferation of new technologies in the late nineteenth century opened up. Guillory writes, “the development of new technical media perplexed thereafter the relation between the traditional arts and media of any kind…the emergence of new media thus seemed to reposition the traditional arts as ambiguously both media and precursors to the media” (321-22). Here, it is not only that phonography and cinema take over representational domains which had been the exclusive purview of imaginative literature, but rather that our approach to literature – and to representation itself – undergoes a fundamental shift as well. That is, literature (which, Guillory observes in a footnote, “seems to be less conspicuously marked by medial identity than other media, such as film” (322n3)) suddenly finds itself regarded in a new light: not only as an art, but as a medium – indeed, as a multi-medium. Guillory goes on suggest that the change in status of the fine arts to media forms in response to the technological innovations Kittler details “demanded nothing less than a new philosophical framework for understanding media as such,” a framework he characterizes as one of “communication” (347). He thus provides an alternative to the dominant paradigm of imitation or mimesis through which the fine arts had been considered since Aristotle’s Poetics and in which Kittler’s focus on recording experience squarely falls. In this view, the play with language for which someone like Joyce is so famous becomes a meditation on the way the literature conveys its message, a meditation that comes to encompass the material support which transmits the language on which we usually – and all too exclusively – focus.

3 For a more fleshed out account of Kittler’s poststructuralist backgrounds, see the foreword to Discourse Networks by David E. Wellbery.
4 See also a 2004 issue of Critical Inquiry devoted to the “Arts of Transmission” that discusses, in the words of editors James Chandler, Arnold Davison and Adrian Johns, the ways in which “knowledge has been, is and will be shaped by transmissive means through which it is developed, organized and passed on” (2). Kittler’s argument bears more than a family resemblance to Clement Greenberg’s famous argument about modernist medium specificity in “Towards A Newer Laocoon.” Considering “literature” as “subject matter at its most oppressive,” where the medium becomes most transparent (301), Greenberg describes the way that, over the last fifty years, the arts, “have been hunted back to their mediums, and there they have been isolated, concentrated and defined” (305). From here, Greenberg draws the conclusion that “the medium of poetry is isolated in the power of the word to evoke associations and to connote” (306). Both Greenberg and Kittler seem to me to have a limited understanding of the concept of the medium, which, as we will see, is always and necessarily a multi-medium: poetry’s word might connote but they are also visible. See W. J. T. Mitchell’s “There are No Visual Medium,” which I take up later, for a fuller exposition of this line of thinking.
The collapse of mimesis and transmission also conditions more specific treatments of modernist literature’s relationship to contemporaneous media technologies. One main strain of this discussion investigates the ways that modernist novels enlist literary versions of cinema’s new representational possibilities – for example, how the quick changes in scene so prevalent in modernist novels find their roots in the cuts between shots in a film. As Julian Murphet and Lydia Rainford write in the introduction to a 2003 collection entitled Literature and Visual Technologies: Writing After Cinema, the essays in their volume treat “the ways in which film infiltrated, contaminated and altered literary forms” (1). Arguments like these suggest that, in the age of these new media forms, the task of literature is to mimic the new technologies since these technologies have changed the way we perceive the world. (This also holds for treatments of literature in the context of the rise of digital, computer-based media, such as those of N. Katherine Hayles with her focus on “information narratives” and “technotechs.”)

More specifically, in The Senses of Modernism: Technology, Perception, Aesthetics, perhaps the most wide-ranging recent treatment of the relationship between the modernist novel and modern technology, Sara Danius suggests that “the emergence of modernist aesthetics signifies the increasing internalization of technological matrices of perception” (2). In viewing the novels of Proust, Joyce and Thomas Mann as “indices of an increasing abstraction of sensory experience” that rely on “an ever-closer relationship between habits of the senses and technologies of perception,” Danius considers these literary works from an exclusively mimetic perspective (21). For her, they only function to describe a growing split between sensation and the body effected by the new ways of seeing and hearing made possible by inventions like the phonograph and the movie camera. She thus disregards the way that the book might counter this technologically-induced abstraction by providing its own concrete sensory experience, its own matrix of perception to which writers and readers were becoming newly sensitive. Not only does she overlook the book’s status as a material object, but her discussion also mobilizes technology as an abstract category divorced from the devices and machinery which constitute it, as if it is only a certain way of perceiving and thinking about the world and does not have any material manifestations. My account of mediation, on the contrary, allows me to expand her understanding of modernism by showing the way modernist literary works function as forms of mediation rather than just as records of the effects of technological development.

Indeed, just as, in Guillory’s words, “the distinction between poetry and painting looks very different when reconceived as the distinction between media (print and plastic art)” rather than the distinction between the art forms in the tradition of, for example, ut pictura poesis, so too does the comparison of literature, film and phonography as media forms take on new features that reorient, if not completely sidestep, Kittler’s and Danius’ arguments (346). Far from sequestering literature in the realm of the symbolic or reducing its project to the documentation of the technology’s effects, the rise of film and phonography also highlights the way in which a literary work is comprised of both the medium of language and of the printed book. In other

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5 For carefully historicized reconsiderations of the analogical relationship between literature and cinema, see David Trotter’s Cinema and Modernism and Laura Marcus’ The Tenth Muse: Writing About Cinema in the Modernist Period.
6 For similarly analogical accounts of the relationship between literature and contemporary digital media, see Hayles’ How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics.
7 Indeed, her definition of technology, which she paraphrases from Barbara Herrnstein Smith’s Contingencies of Value: Alternative Perspectives for Critical Theory, is almost comically vague: she writes, “In this book, ‘technology’ is equivalent to ‘that which is called “technology” in the discourses under discussion’” (6). The tautological construction and the proliferation of scare quotes suggests that “technology” is an undefined and nebulous category in her argument.
words, when compared with the new mediums of film and phonography, the printed book seems all too obviously an object that we approach with our senses as much as a text we cognize with our intellect. When Guillory makes a similar, if more general, point that “The status of representation too is altered in relation to the category of the medium, which directs our attention first to the material and formal qualities of different kinds of cultural expressions and only second to the object of representation,” he suggests the way that the conceptual framework of “mediation” fundamentally alters our understanding of literary experience. Not only, however, does the framework of “mediation,” with its primary definition of a process of communication, open up space for considering a novel’s material support in a book, but its secondary meaning as the process by which two separate parties come into a relationship with each other opens up questions which Guillory does not explore. That is, what is our relationship to the book that we read, and, more generally, what kinds of relationality does reading itself both entail and facilitate?

When Marcel Proust, himself an astute theorist of technological and cultural change, opens his novel with an implicit meditation on film (or at least the proto-cinematic) in the famous “magic lantern” scene, he introduces both issues of materiality and relationality implied in the term “mediation.” As his descriptions offer some resources for articulating just how a comparison with the filmic might underscore the book’s function as a material medium and its status as an object, he also sketches out how a reawakened awareness of materiality inescapably leads into questions of relationality. As he projects images onto the walls of his darkened room, he describes the effect in startlingly complex terms that swing between contradictory claims regarding the materiality and immateriality of the walls and contents of his room. He begins by specifying how the “magic lantern, which used to be set on top of my lamp while we waited for dinner time to come… substituted for the opaqueness of my walls an impalpable iridescence, supernatural phenomena of many colours, in which legends were depicted as on a shifting transitory window” (I: 9). The diction is clear: the walls of his room lose their solidity and take on a kind of phantasmatic, “supernatural” quality which, like a “window,” he seems to look through rather than at. At the same time as the projected images “overcame every material obstacle” to provide the wondrous spectacle of the “Merovingian past,” however, they also highlight those material obstacles (I: 10). He explains that, with the projection of the images, “the door-handle of my room, which…seemed to open of its own accord and without my having to turn it, so unconscious has its manipulation become – lo and behold, it was now an astral body for Golo” (I: 10-11). Here, he loses his ability to ignore the door-handle of his room when the image of Golo passes over it; as he puts it, “the anaesthetic effect of habit [was] destroyed” as his senses reawaken to a new awareness of the walls and features of his room (I: 11). The door-handle is, paradoxically, the locus of both de- and re-materialization; the perceptual effect of the magic-lantern is, contra Danius, as much one of concretion as it is of abstraction.

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8 As W. J. T. Mitchell observes, “the very notion of a medium and mediation already entails some mixture of sensory, perceptual and semiotic elements” (“There are No Visual Media,” 399). Mitchell’s breakdown of “sensory, perceptual and semiotic” offers me an opportunity to specify my understanding of the terms I’m using. “Sensation” refers to the raw physical experience, while “semiotic” describes the deciphering of a signifier-signified structure. “Perception” is somewhat of a middle term that draws from the complex Enlightenment debate over empiricism to refer to the processing of “sensation” into an identifiable experience. (See, especially, Thomas Reid’s “Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man.”) “Reading,” we will see, involves all three of these registers, though the semiotic imperative usually overshadows the other two.
In her attempt to trace the ways that literary images “acquire the vivacity of perceptual objects,” Elaine Scarry reads this moment as an example of Proust’s ability to allow the reader “to imagine a solid surface” in the most vivid way possible (4-5; 11). Thus, though she observes that the moment “occasions, quite famously, Marcel’s meditations on habit,” she goes on to claim that, “more fundamental than Proust’s philosophic speculation on habit is what he does not openly remark on: the perceptual mimesis of the solidity of the room brought about by the ‘impalpable iridescence’ of Golo fleeting across its surfaces” (11). For me, however, the most interesting part of this moment is its very vacillation, the way it moves back and forth between the two positions. The walls seem to force him to look at them to the same extent that they disappear and allow him to look through them. This is, of course, part of Scarry’s point, since she suggests that “taken in isolation, the walls, the curtains, the doorknob are for the reader...certainly as thin and impalpable as the bright colored images issuing from the magic lantern. Yet by instructing us to move the one across the surface of the other, the transparency somehow works to verify the density of the other” (12). While Scarry proceeds to an analysis of the structures of perception mimicked in Proust’s descriptions in order to further her interest in cognitive approaches to literature, I offer a different hypothesis which it will be the burden of the rest of the dissertation to substantiate: that it is not only the walls of the narrator’s bedroom which take on a kind of solidity, but the book itself that becomes a kind of solid object. Though the object of the book does not figure centrally in this moment, we will see the way that the alternately absorbing and alienating effect that the filmic projection has on the walls of the room also characterizes the function of the book that transmits the modernist novel. That is, in the same way that the projection of an image breaks the habit of the narrator’s perception of the walls and causes him to see them, for a moment, with new eyes, the modernist novels I examine in this study leverage a number of devices to break the habits of reading that disregard the material support with which it is inescapably intertwined.

At the same time, however, as the narrator describes how “this mere change of lighting was enough to destroy the familiar impression I had of my room,” he suggests the way in which this new material awareness transforms his relationship to the room (10). He continues, “I cannot express the discomfort I felt at this intrusion of mystery and beauty into a room which I had succeeded in filling with my own personality until I thought no more of it than of myself” (10-11). If, before his play with the magic lantern, the room was simply an extension of himself, an imposition of his subjectivity onto the objects that surround him, the narrator now finds himself forced to reevaluate his connection to the external world. This, we will see, is also an effect of the modernist novel’s emphasis on the object of the book. As they confront readers with the materiality of a page, the of the printed letters or even of their own readerly bodies, these novels spark a meditation on the relationship we have to the book that ultimately extends beyond the book-reader dyad to a rethinking of intimacy as such.

II. READING, FROM TEXT TO BOOK

As I reread the modernist novel’s relationship with other forms of mediation, I take up what Bill Brown describes as “an impulse within the broader field of media studies” to consider the materiality of mediums (“Materiality” 56). I seek to move discussions of materiality beyond the framework of contemporary technological media deployed by N. Katherine Hayles and
Hansen’s early work *Embodying Technesis: Technology Beyond Writing* offers, however, the most theoretically sophisticated account of materiality as it rereads the role technology plays in twentieth-century critical theory. In so doing, he seeks to “prepare the ground for an expanded analysis of technological materiality, one capable of exploring specifically those materializations through which technologies mediate the material rhythms of embodied life” (4). Hansen ultimately describes, by way of an appeal to Walter Benjamin’s account of the “experience” (*Erlebnis*) of technological modernity, the “noncognitive and nondiscursive” way the human body interacts with the mechanisms that constitute that experience (30). This is an alternative to what he calls the strategy of “technesis,” or “the putting-into-discourse of technology” which he finds in the work of Freud, Heidegger, Derrida, Lacan, Deleuze and Guattari, to name the main figures of his study (4). These theorists, according to Hansen, subordinate the “robust materiality” of technology to a “linguistically or semiotically constituted” perspective that allows them to focus exclusively on technology’s modification of ways of thinking (4; 21).

Hansen’s critique of the “semiotic” perspective provides a bridge from his interest in “contemporary technoculture” to my more focused consideration of literary experience and the medium of the book. He observes that the reduction of technology which he describes “takes the form of textualism – the reigning ideology of literary studies from formalism on” (21). Hayles makes a similar argument when she takes issue with the rampant “textualization” prompted by the rise of poststructuralism, which, she writes, “had the effect, in treating everything from fashion to fascism as a semiotic system, of eliding differences in materiality” (*Writing* 30). She calls for a “media specific analysis” that “insists on the way texts must be embodied to exist in the world” (30). Guillory puts it in even broader terms when, in discussing the work of Saussure and Jakobson, he writes of “the failure of much theory to address technically mediated communication even in the process of conceptualizing language,” a failure that considers language only from the point of view of representation rather than as part of a process of mediation (349). Though Guillory’s historical argument suggests the almost total subsumption of representation into mediation (“the system of fine arts yielded to a new system, the media,” he writes (347)), I sketch out an account of literature as a media form that does not completely eschew textual representation. Rather, the distinction I repeatedly make in this dissertation between the text of a novel and the book that transmits (“communicates”) it is in the service of tracing the relationship between these two modes of a literary work. My argument thus contributes to the efforts at providing a complement to the “textualist” bias which Hansen and Hayles diagnose. For me, however, it is less a matter of resuscitating the materiality of technology tout court, as with Hansen, or of “forging an account of how literature is changing under the impact of information technology” (19), as Hayles puts it, than it is of offering a more specific account of the experience of the book which an (over)emphasis on the text in the last forty years of literary studies has disallowed. Even studies that proclaim to take the book into account do so only by way of transforming the material facets of the book into a text to be read: Jerome McGann, for instance, turns his attention to “the physical form of books and manuscripts (paper, ink, typefaces, layouts)” only to consider “the semiotic function of

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9 In addition to Hayles’ *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature and Informatics*, see her *Writing Machines* and *My Mother Was a Computer: Digital Subjects and Literary Texts* as well as Hansen’s *New Philosophy for New Media* and *Bodies in Code: Interfaces with Digital Media.*
McGann is, however, only the most explicit example of the way the “textual turn” to which Hansen and Hayles are responding depends on a disregard of the book. The same occurs in the context of literary theory since the critical intervention which arguably inaugurated poststructuralism – Jacques Derrida’s ground-breaking Of Grammatology – dismisses the book from the very get-go: the title of its first chapter is, tellingly, “The End of the Book and the Beginning of Writing.” Though, as we will see, Derrida’s argument begins to look very different when considered in light of our current media explosion and, by analogy, of the cultural moment of the early twentieth century, the title here does not refer to the challenge the book faces from other media forms as it describes the book’s privileged position of authority from which Derrida wants to unseat it. His chapter offers an account of the opposition set up over the past two-thousand years between (the fantasy of) the full presence of “good writing,” “the writing of truth in the soul,” and “bad writing,” “writing in the ‘literal’ and ordinary sense, ‘in space’” (15). The contrast that Derrida is locating in the history of philosophy is between a divine or natural writing in which the signified has an immediate relationship with an eternal truth, an already-constituted and stable meaning, and the artificial techniques of inscription by which humans signify or simulate that immediacy with finite and sensible signs. He goes on to discuss how the book comes to function as a metaphor for the absolute and ideal presence entailed in divine writing and traces the development of the idea of the book of Nature or of God from the Middle Ages on. Ultimately, he writes,

the idea of the book is the idea of a totality, finite or infinite, of the signifier….The idea of the book which always refers to a natural totality, is profoundly alien to the sense of writing. It is the encyclopedic protection of theology and of logocentrism against the disruption of writing, against its apheristic energy, and, as I shall specify later, against difference in general. If I distinguish the text from the book, I shall say that the destruction of the book [la destruction du livre], as it is now under way in all domains, denudes the surface of the text (18).

The specification of the “idea” of the book points to the way that the book functions here as an abstract concept. Derrida’s critique thus applies not to a specific object (or even category of objects) made out of paper, ink and glue but rather to a mode of thinking governed by an ideal of absolute presence, an ideal for which the “idea” of the book has served as a kind of conceptual shorthand. For him, it is thus important to alter the focus from such a totalizing book to the differential text.11

Yet, as we have seen, with the rise of other media technologies (the Kindle being only the latest in a long train of innovations), our understanding of the book seems to have shifted somewhat. The book is no longer the undisputed queen of mediation, but, at least since 1887, is

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10 See also the way George Bornstein puts McGann’s concept of “bibliographic codes” to use in his discussion of how the physical and historical placement of texts influence their meanings in Material Modernism: The Politics of the Page. Bornstein’s earlier Representing Modernist Texts: Editing as Interpretation addresses similar issues in its treatment of the profound ways editorial decisions affect the readerly reception of modernist texts. As its focus on meaning should indicate, Bornstein’s arguments rely on a textualization of a work’s material facets similar to McGann’s.
11 Roland Barthes famously makes a similar move in his now canonical essay “From Work to Text.”
one among many different kinds of media forms. Just as Proust’s description of the magic lantern points to a renewed awareness of the solidity of the book, and Nicholson Baker’s initial dissatisfaction at the refusal of the Kindle to disappear suggests the way Amazon.com’s device actually acts and contaminates the “higher, purer plane” on which a Kindle book supposedly exists, the book is not just an transcendental “idea,” but rather all too obviously an empirical object. Paying attention to the book’s status as an object thus might also work against the kind of “infinite,” “theological” nature which Derrida uses his notion of “text” to counter. Indeed, he implicitly indicates this when he writes that “the good writing has therefore always been comprehended…. Comprehended, therefore, within a totality, and enveloped in a volume or book” (18). While Derrida is describing the way that, throughout history, the book has offered a model for complete meaning and eternal truth, the fact that the book is precisely an object with “volume” indicates the way it might itself resist sublimation into the kind of idealism he is critiquing. It is thus the project of this dissertation to open up this new way of conceptualizing the book, to consider its volume in more specific terms that do not assume the kind of “comprehension” with which Derrida allies it in Of Grammatology. In this, it unpacks the role that the book plays as a medium and extends the “media-specific analysis” for which both Hayles and Hansen call beyond the strictly circumscribed sphere of “new media.” Instead, it draws from the books of modernist novels to rethink how the “texts” we read are inescapably bound up with (my vocabulary is explicitly bibliographic) the material support that transmits them.

The specifically media-centric thrust of this dissertation should not limit its relevance to the larger fields of literary and cultural studies. Indeed, these introductory meditations on the book’s place among various forms of mediation (historical and contemporary) point to the way that the coexistence of different mediums calls the very act of reading—what we read, how we read—into question. As such, this dissertation’s embeddedness in questions of mediation is in implicit dialogue with the recent reconsideration of reading practices, articulated most fully in the Fall 2009 issue of the journal Representations, entitled “The Way We Read Now.” In their introduction to that issue, Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus characterize a “new” approach to literary criticism—what they call “surface reading”—by trying to distinguish it from the (by now well-known) kind of “symptomatic” interpretation that, at least since Fredric Jameson’s The Political Unconscious (1983), “took meaning to be hidden, repressed, deep, and in need of detection by an interpreter” (1). In contrast, Best and Marcus write, “in the last decade or so, we have been drawn to modes of reading that attend to the surfaces of texts rather than plumb their depths” (1-2). They go on to elaborate in terms that recall my discussion of the effect of the magic lantern on Proust’s narrator: “we take surface to mean what is evident, perceptible, apprehensible in texts, what is neither hidden nor hiding…. A surface is what insists on being looked at rather than what we must train ourselves to see through” (9).

Given that Best’s and Marcus’ description of the shift from symptomatic to surface reading suggests a move from interpretation to perception, it is somewhat surprising to note their clarification that “surface looms large in the vocabulary of our contributors, but rarely do they mean the literal surface of texts: paper, binding, typography” (9). “Surface” for Best and

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12 In Writing and Difference, he makes a somewhat different use of the idea of volume in his critique of the structuralist demand for simultaneity. He writes, “what is intolerable for structuralism is indeed the richness implied by the volume, every element of signification that cannot be spread out into the simultaneity of form. But is it by chance that the book is, first and foremost, volume?” (25).
Marc, as well as for the other critics in the issue, is primarily a metaphorical term that designates the new focus of their interpretive maneuvers. They explicitly exclude the consideration of literature as a form of mediation in favor of treating it as a mimetic art, a fact not wholly surprising since their work appears in the aptly-named *Representations*, the flagship journal of New Historicism which, Guillory points out, “catapulted the concept of representation to the top of the theoretical lexicon” (356n58). Accordingly, their program remains squarely within the “textualist” paradigm that disregards the materiality of a specific medium and, as such, seems hardly different from the symptomatic reading against which it is ostensibly pitted. In other words, though not exactly “hidden,” the “surface” to which these critics switch their attention nonetheless functions according to the dynamics of representation and, as such, demands to be deciphered and interpreted. The symptom, we might say, seems only to have moved from the depths to the surface so that “surface reading” functions, in practice, as a subset of symptomatic reading.

In her contribution to the *Representations* issue, Leah Price describes the problem as a limited understanding of what it means “to read.” She writes, “English professors continue… to use the gerund [reading] as a synonym for ‘literary-critical interpretation’” and elaborates that, “even as successive aspects of late twentieth-century symptomatic reading come under attack – its granularity (Franco Moretti’s ‘distant reading’), its adversarial stance (Eve Sedgwick’s ‘reparative reading’), the wedge it drives between surface and depth (Sharon Marcus’ ‘just reading’) – a familiar noun anchors each new adjective” (121). Price offers a one way to interrogate the ubiquitous gerund “reading” when she describes the recent interest in book history, what she calls the “bibliographic turn” in literary studies with its newly re-literализed take on “textual” terms like “stereotype” and “margin” (120). She pithily describes how “instead of ‘reading’ sewer systems, critics now smell leather bindings” to illustrate her claim that this recent critical trend signals “a slide from the literary to the literal, from the abstract to the concrete” (121; 122). While the “concreteness” of bibliographic studies seems to echo my interest in the book as an object, the slide Price describes leaves the act of “reading” itself not only uninterrogated but almost completely ignored: in a polemical statement surely designed for both instigation and citation, she writes, “One way to describe ‘the way we read now’ is to say that we don’t read at all” (120).

If Price’s response to the current critical situation is to turn almost completely away from reading by “wrest[ing] attention away from the fraction of any book’s life cycle spent in the hands of readers and, towards, instead, the whole spectrum of social practices [beyond reading] for which printed matter provides a prompt” (120), I respond in the opposite way by taking a closer look at – which is not necessarily the same as doing a “close reading of” – reading itself. Indeed, it is exactly with the topic of “reading,” and its relationship to frameworks of representation and mediation, that my argument intervenes in this discussion, since I take up the way the “literal surface” of texts can help us rethink what it means to read in the first place. As the focus on the surface from the perspective of “mediation” leads to an awareness of a kind of bookish (rather than textual) depth, a depth which the word “volume” makes all too explicit, it also allows us to interrogate the very term that seems, so stably and so statically, to be anchoring the various approaches that constitute the recent history of literary criticism. With the heightened awareness of the book which the current (and historical) developments in technology make available, I am able to parse more closely the multiple components that constitute the act of reading and ask what is involved in making meaning out of a textual system that is embodied in a material object.
I thus investigate, from the more specific perspective of reading a book, what Guillory calls “the entire problematic of mediation as the extrapolation of a communicative process from the physical medium” (351). While Best and Marcus claim that the contributors to the volume (all of whom, they point out, “received doctoral degrees in either English or comparative literature after 1983”) “were trained to equate reading with interpretation: with assigning a meaning to a text or set of texts” (1; italics added), I ultimately suggest that the act of reading cannot be reduced to, even as it cannot be separated from, the act of interpretation. In other words, paying attention to the materiality of the book made perspicuous by its comparison with new forms of mediation allows me to tease out two distinct, if interrelated, elements of reading that are usually collapsed: namely, the attribution of meaning to the written word (reading vis-à-vis “representation”), on the one hand, and the sensory experiences and perceptual acts that allow for those attributions (reading vis-à-vis “mediation”), on the other. What this distinction opens up is a consideration of reading’s engagement with both language and the material format without, like McGann, treating the latter in terms of the former.

As the word “engagement” should suggest, however, this interrogation of reading speaks as much to the act of literary transmission as it does to the relationship between reader and book. This is, of course, part of the dual definition of “mediation.” As the dissertation progresses, my consideration of the ways these novels disclose the literal surfaces of the books that transmit and, in moments of so-called “feedback,” influence their texts brings them into conversation with larger questions of relationality that any consideration of contemporary and historical media forms necessarily entails. By investigating the nature of the reader-book relationship, I participate in and extend recent attempts to rethink literary and narrative ethics. This rethinking – what critics calls the “new” ethics – is an extension of the commitment to alterity, indeterminacy and diversity which the older ethical theories that thinkers like Lionel Trilling and Martha Nussbaum have found in literature. By appealing to the radical unknowability of the Other as theorized by philosophers like Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida, the new ethics counters the faith in a unified human subject on which much of the old ethics is predicated, especially in their reliance upon concepts like readerly sympathy. Dorothy J. Hale provides an example of a new ethical approach in her reading, following Judith Butler, of the famously obscure ending of Henry James’ Washington Square in which one of the main characters, Catherine, declines a proposal of marriage without explanation: “Catherine’s refusal to speak – along with Jame’s refusal to speak for her – produce the interpretive difficulty that advances the reader’s ethical (and political) education…. James’s narrative position of the reader in relation to [Catherine’s] silence secures an affective response that marks the limit for the reader not just of judgment but of sympathy as well” (“Restriction” 196). In other words, from the moment of radical inscrutability that ends James’ novel, readers learn an ethical respect for Otherness as precisely what is impossible for the subject to access.

Hale articulates her position in more general terms: “[ethical] theorists old and new agree that the ethical judgments solicited by the story world produce alterity as an emotional experience for the novel reader” (“Restriction” 194). Her focus on the “story world,” however, leapfrogs the question about the ethics involved in the act of reading itself, the acts of perception and interpretation on which the creation of that “story world” necessarily depends.

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13 See Lionel Trilling’s “Manners, Morals, and the Novel” and Martha Nussbaum’s Love’s Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature, on the one hand, and a recent overview of “new” ethical theories in Hale, “Fiction as Restriction: Self-Binding in New Ethical Theories of the Novel,” on the other.
Moreover, when Hale asks “Can novel reading be theorized as helping to promote ethical emotions that would lead to the recognition of alterity – in the sense of appreciating and honoring social difference – outside of novels?” she seems to separate reading from other actions that take place “outside of novels” (190). At the same time, however, her vocabulary offers a way to articulate my project here: that is, paying attention to the book as an object – and the “surface” of the “outside of novels” – is itself a kind of “novel reading,” in the sense of being “new” or different, that not only leads to an emotion on which other ethical actions can be based but that itself also participates in – indeed, embodies – ethical relationality itself. The novelty here stems precisely from this “embodiment,” since our sensory perception of the material surface of novels (less the “form” than the format of the novel) reveals a common physical location that the reader and book share in the phenomenal world. I thus develop an ethics of similitude based less on a strict recognition of alterity than on a “medium point” between identity and difference.

While each of the chapters that follow elaborate this medium point in different ways, my most explicit engagement with the new ethics comes in my discussion of Jacob’s Room in Chapter 4. My pointed investigation of the relationship between reader and book there extends the discussion of ethics beyond the intersubjective to address the subject’s relationship with the object. While the theoretical terms in which I articulate this relationship of similitude come from the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and his “flesh of the world,” my argument abuts the work of Leo Bersani whose resonant discussion of “homo-ness” indicates the ancillary questions of gender and sexuality in these texts, questions at which my discussion gestures but ultimately leaves opens for further inquiry. Part of this turn away from an explicit exploration of gender is motivated by my interest in objects and subjects together rather than, as in so many discussions of gender, with the subject’s relation to itself and the larger social world. When Bersani posits his concept of “homo-ness” as a “redefinition of sociality so radical that it may appear to require a provisional withdrawal from relationality itself” (7), he describes many moments of the argument to come, in which I take our engagement with the book as the ground for a re-engagement with the subject and objects in the world around us that seems to provide very little in the way of relationality or intimacy as we currently understand it. This is ultimately in the service of a kind of “objective intimacy,” by which I mean not an abstracted or universalized intimacy but rather an intimacy between subject and object based in what we will see is the subject’s fundamental homo-ness with the object world.

III. THE FLUID OBJECTS OF MODERNISM

The expansion and revision of reading that makes room for the readerly subject’s relationship to the bookish object finds its own literary example in an early story by Virginia Woolf, whose work as a printer for the Hogarth Press, which we will examine in more depth in Chapter 4, added a physical relationship with the object of the book to her intellectual labor of literary composition. While there has been much work done on the influence of small presses like the Hogarth, Woolf’s story “Solid Objects,” which she published in the Athenaeum in 1920, helps to articulate a different perspective on the role that the book played in the development of modernism. The story narrates the development of its main character’s obsession with the

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14 See Lawrence Rainey’s Institutions of Modernism: Literary Elites and Public Culture as well as Mark Morrison’s The Public Face of Modernism: Little Magazines, Audiences and Reception, 1905-1920 for this other approach to the development of modernism, which I address more explicitly later in the introduction.
flotsam and jetsam of modern life: after finding a “lump of glass” on the beach, John becomes increasingly focused on collecting various “objects” – “a piece of china of the most remarkable shape,” a “massy and globular” piece of iron – to the extent that he loses both a promising career in politics and social ties with his friends (Shorter Fiction 104; 106). The attention to objects that comprises the main drama of the story has subtle ramifications for my consideration of reading and its relation to the object of the book. For example, Woolf’s narrator relates how, “the lump of glass had its place upon the mantelpiece, where it stood heavy upon a little pile of bills and letters, and served not only as an excellent paper weight, but also as a natural stopping place for the young man’s eyes when they wandered from his book” (104). Despite the use of the term “book,” the description refers more to the way the lump of glass distracts John from his engagement with the book’s content – what we would call its text – as if to suggest that John’s interest in objects is at odds with the intellectual demands of reading. And, indeed, as the story goes on to describe his ever increasing captivation by these objects, it offers a corresponding decrease in his readerly interest: “The finest specimens [that he found] he would bring home and place upon his mantelpiece, where, however, their duty was more and more of an ornamental nature, since papers needing a weight to keep them down became scarcer and scarcer” (105). At the same time as his obsession with objects causes him to disregard his reading, however, it implicitly draws the broad contours of a different mode of engaging with reading “materials,” one, we might pun further, that imparts to paper a little more weight. The description of his reaction to the discovery of the glass fleshes out my point here: “it was impossible to say whether [the lump of glass] had been bottle, tumbler or window-pane….It pleased him; it puzzled him” (103). John cannot and does not “decipher” the glass – does not “read” it in the traditional, representational sense – for a larger significance. As the narrator observes, “it was nothing but glass” (103), the object’s transparency becomes exactly what John contemplates. This is very much like the kind of treatment which, we will see, the modernist novels I treat here call out for at certain moments – not for us to look through the normally transparent medium of the book to the textual system it transmits but for us to see and hold it, as if it too is an object which John finds and places on his mantelpiece. We might thus rephrases the narrator’s description of John’s reading and say that my discussion will show how the solid object of the book serves as a “natural stopping place” for my eyes when they wander from the text I am reading.

Both Douglas Mao and Bill Brown turn to “Solid Objects” – though ultimately in different ways – to offers accounts of modernism in terms that allow me to complement my discussion of modernism and twentieth-century media technologies with a more explicitly literary historical genealogy and its relationship to contemporaneous social and economic currents. Mao’s book, which shares its title with Woolf’s story, is an attempt to counter narratives of modernism that revolve around consumption and the relation to the commodity with one focused on production and the relation to the object. He examines what he calls the “peculiarly twentieth-century malady” of a “feeling of regard for the object as object,” as “elements of a material life whose significance can be compassed neither by what they stand for nor for their monetary worth” (4). Focusing on works by Wyndham Lewis, Ezra Pound, Wallace Stevens and, “most visibly,” Virginia Woolf, Mao finds the literary expression of this phenomenon in the way “the high modernists introduced into their writings a self-conscious contemplation of object qua object” that departs from “an older tradition in which the object appears principally as a signifier of something else or a component of scenic plenitude” (13). The effect is ultimately to create “a newer order in which [the object’s] value depends neither on
metaphoricity nor marginality‖ (13). The work which Mao stakes out for the category of the object in modernism involves, rather, an “immunity to thinking and knowing” that opposed “the phenomenon of subjectivity grown rapacious and fantastically powerful either with the help of or under the sway of science and expansionist capitalism” that Mao suggests distressed the writers and thinkers of this period (9). Yet, if the turn to the object is to counter “a vision of a modern age as one in which the particular, the concrete, and the auratic were threatened as never before by habits of generalization and abstraction” (6), Mao’s own appeal to the category of “the object” itself participates in a similar kind of generalizing, as if the specificity of objects matters less than their collective objectivity.

We can see the effects of this move when Mao turns to a discussion of a specific object, namely the object of the book with which we will see these writers and thinkers were intimately concerned. Discussing Woolf, he speaks, on the one hand, of the way that in *A Room of One’s Own* she brings “her narrator repeatedly into confrontation with pages, books, bookshelves and libraries,” but, on the other, disregards these volumes by abstracting their contents in his claim that “the text [is] regarded as a solid object” (37; 39). Additionally, when he makes the point that the common Shakespearean refrain that Septimus and Clarissa share in *Mrs. Dalloway* (“Fear no more…”) stems from the fact that “Septimus (who had been window shopping in the same area [as Clarissa]) had paused before the same words in the same book, open to *Cymbeline,*” he falls back repeatedly from a consideration of their common experience of the “solid object” to the words which they read (55). Despite his claim that “the volume in questions seems less a discourse approached from ‘within’ than a thing regarded from ‘without,’ an object that might mediate between two of its beholders as any other object [in *Mrs. Dalloway*] might,” he not only levels the specificity of the bookish object but he also falls back into textualist terms to conclude that “the reading of texts might constitute only one species of a more general reading of the object world” (55). The object world here – including the books that take their place in it – falls prey to a kind of rapacious readerly subjectivity that, as we saw with McGann, grasps everything in its path by transforming it into a language to be deciphered and comprehended. The claim I have made for modernism’s commitment to “mediation” allows me to tease out another kind of relationship with the object world by showing how these novels both describe and facilitate an experience of the book that sidesteps this kind of linguistic seizure and constitutes one species of a more general experience of the world itself.

The disregard of the experience of reading and its engagement with the object world is ultimately a function of the importance which Mao places on production in his account of modernism. For him, modernism develops out of a rejection of the focus on subjective experience that characterized the movement of aestheticism preceding it: “modernism reverses aestheticism’s tropes so as to emphasize making instead of absorbing, recording instead of experiencing, the enduring instead of the ephemeral, and the solid instead of the fluid” (19). As Mao attempts to shift the formation of modernism from subject-centered consumption to object-centered production, he sets up a series of oppositions – including one between the subject and the object – which break down when we consider the role which the object of the book plays in both the creation and reception of the high modernist novels of Proust, Joyce and Woolf. While he is sensitive to the fact that “it is very hard to think of the work of art as anything but a product of subjectivity’s action on the object world” and introduces a remarkably nuanced account of production in which “all doing seems undoing, all making seems unmaking in the end” (11), I show how the writers in my study temper the rapacious subjectivity by revealing its fundamental entanglement with the object world. As these novels draw attention to
their embodiment in the object of the book, they nuance rather than reverse the emphasis on subjective experience that Mao locates in the writing of the 1890s and ultimately interrogate the relationship between subject and object in a way that reorients the aestheticist emphasis on “experience” to include the role played by the object in its flux.

This is, in fact, the way Bill Brown reads “Solid Objects:” as “a story not about solidity, but about the fluidity of objects, about how they decompose and recompose themselves as the object of a new fascination” (“Secret” 3). In my argument, of course, this new fascination is with the book and its fluid place in our experience, a fascination that potentially places the book in the category of the “thing” which Brown distinguishes from the object. The thing, he writes, depends on “a fetishistic overvaluation or misappropriation, on an irregular if not unreasonable reobjectification of the object that dislodges it from the circuits through which it is what it typically is” (“Secret” 2-3). Elsewhere, Brown puts this in more quotidian terms: the thing is what we begin to confront when objects “stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production, distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily,” and we are able to glimpse what they might look like outside the subject-object trajectory (“Thing” 4). These fleeting glances of thingness are one way of characterizing what occurs at the moments of reading’s breakdown, when the book seems to break into and paralyze the readerly subjectivity as we come to “overvalue” the object on which the transmission of the text depends.

When Brown goes on to specify that “it is only in the subject/object nexus where [things] occur, or where they can be narrated as the effect (not the ground) of an interaction at once physical and psychological” (“Secret” 2), he hints at the important roles which the body and its senses (over which the subject has by no means complete control) play in my account of reading these high modernist novels. Though usually (and necessarily) disregarded, it is the sensory basis of reading to which these high modernist novels will appeal in granting us access to the thingness of books. In this light, the term “modernist aesthetics” returns to the emphasis on sensation and perception suggested by its etymology in the Greek aisthetikos, a return that offers a way to reconsider one of the earliest modernist manifestos – Joseph Conrad’s 1897 “Preface to the The Nigger of the ‘Narcissus’” – and the explicitly perceptual terms in which he describes the intended effect of his work. Famously, he writes, “My task which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word to make you hear, to make you feel – it is, before all, to make you see” (2017). Conrad expands on and complicates this commitment to sense perception when he continues,

All art, therefore, appeals primarily to the senses, and the artistic aim when expressing itself in written words must also make its appeal through the senses, if its high desire is to reach the secret spring of responsive emotions. Such an appeal to be effective must be an impression conveyed through the senses….It must strenuously aspire to the plasticity of sculpture, to the colour of painting, and to the magic suggestiveness of music (2017).

Given his claim in A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature for “the material specificity of reading, of engaging with things – books – that have ideas in them” (9), it is curious to notice Brown’s admission – for which he offers no explanation – that he has “noticeably ignored the thingness of books” (190n12).
The fact that he goes on to specify the “care for the shape and ring of sentences” (2017) as the way to make an approach “to plasticity, to colour” casts his comments in a metaphoric light and suggests that fiction has a sort of medium specificity that is exclusively linguistic – a reading that would, of course, be in line with the textualism which I am attempting to complicate. If Conrad is speaking in metaphorical terms here at the beginning of modernist experimentation in 1897, we will see how the more explicitly experimentalism of Proust’s, Joyce’s and Woolf’s novels of the 1920s and 30s capitalize on the potential literalism of his claim for fiction “to make you see.” In these novels, we will be able to understand his assertions to mean that effective writing draws attention to its own “plasticity” and its “color,” or, more specifically, to the material support (both “plastic” and, to a certain extent, “colorful”) on which written language depends. In what is perhaps the most extensive engagement with Conrad’s preface, Jesse Matz emphasizes the metaphorical thrust of Conrad’s rhetoric and argues that his use of the word “impression” in this passage refers to a kind of intermediate concept, a “unit of perception that conveys sensing into thinking” (140). For high modernism, however, Conrad’s description applies less to the “impression” as an abstract concept (indeed, in the argument to follow, it very much takes on, at moments, a concrete and literal meaning) than it does to the experience of reading, which our novels will reveal as the operation by which physical sensations (for instance, the perception of “monotonous black marks on a white page” which Scarry dismisses out of hand (5)) translate into ideas.

As the preface progresses, in fact, it makes its own literal turn when it claims that the “feeling” to which art is supposed to “awaken in the hearts of its beholders” is one “of unavoidable solidarity…which binds men to each other and all mankind to the visible world” (2017). Conrad expands this sentiment in the last paragraph of the essay: the aim of art is “To arrest, for the space of a breath, the hands busy about the work of the earth, and compel men entranced by the sight of distant goals to glance for a moment at the surrounding vision of form and color” (2018). Here, as art is meant to draw attention to the insistently visible external world which we all share, we might imagine his words describing a reader, engrossed in the plot of a novel, whose forward progress through the narrative is “arrested” for a moment as he comes into an awareness of the “form and color” of the book he is holding (“hands busy about work,” indeed). And, picking up on the dual definition of “mediation,” this material awareness also has the potential to lead to the kind of solidarity which Conrad specifies. This arrest and this feeling of solidarity are, we will see, what occur again and again in the novels I consider: from the encounter which Proust’s narrator has with François le Champi in the library of the Prince de Guermantes at the end of the novel through the unconventional page layout and experimental narrative structures of Jacob’s Room and The Waves to the radical inscrutabilities of Ulysses and Finnegans Wake, these novels both describe and enact pauses and hesitations in the experience of reading that each make their own kind of “impression” on the reader.

The enumeration of these particular modernist novels should indicate the specificity of this dissertation’s treatment of “modernism.” Rather than a redefinition of the period as a whole, I focus instead on one central strand of modernist literary production, the (hyper) experimentalism that has come to be known as “high modernism.” Not only have these works become a kind of synecdoche for modernism as such, but their stylistic innovations provide sustained challenges to conventional habits of reading. The varied styles of Ulysses, for instance, repeatedly shock the reader into new forms of awareness that we will see include attention to the object of the book itself and the reader’s relation to it. Yet, in what remains, even after almost twenty years, one of the most influential readings of modernism, Fredric Jameson posits
modernism’s wholesale commitment to the subject when he characterizes this strand as “the modernism of the isolated ‘genius,’ organized… around the great Work – the Book of the World” (*Postmodernism* 305). Jameson’s phrasing here leads into his claims about the high modernist investment in the “aesthetic as sheer autonomy,” the way the experimental novels seem to possess an independence and freedom from the outside forces of the social world, and he paints the picture of “Joyce in his rooms in Paris single-handedly produc[ing] a whole world, all by himself and beholden to no one” (307). When Jameson updates and expands on this reading in his 2007 volume *The Modernist Papers*, he implicitly offers the seeds for its reconsideration. For example, in his argument about *Ulysses*’ achievement of this autonomization of the aesthetic (what he also describes as the “quest for the Absolute”) (xix), Jameson describes the “radical depersonalization” of Joyce’s writing, how his play with language minimizes the agency of both the author and the reader so that the text becomes its own self-perpetuating machine. Continuing, he turns explicitly to the object of the book: “only a form of material unity is left, namely the printed book itself, and its material unity as a bound set of pages within which the cross-references…are contained” (146). As he puts it on the following page, with a nod to Clement Greenberg’s theory of modernist medium specificity, “the role of the book is functionally analogous, in Joyce, to the materialist dynamics of the other arts” (147).

Despite these pronouncements, Jameson continues to insist on an exclusively “textualist” perspective that elides the agency of objects which in my argument counters the all-powerful subject; another essay on both Joyce and Proust, in fact, characterizes the work of each as “a unified linguistic process, a mode of the production of language as it were, which seeks tirelessly to assimilate all the materials of the outside world into a specific style or linguistic medium” (172; italics added). The blindness to literature’s other medium, itself made of the materials from the outside world prevents Jameson from seeing that his phrase “the Book of the World” can be read to have a meaning other than a book that tries to create (“represent”) a new world. Rather, we might activate the objective aspect of the genitive to suggest that the novels I am considering take their place *within* rather than trying to transcend the world itself; they are precisely “of the world.”

In this light, my reading of high modernism offers a subtle reorientation of the debate surrounding modernism’s relationship to history. Most historicist arguments against modernist autonomy – what Charles Altieri calls “the most maligned of modernist principles” (2) – show modernism’s “worldliness” by elaborating the profound entanglement of the period’s literary production with contemporary market forces and economic structures, what we might call the “contextualist” approach. Thus, books like Lawrence Rainey’s *Institutions of Modernism* or Mark Morrison’s *The Public Face of Modernism* have made important arguments about the modernist habit of publishing in “little magazines” or in small publishing houses like Woolf’s Hogarth Press to break down the lingering assumption of high modernism’s antagonism to and insularity from market culture. For me, these historical conditions are part of a broader media consciousness that finds its specifically literary expression in modernist authors’ interest in and sensitivity to their works’ material formats. In developing ways to talk about the work of literature as embodied in the medium of the book, I am less interested in modernist literary production as a mediation of history than I am in its position in a history of mediation. The chiasmus between the two uses of “mediation” here should suggest that the two perspectives are not, in the least, mutually exclusive: the course of technological mediation is, obviously, also part of “history” more broadly conceived. My approach, however, articulates modernist historicity less in the “contextual” terms of politics or socioeconomics than in terms of the very aesthetics
which spark historicist critiques—“aesthetics” not contra but as history. In the arguments to come, “history” functions less on the macro-level of contemporaneous events and movements than on a micro-level of the time in which readerly experience occurs. As it draws attention to the reader’s perception of the work’s materiality, the “aesthetics” of the novels I discuss thus underscores the way the “solid objects” which transmit these novels unfold within the flow of time and participate in a kind of temporal fluidity distinct from the rigid objects of Mao’s study.

I ultimately suggest that one (heretofore overlooked) facet of history’s function in modernism is its exceedingly personal nature, perhaps a somewhat unexpected claim given the standard arguments about modernism’s impersonality and the focus on the object with which I have been countering the period’s purported subjectivism. What we will see, however, is that the famously universalizing and impersonal play with “form” leads to a very intimate and individual relationship to the novels’ formats, one that intertwines the life of the novels with that of their writer and readers. Moreover, the “personal” is by no means identical with the “subjective” but signifies, rather, the potential for a connection with the book that exceeds, even as it includes, human subjectivity. This “personal” reading of modernism finds its seeds in the singular relationships I elaborate between Proust, Joyce and Woolf and their compositions, relationships which ultimately function as a model for the kind of personal relationship which these works also facilitate for their readers. The kind of intimacy for which I am arguing finds its expression, in part, in the almost confessional tone of certain moments in the ensuing discussions. While somewhat of a departure from the norms of “formal” academic writing, these personal touches are meant to emphasize the way my argument finds its seeds in my private experience with these novels. While I subordinate discussions of identity categories like class, race and gender in my attempt to retool our investigation of literature in terms of mediation and often, in the coming chapters, refer to “the reader” in general, it is my belief—and my hope—that my points will speak to other readers even if they do not share my particular class, racial and gender coordinates. Indeed, this dissertation is an opportunity for me to mediate between my own specific subject position and my reader’s—to find a common ground in the experience of the book that my reader might be able to share with me despite the differences in the construction of our subjectivities. In this, the arguments I put forward are attempts at exploring the homo-ness to which our engagement with the book might open us by developing, to borrow the words of W. J. T. Mitchell, a kind of “medium theory” of relationality, a pun that suggests both the investigation of mediums that I have been outlining in this introduction and an embrace of a kind of middleness between identity and difference. Describing “a picture of theory in the middle instead of on top,” Mitchell locates theory “somewhere between the general and the particular” (“Medium Theory” 332), which is also, we will see, exactly the achievements of the novels I examine here. For, despite the accusations of totalization and universality which high modernism so often receives, these books also investigate the radically

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When, in a recent article whose title unwittingly speaks to my project here: “Why Modernist Claims for Autonomy Matter” (italics added), Charles Altieri argues that modernist autonomy is not an escape from nature but a recasting of art’s relation to the world, he takes some first steps toward reconciling historicist critiques of modernism like Jameson’s with a sensitivity to the formal coherence and internal logic of that period’s works. He explains the critical conflict succinctly by pointing out the way in which historicism relies on a radical separation of nature and culture. The “matter” of Altieri’s title is the most obvious meeting place of nature and culture, the point at which the two inescapably converge. As such, my consideration of the novel’s materiality is the point at which my argument meets and departs from the more specific “materialist” treatments of the period. Though my interest in perception in the arguments to come has an explicitly phenomenological bent, the historical contours I have been tracing here should suggest my awareness of the fact that perception itself is historical.
specific and the deeply private: we might consider *Ulysses*’ focus on June 16, 1904 or Proust’s extensive analysis of his intimate sensory experiences as inviting an analogously specific and private reading experience. We will see the way these novels call for a kind of identification – not identification between the reader and the subjects of the texts but of identification between a particular embodied reader and the *object* of the specific book he is reading.

My argument thus begins, in Chapter 1, “Sleeping with the Books of the *Recherche,*” with perhaps the most “intimate” of modernist narratives, namely Marcel Proust’s *In Search of Lost Time.* In the same way that Proust provides the first literary articulation in this dissertation of modernist media awareness, so too does he open my discussion of the materiality of the book, since it is his novel which describes, in terms both broadly abstract and intimately specific, the way the book’s status as an object functions for a reader. I show how the most peculiar of all of the narrator’s instances of “involuntary memory” – his encounter with George Sand’s *François le Champi* at the end of the novel – opens up an unexpectedly “material” account of the Proustian project. Far from trying to transcend the world by novelizing it, the project to “redeem lost time” which the narrator articulates at the end of the novel hinges on a recognition and embrace of material solidity. As the novel’s meditation on and valuation of the object of the book resonates with Proust’s own compositional tactics, the famous “paperoles” which he created by pasting pieces of paper onto the edges of his manuscript notebooks, it sketches an affective bond between the narrator and the book that also helps us to reread his relationship with Albertine by showing the importance which her body takes on for him. In so doing, the chapter broaches a number of the themes which my subsequent readings of the novels of Woolf and Joyce elaborate. Additionally, as the Proustian narrator shifts between the novelistic and essayistic registers – his recounting of events and his own perceptive analysis of them – he provides an opportunity for a theoretical articulation of literary experience that is not routed solely through the signifier. By mobilizing Melanie Klein’s account of object relations, on the one hand, and the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, on the other, I flesh out the consideration of “mediation” that I have been discussing and outline a critical stance that conditions the rest of the argument. Though the chapters that follow do not always use the theoretical vocabulary I employ in Chapter 1, the specters of Proust, Klein and Merleau-Ponty hover in the background of each of my arguments.

I follow this general account of the ways in which the novel’s status as an object in Proust takes on significance for its reader with four chapters that treat in succession specific aspects of the experience of the book, namely the reader, the print, the page and the binding. I begin with two chapters on the late works of Joyce that develop what I call a “reading of embodiment.” This double-edged genitive draws the distinct but interrelated contours of the two chapters as it signifies both the fact that reading, for all its intellectual orientation, is an embodied activity and that fact that we are always reading a text that is itself embodied in a material object. Chapter 2, “The Embodied Reader of *Ulysses*,” plots how Joyce’s novel progressively draws attention to the agency of the body and its relationship to the book in the process of reading. I focus on the “Sirens” episode and suggest how it brings together, for the novel’s reader, what I show are Stephen Dedalus’ and Leopold Bloom’s respective over-emphases on the operation of the intellectual and physical in the act of reading. Ultimately, I argue that Sirens illustrates a kind of vacillation between these two poles and asks the reader to treat his reading material as both a text to be read and an object to be sensed. If *Ulysses* helps me to elaborate the identificatory aspects of the relationship between my body as a reader and the book I am reading, Chapter 3, “The Dark Print of *Finnegans Wake,*” focuses less on the body of
the reader than on that of the book itself. Drawing on John Bishop’s influential reading of the *Wake* as Joyce’s “book of the dark,” I argue that the work’s multi-lingual puns and portmanteaux – along with its typographical play – highlight the agency of its “dark print” in literary experience. In the pages of the *Wake*, letters themselves take on a kind of volume as they function as the “literal” bodies of its main “characters,” especially HCE and his son Shem (the “obscure” stand-in for Joyce himself). Reading the *Wake* thus becomes an exercise in perspective and “depth perception” that opens up the act of reading, usually conceived as the work of an individual mind, as a much more communal and collective activity, one that, as in the many *Finnegans Wake* reading groups, we can do together.

As Chapters 2 and 3 articulate the affective relationship with the book of *François le Champi* that Proust describes in terms of the body, they set the stage for a broader discussion of relationality as such in *Jacob’s Room* and *The Waves*. By focusing on these novels, I develop the interest in objects by which Woolf complements her more obvious interest in subjectivity and provide a renewed understanding of the corpus of her work (and of her works) that views *Jacob’s Room* and *The Waves* as at least as important as the novels that have comes to stand as trademark’s of the Woolfian project. Chapter 4, “The Pages in *Jacob’s Room*,” considers the novel’s unconventional page layout, which was significantly tied to the inauguration of the Hogarth Press in 1917 and asks how Woolf’s awareness of and play with the appearance of the printed page resonate with her novel’s portrayal of efforts at “knowing” someone. As an explicit meditation on intimacy, my reading of the novel intervenes in discussions of literary ethics and suggests that the reader-print relationship which the novel facilitates (or, better, which it “mediates”) reveals a more capacious kind of relationality that exceeds the strictly interpersonal by situating it within the larger affiliation we have with the external, non-human world. Chapter 5, “The Binding of *The Waves*,” which also serves as the dissertation’s conclusion, treats the way that the turning of the novel’s bound pages comes to index the passing of time which its curious interludes represent. In this way, *The Waves* underscores the persistence of the object world that undergirds – and exceeds – the reader’s subjective experience of the novel. In *The Waves*, however, what persists is precisely the passing of time itself, a transience that impinges on subject and object alike and serves as the ground for a form of community that includes them both.

Though these explorations of the body, finitude, intimacy and relationality might appear to drift somewhat from the overt discussion of the Kindle and the book, I suggest that they are an inextricable part of a meditation on mediation. Indeed, they bring together the various definitions of the term “mediation” that I have discussed. If the repeated claims for the “death of the book” are a sign that the book is itself somewhat alienated by the rise of “new” media, the issues which these modernist novels open up work to mediate between the technologies at play today. In other words, as the dynamics of the modernist novel draw attention to the book as itself a unique and specific medium, they carve out a space for the book among the other forms of mediation which are seen as challenging it. These chapters – with their respective meditations on the reader, print, page and binding – come to constitute this space, since, taken together, they form their own kind of “reading volume.” In doing so, however, they do not reassert the book’s cultural privilege or denigrate today’s new technologies; this is not, let me be clear, a Luddite dismissal of the Kindle and digital media. Rather, I create this space as a way to articulate how the “old” medium of the book is still highly relevant to an increasingly technologized world that seems to contain no end of “new” things.
Sleeping with the Books of the Recherche

My father tells the story – lost, as it is, to my own memory – of a game of trash-can basketball that he set up for me and the other children in the daycare he ran when I was small. He left us to check on something in the house, and, when he returned, I had disappeared. The other children said that I had gone inside, and so he found me sitting at a small table in our playroom. There I was, diligently and deliberately practicing my handwriting. The sweeping curves and solid lines of the written alphabet must have engaged me more than bouncing a ball in the afternoon sun, so it is no surprise that I find myself so taken by the scene of reading towards the beginning of Marcel Proust’s À la Recherche du temps perdu in which the narrator also eschews playing outside for the solitary excitement of a rendezvous with the written word. I begin with this personal mini-narrative as a way to explain the driving motivation behind the argument of this chapter, which intertwines an overview of Proust’s novel with discussions of two theorists, Melanie Klein and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. If learning to write – like learning to read – is a process in which we are trained to look beyond the visual signifier to some kind of transcendent meaning, what was our relationship to those signifiers before we knew how to decipher them? This chapter explores – in terms both concrete and abstract – how the sensory aspects of the relationship with written signifiers suggested by my childhood anecdote might endure in the well-rehearsed decoding that makes up the Proustian narrator’s (not to mention my own) reading practices.

I bring together Proust, Klein and Merleau-Ponty in order to offer a preliminary elaboration of the agency of the book in reading and to explore a model of literary experience that is not – or not only – routed through the concept of the signifier. While my argument here does not discount the advances articulated by structuralism and poststructuralism, it supplements (I choose the word judiciously) those perspectives with an account of the role which the sense perception of the book as an object plays in our experience of reading. There is perhaps no better work to think about these issues than Proust’s, since it is, at bottom, an extended analysis of both sensory phenomena and the creation of a book. My treatment of Proust revolves around – but does not necessarily always focus on – the material significance of his own literary creation, the fact that his novel is, itself, made of paper, ink and glue. In other words, I wonder about the extent to which the material embodiment of Proust’s text has a significance for our relationship to it, how the fact that Proust’s work insists on its own status as an object can be taken into account in discussing the way we approach it as readers. The emphasis on the material is perhaps unexpected for a writer like Proust who is famous for his stringent idealism. Yet, in the introduction to his translation of Ruskin’s Sesame and Lilies, he claims that “Reading is at the threshold of spiritual life; it can introduce us to it; it does not constitute it” (“Reading” 116). The image of the threshold suggests that reading links the spiritual to some other sphere, a sphere which his novel shows is the material world in which the object of the book takes its place.

I begin my account of the agency of the book by exploring two moments in his novel in which the material embodiedness of a book takes on significance for the novel’s narrator.

17 In his Proust and Signs, Gilles Deleuze offers perhaps the most “spiritually” centered account of Proust’s work in the way it traces the narrator’s progressive “apprenticeship” in overcoming his “objectivism” and finding transcendental “essences” (See Ch. 3 and 4). My account focuses on the privileged place which the object of the book – an explicit bearer of signs which the rest of world carries only implicitly – holds in Proust’s work.
namely the night spent reading *François le Champi* with his mother as a young boy and his later discovery of that volume in the Guermantes’ library. I also bring my discussion of these moments into conversation with an account of Proust’s own significantly idiosyncratic and complex compositional habits in his manuscript notebooks, the way his expansion of the novel entails a move away from linguistic signification (discursive directions to his editor on the placement of additional passages) to material manipulation (the creation of his famous “paperoles” via the pasting of loose sheets onto the edges of his notebook pages). In doing so, I appeal to the work of Melanie Klein whose theoretical vocabulary of “object relations” offers terms that clarify the complicated relational dynamics in which the novel’s narrator finds himself. Specifically, Klein’s formulation of the “depressive” position describes the kind of relationships which the narrator has both with his mother and, more interestingly, with the book as an object.\(^\text{18}\) We will see how these moments contain an implicit emphasis on the body of the reader as the means by which he approaches the object of the book. As this emphasis on the body becomes explicit in the descriptions of the narrator’s relationship with Albertine’s sleeping body in *The Captive*, I turn to these moments as a complement to the discussions of the narrator’s encounters with the volume of *François le Champi*. In so doing, I also move away from Klein, for whom the body plays a very limited role, to the embodied phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty and expand on the agency of embodiment – both readerly and bookish – in literary experience.

In drawing connections back and forth across the thematic content of the novel (which we “read”) and its material existence as an object (which we “sense”), I implicitly address what I see as the main thematic of the *Recherche*: the relation between art and life, between the art work and the world which it represents and in which, I propose, it also takes its place. Leo Bersani’s early work *Marcel Proust: The Fictions of Life and Art* remains, as its title proclaims, the most explicit formulation of this relation. In his introduction, in fact, Bersani writes, “If I had to sum up *À la Recherche du temps perdu* in one sentence, I would say that it shows how the disappointments the narrator suffers as a result of his extraordinarily rich imagination lead him to give up novelizing in life in order to reminisce about the way he used to novelize, in art” (17). Bersani’s argument here makes a qualitative distinction between “art” and “life,” a distinction that allows him to make a later argument against claims for what he calls the “redemptive virtues of literature” in which Proust (and Klein) take center stage. These virtues consist of the belief that “a certain type of repetition of experience in art repairs inherently damaged or valueless experience… that the work of art has the authority to master the presumed raw material of experience in a manner that uniquely gives value to, perhaps even redeems, that material” (1). The distinction between art and life on which Bersani’s characterization of the culture of redemptions relies points to the extent to which he conceives of Proust’s art in only representational terms: it “repeats” (or represents) experience, but does not, itself, provide any kind of experience. As we will see, however, Proust’s novel shows the way that art is actually a part of life, that, in other words, it transmits its own kind of experience which can only be articulated within the framework of “mediation” that I discussed in my introduction.\(^\text{19}\) As I develop the role that the material book

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\(^\text{18}\) In her essay, “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading,” Eve Sedgwick also appeals to Klein’s model, though, in my view, mobilizes an overly simplified version of it by conflating the depressive position with the acts of reparation which accompany it. As we will see, Proust’s novel helps to parse these complicated dynamics more precisely.

\(^\text{19}\) Bersani’s argument also condemns Kleinian object relations for a similar drive to “redemption.” In his recent article “Mourning and Subjectivity: From Bersani to Proust, Klein, and Freud,” L. Scott Lerner gives a detailed analysis of Bersani’s argument (in particular, the way the latter’s departure from standards translations of Proust’s work lay the
plays in this mediation of literary experience, I extend the claims made by Antoine Compagnon that the *Recherche* is “a novel of the in-between” (6). Not only is the *Recherche* “in between” the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, the genre of the novel and the essay, the fictional and the biographical in the senses that Compagnon’s argument details, but it is also an attempt to show the way in which the creation of art functions not as a transcendence of the material world but as an action that takes place within the confines of the world. It does this, as I will suggest, by showing how artistic creation is also “in between” the material and the immaterial, indeed, how it mediates between them.

I.

I begin towards the end of Proust’s work, which is also its own kind of ambiguous or retroactive beginning, with the famous series of sensory experiences that instigate the artistic project by which he hopes to redeem his lost time. Samuel Beckett describes this sequence of events succinctly, if somewhat problematically, thus: “the germ of the Proustian solution is contained in the statement of the problem itself. The source and point of departure of this ‘sacred action,’ the elements of communion, are provided by the physical world, by some immediate and fortuitous act of perception” (36). It is interesting to note that, in the list of the narrator’s “fetishes” which Beckett goes on to assemble and which extends from the taste of the madeleine and the sight of the steeples of Martinville through the feel of uneven paving stones, the clink of the spoon on the tray, the brush of a napkin on the narrator’s face, the noise of water moving in pipes and the encounter with George Sand’s *François le Champi*, he includes sensory descriptions in almost all but the instance involving the volume of Sand. This omission of sensation in relation to the novel stems from the opposition which Beckett’s qualification of these perceptual acts as “immediate” sets up with the explicitly mediated nature of books themselves. In describing “immediate acts of perception,” Beckett renders impossible the application of a sensory verb to an object like a novel: “seeing” a novel is not part of our habitual understanding of what one does with such an object. Rather, of course, we *read* novels, an action which is anything but “immediate.”

Beckett thus unintentionally indicates the fact that the narrator’s encounter with the novel is actually quite different from the series of perceptual acts which precede it. Critical accounts of the encounter with the novel either follow Beckett and elide the strangeness and specificity of sensorially encountering a book by folding it into a general account of the cascading series of events that spark the closing revelations of *Recherche*, or they focus on the significance of the content of Sand’s novel. The critical homogenization of these moments takes its cue from the novel itself, which collapses each of the specific experiences into an instance of a more general resurrection of the past; though the moments themselves are different, they all function in the same way. I quote, as is so often necessary with Proust, at length:

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20 Both Margaret Gray and Julia Kristeva, for instance, tease out the Oedipal drama and incestuous relationships that form the novel’s plot to define the mysterious quality which literature takes on for the narrator. See Gray’s *Postmodern Proust*, especially Chapter 6, “Skipping Love Scenes: Marcel’s Repression of Literature” (pp. 138-151) as well as the second chapter of Kristeva’s *Proust and the Sense of Time*, “In Search of Madeleine” (pp. 29-49).
So often, in the course of my life, reality had disappointed me because at the instant when my senses perceived it my imagination, which was the only organ that I possessed for the enjoyment of beauty, could not apply itself to it, in virtue of that ineluctable law which ordains that we can only imagine what is absent. And now, suddenly, the effect of this harsh law had been neutralized, temporarily annulled, by a marvelous expedient of nature which had caused a sensation — the noise made both by the spoon and by the hammer, even the title of a book, for instance — to be mirrored at one and the same time in the past, so that my imagination was permitted to savor it, and in the present, where the actual shock to my senses of the noise, the touch of the linen napkin, or whatever it might be [etc.], had added to the dreams of the imagination the concept of ‘existence’ which they usually lack, and through this subterfuge had made it possible for my being to secure, to isolate, to immobilize — for a moment brief as a flash of lightning — what normally it never apprehends: a fragment of time in a pure state. The being which had been reborn in me… is nourished only by the essence of things, in these alone does it find its sustenance and delight (III: 905; italics added).21

The phrase “whatever it might be” draws out, more explicitly than that “etc.” of the French original, the detachment from and indifference to the specificity of the experience that brings about this shock in the narrator. This affect is due, in part, to the fact that the narrator cannot choose which experiences will elicit a reaction of this kind; they are wholly dependent on chance and accident. At the same time, however, this indifference also stems from the interchangeability of the various moments, the way that, in the end, every moment provides the same essential experience. Bersani describes this fact in succinct terms: “art in Proust is, at least ideally, truth liberated from phenomena” (Redemption 13). He elaborates on this ideal and asks, “In what mode do phenomena persist in the record of their essence? In a sense, La Recherche moves toward a relatively simple answer to that question: in the later volumes, the phenomenal is more and more absorbed into the universally valid formula, the general law” (11). It is against this kind of idealizing moves that he directs the main argument of The Culture of Redemption.

Indeed, the narrator make this kind of idealization explicit when he describes the “process of decipherment” by which he abstracts the transcendental essence of his sensory experiences. Given the fact that these pronouncement are made within a literary text, it is especially interesting to note the explicitly readerly terms which the narrator uses to describe his general treatment of sensation. He writes,

No doubt the process of decipherment was difficult, but only by accomplishing it could one arrive at whatever truth there was to read. For the truths which the intellect apprehends directly in the world of full and unimpeded light have something less profound, less necessary than those which life communicates to us against our will in an impression [en une impression] which is material [matérielle] because it enters us through the senses but yet has a spiritual meaning [l’esprit] which it is possible for us to extract…. the task was to interpret the given

21 The Moncrieff translation omits the phrase, italicized here, “even the title of the book.” The original French, however, enumerates the “expedients of nature which had caused a sensation” thus: “bruit de la fourchette et du marteau, même titre de livre, etc.” (2266).
sensations as signs [signes] of so many laws and ideas, by trying to think – that is to say, to draw forth from the shadow – what I had merely felt, by trying to convert it into its spiritual equivalent. And this method, which seemed to me the sole method, what was it but the creation of a work of art? (III: 912).

Here, the unambiguous vocabulary of reading and interpretation, the conception of sensory experiences as “signs,” the call to “convert” a “material” sensation to a “spiritual” equivalent all suggest the way the narrator treats his experience in representational terms. He “reads” the world and turns it into a text that communicates, as he puts it in the previous sentence, “something of a quite different kind… some thought which [the signs] translated after the fashion of those hieroglyphic characters which at first one might suppose to represent only material objects” (912). This transformation of the world into a text is virtually synonymous with the “redemptive” project that Bersani describes as a desire to reconstruct experience in an ideal realm. This move thus exemplifies what Bersani calls a “devaluation of historical experience” (Redemption 1): that is, in the eyes of the narrator, lived experience is both inherently inferior to and in the service of an experience which has been translated into art. Presentation is only the handmaiden to representation.

The situation grows considerably more complicated, however, when the very “material object” whose sensation the narrator wants to textualize is itself a printed text. A closer examination of the narrator’s encounter with George Sand’s book in the library of the Prince de Guermantes thus outlines the singular place which the object of the book has in this cascade of “involuntary memories.” If the majority of these memories cause him to attempt to think what he “merely feels,” the object of the book transposes this and asks him to feel what he usually thinks. I quote, once more, at length:

As I entered the library where I had been pursuing this train of thought [regarding the creation of a work of art] I had remembered what the Goncourts say about the magnificent first editions which it contains and promised myself that I would look at them while I was waiting. And all this while, without paying much attention to what I was doing, I had been taking first one and then another of the precious volumes from the shelves, when suddenly, at the moment when I carelessly opened one of them – it was George Sand’s François le Champi – I felt myself unpleasantly struck by an impression which seemed at first to be utterly out of harmony with the thoughts that were passing through my mind, until a moment later, with an emotion so strong that tears came to my eyes, I recognized how very much in harmony with them it was. Imagine a room in which a man has died, a man who rendered great services to his country; the undertaker’s men are getting ready to take the coffin downstairs and the dead man’s son is holding out his hand to the last friends who are filing past it; suddenly the silence is broken by a flourish of trumpets beneath the windows and he feels outraged, thinking that this must be some plot to mock and insult his grief; but presently this man who until this moment has mastered his emotions dissolves into tears, for he realizes that what he hears is the band of a regiment which has come to share in his mourning and to pay honor to his father’s corpse. Like this dead man’s son, I had just recognized how completely in harmony with the thought in my mind was this painful impression which I had experienced when I had seen
this title on the cover of a book in the library of the Prince de Guermantes, for it was a title which after a moment’s hesitation had given me the idea that literature did really offer us that world of mystery which I had ceased to find in it (III: 918-919).

The “moment’s hesitation” to which the narrator refers divides this experience into two parts: the first is the encounter with the book, characterized by the feeling of being “unpleasantly struck by an impression,” while the second is the interpretation of that encounter, the generation of the “idea that literature did really offer us that world of mystery.” The contrast between the sensory and intellectual dimensions suggested by the words “impression” and “idea,” respectively, points to the way the narrator abstracts from his sensory experience to a more ideal realm. In effect, the narrator treats the book as one more experience from which to extract a transcendental essence.

Despite the fact that Jesse Matz takes Proust as the basis for the concept of the “impression” through which he reads all of modernism, he completely elides the distinction which I find in Proust’s discussion here. For Matz, the impression is synonymous with Proust’s abstracted internal essence (what this passage construes as the “idea”), an understanding that leads him to overlook the specificity of the agency of physical sense perception. Thus, he writes of the “dream of a literary Impressionist – the production of a book which bypasses all the interference that our perceptual categories place between reality and writing” (10). As we will see, this passage seems to suggest that the impression is precisely the interference which Matz (like the narrator himself) wants to think away. Indeed, the lengthy metaphor in the passage helps to distinguish between these different parts by introducing a narrative delay that mimics the “moment’s hesitation” that precedes the narrator’s own cognition and conceptualization of the title of Sand’s novel. As the metaphor impedes the progress of the narrative and allows the reader to linger in that moment before the narrator comprehends and conceptualizes his preliminary vague physical “impression” into more specific, intellectual terms, it elaborates the sensory dimension initially at play for the narrator. Not only does reading the book’s title perform a role analogous to the overtly sensory experiences which precede it, but the comparison with the “flourish of trumpets” by which the son is shocked alludes this cerebral act with sensation even more closely. That is, the fact that the son – who seems to exhibit a level of inattention to the coffin that resonates with the narrator’s absent-minded survey of the books – is jarred by this “flourish of trumpets” underscores the sensory aspect of the verb “look at [regarder],” an aspect which might otherwise be eclipsed by its idiomatic usage as a synonym for “examine” in both French and English. Moreover, the comparison of the narrator’s visual stimulus with the musical metaphor suggests that the intellectual act of reading depends on bringing together multiple sensory registers, both the visual and the aural, while the echo of “press” in the word “impression” suggests that the register of touch is also in play to a certain extent. This passage thus indicates that, far from being purely mental, reading is actually a radically sensory experience, and, accordingly, the description of being “struck” by an “impression” takes on an insistently physical connotation.

Moreover, this “impression which first seems to be out of harmony with the thoughts that were passing through [his] mind” is much closer to an actual “world of mystery” than the “idea” which the reading of the title offers, as if the repetition of the word “impression” suggests an alliance between that “world of mystery” and the “press” of a yet-to-be-cognized physical sensation. Interestingly, the unpleasantness and disharmony of this “impression”
contrasts sharply with the joy and happiness that were hallmarks of his previous thoughts about
immortality and the purified essence of time. It is thus fitting that the metaphor which extends
this moment of displeasure revolves around grief, death and loss. As it illustrates the way the
sensory experience of the trumpets leads the grieving son to a recognition of his loss that
overpowers the taming of emotions for which social conventions like a wake were designed, the
metaphor suggests the way sensation potentially undercuts the binding effects of our lexical
habits. Since the deciphering of signifiers here leads less to the disembodiment which the
narrator finds in the earlier moments than to an emphasis on the empirical (and hence finite)
body, it also brings him face to face with loss and his own finitude. It is no surprise then that
narrator finds the initial “impression” “unpleasant” and inharmonious with the rest of his train
of thought until he is able to abstract himself from the experience.

The disavowal of death implied in this idealizing abstraction recalls the narrator’s earlier
experience as a child going to sleep with François le Champi. The similarities between the two
moments occur most explicitly in the description of the way the dead man’s son loses “mastery
of himself [maître de soi]” which is also a fitting characterization of the dissolution of self which
the narrator experiences in going to sleep in the opening of the novel. He writes of “the sleep
which lay heavy on the furniture, the room, the whole of which I formed but an insignificant
part and whose insensibility I should very soon return to share” (I: 4). The unconsciousness of
sleep, that is, dissolves the boundary between subject and object and effectively destroys the
narrator’s own subjectivity as he simply becomes one of the “insensible” objects which surround
him. For him, it is a kind of precursor of death, a terrifying harbinger of nothingness: “my sleep
was so heavy as completely to relax my consciousness… and when I awoke in the middle of the
night, not knowing where I was, I could not even be sure who I was” (I: 5). He continues on to
claim that “I had only the most rudimentary sense of existence,” which we might rephrase, “I
could not even be sure if I was.”

Indeed, Serge Doubrovsky has noticed the way that “this ego is a pure non-ego” (3), the
way it becomes identified with the subjects of the book the narrator is reading as he falls asleep:
“a church, a quartet, the rivalry between François I and Charles V” (I: 3). The strange
descriptions of liminality in the opening pages of the Recherche, of an ego that is trying to
recognize its own dissolution into unconsciousness, resonates with Klein’s hypotheses about the
earliest developments of the ego. As she describes the way in which “the early ego largely lacks
cohesion, and a tendency towards integration alternates with a tendency towards disintegration,
a falling into bits,” she effectively formulates the novel’s opening moments into the separate
tendencies which, relying on consciousness, the narrator himself cannot fully describe (179).
When she relates this alternation between integration and disintegration to the ego’s ability to
deal with anxiety, the way the latter “arises from the operation of the death instinct within the
organism, is felt as fear of annihilation (death) and takes the form of fear of persecution” (179),
she gives an implicit account of the way the narrator’s “bedroom became the fixed point on
which [his] melancholy and anxious thoughts were centered” (9).

The defense mechanisms of the early ego against this kind of anxiety are numerous and
complicated but, according to Klein, often involve both a projection outward of the destructive
impulse of the death drive and an introjection of both good and bad objects, the former of
which offer it resources against its anxiety. This kind of introjection closely describes the
narrator’s experience of his mother’s goodnight kiss. If the disappearance of self terrifies the
narrator as a young boy, it is only the mother’s kiss that can counter this disintegration into
nothingness with a reassuring presence. He writes of “the calm and serenity she had brought

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me a moment before, when she had bent her loving face down over my bed, and held it out to me like a host for an act of peace-giving communion in which my lips might imbibe her real presence and with it the power to sleep” (14). The metaphor of “communion” almost explicitly indicates the way in which the young narrator wants to take his mother’s “real presence” into himself as a kind of guarantee of his existence. In doing so, the narrator receives “the power to sleep,” as if, with his mother’s reassurance, the narrator can somehow accept and tolerate the anxiety which accompanies the dissolution of his self.

The language of “imbibing” here points to the insistently oral orientation of this relationship, a cannibalistic orality which destroys at the same time as it incorporates. Klein writes that, with this oral orientation, the subject “finds himself constantly impelled to repeat the incorporation of the good object, partly because he dreads that he has forfeited it by his cannibalism” (119). Accordingly, the narrator describes how “sometimes when, after kissing me, she opened the door to go, I longed to call her back, to say to her ‘Kiss me just once more’” (14). The narrator thus cannot completely rely on the guarantee he receives from her kiss, since it does not persist beyond the moment in which he receives it. In effect, his reception of it is synonymous with its destruction. Additionally, the narrator’s specification that it was “her loving face” with which he communizes suggests that he is only introjecting her as what Klein calls a “partial object,” as opposed to relating to her as a “whole object.” The distinction Klein makes here refers to the (in)ability of the infant to recognize that a part of the mother – say her breast, her face or her hand – belongs to a whole person who lives an independent existence from the infant. Partial object relations are the condition of what Klein calls the paranoid position, since the infant can only cognize the existence of the object in relation to itself and its own survival.

Klein also suggests that this kind of destructive oral introjection results in anxiety over the fear of “retaliatory attacks” from the object the infant has devoured (97). She goes on to postulate this anxiety as the origin of symbol formation in the infant since it “contributes to make [the infant] equate the organs in question with other things” in order to escape the unpleasurable feelings (97). It is George Sand’s François le Champi that becomes the object by which the narrator escapes his anxiety and symbolizes his mother’s presence. On that exceptional night when the narrator’s mother stays with him in his room, she offers him an early birthday gift of books from his grandmother to calm him down and pass the night: “Mamma went to fetch a parcel of books of which I could not distinguish, through the paper in which they were wrapped, any more than their short, wide format but which, even at first glimpse, brief and obscure as it was, bade fair to eclipse the paintbox of New Year’s Day and the silkworms of the year before” (42). Contrasting gifts like the “paintbox” and the “silkworms” with the “short, wide format” of the books highlights the way the former, by their nature, expend themselves in their use. As such, they align themselves with the kind of orality which vitiates the sustained power of the mother’s good night kiss.

The books, on the other hand, present a different situation to his imagination. The narrator elaborates and reports that, for him, “a new book was not one of a number of similar objects but, as it were, a unique person, absolutely self-contained” and, in language which the later encounter in the Guermantes’ library will reiterate, how the “reddish cover and incomprehensible title [of François le Champi] gave it, for me, a distinct personality and a mysterious attraction” (44). In distinguishing the book from other objects, the narrator effectively exhibits the paranoid defense mechanisms of splitting and idealization that can preserve it from becoming itself a cause of anxiety for him. Klein describes these mechanisms
thus: “Idealization is bound up with the splitting of the object, for the good aspects are exaggerated as a safeguard against the fear of the persecuting breast;” idealization aims, she goes on, “at unlimited gratification and therefore create[s] the picture of an inexhaustible and always bountiful breast – an ideal breast” (182). The book thus becomes a kind of metonymic stand-in for the ideal breast or, in this case, for the mother’s face. The self-containment with which the narrator idealizes the book, the valorization of the way it encloses a mobile plot in its “reddish cover” and “short, wide format,” suggests that it can quiet his anxiety precisely because, he imagines, it persists through time. Though the narrative it contains might press ever forward (like time itself), the object of the book offers to his mind a kind of transcendent permanence. Yet this idealization depends on another kind of splitting, namely the separation of the book as an object from the narrative it contains. (This echoes, of course, the splitting of the book and text which Derrida makes in Of Grammatology.)

If this kind of reassurance is what the narrator desires from the “presence” of his mother, a closer examination shows the way that the mother’s reading aloud nuances the idealized conception of the book. As such, it also shows how both this “presence” and the reassuring density of the book are actually predicated on an experience of loss and absence. This is the case not only because the narrator’s mother skips the love scenes of the novel as she reads, a fact which Margaret Gray has discussed, but also because of the way her voice interacts with the text of Sand’s novel. The narrator observes that his mother “supplied all the natural tenderness, all the lavish sweetness which they demanded to the sentences which seemed to have been composed for her voice” (45). Though, at first glance, it seems that the mother’s voice takes the lead in imparting affective significance to the sentences of Sand’s novel, she does so in response to their “demand.” That is, her voice does not communicate its emotion directly but works in tandem with the sentences. Language and the voice here work as mediums for each other; they interpenetrate each other as the sentences embody the emotion of the voice to the same extent that the voice expresses the emotion of the sentences. This interpenetration – what we will see Merleau-Ponty call the chiasm – underscores the way in which the significance of the novel depends on the fact that neither the language of the novel nor, even, the mother’s voice is a perfectly transparent medium for the transmission of a narrative. Rather, they both have a certain opacity that precludes complete transmission.

The narrator also seems to appeal to a kind of opacity, in fact, when he goes on to recount how his mother “smoothed away, as she read, any harshness or discordance in the tenses of the verbs… guiding the sentence that was drawing to a close towards the one that was about to begin, now hastening, now slackening the pace of the syllables so as to bring them, despite their differences of quantity, into a uniform rhythm, and breathing into this quite ordinary prose a kind of emotional life and continuity” (46). As the language here casts the text of Sand’s novel in terms which could just as easily apply to the object of the book that is its material support, it suggests a kind of ‘objectification’ of it. Here, that is, as the mother’s delivery adjusts the “differences” by which signification functions, it massages the text as if it contained a kind of solidity that can be “smoothed” and a depth that can receive and incarnate an affective charge, a “kind of emotional life.” The nature of this solid object is a peculiar one, however, since the description indicates not a complete condensation of the syllables into an undifferentiated mass but rather a certain kind of managing of the gaps between them that seems to create a continuity based on discontinuity. In other words, as her voice guides the sentences “towards” each other, it creates what we might think of as a prepositional relationship that does not elide the gap between them, but rather maintains it in a way that highlights the fact....
that these gaps are not separate from but part of, indeed the condition of, the delivery of the text. I want to emphasize here the way in which these gaps function not so much as an impediment to but as the enabling conditions of both communication and, indeed, “communion” between the narrator and his mother. Though these circumstances elude the consciousness of the narrator, this moment lays the groundwork for a more “depressive” relationship to the book, a treatment of it less as a totalized object – a la Derrida’s descriptions of it – than as one that itself participates in the kind of aporetic structure by which the language of its text also functions.

Indeed, Klein describes how the movement to the depressive position “forms the foundation of that situation called loss of the loved object.” Yet, she specifies that “Not until the object has been lived as a whole can its loss be felt as a whole” (118; italics original). With its ‘object-ifying’ description of Sand’s novel, the narrator’s account of his mother’s reading suggests a kind of intersection of the text and the book, the way he experiences the volume in its entirety, or, to pun slightly, en bloc. However, by the time of his emotional response in the library of the Guermantes, when he feels an “emotion so strong that tears came to [his] eyes” at the sight of Sand’s book, he seems to exhibit the hallmark of the depressive position, namely, “feelings of sorrow and concern for loved objects, the fears of losing them and the longing to regain them” in addition to the fears and anxieties about the destruction of the ego which constitute the paranoid position (151). Klein goes on, “while grief is experienced to the full and despair is at its height, the love for the object wells up” (163). The narrator here exemplifies Klein’s description of mourning as a simultaneous experience of despair and love that indicates the different affective orientation towards loss implied by the depressive position. He thus becomes aware of his own limits without needing to deny their existence or disavow their importance. Indeed, the lengthy metaphor involving the son’s grief at his father’s funeral seems to portray a state very close to this.

It is also this kind of relation which the narrator ultimately (if unconsciously) describes by connecting his encounter with François le Champi with other perceptual moments of involuntary memory. Referring to the theory of memory which explains the fact that, for example, the madeleine evokes Combray so strongly, he writes, “And this is true of everything that we see again after a lapse of time, books in this respect behaving just like other things: the way in which the covers of a binding open, the grain of a particular paper, may have preserved in itself as vivid a memory of the fashion in which I once imagined Venice and of the desire that I had to go there as the actual phrases of the book. An even more vivid memory perhaps, for phrases sometimes are an obstruction” (III: 921; emphasis added). It is interesting to notice the alliance the narrator draws between the material aspects of the book – “the way in which the covers of a binding open” and “the grain of a particular paper” – and the memory of a past experience. Though the qualifier “vivid” suggests a kind of presentness and vitality, as if the past moment returns completely, the specification of the “lapse of time” on which memory itself is predicated indicates that the material aspects of the book actually highlight the passing of time, the “vividly” non-transcendental nature of his experience. This is thus the very opposite of the

22 The Kleinian model is quite complex since her term “position” is meant to indicate an instability and fluctuation which a term like “stage” or “phase” turns into a unidirectional progression. This instability speaks to the way the depressive position exceeds but does not obliterate the paranoid position. Rather, when Klein writes “I consider the depressive state as being the result of a mixture of paranoid anxiety and of those anxiety contents, distressed feelings and defences which are connected with the impending loss of the whole loved object,” (130-31), she suggests the interdependence of the positions.
imagined permanence with which the narrator endowed the volume of *François le Champi* as a child, and, as such, indicates the potential for an awareness of finitude which the narrator has developed.

At the same time, however, the narrator makes explicit claims for the dematerialization of the book. He writes, “For things – and among them a book in a red binding – as soon as we have perceived them are transformed within us into something immaterial [quelque chose d’immatériel], something of the same nature as all our preoccupations and sensations of that particular time, with which, indissolubly, they blend” (III: 920). The explicit valorization of the immaterial here obscures what, to me, seems more to the point: not the importance of materiality or immateriality, but the blending of the two. This blending, the intersection of materiality and immateriality which we saw in the mother’s reading, is what marks the book – which the narrator describes as “not a very extraordinary one” – as significant for him. We thus might suppose that a book which is “very extraordinary,” that is written with what he later calls a “magic pen,” is perhaps one which draws its reader’s attention to its own material embodiedness *via its text*. An extraordinary book will thus draw a connection between itself as a text and itself as a book to mimic – or better, create – the affective significance which, due to his childhood experience with it, *François le Champi* has for the narrator. This need not (and perhaps cannot) be done through play with the layout of pages, the design of a cover or the choice of a font, since these latter would thus end up as only another kind of “language” to decipher.

The example of *François le Champi* emphasizes, on the contrary, the relation between a book’s materiality and the linguistic content which it contains, that fact that one is always implicated in other. The apparent privileging of “immateriality” here takes part in the insistent idealism which the redemptive assertions that conclude the novel put forth. This idealism overshadows the other, less transcendent moments in his closing descriptions (which, accordingly, have received considerably less critical attention). For example, the narrator claims that “once one understands that suffering is the best thing that one can hope to encounter in life, one thinks without terror, and almost as of a deliverance, of death,” an almost explicit contradiction of the death-defying assertions he makes elsewhere (947). And again, of the “discovery of the destructive action of Time” which the aged faces at the Princesse de Guermantes’s party offer the narrator, he writes, “I had decided that [my book] could not consist uniquely of the full and plenary impressions that were outside time, … Time in which, as in some transforming fluid, men and societies and nations are immersed, would play an important part” (III: 974). It seems to me to be precisely the vacillation between descriptions of loss and finitude and these manically idealistic claims that is in play here: “Let us submit,” the narrator exhorts, “to the disintegration of our body, since each new fragment which breaks away from it returns in a luminous and significant form to add itself to our work” (III: 944). Klein’s term “position” is especially suited to describe this vacillation and, in fact, she claims that “when the depressive position arises, the ego is forced…to develop methods of defense which are essentially directed against the ‘pining’ for the loved object” (151). These methods are precisely those of the paranoid position, namely idealization and denial (152). As this more labile idea of the “position” suggests the close relationship between feelings of omnipotent mania and depression, it suggests the way that the idealistic claims for which the novel is so famous are themselves potential indicators of a kind of depressive orientation, one which it is the project of the rest of this chapter to articulate more explicitly.

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23 See Jerome McGann’s *The Textual Condition* for an example of this kind of approach.
II.

An examination of Proust’s own strategies for composing and expanding his novel offers a radically concrete demonstration of the kind of depressive relationship with the book as object for which, I suggest, his novel calls. The narrative provides a thumbnail sketch of Proust’s idiosyncratic working methods when the narrator describes his plans for the novel he will write. He states, “I should work beside [Françoise] and in a way almost as she worked herself… in pinning [épinglant] here and there an extra page, I should construct [bâtirais] my book, I dare not say ambitiously like a cathedral, but quite simply like a dress” (1090). In her reading of the novel, Mary Lydon focuses on Proust’s knowledge and use of the figure of Fortuny and argues that the designer offered Proust a model and taught him a kind of “professional secret… a tour de main that defies analysis, and hence imitation” (174). For her, the development of the Recherche, “proceeding, as it does, by the pinning on of supplementary pages, might be viewed as the history of Proust’s laborious pursuit and ultimate acquisition of such a tour de main, his apprenticeship to a profession (writing) whose manual aspect, the word ‘manuscript’ notwithstanding, is all too often ignored” (175-176). My argument follows Lydon’s but takes a more precise look at the “manual aspect” of Proust’s compositional process.

The notebooks in which Proust composed his novel are rightly famous for their complexity, and they are especially fascinating for the way they illustrate the importance of the material page for his compositional process. Jean-Yves Tadié, one of Proust’s major biographers, describes this process as one in which Proust used a series of sequential notebooks to develop his narrative while, at the same time, he elaborated other ideas in fragmentary form in separate notebooks. These latter were then often dismantled into a number of loose pages – what came to be called his “paperoles” – which Proust pasted into other notebooks. This pasting technique became especially prevalent towards the late phases of the novel’s composition, when Proust was expanding the figure of Albertine and adding the narrative that involves her. Here, Proust abandoned the discursive directions he had used in earlier drafts to instruct his editor on how to collate additional passages in favor of this kind of pasting, as if material manipulation had come to supplement linguistic signification.

An examination of a particularly complex notebook in which we can see Proust experimenting with this new strategy of pasting passages towards the end of the composition of Cities of the Plain sheds light on the consequences of the kind of material awareness which the unconventional cutting and pasting evinces. In the notebooks from later stages of the novel’s composition, when Proust adds a piece of paper to the edge of a page (usually the top or the bottom), he does so almost invariably without comment; the pasting of the additional material “speaks for itself,” as it were. In this notebook, however, Proust includes directions on the pasted addition. That is, for example, we find an extension pasted to the top of the page with

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24 While Proust’s manuscripts have provided the fodder for a number of genetic studies of his work, I am not interested here in describing Proust’s creative process in order to reconstruct the development of the specific moments in the work like traditional genetic critics. Antoine Compagnon’s treatment of the notebooks in Proust Between Two Centuries perhaps comes closest to my approach, however, as he attempts to read back and forth between the right-hand pages (the location of the novel’s development) and left-hand pages (the location of the rare personal note) of the notebooks as a way of drawing the relationship between Proust’s novel and his life (see Chapter 5, “Tableaux Vivants in the Novel,” specifically pp. 107-120). I am nonetheless also not engaged in treating the well-examined relationship between Proust’s biography and the content of his novel.

25 For more details on this, see Tadié pp. 534-535 and 664-665. See also Proust’s housekeeper Céleste Albaret’s memoir, especially pp. 273-276.
the direction “not to place on the facing recto, but on the following recto” (Fonds Marcel Proust 54v). Though Proust does not completely eschew the discursivity of his earlier directions here, the fact that he refers to pages and spatial locations rather than citing the language of his text suggests the way that this strategy of pasting requires a heightened awareness of his composition’s status as a material object, something that has spatio-temporal coordinates in the world.

The operation of this heightened material awareness becomes clearer when considered in light of a particularly heavily revised page which displays a close relationship among sense perception, affect and reading. On this page, Proust includes the standard reference direction “See the page” but follows it not with a page number but with the word “AMOUR” drawn in large letters with a heavy red pencil. Additionally, in the margin of the following page, there is a discursive direction that reads “this page and that which should come after the part that begins 22 pages farther on at the sign AMOUR,” a reference to a passage found twenty-two pages later in this same notebook whose cross-reference is signaled by the twin sign of another heavy, red-penciled AMOUR (52v). Here, the word’s ostentatious color and size call attention to its visual aspects, the features of writing which, far from being strictly linguistic, appeal instead to the senses. In doing so, it makes conspicuous the integral part which the senses play in reading, the fact that to read we must also see. At the same time, however, the lexical associations that spring up around the word “love” suggests the way that these sensory features of writing, which the intellectual act of reading (necessarily) ignores, only become conspicuous through an affective approach to the work. To put it crudely, it is perhaps a kind of love that can recognize the sensory relationship which we have with the materiality of a literary work. In making the otherwise invisible commerce between the sensible and the intelligible aspects of writing conspicuous, the example of the word AMOUR offers a way to understand the heightened material awareness which Proust’s use of paperoles demand. That is, the cut-and-paste work by which Proust comes to revise and expand his novel involves him in his own affective, even amorous, relationship to the materials of his novel’s composition, not unlike the narrator’s relation to François le Champi.

We might also recall the way in which Klein describes the working through of the depressive position: at the height of grief, “love for the object wells up,” and the ego begins to “pine” for the object (163). Elsewhere, she elaborates on this kind of love further: when the ego comes to realize the effect of its own paranoid aggression on its loved object, it responds “with anxiety for it (of its disintegration), with guilt and remorse, with a sense of responsibility for preserving it intact against persecutors and the id, and with sadness relating to expectation of impending loss of it. These emotions, whether conscious or unconscious, are in my view among the essential and fundamental elements of the feelings we call love” (125). These feelings of love, remorse and guilt awaken in the ego a desire to repair the loved object, to make it whole again; this desire is what Klein calls reparation. As Proust’s cutting and pasting functions as a

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26 Kaja Silverman formulates an idea very similar to this, though in explicitly visual terms. She writes, “We illuminate the world by affirming it in its visual specificity. I would now like to advance the philosophically unthinkable addendum to this claim: the stripes of the Bengal tiger, the peeling of the bark of the eucalyptus tree, and the ruffles on top of the New England daffodil themselves solicit this affirmation. The world does not simply give itself to be seen; it gives itself to be loved” (132-33). Silverman’s conception of “loving” here develops out of her treatment of Freud’s psychic model and involves the transfer of libidinal energy between a perceptual experience and an unconscious memory. (See, in particular, Chapter 5, “The Milky Way,” pp. 101-25.) To Silverman’s list, I would like to add the volume of François le Champi for the narrator, which, we have seen, takes on a very specific status for him.
concrete, embodied example of this “reparation” (which, in Klein’s model, is wholly phantasmatic), it speaks to the agency of the reader’s body in the affective stance toward the book that I have been developing. In fact, his narrator points to the way we might further investigate the role of the body when he uses the language of love to draw a connection between his feelings for both books and women. Recalling the image of a dress, he states, “The first edition of a work would have been more precious in my eyes than any other, but by this term I should have understood the edition in which I read it for the first time…. I should collect old-fashioned bindings, those of the period when I read my first novels, those that so often heard Papa say to me: ‘Sit up straight.’ Like the dress which a woman was wearing when we saw her for the first time, they would help me to rediscover the love that I then had” (III: 923). It is the narrator’s preeminent amorous affair with Albertine, who comes to drape herself in the gowns of Fortuny, that will help me to round off—or “flesh out”—the affective and amorous account I have been developing of literary experience. I thus turn now to the narrator’s relationship with Albertine—and Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of “the flesh”—to further articulate the operation of the physical body in reading.

III.

Constellating the narrative of Albertine’s imprisonment with Proust’s extra-textual strategies of composition and with the scene in the Guermantes’ library is no arbitrary decision. Not only are there significant thematic resonances among them, but Proust’s introduction of the character of Albertine in 1914 (when the war halted further publication of his work) had a profound effect on the structure of the novel and, in fact, precipitated many of his idiosyncratic revisionary practices. As Proust developed the plot lines involving Albertine, he expanded what essentially would have been the three-volume novel which Swann’s Way promised on its contents page (with The Guermantes’ Way and Time Regained being the two volumes to come) into the seven-volume structure that it has today. The character of Albertine thus allowed the first trip to Balbec to grow into a whole volume, Within a Budding Grove; her potential lesbianism provided additional subject matter for Cities of the Plain; and, most interestingly, the experience and aftermath of the narrator’s love affair with her in Paris comprised the whole of The Captive and The Fugitive.

Tadié’s observations about Proust’s specific compositional strategies at this moment—the way he added parts involving Albertine to chapters and sections that had already been written to form the volume of Cities of the Plain, while, with The Captive and The Fugitive, “everything is reversed: the sections that are already written are inserted into Albertine’s story”—indicate that the introduction of Albertine is the place in the novel’s composition in which the material aspect of the work comes to take on the most agency for Proust himself (608). This finds a significant analogue in the reception history of the novel: Christine Cano has recently detailed the way that contemporary reviewers saw the roman d’Albertine as a “disharmonious and dysfunctional excrescence” that remained heterogeneous to the rest of the novel—in much the same way that critics had condemned the “Swann in Love” section of the 1913 Swann’s Way (60). These critiques of “disharmony” seem to echo the narrator’s own reaction to François le Champi, as if to suggest an alliance between the roman d’Albertine and the kind of material awareness that later disturbs him in his encounter with François le Champi. The correlation of Proust’s extreme revisions with the sense of “disharmony” claimed by the novel’s critics ultimately casts the strange relationship between the narrator and Albertine as an implicit investigation of material awareness as Albertine’s body strikes the narrator as similarly “disharmonious.”
Critics have commented extensively on the “readerly” nature of the narrator’s relationship based in his paranoid jealousy of her. Perhaps the most explicit of these arguments is David Ellison’s claim in his book *The Reading of Proust* that “The entirety of *La Prisonnière* tells the story of a reader’s vacillations: it is the figural narration of the interpretive process as such. Marcel’s relationship to Albertine is that of a jealous decipherer to a dark code, and his judgements alternate between… the poles of delusion and critical penetration, which like vice and virtue in the *Recherche*, cannot exist independently of one another” (176). The polarized view of the narrator’s relationship with Albertine forecloses any middle ground between delusion and penetration and limits him to the role which, in her extension of Klein’s model to “critical practices,” Eve Sedgwick describes as the “paranoid reader,” one who adopts an “anticipatory mimetic strategy whereby a certain, stylized violence… must always be presumed or self-assumed” (133). Indeed, with his wild flights of fancy in which he imagines all the ways in which Albertine not only could betray him but has betrayed him, he very often functions as the paragon of such a role. While this reading recognizes the narrator’s desire for stable knowledge of Albertine as the motivation for his transformation of her into a text, it seems to disregard—or take for granted—the limits of this endeavor, that fact that total comprehension of her is an impossibility.27 The narrator is, however, well aware of this impossibility and comes, at moments, to give up the readerly tactics on which the critical conversation has focused and to tolerate the opacity that usually incites his paranoia. Without discounting the narrator’s thoroughly paranoid “readerly” tactics, I more closely interrogate the moments when he gives up penetrating here to sketch out the way he unknowingly inhabits a depressive relationship to Albertine and her body.

Indeed, for all of the narrator’s hermeneutical acumen, he exhibits a certain level of skepticism towards the power of interpretation to get a hold of Albertine and her dynamism. He observes that, after her imprisonment, “it was no longer the same Albertine, because she was not, as at Balbec, incessantly in flight upon her bicycle… because, shut up in my house, docile and alone, she was no longer what at Balbec, even when I had succeeded in finding her, she used to be upon the beach, that fugitive, cautious, deceitful creature,… [and] because, above all, I had clipped her wings, and she had ceased to be a winged Victory [une Victoire] and become a burdensome slave [pesante esclave] of whom I would have liked to rid myself” (II: 378). As happens so often in the novel, the narrator’s perspicacity here anticipates that of the reader. The explicit formulation of the paradox of Proustian desire, itself a symptom of the narrator’s paranoia, pre-empts any demystification of the relationship dynamics on the part of the reader, so that we as readers already seem to be in a somewhat different position from the narrator. The terms describing the pre-emption, however, offer insight into the nature of this position. The allegorical image of the “Victoire” points to an interdependence between the qualities of flight and movement and the tendency to treat Albertine as a sign. In other words, Albertine is a “fugitive creature” in so far as she represents something else.28

When the narrator sets up a contact between an image of flight and movements and the description of Albertine as a “burdensome slave,” points to the way in which his strategy of “reading” her implicitly depends on disregarding her physical embodiedness. The Albertine who, he thought, had possessed a kind of nimble weightlessness, who had seemed

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27 See also Kassell, Bowie, Ross and Gray all of whom give a more or less similar argument in varying vocabularies.
28 For a more developed account of the dynamics of allegory and the ideology of “capture” or “possession,” especially as they relate to issues of gender and memory, see my “Modern Mnemosynes: Female Memory and Allegory of Gender.”
unencumbered by a physical body in her allegorical significance, takes on a "pesante" (literally, "heavy") solidity that hinders her mobility and refutes his attempts to make her something he can "read." As Mary Lydon puts it, "the more successfully she functions as a metaphor, the more her literal body poses itself as an obstacle" (173). Significantly, this is not far from the dynamic at work in the narrator’s later encounter with François le Champi. The blindness to Albertine’s body on which the transformation of her actions and words into “lucid ideas” (83) depends is essentially the same kind of myopia from which the sensory experience in the Guermantes’ library jars him: to read a text entails being blind to its material embodiedness, just as reading Albertine means disregarding her physical embodiedness.

Yet The Captive offers a different attitude towards Albertine’s body in the famous scenes in which the narrator surveys her while she is asleep. These moments ultimately point toward a more complicated dynamic at play in “fixing” Albertine, one which acts as an alternative to the model of “reading” which dominates critical understanding of the volume. He states,

Her personality was not constantly escaping, as when we talked, by the outlets of her unacknowledged thoughts and of her eyes. She had called back into herself everything that lay outside, had withdrawn, enclosed, reabsorbed herself into her body. In keeping her in front of my eyes, in my hands, I had an impression of possessing her entirely [En la tenant sous mon regard, dans mes mains, j’avais cette impression de la posséder tout entière] which I never had when she was awake (III: 64).29

Here, rather than disregarding her body’s physicality, the narrator seems to find new value in it, as if “reabsorbing” her personality imbues her flesh with a kind of numinous quality. Her body thus becomes a kind of exterior space that isn’t so much to be penetrated as it is to be kept “in front of [his] eyes, in [his] hands” – in other words, not penetrated but sensed. The use of prepositional phrases here – those grammatical structures that describe the relation of one object to another – undercuts his claim to “possess her entirely” since they refer only to his physical relationship with her and do not necessarily extend beyond that. It is significant to notice how prominent a role the preposition plays in Merleau-Ponty’s theorization of sense perception. Using terms of possession that echo the narrator, he writes, “he who sees cannot possess the visible unless he is possessed by it, unless he is of it” (134-135, italics original). The “of” here becomes the index of a shared space and time, a fundamental phenomenological affiliation (what Merleau-Ponty calls the “flesh”) and a common belongingness to the same world. Because the preposition describes – if only implicitly – a two-way relationship, one in which the objects necessarily come into contact with each other, the narrator’s description of “keeping her in front of my eyes, in my hands” underscores the way that Albertine’s body is in contact with Marcel’s hands to the same extent as his hands are in contact with it.

Moreover, though his use of the word “impression” (which, significantly, coincides with the narrator’s sensory encounter with François le Champi) ultimately signifies his intellectual understanding of the situation, it also speaks to the fact that this understanding is itself based on

29 Moncrieff translates the last sentence of this paragraph as “In keeping it in front of my eyes…” rather than “In keeping her…” as if the object of the opening phrase is Albertine’s body. Given the fact that le corps is masculine in French, however, the le must refer to Albertine herself. I thus deviate here from the standard translation, and thank Elizabeth Abel for pointing out this detail to me.
a sensory experience in which Albertine’s body “presses” back in response to his. The physical boundaries between the narrator and Albertine thus become the space out of which sense perception (looking and touching) can form a bridge that connects, but does not collapse, the two of them. Indeed, when Merleau-Ponty describes his understanding of sense perception further, the special emphasis which he places on the body extends my point. He writes, “our body is a being of two leaves, from one side a thing among things and otherwise what sees them and touches them; we say, because it is evident, that it unites these two properties within itself, and its double belongingness to the order of the ‘object’ and to the order of the ‘subject’ reveals to us quite unexpected relations between the two orders” (137). He goes on to describe this “unexpected relation” between the subject and the object which the body’s relationship to things demonstrates and writes, “If it touches them and sees them, this is only because, being of their family, itself visible and tangible, it uses its own being as a mean to participate in theirs” (137). The narrator and Albertine also participate in this kind of “unexpected relation” as their bodies become the means for a primary reciprocity and mutuality that the narrator’s explicit statements seem to belie, a homo-ness – to use Bersani’s term – which they inescapably share.

Indeed, bringing Merleau-Ponty’s argument to bear on this moment in Proust’s novel is perhaps counter-intuitive, especially in light of the description of the narration’s sexual enjoyment of Albertine while she is asleep. He reports, “So long as [her sleep] lasted, I was free to dream about her and yet at the same time to look at her, and, when that sleep grew deeper, to touch, to kiss her,” and, a few pages later, “The sound of her breathing, which had grown louder, might have given the illusion of the panting of sexual pleasure, and when mine was at its climax, I could kiss her without having interrupted her sleep” (64; 67). Though not explicit, the possibility of Marcel’s physical penetration of Albertine here seems to suggest exactly the opposite of the shared agency which I am claiming. That is, some prepositions, like the *in* of penetration for instance, certainly do not indicate a completely or perfectly reciprocal relationship: Marcel might be *in* Albertine, but Albertine is certainly not *in* Marcel. At the same time, however, while she might not be *in* Marcel, she is nonetheless still in some kind of spatial relationship with him: we might say that she is *outside* Marcel, around him.

Though the narrator asserts that “I felt at such moments that I had possessed her more completely, like an unconscious and unresisting object of dumb nature,” Albertine’s unconscious state does not necessarily mean that she is simply a passive object to be penetrated and dominated (67). In fact, the “dumbness” of her body is exactly what does resist his attempts at intellectual (if not sexual) penetration. Accordingly, we might say that what seems to the narrator as “complete possession” is actually a relinquishing of the will to possess in the face of its ultimate impossibility. As Leo Bersani observes, the narrator “can love her most gently now [that she is asleep] because it is really he who is at rest” (Fiction 79). What allows him to rest, in fact, is an implicit acceptance of her opacity, since what he is actually “possessing” is the resisting “dumbness” of her body. This acceptance occasions a shift, as we have seen, from an epistemological search for Albertine’s truth to a less productive but more satisfying “sensual” model. Indeed, the narrator makes this shift almost explicit when he contrasts his sensual relationship with the sleeping Albertine to the linguistic and discursive knowledge that he might gain while she is immobilized and unconscious. He writes, “I was not troubled by the words that she murmured from time to time in her sleep; their meaning was closed to me, and besides, whoever the unknown person to whom they referred, it was upon my hand, upon my cheek that her hand, stirred by an occasional faint tremor, stiffened for an instant” (67). There is a clear privileging of the sensual here. The “closed” meaning of her words mimics the kind of “closed”
or bounded state of her unconscious body and paves the way for the mutuality of sense perception to condition the relationship of reading that the word “upon” suggests.

Indeed, the narrator forgoes discursive knowledge altogether when, a paragraph later, he comments on the fact that “all her letters were in the inner pocket of [her] kimono, into which she always thrust them.” Though he observes that “a signature, an assignation, would have sufficed to prove a lie or to dispel a suspicion,” he admits that “never once did I touch the kimono, put my hand in the pocket, examine the letters… realizing that I would never make up my mind, I would creep back to my bedside and begin again to watch the sleeping Albertine, who would tell me nothing, whereas I could see lying across the arm of the chair that kimono which would perhaps have told me much” (67; 68). In his recent work on Proust, Joshua Landy proposes that the narrator dispenses with a perusal of the letters out of a fear of finding his suspicions confirmed. For Landy, the narrator seeks not the truth but a “convincing lie” with the power to “send all his doubts to sleep” (96). Given the paranoia which the narrator so insistently exhibits, the idea of a “convincing lie” in the Proustian universe seems to be a logical impossibility: the condition of his epistemological relationship with Albertine is that no lie is every convincing enough. It is only when he sidesteps the truth-lie framework that structures an epistemological orientation – when, to paraphrase Bersani, he stops looking for truth as such – that he not only sends his doubts to sleep but, by focusing instead of his sense perception (“I began to watch the sleeping Albertine”) puts his penetrating intellect and its epistemological imperative to sleep.

IV.

The sleep-like disregard of letters and language that attend the narrator’s encounters with the unconscious Albertine bears a startling, if veiled, similarity to the descriptions of artistic creation with which the narrator ends the novel, startling because the narrator is setting out to become a literary artist. He writes,

This work of the artist, this struggle to discern beneath matter, beneath experience, beneath words, something that is different from them, is a process exactly the reverse of that which, in those everyday lives which we live with our gaze averted from ourself, is at every moment being accomplished by vanity and passion and the intellect, and habit too, when they smother our true impressions, so as entirely to conceal them from us, beneath a whole heap of verbal concepts and practical goals which we falsely call life (III: 932).

In looking for something “beneath” [sous] the intellectual understanding of experience, the artist effectively treats all of experience, language and matter like a sleeping Albertine, who was literally “beneath” the hands of the narrator. Accordingly, the hazy imprecision of the description of the artist’s search for “something that is different” suggests that just as the narrator does not ultimately penetrate the sleeping Albertine, nor will he seize any kind of transcendent meaning from these other experiences. Moreover, as the narrator allies the “smothering of our true impressions” with the “heap of verbal concepts and practical goals,” he also turns his choice to ignore Albertine’s letters and language into a constitutive principle of art. If the deciphering of verbal meaning that might lead to any kind of illumination – what we might think of as the “habitual” function of our “intellect” – is exactly what the artist must “reverse,” then the act of artistic creation which he is setting for himself has even more in
common with his behavior with the sleeping Albertine. Artistic work functions less to illuminate abstract and intangible truths than to recognize a kind of ultimately impenetrable mystery – perhaps, indeed, to recognize and tolerate impenetrability itself.

The distinction the narrator draws between “reality” and “realist art” clarifies what is entailed in recognizing this impenetrability. Contrasting the kind of art he wants to make with “the kind of literature which contents itself with ‘describing things,’ with giving of them merely a miserable abstract of lines and surfaces,” the narrator denigrates a strictly representationalist conception of literature, one exclusively concerned with description and information (III: 920-921). As his language suggests, this kind of literature would be overly thin, almost skeletal, without any flesh or depth. The narrator also describes “the falseness of so-called realist art, which would not be so untruthful if we had not in life acquired the habit of giving to what we feel a form of expression which differs so much from, and which we nevertheless after a little time take to be, reality itself” (III: 915). Here, representation, or “giving to what we feel a form of expression,” falls short of “reality” to the extent that we confuse the two. It is not necessary to reject representation completely (which would, of course, be impossible); rather, the narrator’s statement suggests that the sphere of representation needs to be more precisely defined and delimited.

By allying representation with habit and “expression,” the narrator makes space for “reality,” which he significantly describes via an appeal to the object of the book. He writes, “this book, more laborious to decipher than any other, is also the only one that has been dictated to us by reality, the only one of which the ‘impression’ has been printed in us by reality itself” (III: 914). As reality makes a book out of the self by “printing” it with “impressions,” it recalls a non-metaphorical book, namely the volume of François le Champi. “Reality” thus includes all the physical, sensory experiences that the object of the book (among other things) provides but that the reportage of description discounts, so that the object of the book comes to function not only as a metaphor for our experience but also as part of our experience of reality itself. Moreover, the connection which the narrator’s metaphor draws between the inner self and the literal object of the book suggests that artistic creation, even for a literary artist, does not exclusively consist of verbal representation but consists of a more capacious act of mediation. The narrator makes this practically explicit when he writes,

If I tried to understand what actually happens at the moment when a thing makes some particular impression on me… I realized that the words in each case were a long way removed from the impressions that I or Bloch had received. So that the essential, the only true book, though in the ordinary sense of the word it did not have to be ‘invented’ by a great writer – for it already exists in each one of us – has to be translated by him. The function and task of a writer are those of a translator (III: 925-26).

Here, in light of the role which the literal book of François le Champi plays in the narrator’s experience and which the metaphorical book plays in his conception of “reality,” his comments suggest that part of what he must “translate” – or communicate – is the experience of the book itself.

The agency of the book here calls us back to the mystery inherent to artistic creation. He writes of the “inner book of unknown symbols” and describes the “symbols carved in relief they might have been, which my attention, as it explored my unconscious, groped for and stumbled
again and followed the contours of, like a diver exploring the ocean-bed” (913). The phrases here depict the recognition of impenetrability which we saw earlier and, not coincidentally, could also apply to the narrator’s “exploration” of Albertine’s sleeping body. Significantly, he is not shining light onto these symbols but fumbling blindly in the dark; the symbols remain “unknown.” The experience of the book which it is part of the narrator’s task to communicate is not, however, one that can be understood via the illumination of the intellect. Rather it must be explored in the dark, indeed, as a kind of darkness. This darkness takes center stage, in fact, in the narrator’s plans for composing his novel: “By day,” he writes, “the most I could hope for was to try to sleep. If I worked, it would be only at night” (III: 1101). Though he provides no explanation for the necessity of inverting day and night, the other passages we have examined suggest that, by this inversion, he can complicate, if not totally avert, the work of the intellect by mixing it with the habit-breaking darkness of the night – in much the same way that Proust’s compositional methods combine the discursive and the material in his *paperoles*.

Darkness, in fact, is a major, if mostly overlooked, thematic of the *Recherche*, since images of the dark begin and end the novel. It opens with the image of the narrator going to bed, while many of the closing sequences take place in a wartime Paris that is cloaked in darkness to avoid the bombings of the Germans. The effect of the darkened Paris extends – indeed, “translates” – the mode of reading which the narrator uses for his “inner book of unknown symbols” from the internal, psychic register to the outside world and offers a final elaboration of the sensory reading which this chapter puts forth. In a passage that details people seeking shelter in underground Metro stations during a bombing, the narrator writes, “And darkness, which envelops all things like a new element, has the effect, irresistibly tempting for some people, of suppressing the first halt on the road to pleasure – it permits us to enter without impediment into a region of caresses to which normally we gain access only after a certain delay” (III: 864). He continues and explains that “In the darkness this time-honoured ritual [of courtship] is instantly abolished – hands, lips, bodies may go into action at once” (III: 864). As the Parisians in the Metro station leave off the various social conventions – the “habits” – that precede a romantic encounter, they become all body, much like the sleeping Albertine or even the narrator in his moments of involuntary memory when he is “struck by an impression.” In the same way, darkness might reveal the agency of the body in reading and break, for a moment, the habits of the intellect which the narrator wants to supplement.

This is, of course, the image with which the whole novel begins, the narration of the narrator going to sleep: “For a long time I used to go to bed early” (I: 3). He falls asleep so quickly, however, that “I had not even time to say to myself: ‘I’m falling asleep.’ And half an hour later the thought that it was time to go to sleep would awaken me; I would make as if to put away the book which I imagined was still in my hands” (I: 3). Here, as sleep disables language, it reveals – if only for a moment – the way the act of reading depends on a physical relationship to a material object. “At the same time,” he continues a few lines later, “my sight would return and I would be astonished to find myself in a state of darkness, pleasant and restful enough for my eyes, but even more, perhaps, for my mind, to which it appeared incomprehensible, without a cause, something dark indeed” (I: 3). The explicit play with the literal and figurative valences of “darkness” suggests that the reawakening of sense perception leads not to a greater but to a *feoter* level of comprehension. To awaken the senses is, in a certain way, to put the intellect to sleep. This is not a wholly privative phenomenon, however: the narrator describes how, throughout the night, he “would reawaken for short snatches only, just long enough…to open my eyes to stare at the shifting kaleidoscope of the darkness, to savour,
in a momentary glimmer of consciousness, the sleep which lay heavy upon the furniture, the room, the whole of which I formed but an insignificant part” (I: 4). For brief moments, the narrator experiences sensation stripped of a determinate content, what we might think of as sensation itself, not yet mixed with the operation of the intellect. To overstate my point: the narrator is, momentarily, a body without a mind.

The opening sequences thus announces the way reading entails moments in which, quite unexpectedly, the operation of the mind is not yet in play, a kind of mindless reading that it is the task of the narrator to “translate” for us. In response, we must make space for these moments in our account of reading and see it as a thoroughly liminal activity, one in which, as the books of the Recherche show us, we vacillate between the narrative world in our imagination and the consciousness of the book’s material status in our world. As with the sleep of the narrator, we are never fully at rest when we read: we are asked, in effect, to open our eyes to the dark, the strange squiggles printed on a page are themselves a kind of “kaleidoscope of darkness.” In the end (or is it at the beginning?), we must see – must sense – the materiality of the book and the insistence of our own body, that which is precisely “incomprehensible, without a cause, something dark indeed.”
The Embodied Reader of *Ulysses*

The first time I read *Ulysses* was in an undergraduate course on the twentieth-century novel. The professor had ordered what has become known as the “Gabler edition” published by Vintage Books, and I carried around the large gray book with a cover design reminiscent of the primary colors and rectangular patterns of a Mondrian painting for the month that we spent reading it. By the time I reached Molly’s final Yes, the pages had come unglued from the paperback spine, and they fell out in large chunks every time I opened the book. I took pride in the way the wear and tear indicated that I had, indeed, made it all the way through *Ulysses*; I could now brazenly display the tattered copy on my bookshelf as a testament to my intellectual fortitude, a kind of “portrait of the critic as a young man.” (After all, I was, like Stephen Dedalus, a product of a Jesuit high school.) I knew, however, that I never wanted to open that edition of *Ulysses* again since the broken spine and loose pages made it especially annoying to read. Thus, it was fortunate that, when I returned to Joyce’s novel in my first year of graduate school, it was in the smaller format edition (published by Vintage International) that contains Judge Woolsey’s famous legal decision. This less stately but more plump volume stayed together even after I had broken the spine. Notably, the cover design of this edition is almost completely monochrome, with the title reading vertically from the bottom (see figure). Super-imposed over
the last S is a pair of green spectacles that transforms the horizontal serpentine shape into a vague approximation of a mustache, above which is the drawing of a hat, as if to suggest that the type that comprises the novel’s title also forms a kind of body. Indeed, the mustache, glasses and hat recall, on the one hand, Joyce’s own bespectacled appearance and, on the other, standard depictions of the modern-day Odysseus, Leopold Bloom. The cover design thus takes up the parallel between the body of the book and the physical body which my previous chapter on Proust proposed.

This is, of course, no accident since Joyce himself famously commented that his novel was “more an epic of the body than of the human spirit” (qtd. in Parandowski 159). While the schema he provided for Ulysses associates an organ of the body with each episode (with the exception of the first three of the Telemachiad, a fact that is not insignificant for the argument to come), we will see how Ulysses extends this bodily emphasis to that of reader himself. This chapter thus refines the previous chapter’s general account of how the novel’s status as an object takes on significance for its reader by treating the role of the readerly body and its relationship to the object of the book. As I trace the way the odyssey of Ulysses involves the progressive development of the readerly body, I investigate the role the reader’s perceptual organs play in the act of reading. As the perceptual organs are those points on the surface of the body where it is in contact with – because open to – the object of the book, I ultimately suggest that the act of reading Ulysses highlights the limits of the body in a way that develops the discussion of mortality and finitude in the previous chapter’s of Proust and Melanie Klein.

To begin mapping the development of this readerly body, I take the Sirens episode of Ulysses as the center of my discussion. I do this for a number of reasons, not least because the episode is, in Michael Stanier’s words, “the omphalos of the text;” he clarifies how “this chapter takes place in the very center of Bloom’s day, four p.m. (eight hours after he ‘ate with relish;’ eight hours before ‘He rests. He has travelled’)” (326). As the novel’s midpoint, it links the beginning of the novel to the end and provides an ideal perspective from which to comment on both the episodes which precede it and those which follow it. The Sirens episode achieves this kind of Janus-faced potential because of its emphasis on and exploration of the multiple mediums which comprise the novel. We might borrow a pun from W. J. T. Mitchell and say that, in addition to being the novel’s midpoint, Sirens is also the novel’s “medium point,” a term that would signify that it is the moment in the novel when the functioning of its mediums is most in evidence. Indeed, because it is the first chapter of the novel to twist and bend language itself as part of its stylistic experimentation (rather than playing with either narrative structure, as in the interpolations of Wandering Rocks, or generic conventions, as in the headlines of Aeolus), it stands out among the important middle chapters of Ulysses that both Michael Groden and Franco Moretti characterize as a kind of experimental, transitional space in which Joyce develops the polyphonic style of the later episodes. In doing so, this “musical” episode (a somewhat

30 While I do not completely abandon the Kleinian model that I discussed in the Proust chapter, the developmental narrative which forms the argument of this chapter builds on a topic which Klein largely ignores, namely the relationship between the physical body and the development of the ego. This chapter’s interest in sensation and perception thus necessitates a reorientation towards the phenomenological perspective that informed my analysis of the narrator’s interaction with Albertine and somewhat away from the psychoanalytic perspective in play in much of my discussion of the Proustian narrator’s relationship to François le Champi.

31 See Groden 37 and Moretti 183-184. Although Moretti claims that the experiment of the Sirens episode “may be simply regarded as a failure: it is repeated neither by Joyce nor by others” (184), Sirens is the one of the most proto-Wakean of Ulysses’ episodes, as I show in my later chapter on Finnegans Wake. In The Odyssey of Style in Ulysses, Karen Lawrence provides a discussion of the ways in which the headlines of the Aeolus episode interrupt what she calls the
myopic classification, as we will see) also calls particular attention to the worldly medium of print on which the communication of the sounds of language depends, and, moreover, to the multiple sense perceptions on which our access to that communication relies.

To think about the multiple sense perceptions at play in Sirens, let us turn, for a moment, to the myth on which the episode of the Sirens is based and imagine what it was like for Odysseus to be tied to the mast of his ship as he sailed past them. He listens with tortured enjoyment to the song they are singing and loses himself in the melodies and harmonies which waft his way so enticingly. I call up this image because it seems to me to be an apt characterization of one strain of Sirens criticism, namely those treatments of the episode, beginning with Stuart Gilbert’s, which take Joyce’s own pronouncements about its “musical” form and its debt to the *fuga per canonem* as their starting point. From Lawrence Levin’s 1965 reading of the episode as structured according to a canon rather than a fugue to Scott Ordway’s 2007 article on the potentially more appropriate “sonata form” of the episode, to name two book-ending studies of this type, critics have often looked to music to decode the stylistic experiment of the chapter. Both the contradictions among the arguments and the somewhat unsatisfying accounts of the episode that they produce suggest to me, however, that such critics find themselves overwhelmed by the siren-song of a musical approach as their interpretations oftentimes crash onto the reef of an overly determined reading.

Yet, there is another strain of Sirens criticism that seeks to counter the musical approach and argues for the episode’s silence. Critics often produce alternate accounts of the episode by looking to its use of rhetorical figures and its interest in other forms of sense perceptions (namely, vision). Interestingly, this refusal to hear also speaks to the Sirens myth, as it is not very far from (though does not completely coincide with) the position in which Odysseus’ crew members find themselves. That is, with their ears plugged by beeswax, as the story goes, the sailors cannot hear the seductive sounds streaming from the island. We can surmise, however, that their eyes would be wide open. And, if we are to listen to the myths, we might imagine the crew spying on the three winged, bird-like women as they are singing. With their muffled ears, they might actually be able to get a better sense of an encounter with the Sirens since they would not feel the desire to merge or fuse with the Siren song itself. It thus seems to me that, in their claims for the episode’s “silence,” the non-musical takes on this chapter skirt the fact that the

“narrative norm” of the first six chapters (see pp. 55-79). She suggests that the Aeolus episode “can be said to provide the beginning of the middle of the novel we have been reading” and details the way it anticipates a number of the stylistic changes to come (56-7). My discussion focuses, however, on the episode in which the experimentation begun in Aeolus treats language itself as a malleable object.

32 See also Bowen, Lees, Zimmerman, Mooney and Fischer for other examples of this kind of approach.

33 At the same time, these “musical” interpretations speak to a larger tendency in the criticism of *Ulysses* as a whole. Colin MacCabe’s classic study *James Joyce and the Revolution of the Word*, for instance, takes an insistently poststructuralist approach and explores how Joyce’s writing investigates the opposition between writing and speech to deconstruct notions of a stable production of meaning. When, treating Sirens specifically, he writes that “there is no definite limit to a book … Although we can distinguish the physical limits, we cannot ‘close’ the book” (84-85), he seems to conflate the terms text and book, as if there is no room to think about the object which transmits the text we are reading. Additionally, Garrett Stewart’s inspired treatments of the role of the auditory in Joyce’s late works commits a similar elision – even as it attempts to resist “a narrowly conceived grammatological model” by exploring the relation of the phonic to the graphic (*Phonotext* 238) – when he makes claims for the “breathless, the entirely passive, body of the reading agent” (257). Like Odysseus himself, MacCabe and Stewart – as well as the musically-minded critics – lose themselves (indeed, lose their bodies) in their exclusive emphasis on what and how Joyce’s works mean.

34 See Ferrer and Rabaté for examples of this emphatically non-musical approach. Both are also interested in the production of meaning in *Ulysses*, especially given the rhetoricism of Rabaté’s reading of Sirens.
visual experience of the crew is not completely unrelated to music. In fact, what they see is precisely the singing of the song itself. And, moreover, we can surely imagine the mental fantasies regarding the sounds coming from the mouths of these strange creatures which the sight of singing incites in the sailors.

Indeed, part of the reason we can imagine these fantasies so easily is because this is exactly the experience which we as readers have of the so-called Siren song. That is, we see the visual signifiers on the page of our books and imagine the sounds that go along with them. And it is exactly this relation between the visual and the aural which the Sirens episode is investigating, the strange way in which visual signs relate to the sounds which reverberate—however fantastically—in the minds of the episode’s readers. My argument thus departs from the attempts to consider the Sirens episode (and the novel as a whole) from the point of view of Odysseus and tries to think about the position of his crew members by asking about the way our physical sense perceptions relate to the ideas that we think. I am searching, that is, for a middle way—indeed, with another nod to W. J. T. Mitchell, a “medium” way—that need not disregard the physical in favor of the intellectual nor discount the intellectual in favor of the physical, but rather can actually draw a connection between them.

As I do so, I depart from the most recent treatment of sense perception and forms of mediation in Joyce, Sara Danius’ *The Senses of Modernism*. Danius “focuses on the way in which Joyce represents visual and aural sensations” by appropriating “matrices of perception inherent in cinema, photography and telephony, turning them into techniques for rendering the immediacy of lived experience” (22; 23; italics added). In her interest in the way Joyce’s representational strategies are conditioned by the contemporary “new” mediums, however, Danius overlooks the fact, as I suggest in my introduction, that the book itself is a technology that has its own “matrix of perception,” its own way of calling out to an embodied readerly sensorium. Danius’ analyses speak more to what we might think of as the “mind’s eye” (and the “mind’s ear”) and, accordingly, she eschews commentary on Sirens completely and focuses her argument on the “naturalistic” early chapters that are themselves more easily cognizable. In contrast, my argument about the Sirens episode’s central position in developing the role of the body in the reading of Joyce’s novel draws on the special privilege of the body to have already combined or mediated the physical and the intellectual. Indeed, in revealing the connection between the sensory acts of the body and the kind of mental activity by which reading is normally (almost exclusively) characterized, Sirens exposes (perhaps “denudes” would be more appropriate here) a kind of reading of embodiment.35 The polysemic genitive construction should signify the fact that reading, for all of its intellectual orientation, is itself a physical action as well as the fact that we are always reading a text that is itself embodied in the material object of the book. While my next chapter on *Finnegans Wake* focuses more expansively on the second of these two meanings, it is not completely absent from this chapter (as, of course, the readerly body is not absent from

35 Most treatments of the body in *Ulysses* center around the “Penelope” episode that ends the novel. Indeed, the collection of essays entitled *Joyce, “Penelope” and the Body* focuses on just this issue. In the introduction to that volume, Richard Brown writes, “beyond a primarily ‘epistemological’ desire of knowing the body from some supposedly superior other site of consciousness, a more contemporary post-Cartesian project to which Joyce’s Modernism and the ‘Penelope’ episode might be thought to contribute, may emerge as an ‘ontological project,’ one of being the body” (14). My argument thus squares with and extends this approach, as I suggest that not just the last episode but *Ulysses as a whole* (by which I mean, the entire novel as well as the book that contains it) is in the service of bringing the reader to this kind of ontological awareness. At the same time, as I discuss in my introduction, my argument adds a physical, sensory basis to cognitive approaches to literature—for example, Elaine Scarry’s *Dreaming by the Book*—which consider the process of reading exclusively in terms of images in the mind.
my discussion of the *Wake*). As Sirens looks back to and reformulates the orientations towards reading and texts which we will see Stephen and Bloom exemplify earlier in the novel, it also looks forward to the way the stylistic heterogeneity within and among the novel’s later chapters allow them to operate like organs whose separate, independent workings contribute to the overall functioning of the body.

As it brings together what we will see are Stephen’s and Bloom’s respective over-emphases on the operation of the intellectual and physical in the act of reading, Sirens allows me to pick up standard claims about the contrary natures of Bloom and Stephen and refine them in terms of their respective orientations to reading. Ultimately, I suggest that Sirens illustrates a kind of vacillation between these two poles and asks the reader to treat his reading material as both a text to be read and an object to be perceived. I take this vacillation as a kind of fundamental principle that structures the large-scale argument of this chapter at the same time that it conditions individual points I make along the way. On the macro-level, I treat Stephen’s and Bloom’s orientations to reading and their respective relations to Sirens as separate positions which the later episode eventually brings together. On the micro-level, I also alternate within these treatments between a sensory approach to the book of *Ulysses* and an interpretative approach to its text. While my ultimate objective is synthetic, I necessarily appeal to two networks of terms that, in specific analytical moments, split the actions of the mind from those of the body. On the one hand, I use terms of sensation and perception to suggest the worldly, phenomenal relationship between the body and the book, while, on the other, I discuss the role of intellection and cognition in negotiating between what often seems like an abstracted, disembodied mind and the text. By the end, however, as I show how *Ulysses* interlaces the very analytic categories on which these terms are based, I suggest that reading Joyce’s novel mediates between the body and the mind, between sensation and intellection, and, most importantly, between the book and the text.

I.

As the Sirens episode opens, it offers the reader of *Ulysses* what is arguably the most jarring beginning he has yet encountered. To quote the first few lines (paragraph breaks preserved):

Bronze by Gold heard the hoofirons, steelyrining imperthnthn, thnthnthn.
Chips, picking chips off rocky thumbnail, chips. Horrid! And gold flushed more.
A husky fifenote blew.
Blew. Blue Bloom is on the
Gold pinnacled hair (256).

Immediately, the reader notices the lack of standard syntax, conventional spelling and seemingly normal narrative. Customary accounts of the first sixty-seven lines of the episode think of them as a kind of “overture” that employs a number of phrases to allude to moments in the narrative.

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36 While I do not mean to suggest that the terms within each category are synonymous, it is useful to consider the ways in which each of them cluster around a similar pole.

37 Again, while the headline “IN THE HEART OF THE HIBERNIAN METROPOLIS” that opens the “Aeolus” episode certainly comes as a shock to the reader, the fact that it maintains correct orthography and generally follows the rules of English syntax makes it, in my opinion, less of a surprise than the seemingly nonsensical beginning of Sirens.

38 Though I prefer the book published by Vintage, the Gabler edition of *Ulysses* corrects a number of errata in the text, including substituting “steelyrining” for “steelyrining” in the first line of Sirens (210).
to come. While critical debates swirl around the suitability of this term, \footnote{See, in particular, Ordway and Lees.} I am more interested in the way that the list-like string of the chapter’s words and syllables that comprises this “overture” recalls Joyce’s own compositional practices as described by Derek Attridge and Roy Gottfried. That is, as Attridge details, Joyce composed much of *Ulysses* by transferring his notes from a “heterogeneous collection written on scraps of paper” to a notebook and then to his drafts (“Pen” 54), while Gottfried’s account of how Joyce’s iritis forced him to use a magnifying glass to enlarge words suggests that his well-known eye maladies had the effect of “separating [words] out of context and even making prominent the individual letters in them” (6). \footnote{Gottfried, along with Hugh Kenner, also relates this kind of attention to descriptions of Joyce’s exacting treatments of printer’s proofs. See Gottfried 2-4 and Kenner, *Mechanic*, chapter 4, esp. pp. 70-73. Colin MacCabe makes a similar point when he describes how the “words become material objects which rest on the page and resist our attempts to subject them to meaning” (80). For MacCabe this opacity is in the service of showing “how the mechanism of writing works,” while, for me, it shows the complicated dynamics of *reading* as well.} In a sense, we might think of the beginning of Sirens as a kind of cut-and-paste collage made of the chapter’s linguistic material, as if Joyce almost literally arrayed his “scraps of paper” into a patchwork that recalls the kind of material awareness we saw in Proust’s manuscript notebooks. \footnote{André Topia proposes that, because of the lack of stable syntax in the episode, language “ceases to unfold in time and becomes projected into space;” he specifies that “from linear it becomes tabular,” as if the episode’s language itself mimics Joyce’s treatment of his composition materials (77).}

Though Donald Theall, the author of two book-length studies on Joyce’s relationship to modern forms of media, characterizes both *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* as “designed assemblages of expressive elements” (8), he does not treat Joyce’s compositional practices. However, his argument does focus on the way that, with the communication revolution of the early twentieth century, the work of art becomes a kind of “poetic machine” which “encompasses a theory of communicative action” that is “bodily-oriented” (20). More specifically, he suggests that the rise of modern media like photography commenced “a new re-embodying of the communicating person” which he finds in the “integrated and interrelated systems of communication which people used in expressing their ideas, feelings, desires and visions” (30). His use here of the vocabulary of media and communication notwithstanding, Theall’s focus on Joyce’s “poetic practice” and his more general appeal to the synaesthesia that characterizes the content of much modernist artistic production at large indicates the extent to which his argument adheres to a strictly textualist model. As a result, the “re-embodying” which he discusses speaks less to the physical body itself than to an idea of the body, an abstract, almost virtual, phenomenon. From this perspective, reading a book seems simply one part of “a general type of interpretive activity by which people make sense of their world, society and themselves,” an activity in which “the immediacy of the living body’s experience is joined to the abstractions of remembered intelligence” (34). As we will see, however, *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake* reveal the specificity of the book by concretizing this embodiment for both the reader and the book itself.

Indeed, as it recalls a kind of cutting and pasting of scraps of Joyce’s notes, the material collage which I find in the opening of Sirens seems to underscore just this point. In so doing, it actually functions to bridge the competing strains of Sirens criticism since a “material collage” might just as easily be described by the cinematic term “montage” as the musical term “overture.” (*Ulysses* has, of course, been a focal point for a number of comparisons between literary and cinematic modernisms which have alternatively found stylistic similarities or
important differences between the novel and contemporaneous film. Examining the first, seemingly incomprehensible line of the episode indicates, however, the way Sirens announces the sensory combination implied in the embodied perception of the material book: “Bronze by Gold heard the hoofirons, steelyring imperthnthn, thnthnthn” (256). As it begins with the colors “bronze” and “gold” which function as visual synecdoches for the barmaids at the Ormond Hotel with their red and blonde hair, the episode emphasizes its interest in the visual. Almost immediately, however, the verb “heard” points to the explicitly aural interest in the episode, the fact that hearing will be a major – if not wholly exclusive – thematic to the chapter.

It is with the line’s last words, “imperthnthn thnthnthn,” that the two sensory registers of the visual and the aural come together at the same time as the words introduce a third category of sense perception, one which often, especially in the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, functions as the hallmark of embodiedness, namely the tactile. While Derek Attridge considers this moment as an example of “non-lexical onomatopoeia” and argues that the letters on the page “remain resolutely visual, rendering any attempt to convert them into sound arbitrary and inadequate” (Peculiar 142), the combination of a tongue thrust with a dental closure required by any attempt to pronounce the combinations of t, h, and n aloud draws further attention to the agency of the reader’s body in his initial encounter with the episode. That is, the scrape of his tongue on the bottom of his teeth by which the reader voices what, by the next page, he will realize is a barkeep’s lisping mockery of the words “impertinent insolence” highlights the usually overlooked intertwining of the visual, the aural and the tactile in reading.

This moment emphasizes the complex way in which the Sirens episode calls out to the sensory organs of our bodies as much as it does to our minds. As my analysis here recalls the confluence of sensory registers indexed by the word “impression” in my previous discussion of Proust’s narrator’s experience in the Guermantes library, we might say that the lines which open the chapter also open our body to the act of reading itself. The play on “open” here is deliberate, since it is exactly with the openings of our body (eyes, ears, mouth, as well as, we will see, other bodily orifices) that we approach the book.

Indeed, the opening for which I am suggesting Sirens calls is in direct opposition to an earlier elaboration of sense perception vis-à-vis reading in the Proteus episode, encapsulated by Stephen’s instruction to himself to “Shut your eyes and see” (37). Maud Ellmann describes the relationship between the two episodes via an appropriately bodily pun when she picks up on Bloom’s interest in the perspectivalism implied in the concept of “parallax” and argues that “Sirens’ parallels ‘Proteus,’ and provides it with a kind of parallaxative” (“To Sing” 66). I seek to run the (necessarily reciprocal) comparison in the opposite direction, however. I turn now to Proteus to bring into relief the importance of the embodied reading which Sirens both demands and facilitates since Proteus exposes the pitfalls of being “out of touch” with the material world, a condition which the later episode works to counter. Stephen’s impulse here to imagine vision in his mind rather than to experience it with his body suggests a more general inattention to physical sense perception and a greater emphasis on mental intellection. Exploring this attitude towards the body and examining the way in which it goes hand-in-hand with a tendency to treat the material world as a text to be read uncovers, we will see, a certain kind of intellectual will to power at work in Stephen.

For analogical readings of the representational tactics of Ulysses and early twentieth-century film, see Burkdall, Barzagan, Briggs and Baron; for discussions of their differences, see DiBattista and Trotter.
Significantly, the opening of Stephen’s interior monologue in Proteus refers to two of the “modalities” of sense perception which Sirens emphasizes—“Ineluctable modality of the visible” and, a few lines later, “ineluctable modality of the audible” (37)—but remains silent on what we might call the modality of the touchable. Indeed, as the episode progresses this silence develops into wholesale hostility. Here, as Stephen begins a meditation on some of the ways sense perception has been conceived in the Western philosophical tradition by way of references to Aristotle, Bishop Berkeley and the German mystic Jacob Boehme, he indicates the way that his thought separates or splits the two registers of the visual and the aural in order to analyze each more closely. (Buck Mulligan does not call him “the knife-blade” without good reason (4).) Elaborating on the somewhat obscure phrase “ineluctable modality of the visible,” Stephen goes on to reflect “at least that if no more, thought through my eyes” (37). He thus explicitly indicates the extent to which he conceives of vision as primarily an intellectual, rather than a physical, act. At the same time, Stephen also shifts his language from a discourse of sense perception of objects to one of reading and language: “Signatures of all the things I am here to read, seaweed and seawrack, the nearing tide, that rusty boot. Snotgreen, bluesilver, rust: coloured signs” (37). As Stephen here conceives of the visible—however, “ineluctable”—as a kind of text to be cognized and deciphered, he implies that the intellectualization of his own senses also effects a kind of textualization of the world, as would only be appropriate for an episode whose “art,” according to Joyce’s schema, is “philology” (Gilbert 116). Moreover, a few pages later when he looks at the sand piled up on both a dog’s carcass (more on this to come) and the gunwale of a boat, Stephen thinks “These heavy sands are language tide and wind have silted here” and thus makes explicit the way that he treats the world itself as a kind of language, one which signifies some kind of higher, transcendent meaning (44).

Despite, or perhaps because of, his separation of the sensory registers, Stephen does not limit his intellectualizing to the “modality of the visible,” but treats his auditory sense perceptions in a similar way. Walking with his eyes closed and listening to “his boots crush crackling wrack and shells,” Stephen sings a snatch of song to himself and thinks, “Rhythm begins, you see. I hear. A catalectic tetrameter of iambics marching” (37). Here, Stephen relates the verse he sings to the sounds his boots make and parses the latter in terms of poetic meter, as if the sounds of the world are nothing more than a text to be analyzed in the abstracted language of literary criticism. Stephen’s shift to a vocabulary of vision also indicates the privilege which that sensory register holds for him. That is, as the semantic ambiguity evidenced in the figurative use of the verb “to see” to signify understanding or comprehension demonstrates the easy slippage between perception and cognition, vision seems to allow for a kind of intermingling of the two. Indeed, Stephen’s language draws particular attention to this slippage when he directs himself first to “Shut your eyes and see” and then later to “Open your eyes now. I will. One moment. Has all vanished since? If I open and am for ever in the black adiaphane. Basta! I will see if I can see. See now. There all the time without you: and ever shall be, world without end” (37). In the latter quotation, the semantic shiftiness of the verb “see”

43 There are a number of critical exegeses of Stephen’s relationship to the philosophers he cites in the opening paragraph, particularly the extent to which Stephen is or is not Aristotelian. As my project here is to develop the model of perception which Stephen himself adumbrates, I use the philosophical references to inform my analysis but do not explicitly engage in the minutiae of the discussion of Stephen’s exact relationship to his philosophical forebears. See Duncan, Killham, Vitoux and Livorni for a variety of perspectives on this question.

44 See Martin Jay’s Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought, particularly the opening page of the Introduction (1), for an extended treatment of this slippage between vision and thought.
moves from meaning “to ascertain” or “to learn” in the first instance to the physical action of vision in the second. The third shift is itself somewhat ambiguous since “See now” can function as an imperative to himself to become visually aware, in which case it would describe the act of physical perception immediately after Stephen opens his eyes. At the same time, however, the phrase might also function as an interjection signifying a kind of generalized attention and awareness, a simple recognition or acknowledgement of the external world. We might say that the semantic movement allows us to see a fuller view of his conception of vision. It is not just that, with his eyes shut, Stephen treats seeing only as an intellectual activity of either imagination or cognition, but, even with his eyes open, the shock of physical awareness soon fades into a more generalized form of attention.

Additionally, the anxiety of being swallowed into the “black adiaphane” to which Stephen alludes offers an explanation of the motivation behind both this privileging of vision and the related drive to philological abstraction. The esoteric term “adiaphane,” along with its opposite “diaphane” which occurs in the early lines of the episode, come from Aristotle’s theory of vision and refer to “the opaque” and “the translucent,” respectively. Aristotle mobilizes “the translucent” (as a substantive) to describe a kind of ur-medium, “a common ‘nature’ and power, capable of no separate existence of its own but residing in [bodies]” (qtd. in Gifford 45). For the Greek philosopher, the diaphane is what allows objects to be perceived in the first place. This indicates another way in which Stephen’s conception of vision relies on a kind of substance that can only be imagined or contemplated intellectually but that is undetectable via physical perception. The anxiety over the “black adiaphane” thus suggests that Stephen fears not being able to penetrate into his physical surroundings and to dominate his environment intellectually. The denial of the physicality of sense perception in favor of an intellectualized “reading” of the world is thus an effective way for him to disavow the limits which his (indeed, the) body places on his mind. We might also say that, as part of the workings of denial, Stephen splits his body from his mind in addition to splitting the sensory registers from one another. It thus comes as no surprise that he follows the observation “Sounds solid” by which he responds to the sound of his ashplant tapping the beach with the thought that the earth was “made by the mallet of Los Demiurgos,” a reference to one of the mythical figures created by William Blake, that most transcendental of poets, to imagine the world being created by the mind of the creator (Los) organizing itself. Stephen goes on to make this decidedly transcendental orientation explicit when, in the following sentence, he asks himself “Am I walking into eternity along Sandymount strand?” (37) and suggests the extent to which he is manically denying his physical and temporal limitations.

This transcendental orientation also finds its expression in the relationship which Stephen draws later in the episode between the abstractions of language and his body which develops the slide from physical perception to linguistic cognition that begins the episode. Thinking back to his student days in Paris and recalling a conversation in which he described his pre-medical studies, he recites “Paysayenn. P. C. N., you know: physiques, chimiques et naturelles” (41). As the building blocks of both French and English stand in for a more in-depth account of the body and the material world, the letters allow him to disregard the very nature of the subjects he is studying. While the phonetic prominence of “Paysayenn” draws attention to the

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45 Colin MacCabe observes that Stephen treats the “signatures” of the world “as presenting some full meaning which his full ‘I’ can decipher,” as if Stephen fancies himself a kind of self-sufficient ego (112).
46 See Gifford 45 for a fuller explanation.
material page on which the letters appear as well as to the readerly sensorium which perceives both their visual and auditory contours – a phenomenon which we will see *Ulysses* begin to exploit as it progresses – Stephen’s insistent disavowal of the body suggests the way he might refuse to acknowledge this kind of sensory emphasis. Indeed, when he takes up his own pen to compose a poem on a slip of paper torn from Deasy’s letter, he not only emphasizes the textuality of his own writing, but he repeats and further elaborates the textualization of the perceptual world with which the episode begins. He asks himself, “Who ever anywhere will read these written words? Signs on a white field….The good bishop of Cloyne took the veil of the temple out of his shovel hat; veil of space with coloured emblems hatched on its field. Hold hard. Coloured yes on a flat: yes, that’s right. Flat I see, then think distance, near, far, flat I see, east back” (48). While the “signs on a white field” initially function in apposition with the “written words” of the poem, the phrase also recalls the “signature of all the things I am here to read” by which he described the phenomenal world at the episode’s beginning. In doing so, it delineates the continuum which Stephen conceives between signs and objects in the world. Similarly, as Stephen’s thought progresses into a review of Berkeley’s (“the good bishop of Cloyne”) theory of vision, which quite significantly places visual agency in the mind rather than in the eye,47 he also recalls the “coloured signs” of the opening lines. Ultimately, the appeal to Berkeley at this point has the effect, as Stephen’s language makes clear (“Flat I see, then think distance”), of flattening the world, as if everything he perceives has the same status as a letter on a flat page. For Stephen, then, the actions of reading a text and perceiving the world are not only synonymous but also both imply a kind of otherworldly, disembodied position which disavows any spatial relation between the perceiving-reading subject and the perceived-read object.

As I write, however, I find myself falling all too easily into Stephen’s mindset. That is, I appeal to the “flat page” on which letters appear as if, in a project about the materiality of the book, I inadvertently deny (or, at best, flatten out) the very materiality I am trying to highlight. I draw attention to this slippage in my argument to suggest the ease (indeed, perhaps the necessity) with which a reader neglects the materiality of the book and imagines himself as the kind of disembodied mind of which Stephen provides such a clear example. We might say that what I am calling Stephen’s “textualization” of the world participates in a kind of unexamined or limited conception of the act of reading which it is the work of this project to counter.48 In this way, my argument departs from Roy Gottfried’s ingenious discussion of the appearance and materiality of *Ulysses* and their relation to Joyce’s iritis. He argues that the novel is “a product of Joyce’s increasing difficulties in seeing” and makes claims for Joyce’s concern for the book as a “material, physical object” by detailing his close attention to the most minute details of the novel’s printing (1; 3). For all its interest in Joyce’s vision problems and the appearance of

47 In his treatment of the presence of Berkeley in Proteus, Pierre Vitoux paraphrases the philosopher’s position succinctly: “When we see two houses, the actual content of our perception is colors, variously disposed; but we arrange them into definite forms, and if one of those forms is smaller than the other, we conclude that we will have to cover a greater distance to reach it. Stereoscopic vision is not given in, but constructed out of, sensible ideas” (161). Later, he quotes from Berkeley’s *New Theory of Vision* and relates this model of perception to language and signs: “We may fairly conclude that the proper objects of vision constitute a universal language of the Author of nature…. And the manner wherein [these signs] signify, and mark unto us the objects which are at a distance, is the same with that of languages and signs of human appointment” (167).

48 In a related argument, Thomas Docherty describes the way Joyce’s modernism “is interested in reconstituting the plastic, the figural and spatial voluminousness,” though he focuses his argument mostly on the aural timbre of words to which we must attend (122).
letters, however, Gottfried’s imaginative treatment of *Ulysses* seems to take a page from
Stephen’s discourse as it moves quickly beyond a discussion of materiality, not to mention a
reader’s physical relationship to the book. Indeed, as he argues that “Joyce translates his
physically disrupted experience of observing the text, with every letter a physical challenge, into
the reader’s imaginatively disrupted experience of reading the text, with every word an enigmatic
challenge” he indicates the way in which “seeing,” for him, functions less as a signifier of the
physical act of vision than it does as a metaphor for intellection and imagination (6).
In a
sense, Gottfried imagines a reader that, like Stephen, is nothing but mind.

This focus on a disembodied mind finds its intellectual seeds in the aesthetic theory
Stephen proposes in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, in which he draws on the thought of
Thomas Aquinas and claims that “Beauty expressed by the artist cannot awaken in us an
emotion which is kinetic or a sensation which is purely physical” but rather must raise the mind
above the body (200). At the same time, the disavowal of his physical limits possibly finds an
affective motivation in the recent death of his mother (the figure, incidentally, at the center of
both Proust’s narrator’s experience of the book and Kleinian psychoanalysis). Earlier in *Ulysses*,
Stephen has recalled a dream of her corpse: “her wasted body within its loose graveclothes
giving off an odour of wax and rosewood, her breath bent over him with mute secret words, a
faint odour of wetted ashes” (10). The focus on her physical remains and the scents which
accost Stephen imply the close alliance, in his mind, of death and embodiment. He even calls
out in defiance, “No, mother. Let me be and let me live” (a reprise, perhaps, of *Portrait’s* “Non
serviam”), as if to suggest his own refusal to acknowledge the mortal traits which he shares with
her (10).
In this sense, Stephen acts in much the same way as the Proustian narrator in his
paranoid moments, but without the alternation with a depressive position which allowed the
narrator to find comfort in the maternal body and the material book.

Indeed, the poem Stephen writes – both in its content and in the act of its composition –
expands on the denial of mortality which seems to be at play in such an overly intellectualized
conception of reading. The poem reads, “He comes, pale vampire, through storm his eyes, his
bat sails bloodying the sea, mouth to her mouth’s kiss” (48). Here, as the mouth of the vampire
and that of the woman come together (Stephen muses “Glue ’em well” in the following line),
the kiss, usually a sign of affection and often a synecdoche for (procreative) sexual relations,
transforms into a signal of mortality and decay, as if to suggest that the body is itself never
anything more than the animated corpse which the figure of the vampire so clearly embodies.
Indeed, this focus on a sordid, disgusting mortality surfaces again towards the end of the
episode, when Stephen imagines not only the discovery of the drowned man he has heard about
but also the way in which his own body forces him into constant close contact with death. In
words that recall the sensory experience of his dead mother, he thinks, “Bag of corpse gas
sopping in foul brine….Dead breaths I living breathe, tread dead dust, devour urinous offal
from all dead” (50). It thus seems particularly appropriate that, as Stephen composes the poem
and deliberates over his choice of words, he seems to fantasize a paradoxically bodiless body:
“His lips lipped and mouthed fleshless lips of air…. His mouth molded issuing breath,

49 Gottfried makes this metaphoricity explicit when he writes that “forced by an obscuring of what is seen on the page
into the metaphoric effect of a disability of reading, the reader will be prone to errors and unclarity” (20). The
metaphoric jump here seems to me to be unduly large.
50 The Vintage International edition which I prefer has no comma between “No” and “mother,” but the standard
“Gabler” edition reinserts one (p. 9) to suggest less a description of not having a mother than a direct address of
defiance and resistance. I thank John Bishop for bringing this to my attention.
unspeechoh: roar of cataractic planets, globed, blazing, roaring wayawayawayawayawayaway" (48). The focus on "fleshless lips" and the molding of "breath, unspeechoh" intimate a certain fetishization of air as something both imperceptible and immaterial (a kind of modern "diaphane"), while the mention of "planets," along with the repetitive emphasis of the word "away," suggest Stephen's desire to exist in some kind of non-earthly, otherworldly environment (in which the physical earth might look exactly like a flat page to be read).

As a result of these fantasies of disembodiment and transcendence – in fact, precisely because he cannot actually escape from either the world or his body – Stephen develops a relationship with the material world based on antagonism and hostility. We see this most clearly when he comes across "the bloated carcass of a dog" and then notices the way "a point, live dog, grew into sight running across the sweep of sand" (44; 45). While the phrase "grew into sight" describes how the dog comes at Stephen from a distance, the curious choice of the verb "grow" also suggests the way the external world defies Stephen's imposed sensory deprivation as it solicits his sense of sight and makes unavoidable inroads into it. Stephen’s reaction is expectantly negative: "Lord, is he going to attack me?" and, a few lines later, "Dog of my enemy. I just stood pale, silent, bayed about. Terribilia meditans" (45). Stephen’s thoughts here make his extreme antagonism to the material world explicit and suggest that he conceives of his connection to the world as a hostile and discordant one. (We also recall the personal offense Stephen takes when he overhears Mulligan call his mother "beastly dead," as if the former wants to separate himself as far as possible from the animal (8).) In an example of Hugh Kenner’s "Uncle Charles principle," in which the narrative voice takes on features of the character whose experiences it is narrating, the episode offers another example of this antagonism: "Unwholesome sandflats waited to suck his treading soles, breathing upward sewage breath. He coasted them, walking warily" (41). While the "upward sewage breath" refers, as Don Gifford points out, to the fact that Dublin’s sewers emptied into the River Liffey and Dublin Bay where Stephen is walking (51), the "breathing" suggests the way the shore shares characteristics with Stephen's image of the drowned man's corpse: both, in a sense, take on a life of their own that menaces Stephen's own existence. Moreover, as Stephen's anxiety transforms the landscape of the earth itself into a voracious mouth that threatens – almost vampirically – to "suck" him in, it turns the inescapable act of touching it into an ever-present hazard. Indeed, a few pages later, as Stephen reaches "the edge of the sea," his feet begin "to sink slowly in the quaking soil," since, at this point in the day, the tide is rising (44). Stephen goes so far as to articulate this threat via a comment on his own body. The narrative describes how "he watched through peacocktwittering lashes the southing sun" and suggests the extent to which the sight of Stephen’s eyelashes is an unavoidable part of his vision. Stephen expresses his feelings of restriction and imprisonment when he thinks "I am caught in this burning scene" (49).

Ultimately, Stephen’s antagonistic conception of his embodied place in the world comes to color the way he views humanity in general. At the sight of two cocklepickers, one of whom "swung lourdily her midwife’s bag" (37), Stephen meditates on human birth: "One of her sisterhood lugged me squealing into life" (37) and, on the next page, "Wombed in sin darkness I was too, made not begotten. By them, the man with my voice and my eyes and a ghostwoman with ashes on her breath. They clasped and sundered, did the coupler's will" (38). His diction here suggests his disdain for being born of bone and flesh parents and his disappointment at

51 See Kenner, Joyce's Voices, pp. 15-38.
being “made” by such a common and unexceptional act as “the coupler’s will,” rather than the more singular “begotten.” Significantly, his model for the latter is Adam and his “spouse and helpmate” Eve who “had no navel. Gaze. Belly without blemish, bulging big, a buckler of taut vellum” (38). As the lack of a navel indicates that Eve was not born of woman, the description of her stomach as a “buckler of taut vellum” suggests the way that, in Stephen’s mind, paper and writing surfaces (“vellum”) act as a kind of shield (“buckler”) against the contamination of a physical (and hence mortal) body. His gaze here, far from describing an act of vision that would take in the external world, actually refers to navel-gazing, which the episode first mentions a few lines earlier along with an allusion to the telephone, another kind of communication medium: “Will you be as gods? Gaze in your omphalos. Hello. Kinch here. Put me on to Edenville. Aleph, alpha: nought, nought, one” (38). While the tongue-in-cheek parody of telephoning Eden may make the reader chuckle, it should not mask the way in which Stephen’s will to transcend his earthly situation by descending into himself again functions by turning a means of reaching out to someone else (namely, the telephone) into a technique for walling himself in and separating or distinguishing himself from the rest of the material world. As he imagines the descent into his navel, Stephen appeals to the very building blocks of text in the letters and number of the telephone exchange AA 001, as if to extend the textualization of the world resulting from the intellectualization of his sense perceptions to the object of his own body as well. Stephen thus resists, in more ways than one, being “in touch” with the world.

II.

In light of Stephen’s extreme disregard of both his body and the material world, it is curious that the Proteus episode is set on the beach. As the location in which the land meets the water, the beach is precisely where the solidity of the ground, which we normally can ignore and take for granted, begins to dissolve into the fluidity of the water. In its in-between state, we are brought into a much greater awareness of the function of the ground; we feel it differently (as Stephen was so quick to disavow), the way it supports us and touches us, how it shapes itself or resists being shaped. In a subtle moment of intratextuality, the Sirens episode recalls Stephen’s stroll on the beach when it refers to Vincenzo Bellini’s 1831 opera *La sonnambula* (The Sleepwalker), since Stephen’s sensory experiments leave him, for the beginning of Proteus, in the dark of blindness. On hearing Richie Goulding begin to sing the aria “All is Lost Now” from that opera, Bloom thinks, “Yes, I remember. Lovely air. Innocence in the moon. Still hold her back. Brave, don’t know their danger. Call name. Touch water” (273). As Bloom muses on the content of the aria and the traditional ways by which to

52 This is in direct contradiction with Suzette Henke’s explicitly phenomenological reading of *Ulysses* in *Joyce’s Maraculous Sindbook*. She argues that Stephen ultimately “initiates an aesthetic celebration of phenomenal reality” perceived and sanctified in the present moment (4). She goes on to suggest that Stephen must “learn through a long, somewhat torturous apprenticeship, to connect word with flesh” (an act of association that, she claims, Bloom is more naturally able to accomplish) (8). Her almost wholesale adoption of the language of Husserlian and Heideggerian phenomenology (the way she views *Ulysses* as an “existential act of mind and a phenomenological life-world” [Lebenswelt]” (11), seems to elide sense perception altogether at the same time as it places faith in the idea and possibility of full presence. With the emphasis we will see *Ulysses*’ interrogation of reading and sense perception places on limits, this is precisely what the novel resists.

53 Let us also recall Stephen’s hydrophobia, his reluctance to go swimming in the opening Telemachus episode and Buck Mulligan’s comment that “the unclean bard makes a point of washing once a month” (15). Part of this hydrophobia is, perhaps, the reluctance to immerse himself in a medium which envelops his body so completely and which is, at the same time, so different from the “immaterial” medium of the air.
safely wake a sleepwalker (by calling their name or having them touch water), he effectively
describes the way Stephen’s contact with water in the narrative of Proteus works to wake him
up, or, in other words, to forestall the elision of the body and the material world. In a somewhat
analogous way, as *Ulysses* progresses, it begins to mix what we might think of as the solidity of a
grammatical language and a standard narrative with experimental fluidity, which, as we have
seen, reaches an extreme in Sirens, to wake the reader up from the kind of somnambulistic
reading which ignores its dependence on the body’s sensory organs. That is, as language bends
and twists itself in the Sirens episode in ways that reveal the sense “modalities” by which the
reader always approaches writing, most obviously vision and (imagined) hearing, the reader
becomes aware of the way in which his body is really the vessel or the echo chamber for the
language of the text.

The motif of “sleepwalking” that I am setting up here is not an arbitrary one, since Sirens
includes two characters who are themselves deprived of one of their senses, namely Pat the deaf
waiter and the blind stripling who tunes the piano. Taken together, these two figures function
as examples of a relationship with or reaction to the “ineluctability” of the visible and the
audible different from the one which Stephen dramatized via his textualizing compulsion. Both
the deaf waiter and the blind stripling treat sensation less by analyzing it into different
cognizable registers, than by treating it synthetically, as itself a heterogeneous and multi-faceted
phenomenon. Appealing to and depending on another sensory register to supplement the one
each is missing, they underline the way that each of the senses interacts with the others and
never functions alone. Bloom, in fact, makes this lexically explicit when, on seeing Pat the
waiter, he thinks, “He seehears lipspeech” (283). The verbal combinations here describe not
only the inextricability of the assumedly separate sensory registers (“seehears”), but, more
specifically, the way in which speech itself is not merely an aural phenomenon, but arises from –
and is closely connected to – our physical lips which we can both feel and see. Pat the deaf
waiter thus not only recalls Ulysses’ sailors with their wax-plugged ears, but, even more
interestingly, he also stands in as a figure for the reader who shares with him a kind of deafness
for which he must use his other senses – in this case, vision – to compensate.

Conversely, the description of the blind tuner’s tuning fork indicates the way that both
touch and hearing might also compensate for the lack of vision: “From the saloon a call came,
long in dying. That was a tuningfork the tuner had that he forgot that he now struck. A call
again. That he now pointed that it now throbbed. You hear? It throbbed, pure, purer, softly
and softlier, its buzzing prongs” (264). The repetition of the “that” throughout the passage
imparts a rhythm that recalls a physical pulse, as if the syntax of the sentences begins to “throb”
like a tuning fork. The choice of the word “throbbed,” in fact, suggests the way in which sound
is produced by mimicking the functioning of the heart (another bodily organ that “opens” and
“closes,” if only figuratively). This alliance of the aural and the tactile takes on a visual aspe-
t when compared with the description of Lenehan at the piano a page earlier: “Upholding the lid
he (who?) gazed in the coffin (coffin?) at the oblique triple (piano!) wires. He pressed (the same
who pressed indulgently her hand), soft pedaling a triple o
of keys to see the thickness of felt
advancing, to hear the muffled hammerfall in action” (263). As Lenehan stares at the
instrument’s wires and experiments with the keys and the pedals of the piano, the production
of sound becomes a visual experience. Additionally, the phrase “thickness of felt” recalls the
“pressing” which produces the sounds from the piano at the same time as the pun on “felt”
immates the importance of touch here. (It also resonates with the emphasis which the word
“impression” takes on in the scene at the end of Proust’s novel where the narrator encounters

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the volume of François le Champi.) This kind of sensory awareness is obviously contrary to
Stephen’s closed eyes and textualized senses.

Before we submerge ourselves completely in the stream of Sirens, however, an
examination of the way in which Bloom opens himself to the physical world, including the
materiality of written words, offers resources for fleshing out (the idiom is, once again, quite
appropriate) the way the sense perceptions which Sirens emphasizes here relate to the act of
reading. As Bloom provides a counterpoint to Stephen which it will be the work of Sirens to
harmonize, he seems at moments to place an overemphasis on the body at the expense of the
mind. The famous beginning of the Calypso chapter is a particularly clear example of how
Bloom’s attitude towards the world differs from Stephen’s: “Mr. Leopold Bloom ate with relish
the inner organs of beasts and fowls. He liked thick giblet soup, nutty gizzards, a stufféd roast
heart, liver slices fried with crusterumbs, fried hencod’s roes. Most of all he liked grilled mutton
kidneys which gave to his palate a fine tang of faintly scented urine” (55). The immediate
association of Bloom and “inner organs” clearly points to his embrace of an embodied
physicality which Stephen, with his “lack” of organs, ignored. What is more, the fact that the
“inner organs” which he so relishes are also parts of the body that metabolize and filter out
toxins suggests that Bloom’s interest in and relation to the body extends beyond any kind of
idealized notions to include the dirtiest and most “polluted” parts. Indeed, the “fine tang of
faintly scented urine” which attracts Bloom to kidneys in particular explicitly recalls and even
somewhat revalues the “urinous offal” that Stephen derides just a few pages earlier.

Additionally, since the simple past tense of the verb “ate” refers less to a specific action
than to a habitual one, the reader’s first picture of Bloom is one in which, significantly, he is
opening his mouth to consume these “inner organs.” When Bloom speaks for the first time
and addresses the cat with the interjection “O,” he reinforces this image. At the same time, the
book’s type offers the reader an image that depicts the shape Bloom’s mouth must make not
only to speak this sound aloud but also to “eat with relish.” Indeed, it is a shape very similar to
the one Stephen makes when he “mouthed fleshless lips of air” and “moulded issuing breath” as
he composes his poem. Here, however, this shape is in the service of either ingesting organs or
communicating with the cat (something that Stephen, we might presume, would never do). As
such, it underscores the way Bloom depends on his body for intercourse with the external
world. There is, however, another kind of intercourse occurring here, one between the reader
and the book. As the difficulty in pronouncing the virtually unsayable “Mkgnao!” of the cat
which immediately precedes Bloom’s “O” primes the reader to voice the words on the page, we
might imagine the reader’s mouth taking the same shape as Bloom’s so that an opening of his
body subtly mirrors the signifier on the page. At the same time, the cat’s “Mkgnao!” and
Bloom’s phatic “O” function as moments of textual opacity which resist the kind of
straightforward comprehension usually at play in reading and draw attention to the material page
on which they are printed. Taking both into account, we see how the specular relationship
between the reader and the book depends, in a way that recalls the Proustian narrator’s
interaction with Albertine, on their mutual embodiedness. The experience of reading this
episode’s opening thus incites an awareness both of reading as an embodied act and of the book

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54 Indeed, Merleau-Ponty explains the way “we see the things themselves” and “at the same time are separated from
them by all the thickness of the look and of the body… It is that the thickness of flesh between seer and the thing is
constitutive for the thing of its visibility as for the seer of his corporeity; it is not an obstacle between them, it is their
means of communication” (135). His description puts into more general terms the specific relation between reader and
book that Ulysses makes apparent at this moment.
as a substantial object that takes (its) place in the world in a way that Stephen’s intellectualizing textualization was unable to take into account.

In fact, Bloom’s first scene of reading continues this physical emphasis and displays a similar awareness of the embodiedness of reading. Moreover, the narration of Bloom reading an advertisement for a farm in Israel while he is waiting in Dlugacz’s butcher shop effectively transmits this awareness to the reader himself:

He took up a page from the pile of cut sheets. The model farm at Kinnereth on the lakeshore of Tiberias. Can become ideal winter sanatorium. Moses Montefiore. I thought he was. Farmhouse, wall round it, blurred cattle cropping. He held the page from him: interesting; read it nearer, the blurred cropping cattle, the page rustling. A young white heifer. Those mornings in the cattlemarket the beasts lowing in their pens, branded sheep, flop and fall of dung, the breeders in hobnailed boots trudging through the litter, slapping a palm on a ripened hindquarter, there’s a prime one, unpeeled switches in their hands. He held the page aslant patiently, bending his senses and his will, his soft subject gaze at rest.

The passage is an illuminating mix of intellection, sense perception and fantasy that portrays the inextricability of the three in the act of reading. While the fantasies of the cattlemarket which the advertisement incites in Bloom recall the kind of physical awareness suggested by the opening lines of the chapter, the narrative interweaves snippets of the text Bloom is reading to effectively put the reader at a double remove from the text, a narrative move that forces us to read—literally—through Bloom’s eyes. As the specifications of the distance and angle at which Bloom holds the page describe his attempts to find the position in which his eyesight can view the advertisement in focus, the narrative also asks the reader to picture the kind of trial-and-error in which Bloom is involved. The reader must thus imaginatively try his hand at “bending his senses” to take on the kind of momentarily blurred vision that confronts Bloom. My argument here recalls Roy Gottfried’s interest in Joyce’s iritis and his claim that the confusion of the reader—what he calls the latter’s “dys-lexia”—conditions “that component of the reader’s experience of reading that evokes the material world” so that “the reader literally confronts the book, face to face, holding it in hand, as a book has its own first order reality as a material object” (52). Yet, as I have suggested, his actual readings elide this materiality as they treat the text as a “puzzle” to decipher rather than an object to be perceived, while my reading here falls much more in line with his declared project. That is, as the narrative asks the reader to imagine the letters themselves being blurred, the reader is less “cognitively” disrupted, as Gottfried puts it (6), than he is made aware of his own vision in the first place.

Furthermore, the description of the way that holding the page “aslant patiently” places Bloom’s “soft subject gaze at rest” expresses his willingness to surrender total control of his own powers of perception, his ability—contra Stephen’s example—to let the world have some agency in soliciting his look. Derek Attridge also discusses what he sees as the dismantling of a “undivided, masterful, efficient self” and appeals, as an example, to the unconventional syntax of a sentence in this episode that describes Bloom’s purchase of the kidney in the butcher’s shop: “His hand accepted the moist tender gland and slid it into a side pocket” (“Lipspeech” 59). By considering how Bloom’s “subject gaze” is “at rest” but not extinguished in the description of his interaction with the advertisement, we can nuance Attridge’s claim that the
syntactical “transgression” which effects the respective replacement of Bloom and Dlugacz by the organs of the hand and the kidney “can be regarded as a stratagem which liberates the body from a dictatorial and englobing will, and allows its organs their own energies and proclivities” (61). The emphasis which the novel places on separate organs describes less the way the body completely shirks its organizing will (what we might also call, in psychoanalytic terms, its “ego”) than it does the intimate connection between body and ego, the way they depend on each other. Indeed, as we have seen, the body is the means by which Bloom comes into a relationship with the external world in the first place. Accordingly, the way the Calypso draws attention to the organs of the reader suggests a similar imbrication of the physical and the mental that prepares him for the ways that the Sirens episode will call out to his body by, as we will see, calling out to his mind.

As these specific narrative mechanisms function in ingenious ways to draw attention to the body of the reader, the narrative content of Bloom’s morning serves to reinforce the notion of reading as a bodily act by aligning it with a number of the physical actions with which he begins his day. That is, the novel grants the act of reading (the bodily nature of which it takes such pains to highlight) the same status as the other physical actions and concrete details that contribute to the realistic verisimilitude of the novel’s portrayal of 1904 Dublin. Thus, the narrative tells how, with the Zionist advertisement in hand, Bloom “walked back along Dorset street, reading gravely” (60). The coincidence of reading and walking in this sentence suggests that these actions are somehow comparable, that, at least, they take place in the same world and by the workings of the same body. Accordingly, one chapter later, the narrative details how “Mr Bloom stood at the corner, his eyes wandering over the multicoloured hoardings. Cantrell and Cochrane’s Ginger Ale (Aromatic). Clery’s summer sale” (76). Bloom’s stasis here only serves to highlight the description of his “wandering” eye, as its agency in the act of reading the surrounding advertisements stands in for the actions his legs would usually take. Additionally, as the “multicoloured hoardings” recall the “coloured signs” by which Stephen described the “seaspawn and seawrack, the nearing tide, that rusty boot” on Sandymount strand (37), the narrative highlights the contrast between the two characters’ readerly habits. If Stephen has the tendency to textualize the phenomenal world, then, conversely, the “wandering” of Bloom’s eye phenomenolizes the texts that make up the city. The suggestion of accumulation and mass in the word “hoarding” implies, in fact, the way the signs are themselves also objects to be perceived.

This bodily relationship to textual objects becomes even more pronounced in the scenes which align reading with the physical processes that most obviously involve two bodily openings – eating and excretion. Having saved the kidney from burning, Bloom sits down to breakfast with a letter from his daughter Milly: “He shore away the burnt flesh and flung it to the cat. Then he put a forkful into his mouth, chewing with discernment the toothsome pliant meat…. He creased out the letter at his side, reading it slowly as he chewed, sopping another die of bread in the gravy and raising it to his mouth” (65). The rhyming between the actions of cutting away the burnt part of the kidney and smoothing out the creases of the letter, which prepare for eating and reading respectively, draws a connection between the two and casts reading in terms of a kind of bodily consumption. (This rhyming occurs again a page later when Bloom “ate piece after piece of kidney” and “read the letter again: twice” (66).) Interestingly, the novel immediately follows this alliance of reading and eating with a transcription of Milly’s letter. In her wide-ranging treatment of letters in *Ulysses*, Shari Benstock points out that Milly’s letter – as well as the letter from Martha with which Bloom has such an erotic relationship – displays “a
greater degree of textual ‘facticity’” than other letters in the novel (like Deasy’s letter to the newspaper, for instance) “simply because [both Milly and Martha’s letters] appear as separate texts, set aside from the narration” (423). Though Benstock’s argument about “facticity” here is in the service of an analysis of the “verisimilitude” and “reliability” of the novel’s narrative voices, the close proximity between the heightened “facticity” of Milly’s letter and the connection which the narrative draws between Bloom’s readerly and physical consumption draws attention to the dependence of this “facticity” on the sensorium of the reader, the fact that the reader’s senses must – like Bloom’s mouth – be open to the text as an object.

Bloom ends this episode with a radical example of this kind of openness. Indeed, if he begins the Calypso chapter with an open mouth, he ends it, appropriately, with an open anus: as the narrative points out, Bloom “liked to read at stool” (67). It goes on to give the details of Bloom’s doings in the outhouse: “Quietly he read, restraining himself, the first column and, yielding but resisting, began the second. Midway, his last resistance yielding, he allowed his bowels to ease themselves quietly as he read, reading still patiently, that slight constipation of yesterday quite gone” (69). Here, the syntactical construction of the sentences explicitly interweaves the actions of reading and moving one’s bowels. The “restraining” and “yielding” in the first sentence seem to refer to reading itself before the second sentence clarifies the object of those actions, as if the controlled and steady pace at which Bloom encounters the words of the newspaper is commensurate with the rhythms of his bowel movement. (Moreover, the “column” could also refer just as easily to what’s coming out of him as to the newspaper he is reading.) Additionally, the way the participial phrases break into the description also causes the reader himself to share in the kind of rhythmic peristalsis by which Bloom defecates, a rhythm of contraction and relaxation that will become, according to Joyce’s schema, the “technique” of the entire Lestrygonians episode. When the narrative goes on to observe, with typical referential ambiguity, that “It did not move or touch him but it was something quick and neat” (69), it sets up a telling contrast between the product of his colonic efforts and his reading material. That is, the fact that Bloom “tore away half the prize story sharply and wiped himself with it” (70) indicates the extent to which the page he is reading does touch him (indeed, quite intimately at that) and, once he is finished with it, is anything but “quick and neat.”55 The resonance between the images which open and close an episode whose content is so full of reading demarcates the limits of the body itself and emphasizes the way in which bodily openings function as the interface between the reader and the book.

III.

As the chapters which detail the beginning of Bloom’s day progress, they offer further examples of the attention he pays to the material aspects of the texts with which he is confronted. In doing so, they indicate the way in which what we might think of as Bloom’s overly physical relationship to texts often forestalls the intellection necessary to comprehend them. (For all its physical “openness,” his use of the newspaper as toilet paper certainly does not help him decipher the “prize story.”) Similarly, when Bloom transforms his newspaper into a kind of ersatz walking stick in the “Lotos-Eaters” episode, he indicates the way that his awareness of the materiality of texts can keep him from reading them: “As he walked he took the folded Freeman from his sidepocket, unfolded it, rolled it lengthwise in a baton and tapped it at each sauntering step against his trouser leg” (72). Here, as Bloom recognizes and leverages

55 Henry Staten reads this moment as a “witty and profound allegory of literature touching reality” (173).
the materiality of paper – its fine but by no means non-existent thickness – to create a “baton,” a musical term that brings with it echoes of the “tapping” of both Stephen’s ashplant and the walking stick of the blind stripling, he effectively disables himself from reading the paper. At the same time, the subtle similarity between Bloom’s actions here and his masochistic fantasies of being beaten which surface throughout the day (most explicitly, of course, in the “Circe” episode) suggest the erotic valence that a physical relationship with a written text entails. Additionally, we see the transfer of the amorous nature of Bloom’s epistolary exchange with Martha to the physical object of the letter itself in the colorfully descriptive language that details the masturbatory actions of opening the envelope: “He strolled out of the postoffice and turned to the right….His hand went into his pocket and a forefinger felt its way under the flap of the envelope, ripping it open in jerks” (73).

I defer further discussion of the erotics of an embodied reading to my later treatment of Finnegans Wake and make a final foray into the Sirens episode – which I propose is one of Joyce’s last work’s closest stylistic antecedents – to show how this central episode stages a détente in the competition between reading and sense perception as exemplified by Stephen and Bloom. That is, the chapter at the center of the novel, what I have cited as its “navel,” brings together Stephen’s overly intellectualized, disembodied approach to the world with Bloom’s insistently embodied orientation; in a sense, we might say that Sirens indicates the profound connection between the two which my treatment thus far has (paranoiacally) treated as separate and opposed. Sirens allows us to see the way that reading is an action of both mind and body, that it is, moreover, an action that connects the two.

And, as I have suggested, Sirens is particularly suited for this task. In his argument for a transition from the stream-of-consciousness technique in the early chapters to “polyphonic devices of various kinds” that come dominate the style of each of the later chapters (183), Franco Moretti notes how much of Bloom’s stream of consciousness consists of “undigested” fragments of other people’s speech (and, given Stephen’s penchant for intellectual citation, the same would be true for him). He proposes that the novel itself acts similarly: “it is precisely from this undigested language that the polyphony of Ulysses develops,” and, indeed, we have already seen examples of the way Sirens re-employs details and motifs from earlier in the novel (188). As he points out, however, the novel picks up and reworks this “undigested” language “without any longer passing through Bloom’s mind” (188). Going on to argue more generally that the transformation of stylistic polyphony into an artistic device free of the motivation of subjective ego depends on the disintegration of an “anthropocentric framework” (he draws his vocabulary from the Russian formalists), Moretti opens up the potential for the novel itself to partake in a kind of authorial (or narrational) agency. His metaphor of digestion, moreover, imparts a kind of body to the novel and suggests the way it exercises this kind of agency is by treating itself as an object to be broken apart and reassembled.

Sirens, in fact, offers an allegory of this agency in the scene when the barmaid Lydia Douce holds a seashell up to George Lidwell’s and Mina Kennedy’s ears. Here, the episode not only picks up and, in Moretti’s terms, “digests” Stephen’s promenade on the beach, but it also gives an almost explicit example of the way the production of both bodily sensation and

56 I am indebted to John Bishop’s lectures on Ulysses, specifically on the “psychopathology” of the Lotos-Eaters episode, for this point.
57 For more on letters and masturbation, see Jacques Derrida’s treatment of the French slang “envoyer” in “Ulysses Gramophone” (303-304).
intellectual meaning depends on the contact between the body and an external object. The narrative reports: “To the end of the bar to him she bore lightly the spiked and winding seahorn that he, George Lidwell, solicitor, might hear” (281). Not only does the female figure holding a seashell recall the cocklepickers in “Proteus,” as if Lydia Douce is a kind of “metempsychosis” of the woman collecting shells that morning on Sandymount strand, but George Lidwell also responds with an answer reminiscent of Stephen’s “discursive” treatment of sense perception when he asks a few lines later “What are the wild waves saying?” Moreover, the repeated instance of “Tap” in this moment that signifies the sound of the blind stripling’s walking cane recalls Stephen’s experiment in blindness and his observation that “My ash sword hangs at my side. Tap with it; they do” (37).

Yet, these parallels serve only to emphasize the important differences between this moment and the earlier one in Proteus. In fact, the episode’s description of the act of listening to the shell indicates the influence of the kind of embodiedness which we saw at play in my treatment of Bloom: “Ah, now he heard, she holding it to his ear. Hear! He heard. Wonderful. She held it to her own ear and through the sifted light pale gold in contrast glided. To hear” (281). Most obviously, the rhyme between “hear” and “ear” binds auditory sense perception to the physical organ on which it depends, while the homophony between the verb “hear” and the deictic “here” suggests that the act of listening entails an awareness of the surrounding environment. Indeed, the imperative form of “hear” turns that suggestion into a kind of demand, as if the “musical” nature of the Sirens compels a consciousness of the situation in which the sensory experience is taking place. At the same time, this homophony and the structure of the infinitive recall a prepositional phrase describing the movement of Mina Kennedy (“pale gold”) to a specific position. Thus, far from taking the listener away from the world or out of his body, listening in Sirens is as earthbound as reading in Calypso. Part of this situation is, of course, the physical openness which Lydia and Lidwell have with the shell itself, the fact that they allow it to come into contact with their ears (which, Joyce was later to observe, can never be “closed”). We might push this point and draw a parallel between the shell in Sirens and the book itself since they both function, to a certain extent, by coming into a relationship with our bodies.

In combining both Stephen’s and Bloom’s orientations towards sense perception in this scene, Sirens points to the way that reading is neither purely mental nor purely physical but rather is a kind of vacillation between the two. My reading of this moment itself participates in this vacillation, as I take the raw sound of a word like “hear” and subject it to an act of interpretation that points back to the sensory experience on which it is predicated. (And, as such, it is only the most recent example of my more general critical strategies.) Bloom himself articulates this kind of combination or vacillation explicitly when he emphasizes the connection between the workings of the body and the sound effects of the shell. He thinks to himself,

58 MacCabe also sees the shell as a kind of allegory: for him, the shell illustrates how meaning has no ultimate origin but is made via the interaction of the discourse of the reader and that of the text (85-6). The description in both its form and its content seems to me to point just as much (if not more) towards the importance of the body-object relationship as it does to the mind-text one.
59 The first part of Jean-François Lyotard’s *Discours, Figure*, entitled “Signification and Designation,” discusses the way that the perceptual field always inhabits language. He elaborates Émile Benveniste’s discussion of deictics to suggest that these pointing words are where the perceptual most obviously breaks into the linguistic. See, in particular, pp. 33-39 for a discussion of deictics specifically and pp. 73-104 for an elaboration of the larger ramifications of this argument.
“The sea they think they hear. Singing. A roar. The blood is it. Souse in the ear sometimes. Well, it’s a sea. Corpuscle islands” (281). The use of the verb “think” here indicates, on the one hand, that Lydia and Lidwell “believe” or “suppose” that they hear the sea, while, on the other, it also suggests that this belief stems from a cognitive act of deliberation, that, not unlike Stephen in Proteus, their auditory sense perception has been the subject of an act of interpretation. At the same time, however, as Bloom’s customary role as amateur scientist leads him to observe (mistakenly, as it turns out) that the sounds which Lydia and Lidwell are interpreting as the sea are actually caused by the echo of the pumping of their own blood, he also indicates the way that sense perception is itself an embodied activity. By putting the blood internal to the body into an analogous relationship with the sea, Bloom implies that one way we come to an awareness of our bodies is through a comparison with or relation to external objects. (A few lines earlier, in fact, he thinks “Her ear too is a shell, the peeping lobe there” (281).) Sense perception, and hearing in particular, thus becomes a worldly phenomenon that does not occur from the position of some kind of disembodied divinity, as Stephen would have it. Even more significantly, the emphasis on this kind of embodied sense perception suggests that the intellectual act of interpretation is itself also embodied. The cognitive actions which lead us to an understanding of meaning and which Stephen’s example makes so explicit not only depend on the kind of sensory perception on which Bloom’s earlier example places such emphasis, but themselves take place within and stem from the functioning of a physical body.

As if to underscore this idea, the narrative points out how Bloom’s scientific insight into the shell’s production of sounds depends, much as the imagined sounds which result from reading do, on an act of visual perception. It reports, “Bloom through the bar door saw a shell held at their ears. He heard more faintly that that they heard, each for herself alone, then each for other, hearing the plash of waves, loudly, a silent roar” (281). Here, as Bloom’s vision of the shell at their ears allows him to posit the embodiedness of hearing at the same time as it also incites him to imagine the sounds reaching Lydia and George Lidwell, it casts our “Odysseus” in the position which the sailors, with their wax-plugged ears, inhabit in the Sirens myth.61 It also draws the connection between physical perception and mental acts that I am developing in my treatment of the body and reading in Ulysses as a whole and in Sirens in particular. Indeed, the contradiction within the oxymoron “silent roar” is a particularly apt description of reading this musically-influenced chapter, since the letters which comprise the latter are not so much instruments – they make no sounds themselves – as they are representatives of sounds for us to activate and hear in our minds. As we have seen, however, the musical emphasis of the chapter makes especially lurid solicitations to our inner ear via our eye’s perception of the silent letters on the page. We might say that the sounds of the chapter are especially “loud” (hence the “roar”), an imagined sonic amplitude that finds its visual analogue in what Attridge describes as “sequences of letters which go beyond the normal configurations of written English” (Peculiar 142). Yet the tie between the imagined sounds and their visual basis should indicate the extent to which this kind of “silent,” mental reading is also an embodied act which, like hearing and sight, takes place within the perceptual world and, moreover, involves an interaction between the body and an external object.

In order for this interaction to occur, however, the body must be open – or must open itself – to contact with the external world. Indeed, the moment in the episode when Bloom

61 This point directly contradicts one of the fundamental tenets of Danius’ discussion, namely that “Joyce’s novel is both an index and an enactment of the increasing differentiation of the senses, particularly sight and hearing” (149).
composes a response to Martha's letter offers an explicit example of this kind of bodily openness to a text. As this moment in the narrative reformulates and literalizes the metaphorical significance of the shell, it also shows how the bodily interaction with a text also (indeed, necessarily) relates to the acts of intellection by which we normally conceive of reading and which were the hallmark of Stephen's orientation to sense perception. The narrative reports: “He held unfurled his Freeman. Can’t see now. Remember write Greek ees. Bloom dipped, Bloom mur: dear sir. Dear Henry wrote: dear Mady. Got your lett and flow. Hell did I put? Some pock or oth. It is utterl imposs. Underline imposs. To write today” (279; italics original). In his anxiety over being seen composing his letter to Martha, Bloom swings here between sense perception and intellection when he treats language as both a transparent medium of communication and as an opaque object. In an action that recalls the moment in the Lotos-Eaters episode when he “opened the letter [he received from Martha] within the newspaper” (77), Bloom hides his note by placing it under the Freeman newspaper. By hiding the writing of his note under more writing (creating a literal “subtext”), Bloom illustrates the dual capacity of writing’s materiality to communicate and conceal. Writing, that is, not only creates a communicative text that can be deciphered (a process which is itself by no means fully transparent), but it also yields an opaque object to be sensed. My analysis should not suggest, however, that there is ever a pure moment of either sensation or intellection. Rather, the close proximity of the letter and the newspaper (in the Lotos-Eaters chapter the letter is “within” the newspaper) dramatizes the fact that the two are always intertwined. This intertwining extends beyond writing, however, when he speaks the words “dear sir” to cover the “dear Mady” he is writing and suggests that spoken language also participates in the double role of transparency and opacity.

Moreover, when Bloom reminds himself to “write Greek ees” thereby signaling the way that his eyes are open to the appearance of his letters on the page, he also indicates that this visual appearance also has a kind of communicative meaning – Gifford notes that “handwriting with Greek e’s (ε) was thought to indicate artistic temperament” (304). As Bloom’s letters themselves thus take on a kind of body that both transmits and departs from the meaning they signify, they call out to both the eye and the mind. Accordingly, the phonetic spelling of the letter “E” in the text incites a visual awareness in the reader similar to Bloom’s, but, rather than being based, as elsewhere in the text, on a phonetically unpronounceable or cognitively incomprehensible set of letters, the emphasis on the visual here takes place via phonetics itself. In other words, the reader becomes aware of his readerly eye by way of the intellectual act of processing the meaning of the letters he sees and brings together the orientations toward reading and sense perception which Stephen and Bloom typified earlier in the novel.

The complex narrative structure of this moment also contributes to the embodiment of the intellectual act of reading by weaving together three separate discourses. The narrative descriptions of Bloom’s actions alternate with both Bloom’s own inner monologue and his voiced recitation of the language composing his letter. Shari Benstock suggests that the result of this kind of narrative weaving is to produce the letter as “a text which cannot be easily teased out of its narrative environment” (419). Bloom’s letter thus becomes as much a linguistic text to be read or deciphered as it is also an object in the world of the novel which, as with any other

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62 Interestingly, Maud Ellmann finds the motif of the navel again in the “Greek e’” when she observes how Plutarch reports that “the letter E was carved into the navel of the world, the stone of the Delphic oracle…. When he countersigns his pseudo-signature with two ‘Greek ees,’ Bloom commemorates this ancient graffito, and hollows out an omphalos within his name” (67).
object, it is the job of the narrative voice to present and describe. The letter cannot be “teased out” of the world of the novel precisely because it is an integral part of the scene which the narrative is describing. Indeed, the truncated words that the narrative uses to report the language of the letter underscore this doubleness. At the same time as they function to transmit an intellectual meaning which we process cognitively, the words also effectively function as part of the narrative depiction of Bloom writing by dramatizing the speed with which he moves from one thought to the next in his mind. In so doing, the language of the novel itself, like that of both the Freeman and Bloom’s letter, draws attention to itself as part of an (opaque) material object by way of its very function as a transparent communication medium.63

As the episode thus reveals its own phenomenal body and mediates between the physical and the intellectual, it functions in a way not unlike the physical body which encases the mental and cognitive actions of a mind. As such, it not only shows how the novel itself is both a text to be read and an object to be sensed, but it also brings the physical aspects of perception at play in reading (which Bloom exemplified in Calypso) into harmony with the latter’s intellectual aspects (as demonstrated by Stephen). It effectively shows how the intellectual act of reading takes place in the same world in which acts of perception occur. Rather than taking us away from the world, reading the Sirens episode brings us into a relationship to it, a relationship in which our minds are as open to the material, perceptual world as our bodies. In weaving together the narration of Bloom’s fart with his inner monologue and his reading of Robert Emmet’s epitaph, the closing lines of the episode hint at the kind of depressive orientation to loss and finitude which such a relationship ultimately entails:

Seabloom, greasabloom viewed last words. Softly. When my country takes her place among.
Prrpr.
Must be the bur.
Fff. Oo. Rprr.
Nations of the earth. No-one behind. She’s passed. Then and not till then. Tram.
Pprrrprrppfff.
Done (291).

In the same way that the unpronounceability of the episode’s opening lines emphasizes the visual nature of the aural signifiers, so too does this closing narration of Bloom’s flatulence open the reader’s eyes to the work of the visual in reading. Not only this, but the episode ends with the reader’s own kind of “lipspeech,” as an attempt to pronounce the series of plosive p’s and fricative f’s draw attention to the agency of his lips. In this case, however, he alternates between incomprehensible sequences of letters and more easily cognizable words. In so doing, he vacillates between an awareness of his bodily organs in the sensory aspects of his reading and the more general awareness of his own internal readerly ego, between sensation and intellection.

63 Derek Attridge makes a related argument in his treatment of “lexical onomatopoeia” when he suggests the “momentary and surprising reciprocal relationship established between phonetic and semantic properties, a mutual reinforcement that intensifies both aspects of language” (Peculiar 151). Attridge’s focus on the interpenetration of semantics and phonetics in the production of onomatopoeia echoes (within the category of the linguistic) my own claims for the intersection of the linguistic and the phenomenological.
The emphasis on ending— in both the form and the content of this narrative moment— ultimately allies this bodily reorientation of reading with mortality and finitude.

Maud Ellmann also addresses the interpenetration of content and form in this moment when she describes how Bloom’s fart “belongs to music, but it also seeps into the written word, to vex the opposite modality…. As writing, the fart cajoles the eye: as voice, it saturates the ear. But there is a third organ which can detect the fart when it is neither audible nor visible” (68). She goes on to make an appropriately Joycean pun to summarize her point: “What the ear hears, and the eye sees, give way to what the nose knows” (69). Ellmann’s appeal to what we might use our own pun to call the “knowledge of scents” within the episode names (and performs) exactly the kind of interpenetration of the sensual and the intellectual which the episode is demonstrating. Indeed, this interpenetration is signified by one aspect of the double-edged meaning expressed by the phrase “knowledge of scents.” That is, this genitive construction signifies, on the one hand, the awareness of and familiarity with the fact that sense perception exists, a kind of knowledge that *Ulysses* does not let its reader forget. The reader must maintain a kind of “global” awareness that takes in the novel as a whole— as both a book to be perceived and as a text to be read. Yet, far from leading to the kind of domination and intellectual will-to-power which we saw in Stephen, this “global” relationship with the novel speaks to the other meaning of the phrase “knowledge of sense”— the idea that there is a kind of knowledge contained in sense perception. This knowledge, based as it is on the sites of the body located at its outer edges, is precisely a knowledge of (our) limits.64 Not only does this focus on limits recall the kind of limited knowledge which the Proustian narrator glances from watching Albertine sleep, but the last word of the episode, itself the very last of Robert Emmet’s last words, refines the meaning of the idea of a limit: “Done.” The emphasis on ending and on death suggests that the knowledge contained in sense perception is exactly the knowledge that we have seen Stephen deny earlier. (Let us also note that the songs which make up the “music” of this chapter— “All is Lost Now” and “The Croppy Boy” in particular— themselves focus on loss and death.) To be aware of having a physical body is to be aware of one’s own finitude, the way the body ages and moves, inexorably, towards being done.

Yet, “Done.” is not just the last word of the episode but also the last word of the “overture” that opens it. Immediately following, however, is the imperative “Begin!” which many critics read as a kind of conductor’s direction to start the musical “performance” of the chapter. For me, this “Done. Begin!” dyad presages in its meaning the kind of cyclic circularity which *Finnegans Wake* later takes as its structuring principle. The rhythmic punctuality of its form also mimics the movement of the rest of *Ulysses*. Moretti explains how the “last seven” chapters (that is, those following Sirens) are “dominated by polyphony” rather than by stream of consciousness and observes that “when polyphony within individual chapters diminishes, heterogeneity between one chapter and another, by contrast, intensifies” (183; italics original). As the stylistic pluralism which crescendos after Sirens works to underscore the ending and the subsequent new beginnings of each episode, what Moretti calls the “second *Ulysses*” makes its progress in fits and starts. Unlike the circular macro-structure of the *Wake*, each of the later

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64 This is an unspoken part of the point which Derrida makes in his famous reading of *Ulysses* that the *Yes* is never fully self-sufficient, that it must repeat itself *a priori*. He writes, “The final ‘Yes,’ the last word, the eschatology of the book, yields itself only to *reading*, since it distinguishes itself from the others by an inaudible capital letter; what also remains inaudible, although visible, is the literal incorporation of the *yes* in the eye [*œil* of language, *of yes in eyes*]” (274; italics original). Here, he implicitly appeals to both finitude and the readerly sensorium but does not elaborate on the close and complex connection between the senses, reading and our own ontological limits.
episodes in *Ulysses* becomes a kind of closed system that separates itself from what precedes and follows it. We might say that the text of *Ulysses* itself falls apart as it progresses. Henry Staten makes a similar argument on a more local level in his excellent essay “The Decomposing Form of Joyce’s *Ulysses*” in which he claims that what *Ulysses* enacts is precisely “the becoming formless of form” (174).

With this in mind, we might also consider the way in which Bloom’s fart is a moment that, in a sense, “decomposes” his body as he opens the other of his bodily orifices for the second time in the novel. Momentarily relaxing his sphincter to open his rectum, Bloom effectively offers an extreme version of the opening of the reader’s sensory organs which an encounter with this novel demands. Indeed, the instance of the fart indicates an even more radical openness than the earlier scene in the outhouse. While solid waste effectively fills the opening of the anus on which the act of defecation depends, the relaxation of the sphincter for the passing of gas creates an hole in the body, if only for an instant. As it discloses – or better, un closes – an actual space within Bloom’s body, the fart suggests the way that sensory experiences are themselves predicated on the “disintegrated” nature of the body. That is, the body itself is not wholly solid or self-sufficient but encases a hollow openness that is the condition of the its interaction with the surrounding environment. (I will allow the pun on “wholly” and “hole-y” to speak for itself.) Based, as it is, on the bodily openings to which the novel has drawn attention (eyes, mouth, ears, nose, anus), sensation is, it seems, a phenomenon that is always concerned with the limits (physical and ontological) of our bodies. Stretching this part of my argument to what is certainly an illogical conclusion – and, at the same time, anticipating my argument about *Finnegans Wake*, that most illogical of texts – we might consider how the visual emphasis which results from the unreadability of the letters that signify the sounds of Bloom’s fart transforms them, for an instant, into dark shapes on the page, what, in my reading of the *Wake*, become quasi-holes that are vaguely mimetic of bodily orifices themselves.

Thus, it is not only the structure of the text, and not only the physical body (our as much as the characters’ in the novel) that disintegrates, but it is also – especially in light of the foregoing argument – the body of the book that opens up. This is, of course, the way we describe what one does with a book in order to read it. In this instance, however, the phrase takes on a literal connotation. If I began this chapter by relating how the Gabler edition of *Ulysses* that I first read fell to pieces as I progressed through it, I must confess that, during the composition of this chapter, as I flipped back and forth between Proteus, Calypso and Sirens in the volume published by Viking International, it too began to fall apart. The matte surface of the cover separated along the spine from the rest of the paper stock on which it had been affixed and the remaining material was not strong enough to support the broken spine which always results from my reading. The novel thus split down the middle – in the first pages of the Cyclops chapter, right after the end of Sirens – and I was forced to resort to placing a large strip

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65 While Staten’s argument is a highly complex one that ranges over the whole of Joyce’s text, he ultimately locates a similar focus on death and limits by describing the anxiety produced by this decomposition of form, the way the latter “reverberates at every level of *Ulysses* as the undoing of all ontological security and the unleashing of the anxiety of individuation” (175).

66 The emphasis on openings which this chapter has traced adds a new valence to the early condemnations of *Ulysses* as obscene and its characterization as a “pornographic” text. *Ulysses*, that is, shares pornography’s general interest with the body’s openings (as well as with their penetration), but rethinks that interest within the larger questions of phenomenology and processes of reading.
of silver duct tape on the inside of the split to bring the two stacks of pages together with the spine. For the outside cover, I used a piece of clear packing tape, so that the wear and tear on the edition is visible but protected. My actions here all too literally illustrate the kind of “reparation” which, I suggested, is in play in Proust’s pasting of his *papiolles* (and which Klein describes as part of the response to the depressive position). Accordingly, both my editions of *Ulysses* speak to an aging process, one in which my own body also participates, if in a different way. As such, *Ulysses* offers me not exactly consolation for this aging, but rather a kind of comforting solidarity. And “solidarity” is both a perfectly appropriate and a slightly ironic term, since, like the human body, my preferred copy of *Ulysses* now has a kind of hole – a physical gap – right in its middle.
For a book that is, at least according to John Bishop, about the dark, it is appropriate that this treatment of *Finnegans Wake* is written very much in Bishop’s shadow. By this I mean that, as his student for the past five years, I have the distinct privilege of writing in the long shadow cast by Bishop’s stature as a *Wake* scholar. At the same time, however, it also means that I unfortunately approach the *Wake* while John is partly paralyzed from a stroke that occurred in February 2010. The shadow of John Bishop will thus be ubiquitous in the argument that follows – and not only because his *Joyce’s Book of the Dark: Finnegans Wake* remains, after over twenty years, one of the few full-scale treatments of Joyce’s last work that offers something close to a synthetic reading without reducing its complexity and “obscurity.” Rather, I also find in John’s current situation a real-world analogue to his reading of Joyce’s text: indeed, he shows how the *Wake* offers the experience of someone who, all too aware of his incapacitated body, is confused and frustrated, who, ultimately, is unable to work or conduct relationships in ways familiar and comforting to him. I draw this parallel not simply to offer further support for Bishop’s reading of the *Wake*, but rather to launch my engagement with Joyce’s book of the dark in terms that are as poignant and affectively significant as the work itself. In the same way that *François le Champi* takes on significance for Proust’s narrator after a night spent reading it with his mother, my relationship to *Finnegans Wake* has been deepened by its close connection with my experience of John’s stroke.

One particularly difficult challenge John faces at the moment will be as moving for the literary scholars and *Wake* enthusiasts who comprise the audience of this chapter as it is significant for the argument to come: he must relearn how to read. Partially blind in his left eye, John currently has trouble recognizing letters and numbers and connecting them to the meanings that we, as trained readers, perform so effortlessly and automatically. Without reducing John’s condition, I would like to hazard a comparison between it and the task of “reading” *Finnegans Wake*. As anyone who opens the book will immediately notice, the *Wake* does not reward our well-practiced lexical habits: almost every word offers a new and unexpected challenge. Derek Attridge offers the best general description of the work’s language in his discussion of the pun and the “portmanteau” word, the latter of which he calls “a monster, a word that is not a word” (*Peculiar* 196). As a word that, like the suitcase from which it takes its name, packs in two or more meanings, “the portmanteau will contain as much as the verbal context permits it to contain” (202). When it comes to the *Wake*, however, “the context itself is made up of puns and portmanteaux” which causes a “spiraling increase in potential meaning [that] is one of the grounds on which the *Wake* is left unread” (202-03). Bishop suggests that this strange use of language stems directly from Joyce’s stated intentions to write a book about the night: in his view, “The fullest possible response to the question of what happens to (literate) consciousness in the night…would oblige us to wonder, at least if we think it probable that language ever suddenly vacates the head, whether letters and literacy fall into a new strange order in the dark” (19).

We might borrow Attridge’s language to describe this “new strange order” of letters by suggesting that the “ground” on which the *Wake* is left “unread” is, literally, the novel’s embodiment in the object of the book. That is, as the *Wake* shows how the object of the book is a kind of solid “ground” on which our reading is based, it highlights our physical, sensory relationship to the book which reveals the non-interpretative aspects of reading itself. In doing so, the *Wake* takes up the emphasis on the reader’s body that I traced through parts of *Ulysses*.
and transforms it into a constitutive principle. As we become aware of our vision in the act of reading, however, Joyce’s later work extends this physical attentiveness from the reader’s body to “body” of the book, an extension that the *Wake* makes explicit in its play with and meditation on the letter. Reading the *Wake*, we become so aware of the agency of our vision, in fact, that we get stuck at the surface of the page and can hardly understand any “deeper” meaning at all (though, as my scare quotes indicate, the boundary separating the categories of surface and depth becomes quite obscure). It is its dark print that the *Wake* leverages to effect a revision (or, we might say, a re-visioning) of reading, an argument which relies on and reworks Bishop’s argument about Joyce’s “book of the dark.” Though, in the next chapter, we will see how Virginia Woolf’s experimentation with the lay-out of the page in *Jacob’s Room* also meditates on the medium of print by highlighting blank spaces on the pages of the novel, the *Wake* is more interested in the black shapes on its pages than, like Woolf, in the paper on which they are printed. As such, the vaguely metaphorical use of the word “body” to describe a book becomes thoroughly “literal,” since it draws an explicit connection between the characters on its pages and the “characters” that populate its narrative world. Indeed, the *Wake* itself works to link these two senses of “character.”

Most treatments of the *Wake*, however, ignore the fact that it is unquestioningly made up of printed characters as they focus discussion on the extent to which the work does or does not contain “characters” or “narrative” in a traditional sense. This disregard is surprising, since the *Wake* exercises – indeed, “capitalizes” on – its own typography from the very opening, some four pages in, in the first passage that expands on the allusion which makes up the title.

*Finnegans Wake*, that is, is a reference to the Irish folk song “Finnegan’s Wake” which serves as one explanatory subtext for the book by narrating the curious events of a wake for a man named Tim Finnegan. Laid out for a viewing after having fallen from a ladder and died, Finnegan comes back to life when whiskey – one of the traditional drinks at an Irish wake – is splashed onto his face. Joyce writes, “Him a being so on the flounder of his bulk like an overgrown babeling, let wee peep, see, at Hom, well, see peegee ought he ought, platterplate. [6.30-32].

Here, as the description of a man laid out on his back, flat like a “flounder,” finds a “literal” analogue in the overturned E, the narrative content of this moment bleeds into the typography which transmits it. The E thus functions as a “character” in the *Wake* in both senses of the word, that is as a building-block of written signification and as an actor in its narrative. More than this, however, the two functions are not at odds with each other, as a deconstructionist focus on the “remainder” of writing would suggest; rather, they work together and indicate how the print of *Finnegans Wake* is an integral part of the literary experience it offers. Samuel Beckett puts it famously: “[Joyce’s] writing is not about something; it is that something itself” (14).

Critics are fond of quoting this line from Beckett, and most do so in order to explain the exceeding ambiguity of the work’s hypersignifying language; for them, Beckett means that the play of the signifier is what the *Wake* is ultimately “about.” While no one can deny that the language of the *Wake* draws attention to the agency of the letter, exclusively poststructuralist readings miss the attention which the *Wake* pays to the material supports of its letters. To put this in the theoretical terms of my introduction, these treatments consider the *Wake* only from a

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67 While the book’s famous “circularity” makes claims for primacy based on the order of presentation somewhat specious, the words of the work’s title are most likely the first which the reader encounters in their approach to the work.

68 See, in particular, *Post-Structuralist Joyce: Essays from the French.*
textualist perspective rather than within the larger framework of mediation with which the *Wake* is explicitly concerned. The letters are thus “*that something itself*” not only because they point towards multiple, unstable meanings but also because, in the *Wake*, they also function as visual icons. Even media studies approaches to Joyce treat his work only according to its textual operation. Picking up on Jacques Derrida’s description of the *Wake* as a “hypermnesiac machine,” a “1000th generation computer” (“Two Words” 147), Donald Theall proclaims a Joycean “unbinding of textuality” which “frees the idea of the text from its original connection with manuscripts and books” in order to anticipate the multi-media production of contemporary cyberculture (xiv; italics original). He describes *Finnegans Wake* in particular as “the most comprehensive exploration, prior to the 1960s or 1970s, of the ways in which these new modes [of electro-machinic mediation] created a dramatic crisis for the arts of language and the privileged situation of the printed book” (12). In his hands, the *Wake* becomes a prophetic index of the transformation of the book within an electro-machinic world of new technology where the reader becomes enveloped in “process of communication which moves beyond the conception of differentiated media… beyond the very idea of a unique communication medium” (20). As Theall’s future-oriented and almost self-avowedly utopian perspective on the Joycean book paints a picture of the potential for doing away with “media” altogether, it seems to get somewhat ahead of itself. That is, with its overwhelming interest in the progress of technology, Theall’s argument leaves very little room for a consideration of the book and print as such rather than as simply steps in the development of digitized computer mediums (which, as theorists like Hansen and Hayles argue, have their own kind of materialities). For Joyce, writing in the early decades of the twentieth century, the book was *not yet* a disembodied medium but rather, given the Joycean prescience which Theall takes such pains to point out, all the more obviously a material object.

Though the kind of explicit typographical play which we saw in the previous paragraph occurs with relative infrequency in the finished text of the *Wake*, Joyce relied on it to a great extent in his compositional process. In a 1924 letter to his patron Harriet Shaw Weaver, he explains that “In making notes I used signs for the chief characters. It may amuse you to see them so I shall write them on the back of this” (*Letters* 213). These signs came to be called his “sigla,” and the first one he lists is the E, which, he points out, stands for the main character Humphrey Chimpden Earwicker, a clarification that supports my reading of the overturned E as linking the two senses of the word “character.” Indeed, Joyce explicitly comments in another letter to Weaver that the overturned E “means HCE interred in the landscape” (254). Furthermore, when he describes how the E can signify the various letters H, C and E “by moving the letter round,” Joyce also points to its literal plasticity, as if the letters itself is a kind of malleable body (213).

Similarly, John Bishop glosses the acronym HCE, which appears throughout the work within words, between lines and, most often, in acrostic formations, as the means by which Joyce identifies the “man who sleeps at *Finnegans Wake*” who is “unnamable because unconscious” (139). Though he suggests that both the acronym and the sigla which Joyce used constitute “a sign without signification, a human formation closed to any referential exterior,” he also acknowledges the “sketchy consensus” that detects “an evocation of the words of consecration in the Roman Catholic Mass: *Hoc est enim corpus meum*,” which “enables HCE always to verge on signifying, without ever fully doing so, *hoc corpus est* – ‘This is the body’” (141). “HCE mean[s] nothing,” Bishop concludes, “in much the same way that the body ‘means’ nothing” (141). My contention about the attention which the *Wake* draws to its “body” thus
comes to seem all too literal as the reader’s inability to decipher the letters in the *Wake* leaves him with nothing but seemingly meaningless printed letters.

As the puns on “literal” and “letter” that have been animating my argument thus far have perhaps reached the limit of their use, it would seem wise for me to lay them to rest. It is the burden of this chapter, however, to resuscitate the letter and show how, in the *Wake*, letters themselves are very much a “living” medium. I thus use the section in the *Wake* which details the discovery and exploration of a letter to structure the argument to come since it offers, as many critics have pointed out, a model for an approach to the *Wake* as a whole.\(^69\) Significantly, the letter is in fragments and is distorted due to the time it has spent in “heated residence in the heart of the orangeflavoured mudmound” (111.33–34), a phrase which refers to the trashheap in which the letter is found by Belinda the hen. (Even when expressed in straightforward language, the narratives of the *Wake* rarely make complete “sense.”) The account of the kind of “close reading” which this fragmentary and distorted nature demands expands on the function of readerly sense perception that played such a role in my discussion of *Ulysses* to highlight a dimension of the letter’s (and letters’) materiality that is usually overlooked, namely their depth. It thus provides a framework for approaching the *Wake*’s “literal body” that forays into other sections of Joyce’s last work – namely, the description of Shem (Joyce’s ostensible stand-in) and the geometry lesson which he gives his brother Shaun – flesh out.\(^70\) When Joyce himself puns on and personifies “paper,” “print” and “type,” he hints at the ultimate significance of this embodiment of print: “For that…is what papyr is need of, made of, hides and hints and misses in prints. Till ye finally (though not yet endlike) meet with the acquaintances of Mister Typus, Mistress Tope and all the little typtopies” (20.10–13; ellipsis added). As the *Wake* makes our “acquaintance” with print, it links the two meanings of the word “mediate:” to communicate and to bring two parties together. This chapter functions as a transition in the larger argument of the dissertation from a meditation on the materiality of literary mediums to one on the forms of relationality which the book can facilitate. In developing the role which the dark print plays in the transmission of the *Wake*, I show how Joyce’s last work facilitates a kind of mediated intimacy among its readers based on their common experience of the printed book. I thus conclude with a brief discussion of the most “social” of the *Wake*’s chapters, the famous pub scene, which connects this “acquaintance” with print to a kind of interpersonal connection that not only explains the animating dynamic behind the widespread phenomenon of the *Finnegans Wake* reading group but, more personally, also lays bare the mechanisms that contributed to the close relationship at which my opening reflection on John Bishop hints.

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\(^69\) In the introduction to the “basically English” edition of the work (116.26), John Bishop summarizes the critical consensus on this chapter when he characterizes it as “something of a metacommentary on *Finnegans Wake*” since Joyce’s work is itself “a species of ‘buried letter,’ [in which] one has to dig beneath its textual surface to discover latent significance” (“Introduction” xxi). As we will see, however, the letter presents another kind of surface – a manifestly material one that requires less a digging for significance than a perception of the exterior.

\(^70\) In his essay “*Finnegans Wake* for Dummies,” Sebastian D. G. Knowles recommends what he calls a “ski-slope” approach to reading the *Wake* you begin with “what is generally agreed to be the easiest material” and then move on from there (100). He outlines what he calls three “rounds” of reading: the first focusing on the chapters that are “self-referential,” that “introduce plot elements” or that “advance our sense of main characters;” the second focusing on HCE and the more opaque chapters about the children in Book II; and the third finishing in the drunken revelry of the Pub scene. Knowles’ strategy is a good one for a book that seems to demand that you already have read it in order to be able to read it in the first place, and his reordering of the chapters of the *Wake* vaguely fits with the structure of my argument in this chapter. Indeed, in beginning with the account of the letter’s exploration, I provide somewhat of a roadmap for the other, “darker” moments of the *Wake*. 

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In his recent article “Finnegans Wake” and the Character of the Letter,” Jed Rasula points out how most treatments of the letter in the *Wake* focus on its epistolary significance and eschew considerations of the alphabetical valence of the word; in response, he offers a preliminary discussion of the way “*Finnegans Wake* labors to return literature to letters” and points out how “letters are actually the initial point of immersion in the *Wake*” (522). While Rasula’s argument ranges widely in its discussion of the sociopolitical and literary historical implications of this turn towards letters, I offer a deeper meditation on the way “letters are actually the initial point of immersion in the *Wake*” as they “constitute the stuff to which the reader is awakened prior to any awareness of the cover story” (522). The first description of the letter announces this awakening when it focuses on the geometry of its writing: we read how “The proteiform graph itself is a polyhedron of scripture” (107.8). While the qualifier “proteiform” suggests the everchanging nature of the letter’s written graph, which speaks to the fact that the message of the letter changes throughout the *Wake*, the term “polyhedron,” a solid figure having many faces, casts the script as a geometrical solid. The multiple facets of this solidity embodies the idea of multiple perspectives that characterize the various interpretations of any, but especially this, literary work and suggests that, in the *Wake*, the potential for multiple meanings is closely tied to the volume of its alphabetical letters. (Relatedly, the term “cubehouse” appears in the opening pages of the *Wake* in what seems like an oblique reference to the *Wake* itself (5.14)). When the narrator goes on to describe the “naïf alphabetters” who “would have written it down the tracing of a purely deliquescent recidivist, possibly ambidextrous, snubnosed probably and presenting a strangely profound rainbow in his (or her) occiput” (107.9-12), he suggests that a “naïf” way of reading is to disregard the physicality and visuality of letters themselves and approach the alphabet as only a set of phonetic signifiers. At the same time, the “profound rainbow in his (or her) occiput” (the back of the skull) which the “alphabetters” attribute to the author of the letter indicates a kind of abnormally sized bodily cavity which mirrors – quite literally, we will see – the “polyhedron of scripture.”

The continued account of the letter expands on just this kind of shared depth between the body and the *Wake*’s reading material since reading the letter is compared to “experiencing a jolting series of prearranged disappointments, down the long lane of (it’s as semper as oxhousehumper!) generations, more generations and still more generations” (107.33-35). The parenthetical is the first step towards understanding the “jolting” experience that rouses readers from their lexical slumber. According to the *Annotations*, “semper as oxhousehumper” signifies, after a number of machinations, “simple as ABC.” That is, the pictograms for the Hebrew letters Aleph, Beth and Gimel (A, B and C) correspond, respectively, to “ox,” “house” and “camel” (signified here through the metonymy of “humper”). By casting the first letters of the alphabet in terms that refer to these physical objects, the *Wake* gestures at the physicality of letters themselves, which, like an ox or a house, have a certain volume and body in a way that might short circuit the tendency to move beyond the signifier in search of the signified. As the “jolting” caused by these letters recalls the sensation of a driving over a “long lane” of potholes,  

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71 Bernard Benstock’s “Bedeviling the Typographer’s Ass: *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*” also treats the role of print in Joyce’s work but views it as part of the signification of Joyce’s works, while I am looking at the way the *Wake* leverages print to complicate and deepen our understanding of signification itself. For treatments of the letter from an epistolary rather than alphabetic perspective, see Kaufman, McCarthy, Milesi, and Berressem.
the description here points to the way the literal volume I am discussing refers to an extension inward into the page rather than a projection outward from the page. This is, of course, precisely the result of the action of printing itself. Although this explication, this “reading,” of the signifier “oxhousehumper,” itself made up of letters, elides the very physicality on which I am suggesting the text insists, we should not forget the initial incomprehensibility of the compound word. This incomprehensibility (only one specific instance among the many obscurities which the *Wake* offers) trips the *Wake*’s reader up, causes him to stumble on the very signifiers which he is so used to disregarding, a “jolting series” indeed. What’s more, the Latin “semper” hints at the fact that the alphabet “always” possesses this materiality.

The *Wake* expands on this materiality on the next page when it describes “this radiooscillating epiepistle to which, cotton, silk or samite, kohol, gall or brickdust, we must ceaselessly return” (108.23-25). The obscure phrase “radiooscillating epiepistle” subtly undermines the exclusively auditory approaches that dominate the criticism. (In this, criticism of the *Wake* is not unlike that of the “Sirens” episode of *Ulysses*, with its over-investment in the chapter as mimetic of music.) There is no question that the language of the *Wake* is deeply involved with sound, but coupling the polyphony suggested by “radiooscillating” with “epiepistle” suggests a demotion of its absolute importance. Designating the “radiooscillating” sonic landscape as an “epiepistle” – a combination of “epistle” with the prefix “epi-,” meaning “secondary” (as in “epiphenomenal”) – implies that the sounds of language might not be the primary feature of the letter. Indeed, in making claims for the work’s musicality and exceedingly rich acoustic fabric, the majority of critics overlook the other kinds of “fabric” made explicit in the subsequent list of materials. The *Annotations* help to explicate this list as they point out that the Ancient Chinese wrote on silk with a mixture of brick dust and water, while “samite” was a rich silk fabric worn in the Middle Ages; “kohol” is a black colouring agent, and “gall” refers to ink made from outgrowths on trees called “nutgall.” As these fabrics and inks underscore the (albeit ultimately indeterminate) material support of the letter, the description of our “ceaseless return” points to the way that these materials constantly distract from the letter’s lexical signification.

This meditation on the letter helps to supplement the exclusively textualist perspective that dominates discussions of the *Wake*’s relationship to forms of mediation and broadens an understanding of the medium of letters themselves. In fact, attention to this kind of materiality becomes almost axiomatic a page later in the narrator’s statement that “to concentrate solely on the literal sense or even the psychological content of any document to the some neglect of the enveloping facts themselves circumstantiating it is just as hurtful to sound sense” (109.12-15). Written almost completely in straightforward English, there are quiet puns in this line that underscore the depth and dimensionality possessed by both epistolary and alphabetic letters. That is, “solely,” when used in the *Wake*, can just as easily refer to the flat undersurface of a

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72 Perhaps the most explicit and extensive articulation of this is Garrett Stewart’s *Reading Voices: Literature and the Phonotext*, in which he devotes a chapter to Joyce, “‘An Earsighted View’: Joyce’s ‘Modality of the Audible’” (pp. 232-258). Additionally, John Bishop’s discussion of the musicality of the *Wake*’s language in his treatment of the ALP chapter, “‘Anna Livia Plurabelle’: A Riverbabble Primer” (pp. 336-388), makes a compelling case for the demotion of articulated language in favor of a kind of non-signifying sonic landscape. While this certainly holds for the ALP chapter (and, as such, underscores the materiality of sound), critics have been, in my opinion, too quick to extend it to the whole of the *Wake* which pays just as much attention to literature’s other mediums.

73 As *The Annotations to Finnegans Wake* maintains the same pagination as the *Wake* itself, I leave my citations to its pages implicit.
shoe or a foot as it can mean “only” or “exclusively,” as if to suggest that the abstraction of a message from the medium is a kind of flattening. Attention to the “enveloping facts circumstantiating” the message, on the other hand, imparts a vaguely spherical dimension to the letter. At the same time, the “message” of this line is rather clear: it speaks directly against exclusively treating the *Wake* as a text and suggests that a suitable approach to the *Wake* would be one that takes both its textually-constructed meaning and its material support into consideration. A suitable approach to the *Wake* would thus be one that can take both its surface representation and its material depth into consideration. Or, as the *Wake* puts it a few lines later, “Who in his hearts doubts either that …that one may be separated from the other? Or that both may be contemplated simultaneously? Or that each may be taken up and considered in turn apart from the other” (109.30-36).

The *Wake* concedes, however, that this is not necessarily the standard way of approaching a letter: the narrator asks, “has any usual sort of ornery josser [chap]…ever looked sufficiently longly at a quite everydaylooking stamped envelope? Admittedly it is an outer husk: its face, in all its featureful perfection of imperfection, is its fortune” (109.3-9). Here, as the reader of the letter lingers over its “envelope” and focuses on or stops at its “outer husk,” he acts in a rather unusual, way in keeping with the fact that the *Wake* itself is not your “usual sort” of book. Yet, when, unwittingly participating in a rhetoric of “close reading,” the *Wake* describes how “drawing nearer to take our slant at [the letter]… let us see all there may remain to be seen,” it intimates that this attention to the material exterior has much to offer the sensitive reader (113.30-33). The overtly perceptual terms that describe this approach to the letter here make explicit the emphasis on readerly sensation that I traced in my discussion of *Ulysses*. A more extensive analysis of the role of the perceptual organs occurs in the preceding lines: “Let us now… drop this jiggerypokery and talk straight turkey meet to mate, for while the ears, be we mikealls or nicholists, may sometimes be inclined to believe others the eyes, whether browned or nolensed, find it devilish hard now and again even to believe itself. *Habes aures et nun videbub? Habes oculos ac mannepalpabuat?*” (113.23-30). By casting aural experience as more reliable or believable than visual, these lines implicitly suggest the greater flexibility of vision, the way it might provide a more expansive and unrestricted approach to the letter that goes beyond the exclusive interest in its “sound sense.” As the lines continue, however, they trouble the division between the senses – the Latin roughly reads “Do you have ears and will you now see? And do you have eyes and might you touch?” – and describe a kind of readerly synaesthesia, as if to imply that not only vision but sense perception as such might lead to this kind of more open handling of the letter. Moreover, the fact that these sentences are in a foreign language – indeed a dead, ossified language which possesses minimal association with reading as such – highlights less the sense than the *sensing* of these letters on the page.

The alliance of multiple registers of sense perception here comes as no surprise since Bishop points out the relationship, in “Wakean ‘adamelegy’ [etymology],” between “phonetics,” “phenomenon” and “phantasm.” As he puts it, they “share a common ‘sound sense’” and also “stand in spectral relationship to one another” (291). Bishop’s double claim for an aural and a visual relationship between the words coincides with the etymology that he highlights: aural “phonetics” are, in the *Wake*, intimately related to the visual “phenomenon.” Moreover, Bishop explains how the (radically malleable) name of the main “character,” H. C. Earwicker, comes from the Anglo-Saxon words *Euer-waer* or “Ever-Waker.” With its explicit emphasis on the aural organ, “Earwicker” also, as Bishop puts it, “simply designates a *watchman*” (273; italics added). With this background in mind, the well-known phrase describing the reading of the
Wake itself – “that ideal reader suffering from an ideal insomnia” (120.13-14) – takes on a curious and important implication that nuances Bishop’s argument about the Wake as a book of the dark. While “ideal insomnia” implies a kind of perfect sleeplessness and evokes a reader who is constantly and perpetually awake, it might also suggest that the “ideal” itself is never ultimately put to sleep. If, as McHugh points out, “ideal” comes from the Greek “eiddô,” meaning literally “to see,” “ideal insomnia” might also indicate that the oblivion that accompanies sleep does not elide the visual. Though somewhat of a paradox since one’s eyes close in sleep, the fact that the covering of the eyelid nonetheless remains technically “visible” suggests the way that, in a book about sleep and the night, darkness is the one thing to which we are not blind; it is exactly what there is to be seen. Picking up on the same etymology, an “ideal reader” would then be one who reads in an ideal way, that is, one who sees, and more specifically, one who is able to open his eyes to obscurity itself.

The sensory nature of reading which the Wake develops thus functions not only to investigate the figurative darkness that constitutes its theme but also to uncover (which is not necessarily to “illuminate”) the literal darkness that makes up its print. This becomes apparent in the photographic analogy by which the Wake describes the material distortion and deformations which make reading the letter difficult: “if a negative of a horse happens to melt enough while drying, well, what do you get is, well, a positively grotesquely distorted macromass of all sorts of horsehappy values and masses of meltwhile horse. Tip. Well, this freely is what must have occurred to our missive” (111.27-31). The play between “negative” and “positive” here is tellingly complicated. When the negative melts here, it loses its referential qualities, and becomes “a positively grotesquely distorted macromass.” The “positively” here has two obvious functions: on the one hand, it modifies “grotesquely” and means “absolutely” or “completely,” while, on the other, it modifies “distorted” and functions as the opposite of “negative.” From the latter perspective, a “positively distorted macromass” suggests that the effect of the melting is to grant a kind of insistent, corporeal presence to the piece of film. In other words, when the filmic negative stops clearly pointing to a referent beyond itself, it evinces its own kind of presence and shows itself to be a “macromass.” Yet this “macromass” is nonetheless still “negative;” that is, in this description what takes on a positive value is negativity itself: or, in other words, darkness visible.

Indeed, the negativity of the word “macromass” is the point at which the figurative and literal valences of “opacity” converge. In the same way that the photographic negative melts to obscure its representational quality, “macromass” is a kind of linguistic melting in which words themselves have coalesced and lost their referential powers. Accordingly, when Bishop draws a close relation between the “general referential opacity” of the Wake and the fact that “so much of the Wake is hard to visualize,” he also describes the condition in which the language of the Wake itself might take on a body and become visible (216). That is, as “macromass” does not necessarily refer to anything beyond itself, it takes on, like the photographic negative, a kind of textual corporeality. As it cannot be read – at least not in any kind of straightforward, effortless way – it asks, like certain moments I examined in Ulysses, to be looked at. This “visible darkness” allows print’s own visual nature as a medium to come to the fore. Indeed, the Wake includes a sentence almost to this exact effect a few pages later and states how we “may have our irremovable doubts as to the whole sense of the lot…. but one who deeper thinks will always bear in the bacchibocus of his mind that this downright there you are and there it is is only all in his eye” (117.35-36, 118.15-17).
II.

The sketch of Shem as a reader – of *Ulysses*, no less – illustrates the kind of “dark” reading described in the letter chapter and lays the groundwork for what will become a form of relationality based on the common experience of the embodied characters. Joyce writes of “the shuddersome spectacle of this semidemented zany amid the inspissated grime of his glaucous den making believe to read his usylessly unreadable Blue Book of Eccles, *édition de ténèbres*” (179.24-27). Here, as *Ulysses* (the original edition of which was bound in blue paper) becomes an “unreadable” book, the lines highlight its visual aspects instead, as if to suggest that not only the image of Shem reading but the book itself is a “shuddersome spectacle.” The French “*édition de ténèbres*,” or “edition of shadows,” nuances the idea of the book’s unreadability by transforming its opacity from figurative to literal: the print of the book itself is as dark as the “inspissated grime of [Shem’s] glaucous den.” This association between opaque letters and Shem’s dark den is not by chance, however, since we find out, a few pages later, that “The house of O’Shea or O’Shame” was “known as the Haunted Inkbottle” (182.30-31). This recasting of darkness in terms of print picks up and begins to literalize Bishop’s claim, based in Joyce’s stated intentions to write a book about the night, that “only a little reflection, I think, will demonstrate that the systematic darkening of every term in *Finnegans Wake* was an absolute necessity, dictated by Joyce’s subject” (4). This is not to say that the *Wake*’s print is darker than in other works, but that the reader is more attuned to its appearance. We see the *Wake* itself as an “*édition de shadows*,” with dark print on white pages.

This “literal” understanding of the *Wake* as a book of the dark reorients Bishop’s reading and opens up a different approach to the work. Bishop focuses on the fact that the *Wake*’s language, as befits a book about the night, must function in a way diametrically opposed to the day-time, rational language to which we are accustomed, and he thus adopts an approach that “cultivate[s] sense by a broad-ranging and digressive association whose only limits have been the covers of the book and the terms contained in it” (305). As this associationist strategy clearly draws from Freudian dream interpretation, it is not, however, altogether unlike the way in which we might approach more conventional novels, since very often critics bring disparate moments from one or more texts together. When he makes the claim (which, in a personal conversation with me some twenty years later, he came to revise) that “the printed letters and words in *Finnegans Wake* are mere ‘vehicles’ leading to hidden meanings that are nowhere explicitly evident to a reader’s literate consciousness” (310), he overlooks the fact that, as we began to see with Shem’s engagement with the “unreadable Blue Book of Eccles,” printed letters and words might be evident to a reader’s *illiterate* consciousness. As we proceed, we will see how, for Shem, print does not only work to stimulate a visual hallucination of the text’s events but also functions as itself a strange apparition, one that might speak to a reader’s unconscious, so to speak.

This other perspective on the dream and its function in the *Wake* provides something of a corrective to what Derek Attridge has described as an uncritical embrace of the dream framework in *Wake* interpretation. Citing Bishop’s book specifically, Attridge suggests that the paradigm of the dream is “a direct historical consequence of extratextual commentary, by Joyce and by others” (*Effects* 141). He continues, and writes that “the idea of the dream offered a simple and effective strategy of recuperation: here was a categorization by means of which the suspension of the normal rules of language and literature could be excused, and Joyce’s book placed in quarantine so that it could mount no challenge to the reading of other books” (143). Though he does not advocate completely jettisoning the dream as a critical approach to Joyce’s
last work, he does insist that we deprivilege it as the work’s “skeleton key,” to use Campbell and Robinson’s title for their famous guide to the *Wake*. Attridge cites the language of jokes and slips of the tongue as two possible alternatives for *Wake* interpretation and argues that the dream is “less relevant” because it is “a largely non-verbal and non-comic text” (148).

When Bishop himself discusses the character of dreams in more specific terms that go beyond using the dream as a large-scale interpretive framework, he hints at the non-verbal, indeed visual, aspects of dreams by using language that intertwines the visual with writing and print. He points out how we might explain the visual nature of dreams by “conceiv[ing] of an agent internal to the body agitating the ‘rods and cones of this even’s vision’ into wakefulness during visual dreams – and doing so not haphazardly, but with such weird precision as to etch there, graphically, people, scenes, and even alphabetic characters of sufficiently credulity-gripping likeness as to convince the dreamer of their reality” (248). As he makes alphabetical characters part of the dream’s content, Bishop describes Shem’s own reading practices (which are, *pace* Attridge, an intratextual phenomenon) almost to the letter. As Shem reads, he is “telling himself delightedly, no espellor mor so, that every splurge on the vellum he blundered over was an aisling vision more gorgeous than the one before” (179.29-32). The word “aisling” is Irish for a dream or vision and refers to a poetic genre in which the poet dreams of Ireland. Here, however, the content of the dream is “every splurge on the vellum,” a colorful description of the marks on the book’s pages that allies Shem’s perception of them with the act of dreaming. In this light, reading is itself a kind of waking dream, not in the sense that the reader dreamily imagines scenes by deciphering linguistic signifiers, but, more radically, in the sense that the letters *themselves* are a dreamlike vision. The redundancy of the phrase “aisling vision” supports this point as it once again underscores the visual aspects of reading which it shares with the visual character of dreams. (Shem’s reading thus recalls the opening of Proust’s novel and the strange concatenation of sleeping, waking, reading and dreaming I discussed in Chapter 1.)

When the *Wake* goes on to make a comparison between the letter and the famous illuminated Irish manuscript *The Book of Kells*, it offers a concrete example of print as a kind of dreamlike vision and further develops the connection between the sensation of reading and the reader’s relationship to written letters. While most treatments of the *Wake’s* use of *The Book of Kells* consider only its farcical perspective, I agree with Vern Lindquist, who argues that the letter chapter goes beyond mere mockery of *The Book of Kells* to use it “as a structural source” for the chapter much like the philosophy of Vico for the *Wake* as a whole or the *Odyssey* for *Ulysses* (80).74 We thus read about

those indignant whiplooplashes; those so prudently bolted or blocked rounds; the touching reminiscence of an incomplete trail or dropped final; a round thousand whirligig glorioles, prefaced by (alas!) now illegible airy plumeflights, all tiberiously ambiembellishing the initials majuscule of Earwicker: the meant to be baffling chrismon trilithon sign [Ʌ], finally called after some his hes hesitency Hec which,

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74 Joyce, in fact, told Arthur Powers that, “some of the big initial letters which swing right across a page have the essential quality of a chapter of *Ulysses*. Indeed, you can compare much of my work to the intricate illuminations. I would like it to be possible to pick up any page of my book and know at once what book it is” (qtd. in Ellmann 545). As the appeal to a hand-written manuscript recalls the object-like status of Proust’s *paperoles*, it accords with the account of the letter’s materiality which I have been developing.
moved contrawatchwise, represents his title in sigla as the smaller $\Delta$, fontly called following a certain change of state of grace of nature alp or delta (119.14-21).

The catalogue which begins the passage highlights some of features of the “initials majuscule,” a phrase that describes the large, ornamented first letter in an illuminated manuscript, and anticipates, especially in the specification of the circular “whiplooplashes” and “rounds,” some of the shapes which we will see Shem and Shaun investigate in their geometry lesson. While these descriptions ask the reader to imagine the embellishing ornament of the letter’s letters, the subsequent discussion of HCE’s and ALP’s sigla imports a bit of visual decoration into the printed text itself as some features of the *Wake*’s own handwritten manuscripts persist into its printed form. More than this, however, the descriptions which surround the Greek delta and the horizontal $E$ impart some depth to the sigla by casting them as literal holes in the page. Most obviously, the portmanteau “fontly” transforms the adverb “fondly” by drawing on the etymology of the word “font,” which connects letters and holes by recalling both a deep, productive source and the hollow mold used to make typefaces. The same imagery is at play, though more complexly, in the phrase “chrismon trilithon sign” where the Greek χρήσμον, meaning “oracle,” casts the horizontal $E$ as the kind of hole around which temples were built to house the priest or priestess who could receive the messages which emitted from it. Accordingly, a “trilithon” is a megalithic structure involving two uprights and a lintel, a kind of real-world E-shape that adds a second function to the letter: not just the hole from which a message spews, but also the structure that surrounds and transmits it.

Viewing these sigla as holes which send out a message highlights the reader’s receptive position which the more prevalent understanding of reading as an active process of meaning-making minimizes. This is not to say that the *Wake* offers a static meaning for the reader to receive but rather that the readerly production of meaning depends on an interactive relationship with letters, what the *Wake* describes as a “constant labour to make the ghimel pass through the eye of an iota” (120.24-27). This coded citation to the camel passing through the eye of a needle from the Gospel of Matthew places as much emphasis on the readerly “labor” involved in deciphering letters as does on the fact that this labor is in response to their appearance. Indeed, the homophony between a human “eye” and the letter “i,” the Roman version of the Greek iota, suggests that the active labor which accesses the intellectual meaning of the physical letters itself depends on the penetration of the reader as the “ghimel,” which is the literal meaning of the third letter of the Hebrew alphabet, must, like a wave of light, “pass through” the reader’s eye. Far from a unidirectional imposition of meaning by the reader onto or into the text, reading here becomes an act of interpenetration in a way that recalls both Merleau-Ponty’s reciprocal account of perception and my earlier discussion of Marcel and Albertine. This time, however, it is less the general materiality of the book than the alphabetical letters themselves with which the *Wake* asks the reader to interact.

The echoes between reading and Marcel and Albertine’s sexual relationship increase as the comparison between the letter and *The Book of Kells* progresses and this sensory interaction between reader and printed letters becomes more and more sensual. In a line which posits the letter as the inspiration for the ancient document (rather than the other way around), the *Wake* describes how the “cruciform postscript from which three basia or shorter and smaller oscula

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75 This more active orientation characterizes approaches that range from the phenomenology of reading like Wolfgang Iser’s (in, for instance, *The Implied Reader*) to the poststructuralist idea of the “writerly” text in Barthes’ *S/Z*. 
have been overcarefully scraped away, plainly inspiring the tenebrous *Tune* page of the Book of Kells” (122.20-23). The reversal of influence here hinges on the way the X shape of the letter’s “cruciform postscript” functions as the model for the *Tune* page of the manuscript, which consists of a Latin text describing Christ’s crucifixion laid out in an X design. The topsy-turvy connection between the two documents extends beyond the direction of influence: the qualification of the “illuminated” *Tune* page as “tenebrous,” which recalls Shem’s “édiction de ténèbres,” points to the way we might think of the *Wake* as an “obscured manuscript” that has a darkening effect on *The Book of Kells*. Indeed, the darkness of the letter’s X-shaped postscript is what provides the “**basia**” and “**oscula**,” Latin terms for “kiss” which recall the affectionate “xo” closing we still use in informal correspondence today. The “overcareful scraping away” describes the kind of gingerly physical contact between the reader and the letter that constitutes a kiss, as if, forestalling intellectual comprehension, the letter’s obscurity incites an act of corporeal intimacy instead. At the same time, the “scraping away” also contains echoes of a kind of scooping or digging that suggests not only the materiality of the epistolary letter but also the literal depth which the alphabetical letter X shares with it.

The interactive physical intimacy between reader and letter suggested in these lines sheds new light on the parody of Sir Edward Sullivan’s exegesis of the origin of punctuation in *The Book of Kells*, one of the most famous and “obscure” moments of comparison between the manuscript and the letter. Expanding on its report that the letter was “partly obliterated” (111.34-35), the *Wake* describes how it “was but pierced butnot punctured (in the university sense of the term) by numerous stabs and foliated gashes made by a pronged instrument” (124.1-2). As the lines that follow speculate hilariously on the four different punctuation marks used in *The Book of Kells*, they develop a more serious correlation between print and holes that once again casts writing itself as a kind of deep hole in the page:

> These paper wounds, four in type, were gradually and correctly understood to mean stop, please stop, do please stop, and O do please stop respectively, and following up their one true clue, the circumflexuous wall of a singleminded men’s asylum, accentuated by bì tso fì bì rok enlg a ssan dspl itch ina, – Yard inquiries pointed out → that they ad bìn “provoked” ay A fork, of à grave Brofèsor; âth c’s Bréak – fast – table; ; acutely professionnally **piqué**, to=**introduce a notion of time** [upon à plane (?) sù ‘’ fàc’e”] by pùnct! ingh oles (sic) in iSpace?! (124.3-12)

Lydia Liu argues that the “double entendre of writing and wounding in the quote is carried out through the movement of graphic marks that visualize the ‘bits of broken glass and split china’ by mangling the word spaces as ‘bì tso fì bì rok enlg a ssan dspl itch ina’” (525). For Liu, it is the spaces that, having a kind of “negative” value, are the holes in the text, a spacing that could be said to open up a gap within “h oles” itself. Yet, the gratuitous, even ornamental, use of diacritical marks here seems to align much more closely to the kind of “piercing” which this moment in the *Wake* is describing. Rather than the “graphic spacing,” we might think of the diacritical marks as the holes in the passage; it is, after all, the “fork” of the “grave Brofèsor”

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76 Interestingly, when Sam Slote describes Joyce’s compositional process and the way he “tended to fill all available space on the page with revisions” which ended up creating a “dense, scrawled web of writing and revision,” “a page so crowded that it is difficult for almost any reader, including its author, to unravel and decipher,” he also gives a good picture of the pages in *The Book of Kells,* with its density of ornament that makes reading (“deciphering”) difficult (12; 34).
that is responsible for making them. While at first glance this passage suggests a certain kind of penetrative readerly violence, the distinction between “piercing” and “puncturing” which precedes this passage suggests a more moderate reading along the lines I have been developing. Indeed, as the diacritical marks bleed into the shapes and forms of the printed letters, we might also consider printed letters as themselves holes in the page over which we linger (the notion of time having been introduced upon the plane surface of the page). The act of reading thus becomes less a kind of penetration than a kind of tickling, underscored by the series of playful pleas to stop, a manipulation of these literal holes that gives new meaning to the phrase “the pleasure of the text.”

There is also, however, some pleasure in the text as the *Wake* describes how “the pees with their caps awry are quite as often as not taken for kews with their tails in their mouths” (119.35-120.1). Though this line refers to what linguistic historians call the p/k or p/q split, the way that Celtic languages, and the Irish language in particular, developed from primitive Indo-European by transforming p sounds into k or q sounds, the *Wake* revises the idea of the split and casts the linguistic transformation as a sexual coupling of letters instead, complete with the flirtation of the jaunty cap and an obscure kind of fellatio between p’s and q’s. This literal intercourse depends, of course, on the way the *Wake* anthropomorphizes and embodies its letters, which is, we will recall, the point from which it begins: with the sigla for HCE lying on its side. At the same time, Shem’s own compositional process entails a similar kind of embodiment: we learn how “the first till last allshemist wrote over every square inch of the only foolscape available, his own body, till by its corrosive sublimation one continuous present tense integument slowly unfolded all marryvoising cyclewheeling history” (185.32-186.2). As the “all marryvoising cyclewheeling history” describes the *Wake* and its interest in a kind of cyclic, universal history, the explicit description of Shem’s (as an “alchemist”) writing as an inscription on his literal “body” points to the extent to which the *Wake* imagines itself as a kind of corporeal mass. Moreover, the description of Shem creating “indelible ink” out of his own defecation and urination in the long and equally famous passage in Latin that immediately precedes these lines recalls Leopold Bloom’s intimate “marking” of the *Titbits* page as much as it anticipates the actions of the Russian General (who wipes himself with a “sod of turf”) with which I will end my discussion. In more ways than one, it seems, Shem’s body provides the mediums of the *Wake* and underscores the necessity of considering his literary performance in terms that go beyond an exclusive play with language.77

Jed Rasula picks up on the indecency suggested in these lines when he observes that “Joyce literally produces obscenity, because in compelling our attention to letters, he trains our gaze on that which we customarily put out of sight” (522). It is this insistence on the obscene body, however, that leads to a mode of sociality, a way to be together with others for which reading, normally conceived of as an act of an isolated mind, does not usually allow. This begins to come to light in the reaction of those who listen when Shem

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77 Bishop makes a similar point when he describes how the letter is “[w]ritten not on paper with pencil, but on the ‘tissue peepers’ of the eyes with ‘eyebrow pencil,’ this deceptive ‘letter’ and all the signs constituting it would resemble the dream exactly in being a graphic representation written in the medium of ocular flesh” (248). He ultimately abstracts from this point, however, and discusses Shem’s “somatic” writing as “symptom-making” rather than any kind of literal embodiment (249).
At the same time as these lines make a good description of the *Wake* and its obsession with HCE, present in acrostic here, and his crime, the “carnality” suggested by Shem’s focus on his “entire low cornaille existence” contrasts with the more high-minded “intelligentsia,” characterized by references to major bourgeois professions of law, medicine, politics and business. Shem’s bodily orientation seems to set him apart from the more decorous members of middle class society (where his more respectable twin Shaun would feel much more at home). Yet, this intelligentsia develops “an increasing lack of interest in his semantics” and allow “various subconscious smickers to drivel slowly across their fichers” (173.31-33). The easily understandable language of the first phrase offers relatively untroubled access to a semantic meaning which itself declares that semantics are not necessarily the most compelling part of Shem’s performance. Rather, as the trickier language of the second clause suggests, the listeners seem unknowingly to connect with Shem via the jokes and slips of the tongue implied by the garbled “subconscious smickers.” With the condensation of “snickers” and “smirks,” the bodies of the intelligentsia become, like Shem’s, mediums of communication that tell the story of a “low” existence suggested by the qualifier “subconscious.” Not only this, though, but the word “fichers,” as a form of the French *ficher*, or “to open a file,” subtly turns their facial “features” into a kind of page, as if the words themselves are “driveling” across an open file. Here, there is less a sense of mutual understanding than of mutual embodiment, a sharing of space and time that undergirds any intellectual communication. This shared sense of space and time expands in the next sections and becomes the ground on which we can think a kind of togetherness based in our individual relationship to a printed page.

III.

The “Night Lessons” chapter, which constitutes the section of the *Wake* that many, including Joyce himself, consider to be most obscure part of the novel, elaborates the dark, obscenely sensual reading we have been examining into a specific kind of embodied intimacy between Shem and Shaun. One of the last pieces that Joyce composed, this chapter recounts the education of Shem, Shaun and Issy, and towards the end of the chapter, Shem describes how “We’ve had our day at triv and quad and writ our bit as intermidgets” (306.11-12). “Triv and quad” here refers to the medieval division of the seven liberal arts into the trivium (grammar, rhetoric and logic) and the quadrivium (arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music), while “intermidgets” functions as a telling portmanteau that suggests the way the writing of these small children (“midgets”) works to “intermediate” and connect the various arts in a way that recall the emphasis I have been developing on the confluence of the visual and the verbal. As we will see, however, this intermediation also helps to connect the characters in the *Wake* themselves. The format of this chapter, which Joyce described in a letter as “a reproduction of a schoolboy’s (and schoolgirl’s) old classbook complete with marginalia by the twins, who change sides at halftime, footnotes by the girl (who doesn’t), a Euclid diagram, funny drawings, etc.” (*Letters* I: 405-6), performs these two kinds of intermediation from the very get-go. On the one
hand, it pays special attention to the visual appearance of the page by supplementing the standard lines of uniform type that fill the other pages of the *Wake* with two wide margins that comment, in italicized print on the left-hand side and small caps on the right, on a central column of justified text, all of which hover over the footnotes which Joyce mentions. And this layout is not even completely consistent, as not only does a lengthy parenthetical interrupt the layout toward the middle of the chapter, but the “Euclid diagram” (See figure) and “funny drawings” add other graphic ornament. On the other hand, however, the layout anticipates the social aspect of reading *Finnegans Wake*, as the multiple voices on the page indicate the way the children work together to learn their lessons.

Vieux Von DVbLIn, ’twas one of dozedeeams a darkies ding in dewood) the Turnpike under the Great Ulm with Mearingstone in Fore ground). Given now ann linch you take enn all. Allow me, And, having alljawbreakical expressions out of old Sare Isaac’s universal of specious aristmystic unsaid, A is for Anna like L is for liv. Aha hahah, Ante Ann you’re apt to ape aunty annalive! Dawn gives rise.

Lo, lo, lives love! Eve takes fall. La, la, laugh leaves alass! Aiaiaiaj, Antiann, we’re last to the lost, Loulou! Tis perfect. Now (ens

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1. Traumcomdra’s Dreamcountry where the butterflies blow.
2. O, Laughing Sally, are we going to be toadshuntered by that old Pantifox Sir Somebody Something, Buriti, for the rest of our secret striptime.
In his reconstruction of the chapter’s composition, Luca Crispi observes that this layout “immediately attracts the reader’s attention” and makes reading the chapter “a disorienting experience” even for those accustomed to the difficulties of the *Wake* (214). Part of this disorientation is the demand the layout makes on the eye: it must break out of the uniformly delimited left-right movement involved in conventional reading and allow itself to roam beyond the normal parameters of conventional page design. This necessarily entails leaving off the main text in the central column and venturing to the far right, left or bottom of the page, so that the page functions more as an image with a deliberate spatial arrangement than as a set of signifiers to be deciphered without regard to their position in space. At the same time, as this mobility of the eye forestalls any attempt at linear comprehension, it transforms the intellectual effort of simultaneously considering the multiple meanings of the *Wake*’s portmanteau vocabulary into the physical – or, more specifically, the perceptual – effort of remaining aware of the multiple components that constitute these pages. The layout of the page in the “Night Lessons” chapter thus becomes a graphic performance of the implicit reading lessons that the *Wake* offers in its emphasis on the agency of the reader’s senses and the perception of the materiality of both the letter and of letters themselves. As such, though Crispi echoes the dominant critical view that the main “lesson” of the chapter is actually “a caricature of instruction and learning” (214), we might try to take its explicit scenes of instruction – however parodic – a little more seriously. Indeed, the geometry lesson, which, as Crispi points out, was the first part of the chapter Joyce composed and which remains “the chapter’s dramatic centerpiece,” offers an embedded reading and writing lesson that speaks to the “literal” shapes and alphabetical “polyhedra” that we have been examining.

The first thing to notice about the geometry lesson is that Shem provides the instruction rather than the more rationally-minded and intellectual Shaun. Since Shem is, as we have seen, more closely allied to the darkness and the body, this is a fitting switch, one that also speaks to the foregrounded position that he holds in my argument. The lesson begins with a permutation of the first problem in Euclid’s *Elements of Geometry*, the construction of an equilateral triangle: “Problem ye ferst, construct ann aquilittoral dryankle Probe loom!.... Concoct an equoangular trillitter (286.17-20).” The reference to “ann” and the acrostic “a…Pl” announce ALP’s presence here, a fact which has dominated discussions of this passage due to the fact that, as it develops, we learn that the triangle which the twins construct overlaps with ALP’s “delta,” or the triangular shape between her legs. Less considered, however, are the echoes of “letter” in “auquilittoral” and “trillitter.” As the puns here align the figure’s sides (“lateral”) and angles with letters, they explicitly (even, perhaps, “fontly”) recall the delta sign (Δ) and, more generally, point to the way letters are themselves made up of a kind of combination of line segments which meet at various (if not strictly equal) angles. Though the critical interest in the gender and sexual dynamics of this section has obscured the accompanying meditation on letters, reorienting the discussion according to this other perspective need not commit the same omission. Given the preceding discussion of letters as “holes,” considering the geometry and depth of letters is of a piece with Shem and Shaun’s peek at their mother’s “delta.”

When Shem follows this assignment with the parodic “On the name of the tizzer and off the tongs and off the mythametical tripods,” a permutation of the Trinitarian formula that ends Christian prayers, he points to the significance of the triangular shape beyond its visual echo of ALP’s anatomy. Rather, as the reference here recalls the tripartite structure of the Christian God, according to which the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost are paradoxically both unified and separate components of the divinity, it suggests the way that Shem, Shaun and the letter
stand in a similarly paradoxical relationship of separated unity. While critics debate whether Shem and Shaun are to be considered independent characters or just as different sides of HCE, the construction of the triangle here obviates such a controversy as it suggests that letters—which, after all, are what constitute “HCE”—bring Shem and Shaun into a unified but separate relationship. As we proceed through the geometrical construction, we will see how solving Euclid’s first problem sets up a triangular relationship among the letter and the two brothers which the reading experience of the *Wake* ultimately mimics.

The marginal comment that Shaun uses to summarize the next section of the lesson expands on this kind of triangulated relationship: “PROPE AND PROCUL IN THE CONVERGENCE OF THEIR CONTRAPULSIVENESS” (286.R25-30). The combination of “prope” and “procul,” Latin terms for “near” and “far off” respectively, indicates that the “convergence” here is not a total fusion of the brothers but rather a kind of combination of opposites that maintains their differences. Shem’s first instruction to his brother—“First mull a mugfull of mud, son” (286.28)—opens up this near/far convergence since “mud” not only recalls ALP’s “delta,” but, with its suggestion of volume and viscosity, also points to its function as a thick material that mediates the relationship of the two brothers. To put it another way, the mud becomes the medium which connects the brothers without collapsing their identities. The direction to “mull” indicates how this occurs, since “mull” can refer both to the physical act of grinding or pulverizing a substance into powder and to the intellectual act of pondering (as in “mull over”). It thus suggests not only that Shaun should prepare some mud out of which to construct his “auquilittoral dryankle,” but also that, in Shem-like fashion, he should pay close attention to it as a physical substance. This double task (to which Shaun, with his penchant for rationality and abstraction, responds “What the D.V. [devil] would I do that for?” (287.1-2)) recalls the coincidence of the intellectual and the physical which the chapter’s page layout makes perspicuous and subtly intimates that the dark or muddy marks on these pages might also function as a physical medium of connection.

When Shem tells Shaun that “to find a locus for an alp get a howlth on her bayrings as a prisme O and for a second O unbox your compasses,” he underscores the analogy between the dark letters and the mud of the earth (287.9-11). The general sense of this complicated instruction is that to find a spot for a triangle (an alp, in addition to referring to ALP, is also a mountain with its vaguely triangular shape), “get a hold of your bearings” by taking the topography of Dublin—namely, “Howth Hill” which completes the “ring” of Dublin Bay—as the first circle (“prisme O”) and then construct a second one using a compass. As they draw out the literal meaning of “geometry” as “earth measuring,” the puns here add a layer of geographical specifics to the more general spatial awareness and point to the features of the landscape which Shem and Shaun perceive in common. In doing so, the line expands the “mud” that is the material of their geometrical construction beyond a “mugfull” to include the earth as a whole and suggests that these geographical features are ultimately the ground for their coming together. At the same time, the shape of Dublin’s landscape also echoes the letter O and suggest that the earth is itself a “polyhedron of scripture,” a fact which description of the “prisme O” makes explicit by combining “prime” with the mult-faceted solid of a “prism.” Rather than just reading this earthly letter, however, the reference to “compasses,” which describes both the mathematical and the navigational tool, suggests an exploration of the space and shape which the letter O occupies. The instruction to “unbox” these tools, moreover, goes beyond the simple act of preparing the necessary instruments for the task at hand. “Unboxing” the compass might also mean that you allow the compass to move and measure in directions
beyond the standard two dimensions with which we plot locations and suggests the necessity of considering three dimensions. As in the reading of the letter that we examined earlier, this dimensionality extends the depth of the earth – and the relationality it facilitates – to letters themselves.

And this extension is exactly what Shem urges when, after a brief interlude, he continues his instructions: “Now (lens your dappled yeve here, mine’s presbyoperian, shill and wall) we see the copyngink strayedline AL (in Fig., the forest) from being continued, stop ait Lambday” (293.30-294.4). The puns and tattered syntax here make this line especially difficult to decipher, but it is an account of watching the radius of the first circle being drawn from A to L to form the line AL (see “Fig.”). The first parenthetical phrase speaks directly to the agency of vision – a function of the “dappled yeve” – but, in this case, the description emphasizes depth perception: as the initial y rhymes so closely with “eye,” it doubles the organ of vision here, a doubling that is a prerequisite for seeing in three dimensions. And, indeed, the echo of “doubled” in “dappled” reinforces this reading. Additionally, the qualification of Shem’s own vision as “presbyoperian” transforms “presbyterian,” which describes a form of governance and guidance by church elders, with the ocular condition of “presbyopia,” a form of far-sightedness, as if to suggest that Shem’s role is to guide Shaun in the kind of perspectival sight that perceives depth and distance.

Though this faculty seems unnecessary for the observation of the “copynk strayedline,” it becomes more important in light of the directions for drawing a circle with a radius that runs from alpha (“Olaf”) to lambda (“Olaf’s lambtail”) that immediately follow this moment: “With Olaf as centrum and Olaf’s lambtail for his spokesman circumscript a cyclone” (294.8-10). While McHugh, picking up on the context of the other Greek words in the sentence, explains the choice of the word “cyclone” by appealing to kyklon, the Greek word for circle, the metaphor also calls to mind a twisting funnel of air. Not only does this image point to the volume, usually overlooked, contained by open, empty space, but the command to “circumscript,” or “write around,” also describes the way Shaun is to trace the contours of Dublin Bay in drawing this first circle. The direction Shem gives Shaun for constructing the second circle, this time using point L as the center and point A as the radius, indicates the dependence of this volumic writing on his body: “Now, springing quickly from the mudland Loosh from Lucan with Allhim as her Elder tetraturn a somersault” (295.15-19). The “somersault” here suggests that Shaun must twist himself in a circle to trace out the desired shape, so that his body moves through the space which the circle will enclose. Taken together, the two instructions to “circumscript a cyclone” and to “tetraturn a somersault” not only indicate the necessarily embodied nature of the act of writing – a fact quite in keeping with the earlier discussion of the agency of Shem’s body as the paper on which he pens the letter – but also underscore the way the circles that he draws share the same three-dimensional space with Shaun’s body.

When Shem finishes off the construction by connecting the various points of the circles’ intersections to form the triangle that solves Euclid’s first problem, he makes this shared space explicit: “Alow me align while I encloud specious” (296.24-25), or, in more straightforward terms, “Allow me a line while I enclose a space.” The use of the word “encloud” recalls the obscurity and darkness which condition the Wake and this moment in particular, since, if the procedure we’ve just followed is not exactly “specious,” it is far from being completely clear. Yet, when Shem goes on in the next line to describe this space as an “Innate little bondery,” he extends the physical relationship they both share with the drawing of the equilateral triangle to
their relationship with each other. Moreover, as “bondery” recalls both a “bond” and “boundary,” it points again to the way that this three-dimensional space allows them to come together without collapsing the borders that separate them. The geometry lesson thus not only constructs an equilateral triangle, but it also ultimately reveals a triangulated relationship among Shem, Shaun and the “cloudy” material of their lesson.

Shem expands on this triangulation in the lines that follow when he tells Shaun that, “I’ll make you to see figuratively the whome of your eternal geomater” (296.27-297.1). As “geomater” recasts the word “geometer,” or world-measurer, in maternal terms, it makes the coincidence of the geometric construction and the maternal body of ALP explicit. At the same time, it picks up on the etymological connection between the Latin “mater” and the words “matter” and “material” to underscore the worldly materiality of the geometrical construction. While McHugh glosses the condensation “whome” as “womb,” Joyce’s term is rather more graphic as it combines the words “home” and “whole,” the latter of which, by extension, includes the word “hole.” Shem thus claims that the geometrical acrobatics he and Shaun have performed will allow him to reveal not only the shape of their mother’s delta but the very depths of her vagina. In a way that recalls the function of the unconscious in the earlier discussion of Shem’s own literary performance, figuring the geometry lesson in these incestual terms casts the sensitivity to writing’s materiality in terms of repression: the darkness and depths of letters are exactly what we must put out of our minds if we are actually to decipher the meaning behind these letters. Indeed, the term “figuratively” which makes a “fig leaf” out of the “figurative” register implies that the literal is what we must distance ourselves from. As Shem concludes his demonstration, we will see, on the one hand, how the “leaf” here also speaks to the pages of a book which we must abstract and “figure” in the process of getting at the meaning which they transmit and, on the other, how delaying this abstraction sets up a triangulated relationship among the book and other readers.

Shem thus continues: “we carefully, if she pleats, lift by her seam hem and jabote at the spidsiest of her trickkikant…the maidsapron of our A.L.P., fearfully! till its nether nadir is vortically where (allow me aright to two cute winkles) its navel’s napex will have to beandbe” (297.7-14). Ostensibly recounting the lifting of ALP’s skirt in terms of the triangles just constructed, Shem replays the way our bifocal vision combines two flat images to produce the perception of depth. At the same time, the complex description here broadens Shem’s actions to suggest the turning of a page. Indeed, the garbled Dutch of “at the spidsiest of her trickkikant,” which loosely translates to “at the corner of her triangle” expands beyond just one vertex in light of the enumeration of “seam, hem and jabote,” words that describe the various parts of ALP’s clothing. While the “hem” refers to the bottom of her “maidsapron,” the “jabot,” a frilly neckpiece historically worn in place of an ascot, implies that Shem’s action is much more of a full-body treatment, as if his manipulation here touches on her clothes from head-to-toe. (From this perspective, we might conjecture that the “seam” obliquely refers to some kind of belt around her middle.) As such, the catalogue here subtly describes the act by which a reader grasps the top corner of a page, slides down its side and folds it over (indeed, at the “seam” of the book’s binding) to see what is behind it. Moreover, the parenthetical “(allow me aright to two cute winkles),” or, more clearly, “allow me to set right these two acute angles,” characterizes as much the act by which Shem folds the bottom vertex of the dotted ALP triangle in the diagram up onto the top vertex of the παλ triangle as it does the situating of the two angles that, “arighted” to 90°, form the corners of a page that, in being turned, overlap with the corners of the other pages. And, indeed, the permutations of words like “vertically” and “apex”
into “vortically” and “napex” suggest a skewing of the exclusively vertical dimension of Shem’s action that opens it up to the more horizontal movement of a page-turn.

Though most discussions of what this folding back reveals focus on the significance of the geometric, aquatic or profane figurations of ALP’s delta, Shem description of “the living spit of dead waters…midden wedge of the stream’s your muddy old triagonal delta, fiho miho, plain for you now, appia lippia pluvaville” offers another approach as it expands on the analogy of letters and holes (297.19-25). The echo of “dead letters” in “living spit of dead waters” suggests a rejuvenation of lifeless characters in a way that, significantly, recalls the macronarrative of Finnegans Wake, taken from the Irish ballad with which it shares its name. Moreover, the German “midden wedge” or “middle way” casts ALP’s muddy delta as a kind of “medium,” one that, laid out “plain for you now,” functions as a means of conveyance much like the thoroughfare of the Appian Way (a road in both Dublin and ancient Rome) suggested by the phrase “appia lippia pluvaville” that immediately follows. Here, it seems, Shem and Shaun are privy to transmission itself – less to a particular message than to mediation as such.

Shem indicates, in fact, how this moment bridges the double sense of mediation as both a process of communication and as means of coming into a relationship when he directs Shaun to “proach near mear for at is dark. Lob. And light your mech. Jeldy! And this is what you’ll say.” As he recalls the thematics of darkness that suffuse the Wake and the emphasis on sense perception that I have developed earlier, he also indicates the way that such obscurity entails a coming together – “proach near mear for at is dark.” At the same time as Shem characterizes this kind of reading as a necessarily communal effort, however, the transformation of “me” into “mear,” a British dialect word for “boundary,” once again casts this communality not as a collapsing or even a mutual penetration but as a mutual recognition of a the shared space where one person abuts another. Accordingly, by replacing the definite spatial designation of “it” with “at,” a spatial preposition that has no object here, the murky grammar of the line suggests that the exact contours of this space are ultimately unknown. Yet, this space and this darkness are exactly what Shem and Shaun are sharing and experiencing together, as if to suggest that the murkiness – grammatical and otherwise – is precisely what might allow them to come together, as opposed to the other moments in the Wake where they are wholly at odds with each other.

IV.

The “murky” grammar of the geometry lesson contrasts explicitly with the much more rigid “grammar lesson” that Issy receives as part of her education earlier in the “Night Lessons” chapter. Unlike the dark and undefined space which Shem and Shaun access, Issy learns her “gramma’s grammar,” a system designed to teach her about how to best attract and marry a man: “Take the dative with his oblative for, even if obsolete, it is always of interest, so spake gramma on the impetus of her imperative, only mind your genderous towards his reflexives such that I was to your grappa” (268.22-26). The references to standard grammatical features suggest a predetermined order, a fixed relational structure which, “even if obsolete,” Issy must follow. As the Wake breaks these grammatical structures down – over and over again, much to the consternation of the reader – and underscores the materiality of its pages and letters, it ultimately offers the reader something much closer to the murky space that Shem and Shaun find in their geometrical construction. The experience of reading the Wake also links the two definitions of the word “mediate” as it sets up a more fluid relationship among multiple readers based on a triangulation with the work’s dark print. The most explicitly “social” of the
moments in the *Wake*, namely the pub scene in the chapter that immediately follows the “Night Lessons” chapter, develops the dynamic at work in this triangulation.

The Pub chapter is long and meandering and weaves together a number of stories which John Joyce, James’s father, used to tell, eccentric anecdotes about a tailor and a Norwegian captain or how “Buckley shot the Russian General” that were perfect for entertaining a group of friends in a bar. The latter tale, which appears all over the *Wake* but receives its most extended telling in the pub chapter when Shem and Shaun, figured as “Butt” and “Taff” respectively, perform a dialogue that narrates the playful and colorful story, embeds an analysis of interpersonal intimacy that speaks to the kind of mediated relationship I have been elaborating. The plot is relatively simple: Buckley, an Irish soldier in the Crimean War, comes upon a Russian General in the act of defecating in the woods; such a helpless and human position hinders Buckley from shooting him, until he takes up a piece of grassy turf to wipe himself, at which point he loses all respect and fires. The scatological nature of the story calls up both the images of Bloom in the outhouse in *Ulysses* and Shem’s scene of writing, while the voyeurism of the tale resonates with the efforts to inspect ALP’s “delta” that we just examined. In the first jocular mention of the scene in the preamble to the story, in fact, Butt, who plays the role of Buckley, uses the word “pokehole,” slang for “vagina,” to refer to the General’s anus: “Sehyoh narar, pokehole sann!” (339.2). The echo of the Japanese farewell “sayonara” in “sehyoh narar” suggests that the intimacy here is a fraught one, and we will see that Bud’s immediate reaction is a desire to run away. At the same time, however, the portmanteau “Sehyoh narar” could, as McHugh points out, just as easily be read “see you nearer,” a lexical contradiction that mirrors the dynamics at play in the encounter itself. It is this conflict, however, that the murky space I have been investigating will help, quite literally, to mediate.

Butt’s more extended account of his encounter with the defecating general describes his “full new of his basemiddelism, in ackshan, pagne pogne, by the veeryed lights of the stormtrooping clouds and in the sheenflare of the battleaxes of the heroim,” the result of which is that “my bill it foresooks allegiance (gut bull it!) and, no lie is this, I was babbeing and yetaghain blubbering…tob tob tob beat it, solongopatom” (344.21-30). The phrase “full new” which Bud uses to designate the sight of the General suggests a full view that, as something new to his eyes, compels him to depart from the course of action which his military “allegiance” would prescribe. Rather than shooting the General, that is, he “foresooks” this allegiance and renounces the code of conduct that prescribes such an act. Moreover, with its nonstandard conjugation and incorrect tense, “foresooks” extends this renunciation to the codes of grammar so that the “so long” in “solongopatom” (a permutation, in keeping with the scene’s martial setting, of “Seringapatam,” the location of two battles between Britain and India in 1792 and 1799) bids adieu as much to the norms of grammar as to the general. The “tob tob tob” combines both departures in the grammatically meaningless onomatopoetic performance of his footfalls in running away. Finally, the “babbeing and yetaghain blubbering” casts this farewell to both grammar and duty in terms of infantile regression, a return to a time before articulated language when sense perception – the “veeryed lights” and “sheenflare,” not to mention the “pfierce tsmell of his aurals” – dominates experience.

The appeal to sense perception here offers a way to reconcile the contradiction in this encounter between the intimacy of a “full view” and the desire to distance oneself from it. We might also say that it provides a kind of “basemiddelism” that emphasizes a “medium point” of intimacy, implied by the word “middel” here, with which this argument about the *Wake*’s print medium has been intertwined. In doing so, it leads into a concluding discussion of the form of
mediation which this chapter of the *Wake* uses to figure the transmission of Butt and Taff’s dialogue, namely television. Indeed, in the first lines of the dialogue, Taff uses words that both echo Bud’s description of seeing the defecating General and describe a television image: “All was flashing and krashning blury moriartsky blucherudd? What see, buttwywalch? Tell ever so often?” (338.8-10). The fragmentation of “television” into “tell ever so often” connects the “telling” of the story to come – references to which, as I have observed, come up very often in the *Wake* – to a kind of visual broadcast. As this transmission even comes complete with italicized, indented and bracketed interruptions to Butt and Taff’s dialogue that mimic a kind of channel-changing, the recounting of how Buckley shot the Russian General also functions as an exploration of how this kind of “distance seeing” casts sense perception itself in distanced terms that bring people together into what we might call an intimacy of expansiveness.

This expansive intimacy is a function of the kind of literal depth which I have been examining and that goes hand in hand with an activation of the perceptual faculties at play in reading which this part of the *Wake* articulates explicitly. When one of the interludes in the pub chapter describes itself as “an admirable verbivocovisual presentment,” it underscores the link between its own linguistic medium and the visual one it is representing (341.19-20). The compound “verbivocovisual” spells out the extent to which this episode – and, as we have seen, the *Wake* in general – is aware of the visual nature of its own “verbivocalvisual” medium of print. The oft-quoted lines from another interlude describes the means by which this visual awareness comes about, namely, “[The abnihilisation of the etym by the grising of the grossing of the grinder of the grunder of the first lord of Hurtreford explodotonates through Parsuralia with an iavanmorintheorrorumble fragorombassity amidwiches general uttermosts confussion are perceivable moletons skaping with mulicules while coventry plumpkins fairlygosmotherthemselves in the Landaunelegants of Pinkadindy” (353.22-26). Here, the “annihilation of the atom” becomes the production of “truth” (“etym”) out of nothing (“ab nihil”), a good description of the specious connections sparked by Joyce’s portmanteaux. At the same time, the close association between “etym” and words themselves also suggests the destruction of normal linguistic structure and the “general uttermosts confusion” that comes with it. As a result, “moletons,” which McHugh glosses as “atoms,” become “perceivable,” a phenomenon that, given the association between these building blocks of matter and words themselves in this passage speaks to Beckett’s observation that “Here words are not the polite contortions of 20th-century printer’s ink. They are alive. They elbow their way onto the page, and glow and blaze and fade and disappear” (15-16). What’s more, the mildly hilarious, if rather opaque, description of “country bumpkins smothering themselves in the London elegance of Piccadilly” connects this kind of perceptual writing to the “plumpness” of the letters on the page, a plumpness which I have figured earlier in terms of depth and darkness.

When the Butt and Taff’s dialogue breaks off to portray “[The other forogatthened abbosed in the Mullingaria are during this swishingsight teilweisioned” (345.35-36), it quietly suggests that this mediatory plumpness has the potential to open intimacy to distance itself. The line describes the “others forgotten about in the Mullingar Inn (the name of HCE’s pub) who are during the interval [German, Zwischenzeit] broadcast on television.” The permutation of “television” here is a combination of the German word for partly, “teilweise,” with the English word “vision,” as if to suggest that we are only seeing part of the scene, the rest being cut off by the frame of the screen (the shape of which the square brackets vaguely recall). At the same time, however, the German word “Teil,” which means “part,” also functions as the root of the verb “teilen,” or “to share.” With this in mind, “teilweisioned” suggests that the act of vision is itself a kind of sharing, as each person takes his own perspective on the world. And, indeed, as the interlude continues
it gives an overview of the “fictionable world” (or “fashionable world,” that classic purview of novels) which encompasses the four cardinal directions, as if to suggest the commonality of watching Butt and Taff narrate how Buckley shot the Russian General extends beyond Chapelizod to include all the people in the whole world.

This is, ultimately, one of the payoffs of reading – or “watching” – *Finnegans Wake*: the fellowship that you develop with the people who stare, in in comprehension, at the dark letters on its pages with you. This fellowship is often quite literal, since one of the best ways to experience the *Wake* is by reading it in a group, and, indeed, the first published work on the *Wake*, meant like Stuart Gilbert’s *James Joyce’s Ulysses* to introduce the novel to readers, takes just this form as twelve associates of Joyce contributed essays to the 1936 volume *Our exagmination round his factification for in camination of Work in progress*.78 Reading the *Wake* by yourself is certainly possible, even necessary, but it is also a bit like visiting a foreign country alone: an exhilarating, often confusing, sometimes beguiling experience that you can’t wait to tell people back home about but that, in the recounting, seems to pale. How, for example, was I to answer my mother when she asked me, on seeing the book’s cover, “John, who is Finnegan?” and how to describe the navigation of those labyrinthine passages with unknown words and, from time to time, funny letters? These are not questions which I must answer when talking to the colleagues in my *Wake* reading group; we all know the answers already – which is, of course, that we don’t know the answers at all.

But the kind of intimacy you forge on the basis of this shared ignorance is a special one, and not one that any traditional understandings of close relationships quite describes. Though reading or study groups as such facilitate their own kind of relationships among the participants, one based in a shared interest in and commitment to the subject matter under discussion, a *Wake* group is special. It is not necessarily that the extreme opacities of Joyce’s last work heighten the feeling of fellowship produced by the common effort of interpretation. Rather, the attention they draw to the volume of the book underscores the fundamental relationship we have to the physical world of objects and bodies that allows us to relate to each other in the first place, a kind of intimacy to which the discussion of *Jacob’s Room* in the next chapter will help us to think about further.

Because, in the end, the relationship I had developed over years of reading the *Wake* with John Bishop was not something I was able to recognize until I stepped into his hospital room and which I was not able to begin to understand without the help of the *Wake*. Used to the characteristic smell of hospitals, that strange and somehow quite Joycean mixture of anti-septic cleaner and shit, from the many visits I had made as a child to visit my grandfather when he had suffered a stroke, I was nonetheless not prepared for the wave of emotion at seeing my teacher paralyzed and debilitated. His vision being impaired, I announced who I was and, when he recognized the sound of my voice and greeted me in halting, somewhat garbled language, I took his hand, but I didn’t know what to say. “John,” he addressed me, “don’t ever get old,” a poignant directive from a man who has spent much of his life studying what we might think of as Joyce’s “portrait of the artist as an old man.” We exchanged a few pleasantries, my voice pregnant with concern and confusion, until it was time for him to be wheeled to dinner. Leaving the room and wearing a helmet to protect the place where part of his skull had been removed, a bit of the John Bishop I had known before emerged from his injured body, as he

78 Moreover, Tim Conley has recently edited a revision of this title – *Joyce’s Disciples Disciplined: A Re-Examination of the ‘Examination’ of ‘Work in Progress’* – which includes an essay in response to each of the original 1936 essays.
cracked a wry joke to the nurse. As I left the hospital, I walked into the night, unsure of what I had just experienced or what, exactly, I was feeling. It was not until I got home and opened the *Wake* to the pages he and I and the rest of our reading group labor over that I felt the full significance of the experience imprint itself in me.
I have to confess that, after reading Virginia Woolf’s first experimental novel, I have a crush on its main character Jacob Flanders; he is just my type. His Cambridge degree strikes envy and admiration in the heart of someone like me, whose education has taken place at institutions that, while perhaps equally prestigious and certainly no less intellectually rigorous, are decidedly less ancient and thus carry a different (much more American) kind of social currency. Indeed, his seemingly unquestioned belonging to the social world of the British upper classes – his invitations to dine with the Countess of Rockbier or his weekends spent hunting on horseback in Essex – call up my own fantasies of easy social inclusion and upward mobility. At the same time, it also seems that his intimate knowledge of Shakespeare, Marlowe and Spenser is somehow itself inherited, passed down through the blood, rather than earned, like mine, through lonely hours of study in a library. The oft-noted combination of charming awkwardness and unexplainable distinction in his appearance casts him, for me, in the mold of a young Kennedy, with the kind of good looks that come from an extreme self-confidence based in the knowledge that it is virtually impossible for him to fail. I imagine him, that is, with chiseled features and straight, sandy blond hair that falls, without any effort on his part, into just the right kind of tussled foppishness. And he also goes the Kennedys one better, for the grating Boston accent would of course be replaced by the dulcimer tones of British received pronunciation. It is thus no surprise that I have reread Woolf’s novel so many times, since I have wanted nothing other than to enter Jacob’s room. Yet, as we will see, this is exactly what the novel does not allow me to do.

While this description of what I am deliberately referring to as my “crush” on Jacob might very well serve to introduce an investigation of the impossibilities of same-sex attraction or the tension between the desire to have and the desire to be, this is not, as they say, “that kind” of project. Rather, my account offers a more fleshed out version of an observation made by A. S. McDowall in a 1922 review of Woolf’s novel in the Times Literary Supplement. He writes, “We do not know Jacob as an individual, though we promptly seize his type” (213). On the one hand, McDowall’s statement proclaims that the issue of knowing another person is at the heart of Woolf’s novel; on the other, its language of “seizure” – like mine of the “crush” – points to the possible violence inherent in attempts at knowing someone. Indeed, both McDowall’s and my colloquial appeal to “types” of people portrays this violence as a kind of pigeonholing, a restriction of Jacob’s character to a set of pre-established criteria. (My account of Jacob reveals more about me, of course, than it does about Jacob – and, not incidentally, a close reader of the novel could quibble with almost all of my points.) At the same time, the language of “typing” inadvertently calls out to the printed letters that serve as the basis for my “crush” on the novel’s main character. The pun is particularly apt given Woolf’s almost contemporaneous inauguration of her work as a printer at the Hogarth Press, and, as we will see, it extends the novel’s treatment of relationality beyond the strictly interpersonal to a meditation on the relationship between reader and printed text.
It has become something of a critical commonplace to connect the experimental developments in Woolf's literary style to the Hogarth Press which she and Leonard established in 1917. For instance, in his major work on the history of the press, J. H. Willis, Jr. notes how Woolf's first experimental stories “The Mark on the Wall” and “Kew Gardens” were “tied directly to the serious recreation of providing the Hogarth Press with stories and poems” (48), while Leonard also details how “The idea, which came to us in 1920, that we might publish ourselves the book which she had just begun to write, Jacob’s Room, filled [Virginia] with delight, for she would thus avoid the misery of submitting this highly experimental novel to the criticism of Gerald Duckworth and Edward Garnett” (68). Critics like Edward Bishop, Julia Briggs and Laura Marcus have all made more specific claims about the influence of the Hogarth Press on Woolf’s work, especially the way setting what they call “typographically complex” poems like Hope Mirrlees’ Paris had its effect on the “format” of Woolf’s first experimental novel. As Briggs puts it, “She had learned from Paris how to be free…. Her next novel [Jacob’s Room] would abandon the traditional thirty-two-chapter structure and instead use the layout of the page to create silences and meaningful pauses in the text, expressing these as gaps of varied line lengths, in a prose variation of Mallarmé’s ‘blanks,’ his white spaces” (91). Bishop provides what is perhaps the most meticulous consideration of the blanks in the novel as he examines how, in the original Hogarth edition, “there are four different sizes of breaks, ranging from one to four-line spaces” that each influence our response to the text differently, a carefully planned schema which, he shows, American publishers regularized to the detriment of the novel’s effect (34).

Despite their claims for the relation between Woolf’s manual typesetting of the poem Paris and her composition of Jacob’s Room, both Briggs’ and Bishop’s focus on the “silences and meaningful pauses” indicate the way they ultimately consider the gaps in the novel from a textual rather than a typographical perspective. That is, they treat the way the gaps contribute to the meaning of the textually-based narrative, but overlook the way they function as markers of that narrative’s embodiment in a book. Not only do the gaps in Jacob’s Room inject “silence” into the flow of the text, but the “negative” spaces of the blanks on the page also bring the “positive” spaces of the printed characters into relief (an arrangement which reverses and compliments my discussion of Finnegans Wake’s “dark print”). In doing so, they offer a new perspective on the theoretical descriptions of the purpose and function of the modernist novel which Woolf famously articulates in her essay “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown.” Responding to Arnold Bennett’s critical review of Jacob’s Room, Woolf claims that all novels “deal with character, and that it is to express character …that the form of the novels, so clumsy, verbose, and undramatic, so rich, elastic, and alive, has been evolved. To express character, I have said; but you will at once reflect that the very widest interpretation can be put upon those words” (Essays I, 324; italics added). She thus explicitly indicates, on the one hand, the centrality of “character” for the novel and, on the other, the capaciousness of that category. Bringing Woolf’s use of words like “express” and “character” into the light cast by the historical coincidence of the inauguration of the Hogarth Press and the beginning of Woolf’s work, however, suggests that her point about the novel here has at least an implicit relationship to the occupation of printing. That is, for the “great novelist with composing stick in hand, Virginia Woolf inky and determined,” as J. H. Willis Jr. describes her, the words “express” and “character” also bear the traces of the “pressing” of “characters” which creates a printed page (16).

As printing seems to condition (however unconsciously) Woolf’s thinking about the proper function of the novel, it also suggests that the printed status of a novel is integral to its
functioning. In other words, not only is the novel designed to “express character” in the sense of communicating the personalities and attributes of the figures that populate its plot, but the “expression” of characters is also the means by which the novel accomplishes its aim. Moreover, the language Woolf uses to describe the effect of Mrs. Brown’s “character”– “The impression she made was overwhelming,” she writes (323) – underscores the way that a reader might experience a kind of “pressure” from the “characters” of a novel. I thus suggest that the printed letters of Jacob’s Room press onto the mind of the reader in a way that resonates with the functioning of the movable type of Woolf’s handpress. As such, this chapter treats the literal surface of the novel that reorients the understanding of “surface reading” as theorized in the Representations issue I discussed in the introduction. The “paper, binding, typography” which the contributors to the issue eschew are front and center in the novel, and, as they leap out to the eye of the reader, they all too literally function as the “surface” as Best and Marcus define it, namely, that which “insists on being looked at rather than what we must train ourselves to see through” (9). Jacob’s Room thus allows me to focus less on the surface’s relationship to the “symptom,” as in Best and Marcus’ discussion, than on reading itself.

As the play with and appearance of the page recondition our understanding of the act of reading, they also resonate with the novel’s portrayal of efforts at “knowing” another person. I thus show how Jacob’s Room ultimately facilitates a relationship among reader, book and text based on an ethics of relationality that so far has remained implicit in this dissertation’s argument. More specifically, by looking at the way Woolf’s novel not only experiments with but also interrogates traditional notions of print and printing, I make explicit the relational ethics embedded in my earlier discussion of Marcel and Albertine. For Jacob’s Room, printing does not only mean the production of an impression; rather, it also signifies, we will see, the reciprocal contact between two materials that results in such an impression. It is this reciprocal “contact” which the novel facilitates between the reader and its printed text, a relationship which it is the project of this chapter to elaborate in more precise terms. The elaboration necessarily proceeds in much the same way the novel does, that is, through a series of what perhaps will seem like disconnected vignettes in which themes, ideas and arguments are repeated again and again.79

The more nuanced, reciprocal account of “printing” which Jacob’s Room allows me to develop is a metaphor for a kind of non-penetrating relationality that participates in and extends the current rethinking of literary and narrative ethics. Dorothy J. Hale gives a useful overview of these kinds of approaches in her discussion of recent attempts “to retool the old ethical sense of the novel as a genre of alterity and social diversity [in thinkers like Lionel Trilling and Martha Nussbaum] for our post-structuralist, post-marxist, post-Foucauldian, post-deconstructive age” (“Restriction” 190). Critics like Hale and those she treats in her wide-ranging discussion push the commitment to alterity further and base their formulation of ethics in the encounter with the radical unknowability of the Other as theorized by philosophers like Emmanuel Levinas and Jacques Derrida. She explains: “The problem shared by these new ethicists across schools is how to theorize a readerly emotion that would serve as an authentic basis of social bonding and also serve as a means of self-binding, that would limit the self and, through this limitation, produce the Other” (190). The emphasis which Jacob’s Room draws to its status as an object sets up a kind of relationality, however, that mediates between the poles around which discussions of the “new” ethics cluster, namely, a totalizing (and reductive) apprehension of the other, on the one hand, and an acquiescence to a completely opaque alterity, on the other.

79 See Froula for a compendium of responses to the novel’s lack of plot.
In doing so, the novel takes up a strain of the new ethics, based in Luce Irigaray’s critique of Levinas and employed in recent discussions of Woolf and ethics,\(^8\) that seeks to reconcile the notion of “eros” and intimacy with the model of alterity that dominates “new ethical” discussions. These arguments attempt to elaborate a mode of intimacy that “preserves otherness even in the midst of intense sympathy and emphasizes…mutual immersion” (Hollander 59). This thinking of intimacy and alterity together recalls my argument about Marcel and Albertine in Proust’s novel, the way Albertine’s body functions both to connect and distance Marcel from her. As I showed how this dual function of Albertine’s body depended on a consideration of it via physical perception rather than by the penetration of a purely mental intellection, I argue here that the play with the space of the page in Woolf’s novel works similarly. That is, the blanks on the page subtly highlight the agency of perception in the act of reading to develop a mode of relationality between reader and book that departs from the strict focus on epistemology which govern discussions of the ethics of alterity. This relationship is based less on what the reader “knows” than on what he “senses.” At the same time, this model exceeds the assumption of a specifically human self-Other dyad that structures both the ethics of alterity and the ethics of intimacy by allowing the attention Woolf’s novel draws to its status as a (specifically non-human) printed book to broaden our thinking beyond the purely intersubjective and include the external world of objects.

Paying greater attention to the world of objects is, finally, a major facet of the artistic and intellectual milieu in which Woolf composed her first experimental novel: Roger Fry’s Omega Workshop (1913-1919), for example, which functioned as a model for the Hogarth Press, offers an investment in objects that resonates with Woolf’s own interest in the book. While Ann Banfield has masterfully shown how Woolf’s later works, particularly To the Lighthouse and The Waves, were greatly influenced by the abstractions of the post-impressionist aesthetics that Fry developed with the help of the analytic philosophy of Cambridge,\(^8\) there is another radically concrete strain in her work that focuses on the role the object plays in subjective experience. The connection I develop among the Omega Workshops, the Hogarth Press and Woolf’s early experimentalism (in both Jacob’s Room and her early short stories) excavates this interest in the object – and in the object of the book in particular – that has been overshadowed by linking the logical abstractions in Fry’s thinking of the later 1920s to Woolf’s novels. I thus trace the way Woolf’s first literary experiments develop out of a commitment to the materiality of objects shared by the Omega Workshop to complicate the investigation of subjectivity for which she is more famous. Indeed, when we turn to The Waves in the next chapter, we will see how her interest in the object world will help to provide a fuller and more complex picture of her work as a whole. In this chapter, however, I discuss the way Jacob’s Room portrays and intimacy between subject and object – between, more specifically, reader and book – that counters the fundamentally antagonistic opposition which Douglas Mao’s treatment of Woolf and objects sets up and that shows the way the object world, far from always being at the mercy of a human subject’s domination, possesses and exercises its own kind of agency.

I.

\(^8\) See Berman and Hollander.

\(^8\) See Ann Banfield, The Phantom Table: Woolf, Fry, Russell and the Epistemology of Modernism which I discuss at greater length in Chapter 5.
The influence of books on an understanding of relationality in *Jacob’s Room* is not arbitrary. Books – and reading in general – function as major metaphors throughout the novel, and the narrator appeals to these tropes in a number of instances to describe the interactions between people. Her description of Jacob’s room at Cambridge, in fact, focuses almost exclusively on the books that fill it. She writes:

There were books enough; very few French books; but then any one who’s worth anything reads just what he likes, as the mood takes him, with extravagant enthusiasm. Lives of the Duke of Wellington, for example; Spinoza; the works of Dickens; the *Faery Queen*, a Greek dictionary with the petals of poppies pressed to silk between the pages; all the Elizabethans. His slippers were incredibly shabby, likes boats burnt to the water’s rim. Then there were photographs from the Greeks, and a mezzotint from Sir Joshua – all very English. The works of Jane Austen, too, in deference, perhaps, to someone else’s standard. Carlyle was a prize. There were books upon the Italian painters of the Renaissance, a *Manual of the Diseases of the Horse*, and all the usual text-books (29).

Here, the narrator’s claim that “any one who’s worth anything reads just what he likes” suggests that a list of Jacob’s reading preferences offers a window into the “type” of person he is. (Indeed, they are also partly what allowed for the “typing” of Jacob that facilitated my crush on him.) As such, however, she effectively looks past Jacob and any particularity of character which he might have in her drive to “read” him. Her commentary on his possession of the works of Austen, for instance, is meant to explain what might be seem an anomalous choice for a young man otherwise interested in titles of a more “masculine” bent, though it actually indicates the way the narrator approaches Jacob’s books with some preconceived notions, a set of expectations which she is looking to the books to fulfill. As Rachel Bowlby argues, *Jacob’s Room* is “a demonstration of the inescapability of ‘typing’ in the making…of what is thought as an individual self” (86). Indeed, the narrator’s observation that Jacob has “all the usual textbooks” points explicitly to the existence of some kind of predetermined standard by which she is judging him, and she flattens Jacob into a manifestation of a general, pre-established “type,” what we might call the “Cambridge gentleman.”

As this moment provides an interesting foil to the “readerly self” produced, according to Hale, by novel reading, it begins an implicit interrogation of the act of reading itself. She quotes Judith Butler’s analysis of the famously obscure ending of Henry James’ *Washington Square* and writes, “we are put in a position to ‘understand the limits of judgment and to cease judging, paradoxically, in the name of ethics, to cease judging in a way that assumes we already know in advance what there is to be known’” (“Aesthetics” 900). Elsewhere, she elaborates that “Catherine’s refusal to speak – along with James’s refusal to speak for her – produce the interpretive difficulty that advances the reader’s ethical (and political) education” (“Restriction” 196). The narrator of *Jacob’s Room* acts in precisely the opposite way, however: she does not “cease judging,” nor does she “refuse to speak.” Rather, she extends her judgment to the books in Jacob’s room and transforms them into signifiers of the type by which she understands Jacob. In doing so, she abstracts their content from their format, effectively flattening them in a way not unlike her stereotyping of Jacob. Not only this, but she does not at all distinguish between the books and the other media forms in the room – the “photographs” and the “mezzotint” – but indiscriminately treats them as part of a larger text which she is reading in her effort to
comprehend Jacob’s character. While the positions of a novel’s narrator and its reader are not, of course, perfectly homologous, the focus on texts here does set up some symmetry between them, as if to suggest that the act of reading itself, along with its sensitivity to the material forms of textuality, is implicated in questions of ethics.

An earlier moment in the novel, however, offers a resonant situation that allows us to interrogate the question of reading more specifically. In a scene that recalls the description of Mrs. Brown in Woolf’s famous essay “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” (written, as I have pointed out, in response to Arnold Bennett’s negative review of Jacob’s Room), Jacob is traveling to Cambridge in a railway car with an elderly lady. Nervous about being shut up alone with a young man (“it is a fact that men are dangerous,” she thinks (21)), the elderly woman eyes Jacob to gauge the situation: “She read half a column of her newspaper; then stealthily looked over the edge to decide the question of safety by the infallible test of appearance….She would like to offer him her paper. But do young men read the Morning Post? She looked to see what he was reading – the Daily Telegraph” (21; ellipsis original). Here, the close juxtaposition of the literal act of reading “half a column” of the newspaper and the kind of judgment which the narrator codes, with biting irony, as “the infallible test of appearance” casts the latter action as a kind of “figurative” version of the former. Indeed, like the narrator in Jacob’s room, Mrs. Norman regards both her and Jacob’s newspapers not as the bearer of signs to be read but as themselves signs to be read. They thus do not function as literal texts that impart accounts of the day’s current events but rather as figurative ones that indicate her and Jacob’s membership in certain social groups: Jacob, for Mrs. Norman, is the “type” of person who reads the Daily Telegraph rather than the Morning Post. This moment makes clear in a way that the scene in Jacob’s room does not, however, that one mechanism for this kind of type-casting is Mrs. Norman’s disregard of the newspaper’s status as an object made of paper and ink. The description of the way she “look[s] over the edge” of her newspaper underscores this point as it suggests the extent to which the figurative acts of reading themselves “overlook” the boundaries and “edges” of the material which they are meant to decipher.

Interestingly, the narrator provides a commentary on this interaction that links up with the arguments put forth by the new ethicists. She observes, “Nobody sees any one as he is, let alone an elderly lady sitting opposite a strange young man in a railway carriage. They see a whole—they see all sorts of things—they see themselves….Mrs. Norman now read three pages of one of Mr. Norris’s novels” (22; ellipsis original). As she notes how Mrs. Norman projects her own assumptions and opinions onto Jacob, she describes the kind of relationality against which “new ethicists” like Hale argue, that is, the recognition of the other as merely an extension of the self. Moreover, Mrs. Norman’s move to reading “three pages of one of Mr. Norris’s novels” resonates with Hale’s observation that, in her survey of the ethical theories of literature, “over and over again, I discovered that discussions about the ethical value of literature turned out to be discussions of the ethical value of novels” (“Restriction” 189). Among a diverse group of new ethical theorists, Hale finds a “common theory of literary value” that “is based in an agreement about the novel’s function as an agent of the reader’s ethical education” (189). Hale goes on to single out “the defining ethical property of the novel” as “a training in the honoring

82 As the editor of the Norton Critical Edition of Jacob’s Room, Suzanne Raitt glosses the Morning Post as a “right-wing daily newspaper, popular with retired officers,” while the Daily Telegraph was “founded in 1855 as a cheaper rival daily newspaper to the Times, aimed at the lower classes” (21).
of Otherness” which takes place as the result of the decision “to submit to the alterity the novel
allows” (189).

Yet, Mrs. Norman’s engagement with “Mr. Norris’s novel” does not seem to have the
effect Hale describes. In fact, it seems to have no effect at all: she reflects, “presumably he was
in some way or other – to her at least – nice, handsome, interesting, distinguished, well built, like
her own boy?” (22). The string of adjectives here illustrates how “typing” is a kind of insistently
forward-marching process that functions less to contemplate and recognize Jacob than it does to
disregard him; the equation with “her own boy” makes explicit the way she ultimately looks past
Jacob and replaces him with a figure from own world view and experience. When the narrator
offers a further description of Mrs. Norman’s perusal of Jacob, we see another example of this
process: “Taking note of socks (loose), of tie (shabby), she once more reached his face. She
dwelt upon his mouth. The lips were shut. The eyes bent down, since he was reading. All was
firm, yet youthful, indifferent, unconscious – as for knocking one down! No, no, no!” (21).
Much like her treatment of the newspapers, Mrs. Norman here treats Jacob’s body and clothes
as a text to be read. As the terseness of her parenthetical conclusions indicates, she does not
stop to actually observe him as much as she relies on generalized, ready-made criteria that allow
her to interpret her perceptions as quickly as possible. As such, we might use a term more
germane to printing (and Woolf’s conception of “character”) to say that the “impression” Jacob
makes on Mrs. Norman is effectively the “impression” which she places onto him.

Significantly, however, as the narrator’s description of Mrs. Norman’s inspection
proceeds by separate phrases or short sentences that trace Jacob’s appearance from bottom to
top, it recalls the step-by-step, word-by-word progression by which a reader pieces together the
meaning of a sentence and extends the analogy between literal and figurative reading. If each of
the details of Jacob’s appearance thus functions as a kind of “figurative letter” that Mrs. Norman
deciphers to access some more general idea, might the literal act of reading then also take part in
the same kind of “impression” at work in Mrs. Norman’s figurative acts of reading? Could the
reader of a text impress discursive “meaning” onto what we might call the “literal figures” that
fill the page? How, we might continue to ask, could we conceive of reading in terms that go
beyond – that are not completely reducible to – the kind of generalizing abstractions that Mrs.
Norman illustrates? In other words, might we think of reading in a more nuanced way that does
not automatically and exclusively equate it with deciphering letters on a page as signs of a larger
idea? The fact that Mrs. Norman’s transformation of the details of Jacob’s appearance into
“figurative letters” relies on the disregard of their material makeup (the paper of the newspaper,
on the one hand, and the fabric of the socks or the physicality of Jacob’s own body, on the
other) suggests that the possibility of such a revised notion of reading lies in an awareness of the
material basis (of the “surface,” to use another vocabulary) with which both literal and figurative
reading are always involved. This material awareness would slow down the drive to cognition
and interpretation in a way that makes space for the agency of perception on which reading
depends and in which, as we will see, an expanded notion of ethical relationality is based.

Interestingly, the narrator’s further commentary on Mrs. Norman’s “report” of Jacob –
the fact that “one must do the best one can” with it – makes an oblique (if unintentional)
reference to this tempering of the interpretive drive. “It is not use trying to sum people up,” she
writes. “One must follow hints, not exactly what is said, nor yet entirely what is done” (22). On
the one hand, as she repudiates the action of “summing up,” her pronouncement suggests the
kind of submission to an unknowable alterity, what Hale calls “self-restriction.” On the other,
however, this moment of self-restriction is also a kind of expansion. That is, precisely because
she cannot “sum people up,” the narrator calls for a larger view of her characters than just what they “say” or “do.” The “hints” she “must follow” thus paradoxically go beyond words and actions, those traditional markers of subjectivity which seem to offer themselves up most readily to be epistemologically comprehended and interpreted in an act of reading. As we will see, though the narrator leaves it unarticulated, this “beyond” includes the attention which the novel draws to its page and the print that is on it. While Rachel Bowlby’s claim that “it is not, then, a question of reading behind or beyond the conventional signs and typifications to understand a genuine as opposed to a superficial story or the complete book of a character as opposed to a few hints or fragments” seems to contradict my argument here, her language inadvertently supports the shift I am tracing away from the reading of a text to a consideration of the book (91; italics added). Indeed, the emphasis we will see the novel draw to the page further supports her argument about “fragments,” since what is a page other than a fragment of a book?

II.

The attention which the novel draws to its pages falls directly in line with contemporary trends in art production of which Woolf had a very intimate knowledge and which, we will see, she put to work in her own printing practice and literary composition. Roger Fry, one of the high-priests of Bloomsbury and a close friend of the Woolfs, had started the Omega Workshops in 1913 as a way to further explore the style of post-Impressionism following the exhibitions he had organized in 1910 and 1912 and to provide artists with a co-operative environment that would support them financially. The Workshop was a place in which artists supplemented their “fine art” activities (like painting) with work in the “applied art” of interior design by producing decorated objects like pottery, picture frames and furniture. In the “Preface to the Omega Workshops Catalog” (1914), Fry describes the project: “The Omega Workshops, Limited, is a group of artists who are working with the object of allowing free play to the delight in creation in the making of objects for common life. They refuse to spoil the expressive quality of their work by sand-papering it down to a shop finish, in the belief that the public has at least seen through the humbug of machine-made imitation of works of art” (Reader 201). By lavishing bright colors and loud patterns onto the surfaces of “common objects,” the Workshop called attention to individual objects in a way than ran counter to the homogenizing effects of industrialized mass production.83 While the work of the Omega falls directly in line with the emphasis on handicrafts that Douglas Mao takes as a starting point in his account of modernism and “production,” I am less interested in Bloomsbury’s and Woolf’s relation to capitalism and the “culture industry” than I am in the emphasis which this individualized, handmade form of production influenced Woolf’s own aesthetics. That is, the rough and texturized surfaces of these objects insist on their materiality in a way that departs from the more abstract and theoretical “logical form” which Ann Banfield locates in the aesthetic theory Fry developed in the decades following the closing of the Workshop in 1919.84 Writing in the “Prospectus for the

83 In this, the Omega Workshop bears similarities with its closest precursor, the Arts and Crafts movement of William Morris. However, there were also significant differences between them, in particular the emphasis on present rather than past styles and the lack of a Socialist imperative. See Collins, pp. 29-31, for details.
84 Referring to Bertrand Russell’s theory of knowledge, she writes, “An eyeless logical form completes Fry’s visual aesthetic: art is more than a picture of appearances” (256). She quotes Russell’s Problems of Philosophy to explain Fry’s understanding of post-Impressionism, in fact: “Post-Impressionism, akin to logical philosophy, goes beyond the recording the data of experience, taking them as a ‘sign of some reality behind.’ It organizes vision – color – via geometry, mathematics and logic” (256-57). While Fry’s later writings, particular his book on Cezanne (1927) and Vision
Omega Workshop” of 1913, for example, Fry specifies that the Omega artists “endeavour merely to discover a possible utility for real artistic intervention in the things of daily life” (199). These things are not in the service of the abstract philosophical tenets which Banfield traces, but rather “expressed the joy of the creator and the craftsman and conveyed a corresponding delight to the user” (198). Significantly, the Hogarth Press was, in many respects, modeled after the tenets of the Omega – not only, as David H. Porter observes in his short work on the cross-pollination between the two, because Fry’s emphasis on short, illustrated books in limited editions “foreshadows what [Leonard and Virginia] themselves would seek in many Hogarth Press books” (12), but also because Omega’s joy in production finds an analogue in Virginia’s own printing practice (“the fascination is something extreme,” she writes to her sister about printing Leonard’s story (Letters 2: 159)) at the same time as the emphasis on the object influences her early literary compositions.

More specifically, Hogarth’s first publication, Two Stories, which includes Woolf’s first experimental story, “The Mark on the Wall,” and Woolf’s subsequent short story “Kew Gardens” both included pictures printed from woodcuts made by Omega artists Dora Carrington and Vanessa Bell, respectively. Significantly, Woolf found herself quite drawn to the illustrations and, in an oft-quoted letter to Dora Carrington, she observes that the woodcuts “make the book much more interesting than it would have been without [them]” (Letters 2, 162). She goes on to comment that the woodcuts have shown her and Leonard that “we must make a practice of always having pictures” in their publications; she even proposes, in a letter written to Roger Fry a few days later, the idea of “books of pictures only, reproductions of new pictures” (163; 166). Porter traces the persistence of this idea of a book of woodcuts in Virginia’s mind through various obstacles (for instance, their original press was not very good with illustrations and attempts at buying another bigger press were repeatedly stalled) and shows how what he calls this “idée fixe” ultimately resulted in a volume called Twelve Original Woodcuts, all by Roger Fry, that came out in 1921, one year before the publication of Jacob’s Room (26).

Although Jacob’s Room was her first unillustrated book for the Hogarth Press, the influence of these woodcuts persists in subtle ways that indicate the novel’s alignment with Woolf’s interest in pictures and Omega’s emphasis on objects. In a moment at the end of a description of London at night, the narrator appeals to a “picture book” that clearly draws from the kind of illustrated publications which the Hogarth Press had been producing. Interestingly, a significant gap on the page (which I preserve below) immediately follows before she launches into an account of Jacob in his room in the city:

Shawled women carry babies with purple eyelids; boys stand at street corners; girls look across the road – rude illustrations, pictures in a book whose pages we turn over and over as if we should at last find what we look for. Every face, every shop, bedroom window, public-house, and dark square is a picture feverishly turned – in search of what? It is the same with books. What do we seek through millions of pages? Still hopefully turning the pages – oh, here is Jacob’s room.

He sat at the table reading the Globe. (77).
As the passage describes an epistemological quest, a search for some kind of meaning or significance that functions as an allegory of the kind of reading I examined in the previous section, it turns the “pictures” which Woolf had wanted to make a habit of including in her publications to metaphorical purpose. At the same time, the insistence on visibility in the description suggests a gentle re-orientation from the will to knowledge embedded in the act of reading to an emphasis on visual perception and sensory experience. Even as the unanswered questions and vague language recall the kind of limited knowledge by which Hale characterizes the new ethics, the passage exceeds—or revises—this epistemological uncertainty in a provocative way. When “— oh, here is Jacob’s room” interrupts the narrator’s train of thought (and, by extension, the “feverish” turning of pages), it seems less to breed uncertainty than to assuage the quest for knowledge in the first place. In keeping with the visual emphasis of the passage as a whole, we could say that it transforms the “looking for” into just “looking,” into, that is, a perception of the page itself.

At the same time, the passage traces a corresponding transition from the page as a metaphor for each of the multiple scenes of the external world to the literal leaves of a book. Echoing the change from “looking for” to “looking,” the movement from the metaphorical to the literal suggests that it is exactly the visual appearance of the literal page which softens the will to knowledge. Yet, the passage is not content merely to describe this shift; it also performs it. Not only does the “block” of text created by the spacing on the page recall the square-shaped woodcuts that provided illustrations in the previous Hogarth publications, but the deictic “here” also makes the obvious double referent of “Jacob’s room” more than just a convenient coincidence. Pointing within the narrative to Jacob’s lodgings, the close proximity of “here” to the dash that accentuates the space of the page within the development of the sentence suggests that it is also pointing to the page we are now facing. Not only this—and perhaps this is so obvious a point that it barely needs articulating—but the immediate break in the narrative itself that follows this moment also puts the reader in the somewhat of the same position as the narrator. Here, it seems, is also Jacob’s Room.

This expansion of readerly attention resonates with the general effect of the work produced by the Omega Workshops: in his preface to Isabelle Anscombe’s Omega and after, photographer Howard Grey describes how, with Omega art and design, “one looks past the paintings on the walls to the walls themselves” in a way might also describe how the reader looks past the words on the page to the page itself (8). In the catalogue the Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition (1912), Roger Fry offers a more theoretical articulation of this phenomenon that also sheds some light on Woolf’s novel. He writes, “[post-Impressionist] artists do not seek to give what can, after all, be but a pale reflex of actual appearance, but to arouse conviction of a new and definite reality. They do not seek to imitate form, but to create form; not to imitate life, but to find an equivalent for life” (Vision 167). While Fry goes on to appeal to post-Impressionism’s “logical structure,” an abstract and theoretical phrase that seems to belie the painting’s own position in the “real world,” the emphasis on the “creation” rather than the imitation of form recalls the Omega Workshop’s investment in objects. We thus might read Fry’s statement as an inadvertent description of the way a post-Impressionist painting draws attention to its own status as a part of “reality” rather than simply “representing” it in paint.85 The emphasis on “real” experience rather than mimesis correlates with the shift to

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85 This is, of course, part of Clement Greenberg’s famous argument about modernism.
sensory perception from linguistic representation that I traced in the passage above so that *Jacob's Room* takes on a kind of reality as an object that exceeds the representational work of language by which we normally understand literature's functioning.

In doing so, the novel revises the way we might understand our own “turning” of the pages. That is, while the description of turning the pages “over and over” describes the habitual action by which we proceed through a novel, the gap in the passage works to break this habit (in the same way, for a critic like Edward Bishop, that it breaks up the flow of the narrative). In this light, the “turn[ing] over and over” refers less to our progression through this narrative or these pages than to our inspection of them. Turning “over and over,” that is, could mean that we examine both sides of the page—recto and verso, front and back. As such, the page takes on a kind of depth and an almost sculptural nature; it becomes, like an Omega vase, an important and, perhaps even delightful, object in its own right. The description of Jacob that follows the gap draws further attention to the depth of the book but in a somewhat different way: “He sat at the table reading the *Globe*. The pinkish sheet was spread flat before him. He propped his face in his hand, so that the skin was wrinkled in deep folds” (77). The newspaper’s pink color makes it of a piece with the skin of his face, whose “deep folds” also recall the manipulations which a newspaper undergoes in both its production and its consumption. At the same time as the folded skin draws attention to the multiple “layers” of newsprint, however, the fact that the paper is “spread flat before him” describes the opening of a book that we must also “spread flat” before ourselves in order to read. The novel thus asks us to recall the way we laid it flat in order to come face-to-face with the page we are reading, an action that presupposes that the novel itself possesses a certain “volume” and that reveals the kind of bodily resonance traced by my discussions of *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*.

Indeed, on “opening” Woolf’s novel for the first time, the reader finds her attention drawn, from the very beginning, to the materials that constitute its format as Betty Flanders, Jacob’s mother, is sitting on the beach writing a letter: “So of course,’ wrote Betty Flanders, pressing her heels rather deeper in the sand, ‘there was nothing for it but to leave.’ Slowly welling from the point of her gold nib, pale blue ink dissolved the full stop; for there the pen stuck; her eyes fixed, and tears slowly filled them” (3). As the words Betty Flanders is writing lack context and referentiality (“there is nothing” yet for them to refer to, we might say), they effectively act as empty signifiers that underscore the ink and letters on the opening page. Moreover, the fact that her eyes “fixed” suggests the way the page and ink arrest the easy movement from one word to another that usually characterizes reading. Rather, Betty Flanders inadvertently allows her perception to linger with them and to become aware of the fact that she is seeing in the first place. She too moves from “looking for” to simply “looking.” The tears which fill her eyes have a similar effect: “The entire bay quivered; the lighthouse wobbled; and she had the illusion that the mast of Mr. Connor’s little yacht was bending like a wax candle in the sun” (1). Here, as the world loses its normal contours and takes on an unfamiliar fluidity, Betty Flanders has no choice but to take notice of her vision.

Interestingly, her response is to close her eyes: “She winked quickly…. She winked again. The mast was straight; the waves were regular; the lighthouse was upright; but the blot had spread” (3). Betty Flanders thus imposes order and “regularity” onto the world, so that the objects in it conform to her expectations, to some kind of ideal “type,” we might say again, by summoning up the standardizing forces of her intellect (in the service of “looking for”) rather than the more mobile energy of her embodied perception. A few lines later, moreover, Betty Flanders goes on “scribb[ing], ignoring the full stop,” which contrasts with the earlier “fixed”
nature of her eyes (3). It is almost as if she wants to treat the appearance of her letter with the kind of disregard that the standardization of print normally facilitates. Betty Flanders thus stands in direct contrast to Woolf herself, whose work as a printer draws her attention both to her own body and to the appearance of words on a page. She complains in a letter of how her “back aches with stooping over those infernal trays and tossing ‘u’s into t boxes and ‘y’s into ‘j’s” (Letters 3: 167). In another letter, she uses language that recalls the “wobbling” which Betty Flanders experiences to draw a direct connection between her printing and the inscrutability of her handwriting: “I have just finished setting up the whole of Mr Eliots poem [The Waste Land] with my own hands: You see how my hand trembles. Don’t blame your eyes,” she writes (Letters 3: 56). Printing, for Woolf, was thus something that made her all too aware of both her own vision and the appearance of writing.

Additionally, the opening passage of Jacob’s Room recalls Woolf’s early short story “The Mark on the Wall,” when it describes how the blot imposes itself into Betty Flanders’ attempts at reading the lines she has just written: “what a horrid blot!” she observes (3). A similar disruption opens Woolf’s story but in a different emotional register. She writes:

Perhaps it was the middle of January in the present year that I first looked up and saw the mark on the wall….I looked up through the smoke of my cigarette and my eye lodged for a moment upon the burning coals, and that old fancy of a crimson flag flapping from the castle tower came into my mind, and I thought of the cavalcade of red knights riding up the side of the black rock. Rather to my relief the sight of the mark interrupted the fancy, for it is an old fancy, an automatic fancy, made as a child perhaps. The mark was a small round mark, black upon the white wall, about six or seven inches above the mantelpiece (Shorter Fiction 83).

Here, as the reveries into which the mark breaks evoke chivalric romances occurring in a faraway time and place, they recall the kind of mental imagining that goes on during reading. The mark, however, brings the narrator back to the present moment, a fact underscored by the specification that this event occurred “in the present year.” The “small round mark, black upon the white wall” could very easily describe the appearance of a full stop, a “horrid blot,” or, without too much alteration, a typed letter on a white page. Indeed, when Woolf writes to her sister Vanessa that “we have just started printing Leonard’s story; I haven’t produced mine yet,” she makes explicit the fact that “The Mark on the Wall” was composed amid the first passionate throes of enthusiasm for printing (in a letter a month earlier she tells her sister, “We get so absorbed we can’t stop”) (Letters 2: 155-56; 150). Given that the story begins with the moment when the narrator “first looked up and saw the mark on the wall,” we might conjecture that the story is also part of the moment when Woolf herself “first looked up and saw” the way print appears on the page.87 The “relief” which this sight of the mark provides the narrator finds an

86 As Beatrice Warde writes of the aim of typography, “printing should be invisible” and should aspire to the state of “crystal-clear glass, thin as a bubble, and as transparent” (11).

87 Interestingly, two of the lines which I omit from the above quotation read “In order to fix a date [when I first saw the mark on the wall] it is necessary to remember what one saw. So now I think of the fire; the steady film of yellow light upon the page of my book; the three chrysanthemums in the round glass bowl above the mantelpiece” (83). The italicized portion describes exactly the mechanism by which, according to Elaine Scarry, writers impart “solidity” to their imagined objects, namely by “passing a transparent surface over it” (12). Her key example is the magic lantern scene early in Proust’s
explanation at the end of the story when she observes, “Here is something definite, something real. Thus, waking from a midnight dream of horror, one hastily turns on the light and lies quiescent, worshipping the chest of drawers, worshipping solidity, worshipping reality, worshipping the impersonal world which is proof of some existence other than ours” (Shorter Fiction 88). In a description that resonates with the bed-time anxiety from the childhood of Proust’s narrator, Woolf’s narrator finds a relationality with the external world which, the rest of this chapter will show, the experiments with print and page layout in Jacob’s Room investigates and imparts to the reader herself by “arresting” her eyes and asking her to linger over these facets of the novel in a way that Betty Flanders refuses to do.

III.

The narrator of Jacob’s Room, in fact, explicitly enjoins the reader to just such a lingering when she exhorts “let us consider letters” (71) in the very middle of the novel (an auspicious position indeed for a meditation on a “medium”). The pun is obvious: let us think about the correspondence we write to each other as well as the alphabetic building blocks of written signification. Her discussion is insistently ambivalent, as she swings back and forth between celebrating letters and perceiving their shortcomings: “Life would split asunder without them. ‘Come to tea, come to dinner, what’s the truth of the story? Have you heard the news? life in the capital is gay; the Russian dancers….’ These are our stays and props. These lace our days together and make of life a perfect globe. And yet, and yet…” (73; ellipses original). The description of “stays and props” portrays the kind of structuring effect which these letters have, as if they keep our life from “split[ting] asunder” by giving it a scaffolding. The representative quotations from the letters portray this scaffolding as a function of social convention: teas and dinners organize our day in the same way that gossip processes and judges our actions. The “perfection” of the “globe” thus created is, however, a bit suspect, as the repeated “and yet” casts the benefit of this structure in an uncertain light. Indeed, the description of having one’s life “laced” together hints at the kind of domination and violence inherent in the structures of which letters are the purveyors. It is important, however, to underscore the letters’ function as purveyors rather than creators of these structures. The grammar of the narrator’s declaration points to this distinction as it describes a shift from a discussion of the letters themselves (“them” in the first line) to their content (“these,” referring to the various quotations of the letter).

The ramifications of the distinction become clearer in light of the narrator’s expansion on her ambivalence. She writes: “Am I doomed all my days to write letters, send voices [via the telephone], which fall upon the tea-table, fade upon the passage, making appointments, while life dwindles, to come and dine?” (73). Here, the description focuses less on the content of communication than it does on its mediums. That is, as the narrator lingers over the communications themselves and places emphasis on how the letters “fall upon the tea-table” and how the voices “fade upon the passage,” she effectively separates them from the messages they carry. As they “fall” and “fade,” words that suggest diminishment and disappearance, the letters and the voices have much more in common with the “dwindl[ing]” of life than they do with the dinner appointments that, in the previous passage, “lace our days together and make of life a perfect globe.” Thus, when the narrator goes on to write “Yet letters are venerable; and

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novel which describes how bright images overlay the wall’s opaqueness to occasion the “perceptual mimesis of the solidity of the room” in much the same way as the “film” of the fire’s light “materializes” the book at this moment (11).
the telephone valiant, for the journey is a lonely one, and if bound together by notes and telephones we went in company, perhaps – who knows? – we might talk by the way” (73), she introduces subtle but nonetheless profound changes in the kind of “binding” at play here. Most obviously, rather than amassing “our days” or “life” in some kind of abstract “perfect globe,” the letters here bind people together. At the same time, the fact that the agents of this binding are “notes and telephones” suggests that connection between people always involves something exterior to the strictly interpersonal, a piece of paper or the sound of a voice, materials that, disconnected from their subjects, are rather impersonal.88

This “binding” of people together through the external world departs explicitly from portrayal of the most traditional figure for interpersonal “binding,” namely marriage. The narrator describes how, “Tears... made Mrs. Jarvis, the rector’s wife, think at church, while the hymn-tune played and Mrs. Flanders bent low over her little boys’ heads, that marriage is a fortress and widows stray solitary in the open fields” (3; ellipsis added). While the “fortress” of marriage might be meant to protect, this protection commits its own kind of violence, as it is a hemming-in and a confinement that functions to limit and restrict. The interpersonal relationship thus cuts off relations to the outside world which Mrs. Jarvis views as somehow dangerous and violent.89 Interestingly, it is Mrs. Jarvis who, despite her claim that widows “stray solitary in open fields,” ultimately does just that – in the next chapter, the narrator describes how, though herself married, she “walked on the moor when she was unhappy” (19). In a moment of ambiguous free indirect discourse, the narrator offers a fuller description of Mrs. Jarvis’ experiences on the moor that portrays a different attitude to and relationship with the outside world, one, we will see, in which the reader is allowed to participate as well:

…Yes, yes, when the lark soars; when the sheep, moving a step or two onwards, crop the turf, and at the same time, set their bells tinkling; when the breeze first blows, then dies down, leaving the cheek kissed; when the ships on the sea seem to cross each other and pass on as if drawn by an invisible hand; when there are distant concussions in the air and phantom horsemen galloping, ceasing; when the horizon swims blue, green, emotional – then Mrs. Jarvis, heaving a sigh, thinks to herself, ‘If only someone could give me… if I could give someone…’

88 Not only does this point recall with the well-known claims about the “impersonality” of modernism, but it also resonates with the kind of community set up by the Omega Workshop. In an interview given in 1913, Fry outlined his plans: “I hope to get a group of young artists to work together, feely criticising one another and using one another’s ideas without stint. I think it very important that they should work together in this way, and that we should cease to insist on the extreme individuality of artists” (qtd. in Collins 15). We might loosely extrapolate from this point and describe the relationships among the Omega artists as mediated by their shared investment in the objects which it was the Workshops project to so lovingly create.

89 While the description here suggests the way the “restrictive” relationality of marriage operates along traditional gender lines (the aggressive male doing either the penetrating or the restricting, and the defenseless female being either penetrated or restricted), the example of Mr. and Mrs. Barfoot shows the way in which the restriction of such social conventions cuts both ways. An invalid, Mrs. Barfoot is characterized as “civilization’s prisoner” (rather than, as we might expect, a prisoner of either her own crippled body or her husband), for whom “all the bars on her cage [fell] across the esplanade on sunny days when the town hall, the drapery stores, the swimming-bath, and the memorial hall striped the ground with shadow” (17). Similarly, the narrative details how Mr. Barfoot, who is also lame from a war injury, “sat perfectly still. There was something rigid about him,” while waiting for his visit with Betty Flanders (18). Both Mr. and Mrs. Barfoot thus seem imprisoned in their own kind of fortress, shut off from a relationship with the outside world.
But she does not know what she wants to give, nor who could give it to her (19; ellipses original).

I quote this passage in full not only for the pleasure of seeing Woolf’s lyricism in full force, but also because, as the piling up of dependent clauses here clearly delays the arrival of a concluding predicate, the passage performs the very kind of uncertainty and instability so integral for the new ethics. Moreover, by grammatically encoding this kind of uncertainty puts the reader in the same epistemological condition as Mrs. Jarvis.

More interesting, however, than the simple observation that both Mrs. Jarvis and the reader confront the limits of their knowledge and ability to penetrate into a situation is the question of what, given these limits, Mrs. Jarvis and the reader do know. The descriptions of the natural world surrounding Mrs. Jarvis on the moor hints at an answer to this question. It is not necessarily (or not only) that her experience on the moors indicates to Mrs. Jarvis a larger, more “elementary” kind of relationality that goes beyond the strictures of social convention (what would be a kind of romanticized vision of the landscape and its effect). Rather, the explicit emphasis in each of the clauses of the description on constant movement and change points to the fundamentally mobile and flexible relationship that exists between her and the outside world. That is, her relationship to the lark, the breeze or even the ships in the sea is not a static one, but rather one that is inescapably (and pleasurably) dynamic.

Indeed, the reader also experiences some of this pleasure as the insistent rhythm which the multiple clauses impart through their repeated commas and semi-colons stylistically mimics the very dynamism which they are describing. Moreover, when the narrator uses the ellipses to finish Mrs. Jarvis’ thoughts at the end of the passage, the novel offers the reader a complementary experience of dynamic movement. Not only, that is, do the ellipses leave space for the reader to imagine all the possibilities that would finish the sentence (as a concrete predicate, of course, would not), but, more interestingly, they use the conventions of print to “dissolve” the full stops in a way reminiscent of Betty Flanders’ opening letter. Here, however, rather than “fixing” the eye to draw attention to the act of perception, they track the movement of the eye across the line of type to disclose its mobility in the act of reading. While the book itself might be a “static object” in a way that the lark, the sheep or the boats are not, the reader nonetheless experiences the supple dynamism of his own relationship with the page, a situation not unlike the moment in which the narrator observes “here is Jacob’s room.”

Finally, however, the ellipses come at a moment when Mrs. Jarvis is meditating on exactly the kind of interpersonal relationships beyond which the novel allows us to expand. That is, the ellipses and the dynamic relationship which they both intimate and facilitate supplements the strictly interpersonal terms in which Mrs. Jarvis is thinking. The interaction is not between two human subjects who are “giving” to each other here, but rather the world itself is involved. More specifically for the reader of novels, it is the page that is involved here. It is, however, important to notice that this supplementation not only depends on the blank spaces of the page and in the narrative but also on the ellipses and the way they accentuate (indeed, “punctuate”) those spaces. In this way, the novel extends the role of “printing” as a model of ethical relationality, since it is precisely the functioning of print that facilitates this relationship. Indeed, claims for the novel’s inherent unknowability seem to resonate more with the “fortress-like” relations by which Mrs. Jarvis describes marriage than with the actual relationship which the novel sets up between the reader and its printed pages.
The novel provides an even more explicit treatment of this kind of “printed” relationality in what is, in Rachel Hollander’s recent estimation, “the most significant ethical encounter in the novel,” namely the late-night discussion between Jacob and his friend Simeon at Cambridge. Indeed, Hollander singles out “the representation of Jacob’s education” at Cambridge as a particularly rich place to “clarify a contemporary understanding of the ethics of fiction” (55; 40). In contrast with the didacticism of the professor-student relationship (“the soul itself slipped through the [professor’s] lips in thin silver disks which dissolve in young men’s minds,” Woolf writes (28)), the exchange between the students exhibits, for Hollander, the kind of passivity and receptivity to the Other that allows her to articulate how the English modernist novel’s commitment to “fragmentation and extreme skepticism” (as opposed to the Victorian faith in sympathetic identification, à la George Eliot) “forms the basis of ethical and political significance of the novel” (40).

The moment is, without a doubt, one of intimacy and mutual receptivity. It occurs in the final moment of Chapter 3, which is singular in the novel for being one of the few places that includes additional gaps within the narration of a moment (rather than just between separate moments). I quote the first half of the scene in full:

‘…Julian the Apostate….’ Which of them said that and the other words murmured around it? But about midnight there sometimes rises, like a veiled figure suddenly woken, a heavy wind; and this now flapping through Trinity lifted unseen leaves and blurred everything. ‘Julian the Apostate’ – and then the wind. Up go the elm branches, out blow the sails, the old schooners rear and plunge, the grey waves in the hot Indian Ocean tumble sultrily, and then all falls flat again.

So, if the veiled lady stepped through the Courts of Trinity, she now drowsed once more, all her draperies about her, her head against a pillar.

‘Somehow it seems to matter.’

The low voice was Simeon’s.

The voice was even lower that answered him. The sharp tap of a pipe on the mantelpiece canceled the words. And perhaps Jacob only said ‘hum,’ or said nothing at all. True, the words were inaudible. It was the intimacy, a sort of spiritual suppleness, when mind prints upon mind indelibly (34; ellipses original).

While, in my view, Hollander is certainly correct in describing this moment and the paragraphs that follow as “a nonappropriative, ethically significant moment of insight and communication,” she elides the richness of its metaphoric, dramatic and material details — “types” it, as it were — in her project of developing “an alternative understanding of [the novel’s] feminist ethics” (55). While she does take up the androgynous sexual imagery in the lines that immediately follow and gestures at the homoeroticism which it encodes, she misses the details in these lines which offer a different, more “material” perspective on this moment of ethical communion. At the same time, they clarify and somewhat reorient Hollander’s claim that Woolf’s novel highlights the “necessity of reading” the “failures of communication [that] are a familiar feature of modernist literature…as the very encounter with otherness that defines the ethics of modernism” (41; italics added).
Indeed, a closer examination of this moment extends the modification of reading-as-interpretation which the descriptions of Betty Flander’s opening letter and Mrs. Jarvis’ walk on the moor began. Rather than the traditional understanding of reading as a kind of deciphering or decoding which would ultimately assign meaning to the “failures of communication” on which Hollander and other “new ethicists” base their ethics, the quoted reference with which the narrator opens the vignette — “…Julian the Apostate…” — offers a different model. As the Roman emperor who came to power after Constantine in 361 C.E., Julian rejected Christianity in favor of a return to paganism and thus replaced a religion of transcendence based on “the word” with one based on the importance of earthly elements. As such, he stands as a synecdoche for an embrace of the worldliness of the material instead of — or, at least, in addition to — the abstraction of the linguistic.\(^9\) (Indeed, when the narrator observes that “the words were inaudible,” she implicitly suggests the way in which this “ethical” interaction between Simeon and Jacob does not depend on linguistic exchange.) Moreover, the ellipses which frame Julian’s name extend the typographical spacing that borders the vignette into the narration itself, as the novel highlights the way the “worldly” material of the page functions as an agent in the transmission of this scene.

Indeed, this emphasis on the page occurs again, and this time more obviously, a few lines later when the language which the narrator can only just make out is set off in a way that the rest of the dialogue in the novel is not. That is, Simeon’s comment “Somehow it seems to matter” is surrounded not only by the scare quotes which usually indicate speech but also by the white space of the page that function as a kind of expansion of the ellipses surrounding the name of Julian the Apostate. The novel thus suggests that the blankness of the page itself “somehow seems to matter.” Indeed, as opposed to Simeon’s “low voice,” the space of the page — coming, as I have observed, in the middle of a section of narrative rather than on its borders — jumps out at the reader and draws attention to the facets of the book which usually go unnoticed in the act of reading. The pun on “matter” in Simeon’s statement should also resound in the space surrounding its type, since we might think of the blank lines as an exhibition of an amorphous and deliberately inarticulate substance, a display of the “silent” page which flaunts the very opacity and ultimate inaccessibility that limits the reader’s (and, analogically, the narrator’s) attempts at full penetration. While, for Hollander, the descriptions of Jacob’s and Simeon’s relations at this moment offer a model for the kind of ethical relationality the reader is meant to mimic, I propose that the novel goes one better. *Jacob’s Room* performs the ethical relations which its narrator is describing, as the blankness of the page becomes the means by which the novel engenders the same kind of ethical relationship between the reader and the book.

The seemingly trivial relationship between the reader and the book takes on greater significance when considered in light of the paganism to which the reference to Julian the Apostate alludes. That is, the fact that this instance of performative typographical layout crops up alongside the emphasis on and embrace of the mundane world at play in paganism extends the reader’s ethical relationality beyond just the book itself. The relationship the reader has with

\(^9\) For more on Julian, see Adrian Murdoch’s *The Last Pagan: Julian the Apostate and the Death of the Ancient World*. Additionally, Jean-François Lyotard offers a theoretical articulation of the pagan-Christian relationship at the beginning of *Discours, Figure*: it is “Christianity effectively which occupies the foundation of our problems… it is demanded to deliver oneself from the thick flesh, to close the eyes, to be completely ear… that the appearance and depth which permits it be absolved in some way” (10). Drawing here on the emphasis on vision and depth in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology, Lyotard implicitly casts his emphasis on the interdependence of the discursive and the figural in terms of the pagan (a concept which returns in a more explicit and explicitly political form in *Just Gaming*).
the page is thus a synecdoche for the larger ethical relationship she has to the external world as a whole. The personification of the “heavy wind” in the courtyard of Cambridge’s Trinity College in the “veiled figure” or “veiled lady” functions as a kind of mythological goddess that draws a non-human phenomenon into what seems like the exclusively human intimacy which Jacob and Simeon share. Yet, the fact that the “flapping” of that wind “blurred everything” indicates how Simeon and Jacob’s conversation is not occurring in some kind of ideal vacuum that only involves the mutual calling into being of these human subjects (as new ethical arguments might seem to suggest), but rather is taking place in and involving the external world in which the human subject always finds himself. From the “elm branches” in the courtyard to the “grey waves in the hot Indian Ocean,” the world “somehow seems to matter,” to quote Simeon’s comment. This moment of ethical relationality thus extends beyond the purely intersubjective to suggest a much more radical kind of interdependence for which Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the “flesh of the world” would be an apt designation.91 As recognizing the agency of the world becomes the ultimate basis for the relational ethics which Jacob’s Room models, it demonstrates the connection between this rethinking of ethics and the literal “surface reading” which I am developing here.

The explicit description of the interaction between Jacob and Simeon – what the narrator calls “the intimacy, a sort of spiritual suppleness, when minds prints upon mind indelibly” – not only offers further insight into the kind of relationality in which they are sharing, but also connects it explicitly with the act of printing. With the preposition “upon,” that most Merleau-Pontean part of speech, the metaphor grammatically condenses the kind of mutual exchange and general interconnection at play in this moment of intimacy: the way, for example, that the narrator is initially unable to tell Jacob and Simeon apart when she asks “Which of them said that and the other words murmured round it?” As Jacob and Simeon influence each other in this moment, and it is impossible to tell who initiates or dominates the interaction, they inhabit the kind of pre-positional relationship which I excavated in my discussion of Albertine and Proust’s narrator. (In this respect, the relations described here also echo Merleau-Ponty’s account of perception, his point that “finally one cannot say if it is the look or if it is the things that command” (Invisible 133).) At the same time, however, the metaphor extends this kind of mutuality and reciprocity to the action of printing itself. That is, while “to print” is normally a transitive verb in which the object receives the action of the subject – Virginia, for example, prints a page – the preposition “upon” also suggests the extent to which the ostensibly one-way process of printing might be understood as a reciprocal, two-way action. This revised notion of printing thus becomes a model for understanding the kind of ethical relationality occurring here.

For a printer like Woolf whose afternoons with her and Leonard’s handpress sensitized her to the subtle dynamics of pressing type to paper, the printing metaphor can be neither arbitrary nor insignificant. To understand the function of the printing metaphor and the resources it offers to a thinking of ethical relationships more fully, I want to return to the work with woodcuts which so delighted and fascinated Woolf from her first two Hogarth publications onwards. David H. Porter reads the multiple references to a book of woodcuts in Woolf’s diary and letters from 1917, when she first conceived of the project, to 1921, when she produced Fry’s Twelve Original Woodcuts, as an indication of the way “the idea of a book of woodcuts

91 In “Virginia Woolf and the Flesh of the World,” Louise Westling offers a reading of Woolf’s relationship to Merleau-Ponty that treats the call for an awareness of the external world from an ecocritical perspective; this is, of course, also implicit in my argument, centered though it is in the object of the book.
continued to haunt her mind” (24), and I have already suggested how the blocks of text created by the experimental page layout in Jacob’s Room signal the further persistence of the woodcuts in Woolf’s imagination. Woolf’s description in a letter to Dora Carrington of the problems that she and Leonard had in printing from woodcuts, however, allows us to hypothesize about the extent to which they might have more fundamentally influenced her understanding of the mechanics of printing which she mobilizes in the metaphors here. She writes: “Our difficulty was that the margins would mark; we bought a chisel, and chopped away, I am afraid rather spoiling one edge” (Letters 2: 162). In a letter to her sister, Woolf explains more succinctly that Carrington “didn’t cut the margins [around each image] low enough” (168). In these comments, the cut of the wood all too obviously “seems to matter.”

Woolf thus shows how sensitive she was to the demands of printing with woodcuts, a process which is somewhat different than printing with bits of metal type because of the distinctive way by which each is created. With metal type, molten lead is poured into a mold; this creates a surface that is mostly recessed except for the minimal amount of metal that juts out from it in the shape of a letter. Printing with metal type thus becomes a process of inking and pressing a relatively small amount of surface area into the page. The woodcut, on the other hand, is formed by carving a “negative” image into a block of wood that leaves a raised pattern to receive the ink, a process in which her and Leonard’s stopgap remedy participates all too deliberately. This carving process results in a much larger amount of surface area receiving the ink and coming into contact with the paper. Indeed, the surface that is used to print with a woodcut is in effect a flat one with grooves carved into it, exactly the reverse of the protruding metal on which letterpress relies. Printing with a woodcut is thus much less about pressing a sharp, refined bit of metal into the page than it is about pressing a smooth, flat surface onto the page. The shift in preposition recasts the act of printing from a kind of penetration to as a kind of interaction. Working with woodcuts ultimately reveals the way the paper does not so much function as a purely receptive substance as it shares some of the agency in producing the image: its role, we might say, is to press back. And this would be no less true, if harder to detect, for more “traditional” letterpress printing. In both cases, the paper, as much as the wood or the metal type, “somehow seems to matter.”

Accordingly, as the metaphor describes how Jacob and Simeon’s minds each “print upon” the other, it breaks down the distinction between the “impressing” type and the “receptive” paper. Like the paper and the wood in woodcut printing, the minds come into contact with each other, press against each other in a reciprocal fashion. The fact, however, that in this case it is two “minds” printing on each other intimates the extent to which we might consider reading, that intellectual act which explicitly engages with print, in terms similar to the interaction between type and paper just described. Given the emphasis on the pressing of and contact between surfaces, the metaphor here provides an all too literal description of “surface reading” as well as a way to describe a kind of “reading” that decodes or deciphers characters as an act that, unlike what we saw with Mrs. Norman and the narrator in Jacob’s room, tallies with the kind of ethical relationality between the reader and the book that I have been developing. (Another way of putting this might be to say that the relationship between the reader and the book conditions the relationship between the reader and the text.) This is not to claim that reading is materially the same as the act of printing, that the reader’s mind receives some kind of literal “impression.” Rather, I want to suggest that, in the same way that the characters on the page are produced via an interaction between type and page, reading is itself an analogous interaction. That is, the deciphering which comprises the act of reading must always be in a relationship with
the type on the page, a relationship which the comprehension of the type’s meaning does not invalidate. As I have intimated in my readings of Mrs. Flanders and Mrs. Jarvis and as I will continue to develop as I bring this argument to a close, this interaction involves a lingering and a maintaining in thought, a “turning over and over,” to use another line from the novel, that prolongs the engagement between reader and page. The “turning over and over” which previously referred to the depth of the page, its constitution out of a recto and a verso, here takes on a metaphorical cast as it describes the kind of mental action of lingering which might result from an emphasis on the physical, perceptual aspects of reading. We could put it another way to say that, just as the reader holds the book in his hand, he also holds it in his mind, turns it “over and over” in contemplation, rather than forging ahead to imprint a meaning or interpretation onto it.

Interestingly, a later scene in which Jacob and his friend Timmy Durant are sailing around the Scilly Isles off the coast of England offers an elaboration of this kind of lingering in a somewhat jocular register. While we will see that the majority of the narration of their journey illustrates exactly the opposite of this awareness of the external world, the narrator nonetheless describes the following setting:

The Scilly Isles now appeared as if directly pointed at by a golden finger issuing from a cloud; and everybody knows how portentous that sight is, and how these broad rays, whether they light upon the Scilly Isles or upon tombs of crusaders in cathedrals, always shake the very foundations of skepticism and lead to jokes about God.

‘Abide with me:
Fast falls eventide;
The shadows deepen;
Lord, with me abide,’

sang Timmy Durant.
‘At my place we used to have a hymn which began

Great God, what do I see and hear?’

said Jacob (38-39).

Here, the sight of the external world leads to particularly telling hymn lyrics, however jokingly quoted. Jacob’s line, for instance, points directly to sense perceptions and asks a question that is quite apt for a consideration of the our relationship to the page which, with its indented print, we all too obviously see at this moment. Timmy’s hymn suggests the way visions of the external world have the potential to disarm the critical faculty and cause him to merely “abide” in the experience. Abiding is itself not so much an action as it is a restriction of action, a kind of active passivity that describes the way we might react to the vision of the page that is so apparent here. The joking tone which both Timmy and Jacob share serves less to undercut the significance of these lyrics than to emphasize it, since humor often functions, on the one hand, to avoid critical thinking and, on the other, to express what cannot be articulated in straightforward terms.
IV.

The emphasis on the importance of the external world as a medium in human relationships finds further clarification in light of some of the instances which the novel offers that exclusively focus on the interpersonal. These moments show how an over-emphasis on the interpersonal goes hand in hand with a decidedly “unethical” violence towards the world, a violence that significantly finds its most specific manifestations in the instrumentalization and destruction of the paper that constitutes books. At the beginning of the novel’s seventh chapter, for example, the narrator writes, “About this time a firm of merchants having dealings with the East put on the market little paper flowers which opened on touching water. As it was the custom also to use finger-bowls at the end of dinner, the new discovery was found to be of excellent service. In these sheltered lakes the little coloured flowers swam and slid….Their fortunes were watched by eyes intent and lovely. It is surely a great discovery that leads to the union of hearts and foundation of homes. The paper flowers did no less” (65). Coming in the middle of the novel after Jacob has left Cambridge and entered into the social world of London dinner parties and weekends in the country, the narrator’s ironic observations suggest the flimsiness of the relationships thereby created: the “foundation” of these homes is no more sturdy than “paper flowers” (and wet ones at that). At the same time, the paper’s submersion in water effectively dematerializes it – or at least destructures it – by softening it into a pulp that might be more easily appropriated into the service of facilitating a certain kind of sociality. This alliance of paper and sociality is not a chance association, however, since the next section of the chapter focuses on the way “the little cards, however, with names engraved on them, are a more serious problem than the flowers” (65). Referring to the small cards left when paying a visit to someone’s home, the narrator offers another clearly mocking, but no less revealing, commentary on what we might call the “paper relations” of Jacob’s society friends: “More horses’ legs have been worn out, more coachmen’s lives consumed, more hours of sound afternoon time vainly lavished than served to win us the battle of Waterloo, and pay for it in the bargain. The little demons are the source of as many reprieves, calamities, and anxieties as the battle itself” (65). For all the hyperbolic irony of the Waterloo metaphor, the description here recalls the martial imagery of marriage’s “fortress” at the same time as it underscores the war-like nature of this kind of superficial relationality. Far from leading to the kind of ethical relationships that we might expect from this kind of non-penetration, these “paper relations” possess their own kind of violence.

The narrator drives this point home when she reports a last mishap with the paper medium of society: “For Clara, losing all vivacity, tore up her dance programme and threw it in the fender. Such were the very serious consequences of the invention of paper flowers to swim in bowls” (66). It is interesting to note that the rest of this relatively short chapter is almost entirely made up of short snippets of social conversation separated from each other by the largest of the textual gaps which Woolf uses in her page layouts, the only chapter to have such regularity of spacing. What distinguishes these gaps from the others in the novel – and particularly the space on the page describing the moment in Cambridge of which I made so much – is their number and their uniformity. Rather than varying the spaces between blocks of text and the length of the numerous blocks, this chapter ends with an almost regularized pattern of text and gaps. As such, they no longer cause the page to stand out – they no longer “matter,” we might say – as we gloss over them in easy advances from one virtually interchangeable description of superficial social relations to another. In a sense, the reader herself inhabits the kind of “paper relations” with the novel that are described here as the page all too clearly
becomes another kind of “paper flower” or “calling card” to be put in the service of the “union of hearts and the foundation of homes.”

This is not the only scene in the novel in which the paper is submerged and destroyed, however. In the scene where Jason and Timmy Durant are sailing to the Scilly Isles off the coast of England, paper – this time bound in the leaves of the book – receives a treatment startlingly similar to the paper flowers. The narrator describes how, after a brief swim in the sea, Jacob returns to the boat: “The seat in the boat was positively hot, and the sun warmed his back as he sat naked with a towel in his hand, looking at the Scilly Isles which – confound it! The sail flapped. Shakespeare was knocked overboard. There you could see him floating merrily away, with all his pages ruffling innumera-

bly; and then he went under” (36). Here, at the same time as the frustration caused by the sail flapping disturbs Jacob’s view of the islands, the book of Shakespeare suffers a similar – if also more literal – blow. The personification effected by the collapse of the book and its author (indeed, the “ruffling” recalls traditional portraits of Shakespeare who is often shown with a “ruffled” color) adds to the sense that the book itself is drowning, a more dramatic version of the circumstances which the narrator describes in the beginning of the chapter. She writes, “What’s the use of trying to read Shakespeare, especially in one of those little thin paper editions whose pages get ruffled, or stuck together with sea-water?” (35). In other words, even before its wholesale destruction, Jacob closes his eyes to the book at precisely the moment when its materiality becomes apparent. Because it has no “use” for him, its loss is met with equanimity and irony, as if the pages are no more than paper flowers “floating merrily away.”

The indifference to the book is just a more specific example of Jacob’s and Timmy’s general orientation to the world at large. The narrator describes how “the Scilly Isles had been sighted by Timmy Durant lying like mountain-tops awash in precisely the right place. His calculations had worked perfectly” (35). The phrasing here recalls the rectifying effect of Betty Flander’s “winking” that brings the seascape in line with her expectations. Here, however, Timmy Durant does not just use his intellect to bring the world into rigid focus; the “pun” on “sight” here also indicates his belief that the Scilly Isles appear as a result of his “perfect” calculations. That is, the islands’ position in “precisely the right place” implies that Timmy somehow had an effect on their appearance, as if the Isles themselves obeyed the commands of his mathematics (and not the other way around). When the narrator expounds on the process of this comprehension, she explicitly links this kind of domination to a “reading” of the world: she describes Timmy “looking sternly at the stars, then at a compass, spelling out quite correctly his pages of the eternal lesson book” (35). While the phrase “eternal lesson book” allies the world with the book, the fact that Timmy is “spelling [it] out” points to the treatment of the world as a set of letters to be arranged in a “correct” configuration. Not only does Timmy thus anticipate Mr. Ramsey’s “alphabetic” conception of knowledge in To the Lighthouse, but the emphasis on mathematics and logical order also places him in almost direct dialogue with the abstract “eyelessness” of analytic philosophy which Banfield traces, via Roger Fry’s theorizations of post-impressionism, as an influence on Woolf’s work.

When the narrator elaborates on the effect of this orientation to the world in her account of the intellectual exchange which Jacob and Timmy base on the latter’s “notebook of scientific observations,” she indicates the complexity of Woolf’s relationship to Cambridge philosophy. As Jacob and Timmy disregard the sight of the Scilly Isles and use them instead as a kind of foundation for their discussion, the description subtly points out the pitfalls of such abstract thinking. Timmy finishes his point, and the narrator describes how Jacob responds tentatively:
“Only half a sentence followed; but these half-sentences are like flags set on tops of buildings to the observer of external sights down below. What was the coast of Cornwall, with its violet scents, and mourning emblems, and tranquil piety, but a screen happening to hang straight behind as his mind marched up?” (37). The comparison of the coast of Cornwall to a “screen” casts it as an empty canvas on which Jacob can project his ideas, a projection that involves a certain kind of violence, as the martial imagery of “marching” suggests. Jacob seems, that is, to be stomping out and flattening the world itself in his attempts to comprehend it. Interestingly, it is not only their intellectual but also their affective relationship that distracts them from the sight of the islands (to an almost devastating degree), a distraction which the narrator casts in terms that shift the painting metaphor to a printing one. She relates how “they had quarreled” and then proceeds to repeat the language she first used to describe the “sighting” of the Isles this time, however, with a significant difference: “The Scilly Isles had the look of mountain-tops almost a-wash….Unfortunately, Jacob broke the pin of the Primus stove. The Scilly Isles might well be obliterated by a roller sweeping straight across” (36; ellipsis original). Once again, the ellipsis, an obvious “printerly” effect, breaks into the line here at the same time as Jacob breaks the pin on the Primus stove. In the following line, moreover, the pin becomes a “roller,” the hard cylinder used to apply ink to raised metal type, that effectively flattens the islands which protrude, like type, from the sea. As the frustration and emotion unleashed by the damage to the stove transfers the destruction to the external world at large, the language also recalls Woolf’s letter to Dora Carrington about the difficulty of the working with the woodcuts, itself a frustrating endeavor. She describes how “the rollers scrape up the wood as they pass,” as if to suggest potential violence of printing (not limited here to the impression of type into paper but also extended to the inking of type itself) implicated in a disregard of the material out of which the world outside the self is composed (Letters 2: 162).

When Jacob travels to Greece, however, he offers the complement to this scene: he does not so much disregard the world as he discards human relations. The narrator draws an explicit connection between the two scenes when she writes, “There are very sharp bare hills on the way to Olympia; and between them the blue sea in triangular spaces. A little like the Cornish coast” (110). Unlike his sailing trip to the Scilly Isles, the world here catches his eye and draws him in with its colors and its geometry, hallmarks of the post-Impressionist aesthetic. The narrator reports how “he had never suspected how tremendously pleasant it is to be alone; out of England; on one’s own; cut off from the whole thing” (112). The quiet violence of being “cut off” becomes more explicit in the observations by which the narrator ends this section: “To gallop intemperately; fall on the sand tired out; to feel the earth spin; to have – positively – a rush of friendship for the stones and grasses, as if humanity were over, and as for men and women, let them go hang – there is no getting over the fact that this desire seizes us pretty often” (112-13). The explicit appeal to isolation in these descriptions anticipates The Waves, which Woolf described as a mind’s “soliloquy in solitude,” and which Banfield takes to be the apotheosis of Woolf’s commitment to “eyeless” post-impressionist ideals. As we will see in my last chapter, Woolf’s later novel tempers its commitment to those ideals in its use of multiple soliloquies, brought into relationality within the format of the book. Here, however, the feelings of affinity for the world not only preclude human relationality but commit a kind of execution – “let them go hang.” The destruction which his emotions visited on the Scilly Isles here finds its target in humanity in general, as if Jacob is working in a relational model in which he must choose between two mutually exclusive options.
As we have seen, however, the book offers a kind of relationality that explicitly does not require that kind of choice. In the following passage, in fact, it works to connect the interpersonal with an awareness of the impersonal outside world. In this case, the outside world is not the deserted seascape of the Scilly Isles or the empty landscapes of Greece, but precisely, perhaps unexpectedly, a view of other people. The narrator here describes the strange moment when two London omnibuses pass each other on the street:

The proximity of the omnibuses gave the outside passengers an opportunity to stare into each other’s faces. Yet few took advantage of it. Each had his own business to think of. Each had his past shut in him like the leaves of a book known to him by heart; and his friends could only read the title, James Spalding, or Charles Budgeon, and the passengers going the opposite way could read nothing at all – save ‘a man with a red moustache,’ ‘a young man in grey smoking a pipe.’ (49).

This moment is an explicit example of the “imaginative process by which books and people become interchangeable” that Laura Marcus suggests runs throughout Woolf’s work (132). Yet, this comparison is not in the service of making people “legible” – in fact, it has precisely the opposite effect since the books here are unreadable. Not only does the phrase “shut in” imply that the books are closed rather than open, but the narrator also figures each person’s individual history and interiority as the books’ “leaves” – not, significantly, as the written text one might decipher on those leaves. The distinction suggests that each person accesses their own past not through the process of reading but through a kind of holding of it; here the record is less a text to be read, than it is an object to be held. Yet, as the passive “known” and the prepositional construction “to him” displaces each person from the position of the subject, the phrase describes a relation with the past in which each is the recipient rather than the agent of his experience. We thus might say that this holding is not so much an immobilizing seizure but rather an upholding, a supporting that is at the same time a kind of care. As such, the book becomes less the object of each person’s knowledge, than he is the bearer of its knowledge; rather than possessing this knowledge, each person could more accurately be said to undergo or experience it. The knowledge of the book is thus precisely a knowledge of experience that does not so much depend on the kind of comprehension and understanding on which “reading” is based as it does on “holding” the “imprinting” which the images of rote memorization embedded in the term “by heart” suggest. Indeed, the only knowledge to which “reading” in this passage provides access is of each book’s title, an explicit limitation that, like the scene in Jacob’s room at Cambridge, suggests how little traditional reading might contribute to “knowing” someone.

The metaphor of the “leaves” and the model of “holding” thus offer a subtle revision of the kind of limited knowledge on which – we have seen again and again – the new ethics almost exclusively focuses. Interestingly, however, Hale makes a similar call for a shift to “experience:” she writes, “For the new ethicist, literature does not technically teach us anything at all, unless we understand learning as the overthrow of epistemology by experience, the troubling of certainty by an apprehension that comes through surprised feeling” (“Aesthetics” 903). Here, however, the emphasis ultimately falls back on the “troubling of certainty” on which Hale bases her articulation of the new ethics. Examining the emphasis which her account places on uncertainty brings the ramifications of Jacob’s Room’s model into relief. Extrapolating from the
Butler’s reading of the ending of *Washington Square* to which I have repeatedly referred, Hale claims that through reading novels “we are made to recognize our operative interpretative categories as our own ‘regime of the norm’” (901). The “knowledge” we gain from reading novels then is precisely a knowledge of our own epistemological limits. For Butler and Hale, the effect of novel reading is to leave the reader focused on himself and his own epistemological limits in a way that seems to preclude the question of relationality in the first place.

While this model might apply to the “friends” in the passage above rather well since they (like the narrator) can only “read the title” of the book that figures each person, the passage provides another way of thinking about these limits. While, at first glance, the scene here seems to involve an inescapably closed monadology in which each person is shut up in their own separate sphere, each a closed book, the “proximity” of the two omnibuses that provides the “opportunity to stare into each other’s faces” indicates the common location in a share world that extends beneath this insularity and isolation described here. Indeed, the passengers who “could read nothing at all” seem – unknowingly – to evoke this other relational possibility. “Unknowingly” here has a double valence since it suggests, on the one hand, that these passengers are not aware of the mode of relationality which they inhabit and, on the other, that this mode is precisely one that does not seek to know. Tellingly, the newly explicit emphasis on the visual indicated by the “colorful” description here – the “red” of the moustache, for instance, or the “grey” clothing – suggests that this other relational mode has more to do with sense perception than intellectual comprehension. As the colors here signify nothing at all (which, incidentally, is exactly what these passengers are able to “read”), they do not so much function as an opportunity for the passengers to exercise the kind of interpretive, readerly agency that would grasp their significance as they draw attention to the perceptual world shared by the passengers.

In so doing, they emphasize the extent to which these perceiving subjects are also simultaneously perceived objects and reveal the way that intersubjective relationships inescapably involve a relationship to the object world. The figure of the book that takes center stage here indicates the potential which it holds to sparking a rethinking of intimacy, as if holding the book provides a model for both subject-subject and subject-object relationality. And this is exactly what the novel’s ending bears out in the emphasize it places on pages – or at least paper. On the last page, Jacob’s friend Bonamy stands “in the middle of Jacob’s room” and observes, “He left everything just as it was…Nothing arranged. All his letters strewn about for any one to read” (143). A few paragraphs later, Bonamy is standing at a window, looking out into the city when “suddenly all the leaves seemed to raise themselves” while, in the next sentence, they “sank down again” (143). While the leaves refer to the trees outside the window, they also recall the letters “strewn about for any one to read,” and, by extension, the pages we have just finished turning. Bill Brown suggests that the novel “displays the evanescence of the protagonist’s life as a relation to the material object world” so that the novel’s closing scene “evolves less from the idea of absence (Jacob’s death in the war), and more from a lingering presence, the unburied remains” (“Things” 13; 14). And what remains of the novel that we are finishing but its very pages? We thus might say that, in closing, *Jacob’s Room* recalls in the way that it began: it opens itself up and exposes its pages for us to hold. Of course, this is not limited to the first and last of the novel’s moments, as I have been at pains to show, over and over again. We might put it another way and say that I have been trying repeatedly to open the novel, to draw your attention to its pages. In so doing, I have been following the form of the novel itself, as I suggested in the introduction, by offering vaguely similar readings of each of the
moments that seem to draw my own attention to them. What more, I wondered after realizing how often I seemed to be repeating myself, could I say about these moments? I did not want to commit the kind of penetrative “reading” against which I was arguing – though, to be sure, I have at times inescapably acted exactly like the characters in the novel of which my argument is a less than implicit critique. My opening “crush” on Jacob makes this explicit. Even in this, however, I have followed Woolf’s novel, since those same characters have also offered me examples of exactly the kind of relationality I was using to critique them. Significantly, I now realize, the repetition is precisely my point. These moments offered nothing else to my mind but the repeated opening of the novel, the repetitive attention to the page. So that, lacking a printing press, I find this repetition – that of the novel and of this chapter’s argument – to effect a “mind printing upon mind.” For what is repetition but the mechanism by which we might “imprint” ourselves with an idea, the way that the novel might become “known to us by heart,” how we might receive and “hold” the experience of reading the novel – the way, finally, that, in the face of the evanescence on which it ends, we might abide with, perhaps even linger in, Jacob’s Room.
The Binding of *The Waves*

“Now to sum up,” writes Virginia Woolf, at the beginning of the last section of *The Waves*, which consists entirely of a monologue by the character Bernard that attempts to draw the various strands of the novel together. Like its final section, my reading of *The Waves* also serves as a summing up that gathers together the preceding arguments about the book and the kinds of relationships it allows us to have. For, in Bernard’s words, “The illusion is upon me that something adheres for a moment, has roundness, weight, depth, is completed” (238). As this feeling of “roundness, weight, depth” speaks to “reading volumes,” it characterizes the moment, on finishing a book, when you turn the last page, close the cover and feel its heft in your hands. This volume transforms the temporal duration of the reading you have just completed, the time you have spent engaged with the narrative, into a “solid object,” to use the title of Woolf’s short story that began my argument. When Bernard continues and states that “This, for the moment, seems to be my life,” he offers an apt description of the role which, “for the moment,” this object can play as a material manifestation of the part of your life devoted to reading. While the reader’s life extends beyond the covers of the book that contains the text of *The Waves* in a way that Bernard’s does not, we will see how Woolf’s novel speaks to the persistence of this readerly subject at the same time as it rounds out the object-centered account of reading that I have been developing. Reading *The Waves*, in fact, shows the profound ways in which subjective experience is itself sustained by its bonds to the object world.

In her 1927 essay “The Narrow Bridge of Art,” Woolf describes an expansion of the novel’s purview to include the subject’s relationship to the object and critiques what she calls the “psychological novelist” who “has been too prone to limit psychology to the psychology of personal intercourse” (*Essays II*, 225). In his introduction to the holograph drafts of *The Waves*, J. W. Graham argues that in this essay Woolf was “going beyond the criticism of the Edwardian novel contained in ‘Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,’ her earlier and more famous speculation about the future of fiction, and is scrutinizing the limitations of her own most recent and successful novels” (20). Accordingly, Woolf points out that, with the contemporary novel, “we have scrutinized one part of the mind closely and left the other unexplored. We have come to forget that a large and important part of life consists in our emotions towards such things as roses and nightingales, the dawn, the sunset, life, death, and fate; we forget that we spend much time sleeping, dreaming, thinking, reading, alone” (225). While *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* furthered the investigation of subjective psychology and interpersonal relationships, her enumeration of natural and abstract phenomena here points to an alternative focus that returns to the larger, external world in which she was interested in *Jacob’s Room*. Accordingly, we will see how *The Waves* continues the exploration of our physical and affective relationship with this object world. Indeed, when Woolf points out in her diary that “The abandonment of *Orlando* and *Lighthouse* is much checked by the extreme difficulty of the form – as it was in *Jacob’s Room*” (153-54), she explicitly links the two works and hints at the way they form a common project, one, in fact, that extends all the way back to “Solid Objects.” My discussion of *The Waves* thus rounds out the alternative, object-centered account of Woolf’s fiction that I have

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92 During the composition of *The Waves*, Woolf writes in her diary of “books that relieve other books: a variety of styles and subjects: for after all, that is my temperament, I think, to be very little persuaded of the truth of anything – what I say, what people say – always to follow, blindly, instinctively with a sense of leaping over a precipice – the call of – the call of – now” (134)
been developing by showing how her most experimental work – that seems, at first glance, to be an aberration from her “typical style” – contributes to her larger literary project. If in Jacob’s Room the spaces on the pages contribute to the reader’s experience of its narrative, in The Waves the pages themselves – or, more specifically, the turning of these bound pages – become part of the experience that the novel produces.

The shift from subject to object which Woolf articulates here has been more or less implicit in the arguments I have been making up to this point. From the Proustian narrator’s encounter with François le Champi that shows the way that the world of objects undergirds the idealizations for which the Recherche is so famous through the embodiment of reading mapped out by Ulysses and Finnegans Wake to the intimate relationship which Jacob’s Room facilitates between the reader and the larger, external world, this dissertation has persistently addressed the relationship between the subject and the object that comes to take center-stage in The Waves. More than this, ending a meditation on the concrete object of the book with Woolf’s 1931 novel, which she described as “an abstract mystical eyeless book” (Diary 134), brings the dissertation full circle as it recalls our starting point in the idealizations of Proust, as if my reading of The Waves performs the same circularity that conditions Proust’s novel (no less than Finnegans Wake). Moreover, this is also part of the structure of The Waves since the figure of Bernard offers an account of a would-be novelist’s attempt to write a book that “sums up” his life, an ambition which only The Waves itself fulfills. And, as with Proust, we will see how the bookish perspective that I have been developing can open up a novel that seems, at first glance, so detached from the world it represents.

In this, my reading of The Waves follows – and ultimately revises – the account of Woolf’s work given by Ann Banfield. As she examines the influence that both the logical philosophy of the G. E. Moore and Bertrand Russell and the aesthetic theory of Roger Fry had on Woolf, she reconceptualizes Woolf’s entire oeuvre and provides the most trenchant and important consideration of The Waves. For Banfield, “Woolf’s fiction is an implicit theory of modern knowledge, divided, just as painting for Fry, into dual realities and dual ways of knowing” (52). These dualities come from Russell’s theory of knowledge which, with the help of concepts from Moore’s philosophical work, “addressed the seeming incommensurability of two versions of a knowledge of the external world,” one based in the direct apprehension via a subject’s senses and the other in a scientific knowledge based in mathematical and logical truth that is independent of the subject (6). By appealing to the realm of logical possibility, Russell’s philosophy “revealed [objects] to have a sensible existence independent of an observer” (1), which Woolf exemplifies in To the Lighthouse in the directive “Think of a kitchen table…when you’re not there” (23). Banfield ultimately suggests that Woolf receives this dual perspective on the real world of sense perception and the abstract world of logic through the aesthetic analogues of “impressionism,” the representation of direct sense perception, and “post-impressionism,” the focus on organizing principles like geometric form, transmitted to her by Roger Fry. When Banfield describes Fry’s “dual aims of representing appearances and revealing their underlying order,” she links Fry’s artistic ambitions with the disclosure of the logical structure of reality that Russell was attempting in philosophy (256). Just as mathematics and logic describe an abstract, objective realm, artistic form, for Fry, “crystallizes geometry in the sensible world” (256).

Banfield links Woolf’s fiction with these intellectual currents by viewing the descriptions of “unoccupied places and times” that occur throughout the Woolf’s novels as literary versions of the kind of formal and logical abstraction involved in the work of Fry and Russell. In doing
so, Banfield goes a long way toward accounting for the singular style and structure of *The Waves*, the novel in which this kind of abstraction is perhaps most explicit. As the strange interludes that describe the progress of the sun across an uninhabited seascape interrupt a series of disembodied monologues spoken by six related but seemingly isolated voices, they provide, according to Banfield, “an explicit formal expression of the geometry in the external world” (147). Banfield observes how, in these interludes as well as in other significant stylistic experiments like the “Time Passes” section of *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf transforms her language “by stripping away common-sense assumptions inherent in grammar” (296). At these moments, language represents a thought or sensation not tied to any particular subject via “the elimination of the first person and the representation of a third person privacy” (293), so that “particulars such as ‘here’ and ‘now’ [are] neither ‘egocentric’ nor ‘subject-centered’ because occurring in contexts with no first- or third-person pronouns to attribute them to” (317). In *The Waves*, these stylistic decisions in the interludes offer “the backdrop of an absolutely depersonalized reality” for the “psychological reality” of the monologues (60); they portray the inhuman world external to the subject that Bernard calls “the world seen without a self” at the end of the novel. Banfield views these grammatical choices as an attempt to “find a language with the powers of Cézanne’s painting” (296), the creation of a “linguistic counterpart to ‘plastic color’” that transforms the post-impressionist principles of impersonal form into a literary register (319). In this way, she holds, Woolf’s writing approaches “the unseen world of enduring forms” which do not depend on subject and at which logical philosophy and post-impressionism aim (274).

Yet impersonality is not strictly synonymous with objectivity, as Banfield’s linguistic perspective seems to suggest. Rather, impersonality is a way for a subject to represent its perception of objectivity. By casting the object world to which Woolf turns as itself a kind of linguistic abstraction, Banfield’s exclusive focus on language thus preserves the subject that Woolf is trying paradoxically to think beyond, a dilemma of expression which we will see *The Waves* also faces. When Banfield cites Charles Mauron’s concept of “psychological volume” as a “literary equivalent of plastic color [that] was discussed within Bloomsbury” (319), however, she points to the way my argument might reframe her discussion and extend Woolf’s aesthetic project to the “real” object world in which both the reader and the book take their place. Indeed, the perspective I have been developing unravels the question Mauron asks – “What analogue in literature shall we give to volume?” (qtd. in Banfield 320) – by suggesting that literature need no “analogue” to volume since it already possesses its own voluminous format. As we have seen the way this format offers the reader an experience of the object world in the previous chapters, *The Waves* will show how this experience might be a mediation of the depersonalized reality whose representation Banfield finds in her analysis of Woolf’s language. As the book that transmits the language of the novel exists independently of the readerly subject, its objecthood persists beyond the readerly engagement that brings that language to life.

Woolf’s own commentary about both *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves* attempts to access this kind of objectivity not through the fixed structure underlying reality that Banfield imports from logical philosophy and post-impressionism but through reality’s constant flux. Describing her aesthetic ambitions in “The Narrow Bridge of Art” (ambitions which we will also see the figure of Bernard echo in *The Waves*), Woolf writes that her new novel will dramatize some of those influences which play so large a part in life, yet have so far escaped the novelist – the power of music, the stimulus of sight, the effect on
us of the shape of trees or the play of colour, the emotion bred in us by crowds, the obscure terrors and hatreds which come so irrationally in certain places or from certain people, the delight of movement, the intoxication of wine. Every moment is the centre and meeting-place of an extraordinary number of perceptions which have not yet been expressed. Life is always and inevitably much richer than we who try to express it (228-229).

The experiences of sensation and emotion, along with the important addition of movement, on which Woolf focuses here all extend across multiple points of space and time rather than being located in any single one; the way “life” exceeds attempts at its expression has to do with an uncapturable progression that transforms the static “structure” of reality on which our experience depends into a dynamic flow. While the complex of sensory and affective experiences that constitutes our relationships with the external world recalls a kind of impressionism, the continuous rather than discrete nature of these examples suggests that Woolf’s attempt to exceed the representation of completely subjective perception relies on an appeal to a phenomenon that affects subject and object alike, namely the passing of time. As interested as The Waves is in the object world’s persistence beyond the subject’s perception of it, it shows us that this objective persistence is bound up with time’s passing. We will see that, if anything “persists” in The Waves, it is temporal flow itself. And, indeed, this is exactly the place from which Woolf begins planning her novel; she writes of “the stream that I am trying to convey; life itself going on” and, even earlier, of “some continuous stream, not solely of human thought, but of the ship, the night etc., all flowing together” (Diary 140; 107).

When Woolf continues her brainstorming and asks herself, “Could one not get the waves to be heard all through?” (Diary 141), she suggests how what she comes to call her “interludes” are to weave this flow into her narrative, as if the impersonal seascape exists behind – and extends beyond – the personal lives her novel will be representing. In this, they pick up on the “interlude” of “Time Passes” from To the Lighthouse, which sought to include “this impersonal thing, which I’m dared to do by my friends, the flight of time, & the consequent break of unity in my design” (Diary 79). We will see how the interludes find a “real world” analogue in The Waves’ own succession of pages to which Bernard’s progressive meditations on literary form ultimately directs the reader. Michael Lund states the effect of this attention explicitly, “Though scholars tend to overlook this, especially in The Waves, the ongoing time frame of reading has always been essential to Woolf’s audience” (283). More than this, however, the novel furthers the consideration of “objective” intimacy that Jacob’s Room begins as it points to a form of community – of “binding” – based in the experience of time’s passing and the inevitable return to an inanimate state that reveals the subject’s fundamental tie to the object world.93

I.

While the community of voices that constitutes The Waves consists of six personae – three male and three female – Woolf portions out the most significant meditations on their

93 Along with Garrett Stewart’s “Catching the Stylistic D/rift: Sound Defects in Woolf’s The Waves” which I consider in more detail later in my discussion, see Lisa Marie Lucenti’s “Virginia Woolf’s The Waves: to defer that ‘appalling moment,’” Tamar Katz’s “Modernism, Subjectivity, and Narrative Form: Abstraction in The Waves,” Julie Vandivere’s “Waves and Fragments: Linguistic Construction of Subjectivity as Subject Formation in Virginia Woolf” and Tamlyn Monson’s “‘A Trick of the Mind’: Alterity, Ontology and Representation in Virginia Woolf.”
experiences to her male speakers Bernard, Neville and Louis. Rhoda’s monologues will offer a
counterpoint to these male voices that reveals the way her radical alienation from her own body
and the object world in which it is situated bars her ability to experience the flow of time and
leads to her suicide. At the same time, the male figures will progressively turn our attention to
the object of the book – which lacks a gender – as the means of reconciling ourselves to our
inescapable finitude. As Bernard, in the role of The Waves’ “novelist,” undergoes an aesthetic
development that transitions from the conventional forms of narrative to a more experimental
play with novelistic form that recalls Woolf’s own evolution from traditional novels like The
Voyage Out and Night and Day to revolutionary works like Jacob’s Room, To the Lighthouse and The
Waves itself, he allows us to characterize the object-centered strain of Woolf’s work as an
attempt at a kind of gender-neutral writing rather than the “feminine” writing to which focus on
her more “subjective” novels has led. The account we receive of Bernard’s development
provides an examination of literary form which will prepare the ground for the turn to bookish
format that the figure of Neville will help to flesh out. Indeed, it is Neville who also provides
the earliest and most explicit account of Bernard’s literary ambitions when he states, “let
Bernard begin. Let him burble on telling us stories, while we lie recumbent. Let him describe
what we have all seen so that it becomes a sequence. Bernard says there is always a story. I am
a story. Louis is a story” (37).

The emphasis here is clearly on the construction of narratives which, in these lines, involve the imposition of a sequential order onto visual perception (“what we have all seen”) in a way that recalls the move from impressionism to post-impression. When Bernard later draws a direct link between narrative organization and subjective agency, however, he indicates that this organizing structure has less to do with the impersonal world, as in post-impressionism, than with the construction of his own ego. He states, “I conceive myself called upon to provide, some winter’s night, a meaning for all my observations – a line that runs from one to another, a summing up that completes” (115). With its connotations of pregnancy and origination, the use of the word “conceive” suggests that Bernard creates himself by connecting up all his experiences. The structure to which he appeals has its origin in his own
consciousness.

This subject-centered organization ultimately leads him – along with, we will see, Louis,
Rhoda and Neville – to a wholly abstracted realm that has very little to do with phenomenal
experience. He expounds further on his narrativizing compulsion: “The bubbles are rising like
the silver bubbles from the floor of a saucepan; image on top of image….I must open the little
trap-door and let out these linked phrases in which I run together whatever happens so that
instead of incoherence there is perceived a wandering thread, lightly joining one thing to
another” (49). For the young Bernard, writing is a process that allows him to securely grasp his
chaotic and frenzied experience. By transforming the overlapping simultaneities of the boiling
bubbles into the sequence of the “linked phrases,” Bernard effectively slows down the incessant
stream of images and spaces them out to create a “wandering thread” which he can use to
reduce the vagaries of the external world to correspond to his own subjective experience. Here,
it is not just narrative structure, but language itself that also orders and organizes. When Neville
comments on the effect of Bernard’s narrative and linguistic ordering, however, he suggests a
certain incommensurability between linguistic or narrative structure and the flow of experience –
an incommensurability which, we will see, ultimately leads Bernard to disavow and renounce his
subjectively-centered ordering habits later in the novel. Using some of the same metaphors as
Bernard himself, Neville describes how “Bernard goes on talking. Up they bubble – images….when he talks, when he makes foolish comparisons, a lightness comes over one. One floats,
too, as if one were that bubble; one is freed; I have escaped, one feels” (38). Here, Bernard’s transformation of experience into language seems to liberate himself and his listeners from the constraints of the material world. Indeed, Neville notes how “even the chubby boys (Dalton, Larpent and Baker) feel the same abandonment,” as if to underscore the way Bernard’s talk allows for an abstraction from the earthbound body’s insistent “chubbiness.” In their drive to become disembodied storytelling minds that exist in some kind of transcendent intellectual realm, these English schoolboys effectively become the classmates of Joyce’s Stephen Dedalus, with his heady denial of the material world.

Louis, however, takes this work of ordering and abstraction to its fullest extent, and comparing his and Bernard’s projects draws out the aggression inherent in imposing their own subjectivities onto the objective world. Woolf writes, “‘Now let me try,’ said Louis, ‘before we rise, before we go to tea, to fix the moment in one effort of supreme endeavour. This shall endure’” (39). As a more extreme version of Bernard’s ordering impulse, Louis overlays his own structure onto the flow of experience by trying to grasp the single instant as if he might immobilize the stream of time and seize the moment for himself. When he goes on to observe that “my shattered mind is pieced together by some sudden perception. I take the trees, the clouds, to be witnesses of my complete integration” (39), he amplifies the drive to disembodiment implicit in Bernard’s stories since here physical perception leads to a wholly mental space out of which Louis can imagine his experience synchronically, excised from the flow of life. He makes this even more explicit when, a few lines later, he describes how “our ring here, sitting, with our arms binding our knees, hint[s] at some other order, and better, which makes a reason everlastingly. This I see for a second, and shall try tonight to fix in words, to forge in a ring of steel” (40). Transmuting his experience into the verbal register abstracts the flesh and blood that form the first ring in these lines; in its place, he imagines an enduring temporality in the figure of a steel ring, whose hardness will maintain the circular shape that averts any sense of linear progress. As words seem to allow Louis an escape from the here-and-now and to guarantee his access to the better, everlasting order that he envisions, they lead him to focus exclusively on the abstract structure involved in post-impressionism rather than bringing the abstraction of form together with sense perception – “Fry combined the eye and eyelessness, color and skeletal form,” Banfield writes (249). The numerous commas which break up these lines, however, impart a stop-and-start rhythm which accentuates the way that, unlike a steel ring, language – no matter how well-ordered – unfolds in a temporal register that Louis cannot elude.

And this temporal unfolding is exactly what Louis wants to counter by appealing to poetry rather than Bernard’s “stories;” in a later scene that takes place in a crowded restaurant, he describes how the book he is reading “contains some forged rings, some perfect statements, a few words, but poetry” (94). It is ultimately poetry, with its “forged rings” and “perfect statements,” its clearly defined rhythms and regular patterns, to which Louis looks to establish control over the stream of his experience. He elaborates:

I oppose to what is passing this ramrod of beaten steel. I will not submit to this aimless passing of billycock hats and Homburg hats and all the plumed and variegated head-dresses of women…. And the grinding and the steam that runs in unequal drops down the window pane; and the stopping and the starting with a jerk of motor-omnibuses; and the hesitation at counters; and the words that trail drearily without human meaning; I will reduce you to order (95).
In a way that Bernard does not, Louis makes clear here that, when based completely in the subjective “I,” literary representation has the potential to commit a certain violence towards the world, indicated in his language of “beaten” and “forged” steel which Louis “opposes” to it. As poetry, in his hands, functions as an aggressive force that overlays an oppressive framework on the world, it suggests that the calls for order which Bernard makes, despite their basis in narrative progression, effect a similar reduction and participate in the same kind of representational violence. Yet, the insistent rhythm created by the repeated “ands” in this passage seems to suggest the potential for literary representation to share in the flow and mobility expressed by the images of running steam and jerking omnibuses by which Louis describes the world around him. Indeed, as the sentence here contains a long string of predicates that precede the subject and verb, Louis’ words defer any kind of syntactical closure that might allow the reader to impose a final, ordering meaning on these lines. In a sense, his words almost come to “trail drearily without human meaning” and point to a way other than “human meaning” that language might intersect with an experience of the object world.

When Bernard ultimately disavows the forms of traditional narrative, he hints at exactly this alternative intersection. He proclaims:

How tired I am of stories, how tired I am of phrases that come down beautifully with all their feet on the ground! Also, I distrust neat designs of life that are drawn upon half sheets of notepaper. I begin to long for some little language such as lovers use, broken words, inarticulate words, like the shuffling of feet on pavement. I begin to seek some design more in accordance with those moments of humiliation and triumph that come now and then undeniably (238-239).

While Bernard’s desire for “some little language” has been read as an appeal to the semiotic or even the monosyllabic, it might also suggest a limitation of language that reveals other means of communication and transmission at work. The repetition of “feet” in two different phrases suggests that the image is not a random one, and indeed it is a standard term used to parse poetic meter. While this sense of the word seems to describe its use in the first case – in the “phrases that come down beautifully with all their feet on the ground” – it takes on a different valence in the “shuffling of feet on pavement.” As the second use of “feet” describes a base or foundation that stabilizes without immobilizing, it suggests a different kind of literary rhythm and transforms the ordered structure of narrative or poetry suggested by the former phrase into a more mobile, shifting model where words themselves do not stay put.

Indeed, comparing Bernard’s conclusion further with Woolf’s description of her new novel suggests the increasing influence which the material format of the book comes to have on their respective reconsiderations of literary form. Woolf envisions her new kind of novel as a hybrid combination of prose, poetry and drama; it will, she proposes, “have something of the exaltation of poetry but much of the ordinariness of prose. It will be dramatic, yet not a play” (Essays II, 224). Significantly, to the question of what to call this jumbled genre, she responds that “it is not a matter of very great importance” and elides the question of generic form altogether by focusing instead on its format: in the next sentence, she calls it “this book which we see on the horizon,” as if that object is the means (not to mention the medium) that brings these varied genres together (224; italics added). Later, she describes the composition process for such a novel and writes, “Instead of enumerating details, [the novelist] will mold blocks. His
characters thus will have a dramatic power which the minutely realized characters of contemporary fiction often sacrifice in the interests of psychology” (228). The renunciation of “enumerating details” recalls the way Bernard ultimately tries to avoid the imposition of narrative sequence, while “molding blocks” offers a concrete image as an alternative. Although this metaphor of “molding” recalls the way Louis seeks to “forge a ring of steel,” the “block” that the writer is to produce speaks to the shape of a book, a “solid object” with which Woolf was, of course, quite familiar from her work for the Hogarth Press. Yet, as the early short story with which my argument began should remind us, the “solid objects” which the main character of that story collects are almost always fragments, and we will see how the book, with its separate pages, is an object that mediates between fragmentation and division in a way that diverges from the model Louis proposes.

When Neville describes the breakdown of Bernard’s stories early in the novel, in fact, he also has recourse to fragmented material drawn from the object world. He observes how, as Bernard is speaking, “The sentence tails off feebly. Yes, the appalling moment has come when Bernard’s power fails him and there is no longer any sequence and he sags and twiddles a bit of string and falls silent, gaping as if about to burst into tears. Among the tortures and devastations of life is this then – our friends are not able to finish their stories” (39). Here, the “wandering thread” of his story becomes literal, and a heavy, earth-bound sagging replaces the abstract, sequential ordering of his moments. While the “twiddling” of the “bit of string” echoes the feeble tailing off of Bernard’s sentence and links the moment of narrative disconnection to the intrusion of the material world, the horror which Bernard and Neville experience at this moment overshadows the way that “twiddling” also connects up with a rhythmic action like “shuffling,” an unheeded hint at the potential of the material world to serve as the basis for the alternative model Bernard comes to desire. Moreover, the kind of motion suggested by “twiddling” and “shuffling” – which is composed of a series of smaller movements – also describes the way a reader proceeds through a novel incrementally, by the persistent turning of pages, a comparison which The Waves comes to endorse in the metaphor which Bernard ultimately uses to characterize his closing summation.

While the impulse to sum up is in line with the compulsion to narrate that Bernard exhibited in his youth, he now observes that “in order to make you understand, to give you my life, I must tell you a story – and there are so many, and so many – stories of childhood, stories of school, love, marriage, death, and so on; and none of them are true” (238). Referring to the incidents that he will rehearse, he proposes an alternative: “let us turn over these scenes as children turn over pages of a picture-book and the nurse says, pointing: ‘That’s a cow. That’s a boat.’ Let us turn over the pages, and I will add, for your amusement, a comment in the margin” (239). Characterizing the monologue that follows as a “marginal” commentary to the “pages in a picture-book,” Bernard distinguishes the narrative summary that he constructs from the content he is summarizing; as he puts it later, “Life is not susceptible perhaps to the treatment we give when we try tell it” (267). Yet, by appealing to the way “children turn over pages of a picture-book” (children who, we might assume from the description of the nurse’s instruction, do not yet know how to read), he endows the visual image and the sequence of pages with a novel importance, as if they might communicate “life” in a way that a linguistically-constructed narrative cannot. Turning pages thus comes to index and transmit an experience of the very passing of time which, we have seen, Bernard’s stories – not to mention Louis’ poetry – could only seek to reduce.
Indeed this lack of sensitivity to the passing of time is exactly what Bernard condemns when he launches into another critique of narrative form during his closing monologue. On breaking off from his portrait of himself as a university student, he says, “Here again there should be music…a painful, guttural, visceral, also soaring, lark-like, pealing song to replace these flagging, foolish transcripts — how much too deliberate! how much too reasonable — which attempt to describe the flying moment of first love” (250). In singling out this moment as a significant one over which he wants to linger, Bernard’s appeal to music, an art form that takes time’s passing as its constitutive principle, suggests his simultaneous desire not to linger over the moment, or, more precisely, to record the moment within, as part of a temporal unfolding. He does not so much want to freeze it, as he wants to communicate its very dynamism, both the contradictory and fluid emotions he felt and his experience of the moment’s passing, its “flying” momentariness. He goes on to offer a more expansive description of this moment in a series of sentences which he ultimately interrupts: “— but what is the use of painfully elaborating these consecutive sentences when what one needs is nothing consecutive but a bark, a groan?” (251). Again, this line is often quoted in support of a Kristevan reading with the “bark” and “groan” serving as examples of the “little language” which Bernard is seeking. Yet, the turn to Kristeva ultimately distracts from closer examination of Bernard’s renunciation of the consecutive. Bernard wants to avoid sequence because it splits up what is, in experience, a continuity. In this he echoes Woolf and her ambitions for “unity” and “running all the scenes together.” At the same time, he extends her critique of the genre of prose to the form of the sentence — even, implicitly, to language itself. How, Bernard seems to be wondering, can I run all my words together to communicate continuity rather than sequence?

II.

When Bernard takes up the question of expressing what it is that links his experiences on a deeper, non-linguistic level, he uses a complicated and telling description. Echoing Woolf’s critical writing again, he proclaims,

It is a mistake, this extreme precision, this orderly military progression; a convenience, a lie. There is always deep below it, even when we arrive punctually at the appointed time with our white waistcoats and polite formalities, a rushing stream of broken dreams, nursery rhymes, street cries, half-finished sentences and sights — elm trees, willow trees, gardeners sweeping, women writing — that rise and sink even as we hand a lady down to dinner (255).

What is interesting about these lines is the way they index a “rushing stream” by using images not of flow or progress but of interruption and the instant, as if it is precisely disconnection that reveals the stream deep below, a flow that underlies — even as it avoids — any conscious or deliberate attempts to grasp it. And indeed disconnection was precisely what plagued Bernard when, as a young man, he tried to “run together whatever happens so that instead of incoherence there is perceived a wandering thread” (49).

The Waves performs exactly this tension between disconnection and flow in the descriptive interludes that interrupt the character’s dramatic monologues and allow Woolf to achieve “the idea of some continuous stream” that characterizes her aesthetic goals for the novel (Diary 107). Most obviously, as the impersonal interludes each describe a moment in the sun’s progress across the sky, they tie the book together on a formal level by structuring the
intervening monologues in a larger temporal arc that is defined less by narrative convention of plots than by the representation of the rhythms of the natural world. Interestingly, however, in his account of the work J. W. Graham has recourse to the bibliographic register when he notes the book’s possession of “a structure emphatically modeled on the cycles of day, season and human life, heavily underscored by the spatial and typographical separation of the two ‘streams’ of the book (14). The spatial and typographical underscoring to which Graham refers here suggests the intimate relationship between the experimental form of the work and its format, as if part of The Waves “emphatic” structure comes from the pages on which it is printed.94 Woolf herself hints at this connection between the form and format when she writes in her diary, “the interludes are very difficult, yet I think essential, so as to bridge and also to give a background – the sea; insensitive nature – I don’t know” (150). Though speaking of the scenes that the interludes portray, her description could apply just as easily to the material pages that transmit – and constitute a “background” for – them. These inanimate pages themselves belong to the object world and function as a kind of “insensitive nature” that binds the monologues together – in the most vulgarly material of ways – in the object of the book.95

Indeed, the description of the way an uninhabited seascape gradually becomes visible that opens The Waves supports a connection between the natural world and the materiality of the book. Woolf writes: The sun had not yet risen. The sea was indistinguishable from the sky, except that the sea was slightly creased as if a cloth had wrinkles in it. Gradually as the sky whitened a dark line lay on the horizon dividing the sea from the sky and the grey cloth became barred with thick strokes moving, one after another, beneath the surface, following each other, pursuing each other, perpetually (7). The “creases” which temper the initial indistinguishability of sea and sky evoke paper as much as cloth, while the “thick strokes” that come to “bar” the surface of the sea conflate the waves with the marks made by a pen. The description of this seascape’s differentiation from the sky is thus also an implicit narrative of the process by which the novel takes shape under the eyes of the writer as well as the reader. Not only is it the waves that come to light, but The Waves also begins to distinguish itself, the thick strokes of its print barring and seeming to move perpetually across its own page. When the description continues, the bars of print begin to disappear as “The surface of the sea slowly became transparent and lay rippling and sparkling until the dark stripes were almost rubbed out,” an apt description of the way the reader becomes habituated, over time, to print’s appearance on the page (7). At the same time, however, the “rippling” of the waves persists and suggests that the successive undulations which the “thick strokes” made visible in the opening lines continue despite their indiscernibility. Indeed, in light of the fact that “the air seemed to become fibrous and to tear away from the green surface flickering and flaming in red and yellow fibres” (7), a description that constitutes the sea and the sky out of fibers as if they are themselves made of paper and able to be torn apart, the rhythmic movements of the waves shifts from the novel’s print (which, after all, is static) to the turning of its pages.

Although claiming such significance for the material pages might seem counterintuitive for a novel that seems so insistently abstract, Craig Gordon argues that Woolf’s elaboration of

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94 See also Michael Lund’s “The Waves: Publishing History and Literary Form.”
95 Significantly, when Banfield observes that the kind of depsychologized language which allows Woolf to reorient focus from the individual subject to the external world “congregate[s] in the ‘interludes,’ in ‘Times Passes’ in To the Lighthouse and the chapter opening or ‘lyrical portions’ of The Waves and The Years” (317), she singles out the places – in The Waves at least – where the form of the novel borrows part of its effect from the format of the book. As these interludes “created textual continuity” (146), they recall the way the binding of the book’s pages create a material continuity, one, moreover, that unfolds in time.
psychology in *The Waves* “takes place in close proximity to the corporeal model articulated by turn-of-the-century neuroscience” that seeks to understand the mind through attention to the body (28). While Gordon cites Freud’s *Project for a Scientific Psychology* as well as William James’ *The Principles of Psychology* among others to develop the role that the materiality and physiology of the human body play in discussions of mental processes, I complement and extend his investigation to consider the other material body involved here, namely that of the book. When Gordon claims that the opening interlude which we have been examining “frames the novel by drawing our attention to a conceptual movement from undifferentiation to individuation to a renewed form of wholeness or collectivity that is understood as a state of fusion that paradoxically maintains or supports a constellation of discrete atoms” (26), he describes a model that applies very neatly to the way the bound pages of a book mediate between absolute states of union and division. As such, Gordon’s point suggests that the body of the book – as much as the neuroscientific body of the early twentieth century – provides a material instantiation of the confluence of integration and division which *The Waves* formally enacts.

This focus on the material finds its own articulation within *The Waves* when Neville, who becomes a well-known poet over the course of the novel, describes his reading practices. On arriving at school, he points out the library where, he says, “I shall explore the exactitude of the Latin language, and step firmly upon the well-laid sentences, and pronounce the explicit, the sonorous hexameters of Virgil; of Lucretius; and chant with a passion that is never obscure or formless the loves of Catullus, reading from a big book, a quarto with margins” (31-32). Neville’s plans here involve a slippage from the formal aspects of the classical poets to the “big book” out of which he reads them. When he describes reading as a “step[ping] firmly,” he intimates the way his intellectual explorations seek a stability which he hopes to find as much in Latin’s linguistic “exactitude” as in the stately quarto format whose margins – no less than Virgil’s hexameters – might also be called “well-laid.” In highlighting these margins, Neville indicates the attention he pays to the organization of the words themselves on the page, as if he organizes and regulates his readerly passion via the structures of both poetic meter and typographical layout. Linking the aspects of poetic form and of bibliographic format, these lines overlay the intellectual demands of reading with its sensory ones in a way that distinguishes them from those of Louis and Bernard. While Neville certainly engages with the linguistic structures to which his classmates look to “reduce” the flux of their experience to cognizable configuration, his additional sensitivity to the black and white spaces of the page that are themselves part of the stream of his phenomenal experience connects the regularity of poetic meter to the flow of the world in a way that softens the violence we saw with Louis.

And this sensitivity is quite in keeping with the writers he is reading, since the content of the work of both Lucretius and Catullus explores this very connection between the intellectual and the physical as they center on the material and the carnal, respectively. More specifically, Lucretius was one of the first classical writers to explore our phenomenal experience in terms of the material makeup of the world rather than the divine will of the gods and expounded a theory of atomism that had great influence on later writers. As Susanna Rich points out, Lucretius articulates a “materialism that dispatched with gods and superstitions” and argued that “the soul is corporeal and cannot survive separately from the body which it infuses” (250). Similarly, Catullus’s poetry famously emphasizes the sensual and the erotic in its discussions of love. A lesson Neville might learn from an investment in the poetry of these two writers would be to invest simultaneously in the sensuous materiality of the world, and indeed the readerly “passion” with which Neville approaches the “big book” might recall the AMOUR of Proust’s
manuscripts or the intimately physical relationship which Bloom has with his reading material in *Ulysses*. Additionally, while Catullus is also famous for the homosexual sentiments portrayed in many of his poems (a fact quite in keeping with Neville’s own eventual homosexuality), his alliance with Lucretius here expands the implications of his name from simple male-male eroticism to a larger concept of sameness, what Leo Bersani has termed “homo-ness.” If, for Lucretius, all phenomenal beings are made up of combinations of primary particles, then any contact we have with the material world would necessarily be a meeting of like substances, a kind of objective “homo-ness.”

This is not to say that the male-male desire with which Catullus’ name is associated has nothing to do with material awareness of the book that I am elaborating here. Indeed, at a later moment, Neville’s appeal to the object of the book is explicitly bound up with his angst over “a secret told to nobody yet…. whether I am doomed always to cause repulsion in those I love” (88). The secrecy and repulsion which condition this affective framework suggests that Neville imagines the book’s materiality as the means to contain or even obliterate his desires in a way that that recalls Bernard and Louis’ appeals to language to order their experience. Thus, Neville returns to Catullus and states, “I do not impersonate Catullus, whom I adore. I am the most slavish of students, with here a dictionary; there a notebook in which I enter curious uses of the past participle. But one cannot go on for ever cutting these ancient inscriptions clearer with a knife. Shall I always draw the red serge curtains close and see my book, laid like a block of marble, pale under the lamp?” (87). Once again, Neville slips from a discussion of the exactitude of the Latin language – to which he submits himself “slavishly,” as if he might amplify and borrow its rigor as the basis for his own self-regulation – to the object of the book which transmits that language. In this case, the book does not so much put him in touch with the external world as it becomes the means by which he withdraws from it and retreats behind the “red serge curtains” to a completely subject-centered space. As such, it provides a counter-example of the book as a “solid object” that will clarify the increasing importance of the book’s separated pages. Here, the block of marble portrays a kind of monolithic solidarity whose permanence and immutability create a space for his own self-lacerating subjectivity to reign supreme, walled off from any intercourse with the flow of time or the caprice of other people. The violence of “cutting” into marble recalls the aggression and material hardness suggested by the “forged ring of steel” by which Louis characterizes poetry.

Interestingly, “cutting” is the very action that Neville’s openness to his own desire for Percival, the surrender of his subjective isolation, forestalls. Waiting for Percival’s imminent arrival at his going-away dinner, Neville observes, “every moment he seems to pump into this room this prickly light, this intensity of being so that things have lost their normal uses – this knife-blade is only a flash of light, not a thing to cut with. The normal is abolished” (119). The prospect of sharing the same space with the man he loves transforms the restaurant into a phantasmagoria that illuminates mundane objects: like the main character in “Solid Objects,” Neville no longer sees the knife as something for him to use but as itself a shining fragment of an “intensity of being.”

96 In the vocabulary of Bill Brown (who also, incidentally, uses the knife as an example), Neville experiences the knife as a “thing” rather than as an “object.” I repeat my citation of Brown for my introduction: “We begin to confront the thingness of an object when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production, distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however, momentarily. The story of objects asserting themselves as things then, is the story of a changed relation to the human subject and thus the story of how the thing really names a particular subject-object relation” (“Thing” 4).
to the world itself as he recognizes the way he also shares space with these inanimate objects. Moreover, at the end of the dinner, the knife reappears in a completely different and even more significant guise when it is used to describe the homo-ness experienced by all six friends, what Louis calls “this common feeling.” When Neville describes this feeling, he states, “Happiness is in it… and the quiet of ordinary things. A table, a chair, a book with a paper-knife stuck between the pages. And the petal falling from the rose, and the light flickering as we sit silent, or, perhaps, bethinking some little trifle, suddenly speak” (145). At this moment, it is not only Neville’s love for Percival but his connection with all of his friends, their participation in a common experience, that opens him up to “the quiet of ordinary things,” which includes, of course, “a book with a paper-knife stuck between its pages.” Here, rather than the knife “cutting” an inscription, it is wedged into the book, held by it in a way that relieves it of its use value. At the same time, the specification of it as a “paper-knife” also intimates the other kind of holding the book is doing, namely the binding of the pages that the knife has separated from each other.

The figure of the bound book might ultimately become a way to assuage the anxiety Louis describes when he states, “as we rise and fidget, a little nervously, we pray, holding in our hands this common feeling, ‘Do not move, do not let the swing-door cut to pieces the thing that we have made, that globes itself here, among these lights, these feelings, this litter of bread crumbs and people passing. Do not move, do not go. Hold it for ever’” (145). The image of the globe, with its suggestion of perfect totality, links Louis and his friends in a static arrangement that recalls the steel rings of his poetry. Precisely because it is so solid and stable, however, the figure of the globe becomes a kind of prison and precludes any possibility of change, development or individuation. Not only are these relationships fixed in both space and time, but they obliterate any distinctions among the friends. From this perspective, the dispersal of the friends in space or the passing of time is a catastrophe to be avoided as the globe will be irreparably torn apart, the relationships cut to pieces by the door through which Louis and his friends pass. (Louis’ anxiety thus recalls the Proustian narrator and his paranoid anxiety at his mother’s good-night kiss.) The image of the book with the paper-knife, on the other hand, offers a different model as it suggests the way the knife cuts the book into pieces that the book’s binding nonetheless holds together. In the paginated book, the pages are bound together in a permanent way that does not completely immobilize or homogenize them. A book’s pages are both together and separate so that the book becomes less the monolithic block that Neville imagines than a collection of leaves which move in space and index the passing of time.

And this is exactly the role that the book plays for Bernard when, in an early discussion of his ambitions to write a novel one day, he unknowingly anticipates the paginated children’s book on which he will ultimately base his closing monologue. He reports,

> When I am grown up I shall carry a notebook – a fat book with many pages, methodically lettered. I shall enter my phrases. Under B shall come ‘Butterfly powder.’ If, in my novel, I describe the sun on the window-sill, I shall look under B and find butterfly powder. That will be useful. The tree ‘shades the window with green fingers.’ That will be useful. But alas! I am so soon distracted – by a hair like twisted candy, by Celia’s Prayer Book, ivory covered (36-37).

When the physical world “distracts” him from the abstracting process of his novelizing here, it does so via the object of the prayer book with its ivory covering and the “hair twisted like
candy” that echoes the “bit of string” in Neville’s description. Looking more closely at these two objects helps to elaborate the way the distinct pages in Bernard’s notebook (ordered less by any kind of narrative teleology than by the arbitrary sequence of the alphabet) function as a kind of balm to the “torture and devastation” that we have elsewhere seen beset him when he is not able to finish his story. The hard stoniness of the prayer book’s ivory cover recalls Neville’s “block of marble” and suggests a kind of solidity and unity, an impenetrability and totality that share a sense of timelessness and complete comprehension in keeping with the theological nature of the book’s contents (in keeping, we might also recall, with Derrida’s understanding of the book). Yet, the indefinite article in the phrase “a hair twisted like candy” portrays the hair that distracts Bernard as uprooted and separate from anyone specific, a piece of physical detritus shed by a body in the daily task of living, and implies the very opposite of the eternal solidity to which the ivory prayer book points. Rather, it is an index of a kind of time-bound corporeal dis-integration, the fact, as we saw in *Ulysses*, that the body is not a complete and undivided whole but is an assemblage made up of multiple, interrelated parts. Bernard’s notebook seems to combine aspects of both these images. On the one hand, he plans to use it in his project of translating his subjective experience into a series of well-wrought phrases that, as we have earlier seen him make explicit, will eventually uncover the transcendental meaning of that experience, while, on the other, his description of it as “a fat book with many pages” underscores the way the book’s status as a object depends on the binding together of its pages. At the same time, this binding points to the way that the book is far from being the kind of solid and timeless object suggested by either the ivory-covered prayer book or Neville’s block of marble. In this case, the notebook is made up of multiple material fragments that cannot all be accessed at once, a succession of pages that necessarily unfolds in time. The notebook’s material persistence through time is thus inextricably bound to the way the unfolding of its pages indexes time’s passing, a condition that eventually leads Bernard to a completely different reaction to the ultimate result of time’s relentless progress, namely death.

III.

*The Waves* centers itself (quite literally) around death, the moment of ultimate disconnection, when news that Percival has been killed in India comes crashing into the middle of the work. This event has repercussions for all the characters in the novel but receives the most extended treatment from Rhoda, Bernard and Neville, all of whom react with a deepened experience of time’s passing that depends on an abandonment of post-impressionist abstraction and a renewed engagement with the object world. As the character who is most tormented by the passing of time, the effect of Percival’s death on Rhoda is perhaps most significant. In his ingenious treatment of the novel, Garrett Stewart describes Rhoda as “quick to figure what is most unforgiving and disruptive in temporal consciousness as a precarious linguistic terrain and to find textual metaphors for the unyielding succession of her clocked, disjunctive moments” (422). Stewart’s characterization of Rhoda’s experience of time as drawing on “textual metaphors” to describe its “linguistic terrain” announces an insistently poststructuralist approach which he bears out through lengthy discussions of Kristeva and Lacan, among other theorists. It is his aim to show how “*The Waves* opens the contours of its prose to the counter-logical and subversive possibilities beneath and between the element of syntactic accumulation” (422). Though Stewart’s focus on “syntactic” accumulation obscures the other, non-textual kind of accumulation at work in *The Waves*, namely the slow building up of pages that occurs literally “beneath and between” the language of its text, his argument implicitly gestures at this
alternative. Indeed, in the account she gives of her temporal consciousness and the changes it undergoes on learning of Percival’s death, we will see how Rhoda appeals as much to the material substrate that transmits written language as she does to the signifying chain itself.

Rhoda articulates her anxiety over time’s passing in explicit terms: she states, “nothing persists. One moment does not lead to another.” She continues, “I am afraid of the shock of sensation that leaps upon me, because I cannot I cannot deal with it as you do – I cannot make one moment merge in the next. To me they are all violent, all separate…. I do not know how to run minute to minute and hour to hour, solving them by some natural force until they make the whole and indivisible mass that you call life” (130). Rhoda echoes Bernard’s anxieties here and indicates the extent to which she feels as if she is responsible for producing the flow of time, as if her subjectivity is the origin of her temporal experience. This viewpoint stems from the way she locates time’s passing in her own sensory experience. Interestingly, the traumatic nature of temporal progress for Rhoda lies in the way she experiences both time and sensation as discrete rather than continuous phenomena: lacking a protective, equilibrating shield, Rhoda feels each moment and each sense experience as an encounter with finitude that she is forced to repeat. “Life,” for Rhoda, is always a processual “living,” a successive progression that never stabilizes enough to “hand it to you entire,” as Bernard figures his ambition in his closing monologue. She consequently retreats to the timeless and bodiless sphere of her imagination as an escape from the here-and-now, an indication of her inability to ever withstand an encounter with the object world. In the middle of a party she describes this fantasy space in quasi-post-impressionist terms that recall Bernard’s and Louis’ extremes of abstraction: “Draughts of oblivion shall quench my agitation…. Let me visit furtively the treasures I have laid apart. Pools lie on the other side of the world reflecting marble columns. The swallow dips her wing in dark pools” (105). Here, the austere geometry of pools and columns provide an idealized landscape whose location on the “other side of the world” suggests the opposite of the physical world into which she is “thrust back to stand burning in this clumsy, this ill-fitting body” (105).

This escape finds its origins in an early scene of a childhood arithmetic lesson. Louis observes Rhoda and states, “as she stares at the chalk figures, her mind lodges in those white circles; it steps through those white loops into emptiness, alone…. she has no body as the others have” (22). Here, the “white circles” of the “chalk figures” serve less as the material basis of mathematical notation than they do as a “lodging” house for Rhoda’s mind; she approaches them as if she is completely separate from the materiality of the physical world, her own body included. Thus, she finds herself alone in emptiness, without any sort of connection to those who share the experience of physical embodiment. And it is in this completely mental space of a “linguistically-constructed subjectivity” that Stewart develops his argument. Of this moment, he writes, “Rhoda’s consciousness thus trespasses upon a void she can only succumb to, not manipulate,” a statement that depends on his earlier assertion that “writing...brings home to the subject its own primal homelessness in the world and in the word, the void over which all text is stretched” (434; 433).

Yet, Stewart’s account of The Waves is precisely a description of how “Woolf’s fluent style work[s] to bind and heal these very fissures” by developing what he performatively terms the “transegmental [sic] drift.” This “drift” names the slippage of a phoneme between two separate words that acts, in English, much like the linguistic concept of liaison in French (e.g. the secondary production of the sound “shove” in the voicing of the phrase “rush of”). He thus shows how “continuity, at the textual level, can emerge only from a sense of language that assuages these gaps [between words], turns them to segues, stretches across their rents a
harmonizing reverberation” (454). For Stewart, The Waves “reroutes the written text through the palpable, palpitating upper body, its passively engaged organs of articulation” as the reader’s body silently voices the drift sounds from one word to another (422). When he ends with the assertion that it is the readerly body that allows “the oscillating drift of Woolf’s style [to] serve to flesh out her text,” however, his concluding pun itself drifts into the argument I am making here. For Rhoda, who describes how “I should fall off the edge of the world into nothingness. I have to bang my hand against some hard door to call myself back to my body” (44), the object of the book provides a similarly stable base that connects her, like Bernard, with the external world as it provides a (temporarily) reassuring sense of both spatial and temporal continuity.

While I have no intention of contradicting Stewart’s carefully argued points, I am trying to offer an expanded account of Rhoda’s experience that goes beyond the “linguistically constructed subjectivity” that, for Stewart, “dooms” her to “pre-psychotic lapses and eventual suicide” (422). For Rhoda, Percival’s death opens up an additional approach to these “voids,” one in which she experiences them less as traumatic breaches of a perfect plenitude than as the tolerable – if also unpleasant and unavoidable – condition of openness to the time-bound object world. On learning of Percival’s death, she states, “Now I will walk down Oxford Street envisaging a world rent by lightening; I will look at oaks cracked asunder and red where the flowering branch has fallen….Look now what Percival has given me. Look at the street now that Percival is dead” (159). Not only does the repeated use of the verb “look” emphasize how she is opening herself to the world around her rather than withdrawing into herself, but the word “envisage” hints at the way that she is overlaying these cracks and fissures onto her own face as the idealized perfection of the pools and columns that filled her fantasy also gives way to “oaks cracked asunder” and a “world rent by lightening.” She thus evinces a profound (though momentary) tolerance of the kind of void that, in Stewart’s argument, only causes her trauma and pain. She confirms this as she continues and observes, “I like the passing of face and face and face, deformed, indifferent. I am sick of prettiness; I am sick of privacy. I ride rough waters and shall sink with no one to save me. Percival, by his death, has made me this present, has revealed this terror, has left me to undergo this humiliation” (159-60). Witnessing the ultimate encounter with finitude “reveals” the traumatic “terror” that has been implicit in each passing moment, so that Rhoda can consciously face the passingness of the “present,” indicated here by the “face and face and face.” Her surrender of “privacy” suggests that she no longer tries to bind the moments together through her own subjective agency but gives in to the external and impersonal force of time.

Moreover, when Rhoda reflects back on her younger days in the aftermath of Percival’s death, she does so in a way that connects this embrace of time and openness to the world of objects with the pages of a book. Chastising the social order, she proclaims, “How you chained me to one spot, one hour, one chair, and sat yourselves down opposite! How you snatched from me the white spaces that lie between hour and hour and rolled them into dirty pellets and tossed them into the wastepaper basket with your greasy paws. Yet those were my life” (204). Rhoda’s traumatic experience of time as a discrete phenomenon depends on a belief in the worthlessness of the “white spaces,” a disregard of the intervals of non-significance that leads to a demand for constant and continual significance. While, in Stewart’s argument, these “white spaces” stand for the difference out of which signification is constituted, for me they call out to the renewed look that she casts at “the world rent by lightening,” the attention she withdraws from her inner imagination to the material world outside of her mind. Indeed, the emphasis on the “dirty pellets” and the “wastepaper basket” here not only hints at the materiality of the
“white spaces” but also explicitly figures them as made of paper. Stewart’s contention that Rhoda “lives for, and in, the interstices of duration imaged as the white blanks of a text” sequesters her in a textual sphere constructed wholly out of the differential functioning of the sign, a mental world not completely unlike her own idealized imaginings, as it disregards the way Rhoda’s comment calls out to the white blanks in a book (429). These paper-based blanks offer an experience of duration that folds the unbridgeable “interstices” of time into the sensation of the continuity of space. If Percival’s death opens up this kind of sensory awareness for Rhoda, then, for the reader of The Waves, by extension, it might suggest that we pay attention to the page on which her monologue is inscribed—not so much to the spaces which allow us to make meaning from the dark marks but to the pages that rend the book into consecutive parts even as it unfolds in a continuity of duration. The latter is a bridging that has less to do with signification than with sensation, a bridging that, furthermore, overlays the two registers of progression that haunt both Rhoda and Bernard.

For Bernard, Percival’s death draws out a temporal sensitivity similar to Rhoda’s: when, on learning the news, he resists bulldozing ahead and pauses “to save one hour to consider what has happened to my world, what death has done to my world” (153). This suspension allows him to exhibit the kind of attention to time’s micromovements for which he calls in his closing monologue. He remarks, “This then is the world that Percival sees no longer. Let me look. The butcher delivers meat next door; two old men stumble along the pavement; sparrows alight. The machine then works; I note the rhythm, the throb, but as a thing in which I have no part, since he sees it no longer” (153). If Rhoda responds to Percival’s death via an engagement with the external world that she previously eschewed, Bernard describes a separation from the everyday world that disables his drive to order it according to his own rhythm. Percival’s death reveals to him that what he calls “the usual order….the sequence of things” covers a different temporality (155). Both Rhoda and Bernard thus recognize how the stream of life does not depend on their presence but exists apart from their perceiving consciousnesses in a way that anticipates what Bernard later calls “the world seen without a self” that critics like Banfield take as the skeleton key of Woolf’s aesthetic.

When he observes, two pages later, that “the sequence returns; one thing leads to another,” he recalls his compulsive practice of linking moments into a sequence and suggests the way his consciousness habitually seeks to impose a subjectively-centered organization onto this impersonal flow. As the shock of Percival’s death wears off, Bernard understands that this separation is not a transcendence or a permanent renunciation of sequential organization: he observes, “Bodies, I note, already begin to look ordinary; but what is behind them differs – the perspective” and suggests that learning of Percival’s death offers him a window into a different conception of experience itself, one that, as we saw with Rhoda, does not so much contradict the sequential as exists along with, perhaps below, it (154). This change in perspective, which we will see replayed even more radically in a central scene at Hampton Court, gives him the “chance to find out what is of great importance” (153). He expands on this statement when he revisits the moment of Percival’s death in his closing monologue: “something very important” appears “beneath” his perceptions of the world, namely “To see things without attachment, from the outside, and to realize their beauty in itself – how strange!” (263). Bernard once-again proposes a non-subject-centered account of experience in which the things of the world are not merely objects to be grasped by his consciousness.

In an attempt to prolong this opportunity – for, he comments, “one cannot live outside the machine for more perhaps than half an hour” (154) – Bernard pursues this other perspective
by visiting an art gallery where he can “submit myself to the influence of minds like mine outside the sequence” (155). The pictures that he sees there, he reports, “expand my consciousness and bring him back to me differently. I remember his beauty” (156). Though, at first glance, it seems that the paintings in the art gallery function to extend the dominion of his subjectivity as if he might dominate even more of the external world with his habitual ordering, Bernard’s elaboration suggests the way this expansion is actually an adjustment of his conscious attention. He states, “Here are pictures. Here are cold madonnas among their pillars; Let them lay to rest the incessant activity of the mind’s eye, the bandaged head, the men with ropes, so that I may find something unvisible beneath. Here are gardens; and Venus among the flowers; here are saints and blue madonnas. Mercifully, these pictures make no reference; they do not nudge; they do not point” (156). While the description of the bandaged head and the men with ropes portray Bernard’s imagined scenario of Percival’s death from being flung off a horse, the “incessant” nature of which suggests his inability to pay attention to anything other than his own subjective fantasy, his “mind’s eye” not to mention his mind’s “I,” the alternatives of “pillars” and “madonnas” that they offer him portray a timeless world of geometrical structure that is not so far from Rhoda’s fantasies. This lack of reference speaks to a post-impressionist emphasis on abstract form rather than an impressionist attention to mundane detail.

Yet, as with Rhoda, this turn to formal structure ultimately breaks down to reveal a non-subjective return to the everyday world and the objects in it. He wonders, “How shall I break up this numbness which discredits my sympathetic heart?” and indicates that the “numb” post-impressionist abstractions might relieve him of his own subjective fantasies, on the one hand, but also bypass his affective experience of Percival’s death, on the other. When he immediately goes on to observe that “There are others suffering – multiples of people suffering. Neville suffers. He loved Percival. But I can no longer endure extremities” (158), he describes a return to the world that includes an awareness of other people’s experiences as a way to navigate between the “extremity” of a perspective based completely in either his subjective experience or the objective structure of reality. Turning less to an abstract objectivity than to concrete, “solid” objects themselves – and one kind of object in particular – he states, “But now I want life around me, and books and little ornaments” (158). Previous comments he makes expand on this non-subjective engagement with the object world for which the book stands as a synecdoche. He speaks of the “perpetual solicitation of the eye” and states that “I am titillated inordinately by some splendor,” as if it is the object world that solicits him rather than the other way around. When he continues by describing “the march of pillars,” he notices the way the static structure to which he had previously attended is subject to the mobility of time in a way that suggests that it is the flux of life which these paintings ultimately reveal to him and which he shares with the other subjects and the objects in the world.

It is this common submission to time which ultimately maps out the kind of distanced intimacy that I modeled on the pages of the book and which, moreover, Neville formulates in his reaction to Percival’s death. Opening the central section in which the characters learn this news, Neville transforms the middle of the novel into a kind of ending when he begins, “All is over. The lights of the world have gone out. There stands the tree which I cannot pass” (151). In the image of the tree, Neville recalls a childhood memory of his reaction to hearing a cook speak of a man found with his throat cut, a reaction which also characterizes his response to learning of Percival’s death. He describes the earlier experience thus:
He was found with his throat cut. The apple-tree leaves became fixed in the sky; the moon glared; I was unable to lift my foot up the stair. He was found in the gutter. His blood gurgled down the gutter. His jowl was white as a dead codfish. I shall call this stricture, this rigidity, ‘death among the apple trees’ for ever. There were the floating, pale-grey clouds; and the immitigable tree; the implacable tree with its greaved silver bark. The ripple of my life was unavailing. I was unable to pass by. There was an obstacle. ‘I cannot surmount this unintelligible obstacle,’ I said. And the others passed on. But we are doomed, all of us by the apple trees, by the immitigable tree which we cannot pass (24-25)

Here, Neville shares in the experience of stasis and immobility that death imposes on the man; he cannot “pass by” and the “ripple” of his life is transformed into the (post-impressionist) rigidity of the apple-tree’s static structure. Yet, the fact that “others passed on” indicates that this break in the flow of Neville’s experience, while sparked by the death of a life, is not synonymous with the death of life itself, a kind of ultimate end. Rather, Neville seems to be describing the paradoxical experience of death’s presence in life, the incomprehensible coexistence of these seemingly mutually exclusive opposites. (As Bernard observes of the simultaneity of Percival’s death and his son’s birth, “Such is the incomprehensible combination…such is the complexity of things” (153).) The details of the man’s death provide a way by which we might better grasp this paradox. As cutting the throat severs one of the main arteries of blood, it violently interrupts that feature of the body most obviously characterized by flow. Far from stopping this flow, however, this interruption actually opens it up: as the blood “gurgle[s] down the gutter,” it quite literally streams into larger currents as if to suggest the merging of the individual with the surrounding environment. This merging also occurs on the grammatical level, as Neville’s “I” that is “unable to pass” expands into a “we” who is “doomed, all of us, by apple trees” – from the confines of an individual experience to the aspects of existence shared across subjectivities and, even more radically, with the object world itself.97

And this becomes even more explicit in Neville’s account of the aftermath of Percival’s death which replays the earlier event and recalls the vocabulary Bernard uses to describe the “little language” he seeks to express the flow of his experience: “We are all doomed, all of us. Women shuffle past with shopping-bags. People keep on passing” (152). When he continues, however, he directs his statement to an ambiguous addressee: “Yet you shall not destroy me. For this moment, this one moment, we are together. I press you to me” (152). Though the “you” here might most obviously refer to Percival, the threat of destruction seems to suggest that Neville is addressing mortality itself, the transitory nature of the world. Given the way Percival’s recent death uncovers for Neville the presence of death in life, however, these two options are not necessarily at odds. The togetherness which Neville describes would then be an experience of a kind of death, a pressing that does not stop the flow of time as much as it seeks, however painfully, to embrace it. Thus, he concludes, “Bury your fangs in my flesh. Tear me asunder. I sob, I sob” (152). At the same time, this togetherness also implies a kind of sexual liaison with the pressing of bodies and the penetration of flesh in a way that recalls the connection between Neville’s homosexual desire for Percival and the larger “homo-ness” that it

97 In the famous scene towards the end of Mrs. Dalloway, Woolf offers another example of this phenomenon: “There was an embrace in death,” she writes (184).
entails. It is Percival's death, it seems, that both necessitates and allows Neville to transition from his individual experience to a larger awareness of the outside world of which he is a part.

IV.

This awareness of the world is ultimately part of the effect intended by *The Waves*’ impersonal interludes, the way they weave the changing aspects of a seascape with the individual voices of the novel’s personae. It is also what results from the most explicit communal event which the characters share, namely the scene in which, now middle-aged, they repeat Percival’s farewell party by meeting at Hampton Court outside London. Neville describes their initial emotions succinctly: “what do we feel on meeting? Sorrow. The door will not open; he will not come. And we are laden. Being now all of us middle-aged, loads are on us. Let us put down our loads. What have you made of life, we ask, and I?” (211). The melancholy sparked by Percival’s death bleeds into the recognition of their own aging, the whispers of their own mortality implied by their position as “middle-aged.” While the question of what they have “made” of life anticipates the attempt Bernard makes in his closing monologue to “sum up” and “hand [my life] to you entire” and suggests a desire to ward off this mortality with more permanent-seeming accomplishments, the shared evening provides an experience that recalls Neville’s reaction to Percival’s death in a way that allows all the characters to access the homoness that I have been tracing here.

On finishing dinner, Bernard makes an observation that the rest of the party comes to echo regarding the way the individual identities of he and his friends seem to slough off: “‘Drop upon drop,’ said Bernard, ‘silence falls…. [it] pits my face, wastes my nose like a snowman stood out in a yard in the rain. As silence falls I am dissolved utterly and become featureless and scarcely to be distinguished from another’” (224). The image of the melting snowman suggests the slow softening of the boundaries among Bernard and his friends that recalls the moment of intimacy that Louis was so anxious to preserve at the end of Percival’s going-away dinner. Here, however, the feeling goes beyond their little coterie and, indeed, beyond human community altogether. In response to this dissolution of self, what he also describes as “blunt[ing] the tooth of egotism,” Bernard observes “I reflect now that the earth is only a pebble flicked off accidently from the face of the sun and that there is no life anywhere in the abysses of space” (225). When Louis repeats this cosmological perspective – “Our separate drops are dissolved; we are extinct, lost in the abysses of time, in the darkness,” he remarks (225) – he suggests that this dissolution is itself a kind of death, an experience of being swallowed up by the immensity of the universe that reduces consciousness to a bare minimum. This is, in effect, the death of the subject that discloses the radical impersonality of the object world surrounding it.

Despite the dreamlike disembodiment here, however, the ability to describe the experience of this moment implies that the speakers have survived their own “extinction.” The account of this moment that Bernard offers in his closing monologue indicates a similar persistence of subjective consciousness in the face of an imagined dissolution. He states, “half-way through dinner, we felt enlarge itself round us the huge darkness of what is outside us, of what we are not. The wind, the rush of wheels became the roar of time, and we rushed – where? And who were we? We were extinguished for a moment, went out like sparks in burnt paper and the blackness roared. Past time, past history we went” (277). Here, Bernard transforms the spatial movement suggested by the wind and the wheels into a temporal progress that ultimately leads him to visualize his own eclipse – one, in fact, that he shares with his friends. While the fact that this eclipse lasts only “for a moment” again implies the impossibility
of consciously experiencing – let alone narrating – one’s own death and points, as I have suggested, to the survival of Bernard’s consciousness, it also underscores the persistence of time and space themselves. The speakers do not escape – even if they cannot comprehend – the “abysses” of space and time in which they find themselves.

Interestingly, Bernard’s appeal to the image of “burnt paper” figures this persistence of space via the material out of which a book is made, as the “roar” of the “blackness” links the dark ink that forms these words to the persistence of time – an instance of subtle bibliographic imagery to which his further comments will add some volume. When Bernard goes even further and proclaims the death of time itself, he paints a picture not of the permanence at which Louis aimed with his poetry but rather of a kind of radical finitude in which the very passing of time itself passes by. (Indeed, Bernard paradoxically reports that this surpassing of time “lasts but one second” (277).) From this imaginary perspective, the “roar of time” that indicates the mortality of the speakers also indicates their vitality, the fact that the passing of time indexes not so much their dying but their living. Accordingly, when Bernard describes how this surpassing of time “is ended by my own pugnacity. I strike the table with a spoon” (277), his action not only underscores his strength and vigor but also suggests the extent to which his vitality is bound up with the object world. Indeed, as it is the interaction between the table and the spoon that gets time going again for Bernard, the life which he is living seems to center itself around, if not depend on, its relationship to these objects.

It is around the relationship to one object in particular, of course, that the argument of this chapter – and of this dissertation – has been revolving, on which its progress has depended. And it is ultimately – though not explicitly – to the same object that Bernard’s closing monologue appeals in its final renunciation of the phrase-making with which we have seen him struggle throughout the novel. Toward the end of his monologue, he relates how “the rhythm stopped: the rhymes and hummings, the nonsense and the poetry. A space was cleared in my mind. I saw through the thick leaves of habit” (283). As the buzz of living dies away, Bernard attains a clarity through which he is able to perceive in a new way, outside of his routine practices. At the same time, the preposition “through” also suggests that this clarity allows him to see by means of “the thick leaves of habit,” as if the pages or “leaves” that he – like The Waves own reader – habitually turns reveal something new to him. When he describes how “I addressed my self as one would speak to a companion with whom one is voyaging to the North Pole” (283), Bernard effectively splits his “self” off from his narrating consciousness and makes a kind of object out of it, as if it is ultimately an entity separate from the conscious phrase-making by which he has tried to access it up to this point.

Indeed, when he continues his train of thought, he describes the creation of this object-like self not by means of linguistic construction but in a kind of incremental accumulation that characterizes and subtly recalls the buildup of pages that attends a reader’s progress through a book:

I spoke to that self who has been with me in many tremendous adventures… the man who has been so mysteriously and with sudden accretions of being built up, in a beech wood, sitting by a willow tree on a bank, leaning over a parapet at Hampton Court; the man who collected himself in moments of emergency and banged his spoon on the table, saying, ‘I will not consent’ (283).
As the “sudden accretions of being” ultimately result in a self that is able to “bang his spoon on the table,” these lines link this self to Bernard’s physical body and the relationship it has with other material objects on which we have seen his life depend. For all Bernard’s effort at creating this self out of language, the self does not ultimately – or any longer – speak: “This self now as I leant over the gate looking down over the fields rollings in waves of color beneath me made no answer. He threw up no opposition. He attempted no phrase” (283-84).

This silence sparks a crisis for Bernard: he observes, “No echo comes when I speak, no varied words. This is more truly death than the death of friends, than the death of youth” (284). He makes a similar statement a few pages later, “But how describe the world seen without a self? There are no words. Blue, red, even they distract, even they hide with thickness instead of letting the light through. How describe or say anything in articulate words again?” (287). As Bernard views the lack of words here as tantamount to death, the representational crisis becomes, for him, an ontological crisis. Yet, the fact that his narrating consciousness (however, self-less) once again persists through this death suggests that his being neither ends nor begins with language. When he finally acknowledges that “I have done with phrases” and observes “How much better is silence; the coffee-cup, the table. How much better to sit by myself like the solitary sea-bird that opens its wings on the stake” (295), he opens his consciousness to the very object world whose support we have been examining. As he requests to be allowed to “sit here forever with bare things, this coffee-cup, this knife, this fork, things in themselves, myself being myself,” he accedes to his own status as a physical object which persists through the end of the narrative that has repeatedly exceeded its own pronouncements of closure.

Indeed, the image of the “solitary sea-bird that opens its wings on the stake” intimates the breakdown of Bernard’s subject-centered narrative into the impersonal interludes that underlie it. A few pages earlier, Bernard echoes this interludes and describes how “Day rises; the girl lifts the watery fire-hearted jewels to her brow; the sun levels his beams straight at the sleeping house; the waves deepen their bars; they fling themselves on the shore” (291-92), a description that comes not from the scene of Bernard sitting with his companion in a restaurant but from the very interludes that provide a binding background to the novel itself. When Bernard’s narrative does ultimately end, when he proclaims, “Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O Death!” it is the waves of the interludes, the unfeeling world of objects, that take his place: “The waves broke on the shore,” Woolf writes (297). Concluding with this breaking of waves calls even this ending into question, since this image itself suggests a kind of perpetual continuation, the persistence of the inanimate world beyond our own consciousness.

But this is not only inanimate persistence at work here: though this might be the end of the novel, it is not the end of the book. There is one more page to turn before we close the cover. And, even then, the image of the object world with which the novel leaves us finds its own continuation in the object world in which the book takes its place. This is, ultimately, the effect of the curious choice to open and close the novel with these “interludes,” a term which denotes precisely connection or continuation. At these points of origin and conclusion, however, there seems nothing within the novel’s narrative with which an interlude might connect. In another parallel to both the Recherche and Finnegans Wake, the final line is ultimately of a piece with the opening interlude, whose description of the way “the sea was indistinguishable from the sky” points to a general lack of differentiation that might also engulf the object of the book and, like the space of the page in Jacob’s Room, function as a kind of common ground between it and the natural world. In this way, The Waves becomes the “book of the world” par excellence, one that indicates that the world of books is dead only insofar as we conceive of it as
dependent on our perceiving consciousness. Indeed, the embodied reading practices I have
developed over these chapters are not only impossible to sustain for the whole length of a novel,
but they are not even apparent for every novel – hence my choice of these exceedingly
experimental and somewhat alienating works of high modernism. This is, in the end, precisely
the point, since the object of the book does not need our recognition as much as – in the face of
the inexorable passing of time, the inescapable fragility of our bodies and the dark
inscrutabilities of our limits – it is we who might need them.
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