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**Transience, Technology and
Cosmopolitanism: The Reimagining of
Place in English Modernism**

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Abstract

Recent work by scholars including Jed Esty and Alexandra Harris has emphasised a renewed focus among English interwar modernist writers upon rural landscapes, culture and traditions. This thesis builds upon such work in examining that focus in the prose works of D.H. Lawrence (1885-1930), John Cowper Powys (1872-1963), Mary Butts (1890-1937) and Virginia Woolf (1882-1941). All of these figures have a profound sense of attachment to place, but an equally powerful desire to engage with the upheavals of interwar modernity – in terms of urbanisation, cosmopolitanism, and developments in technology and transportation – and to participate in contemporary literary experimentation. This dialectic between tradition and change, I argue, is analogous to a literal geographical shuttling between rural and metropolitan environments, and in all four writers I identify imagery and literary techniques which reflect those experiences, and are applied across diverse geographical realms.

One central claim is that modernity's tendency to challenge cultural and geographical boundaries, and its oscillations between disintegration and renewal, are manifested in new ways of depicting and understanding our relationships with place and nonhuman animals. I also emphasise the continuity of particular literary techniques (such as paratactic syntax) and forms of imagery (trees, bodies of water) across metropolitan 'high' modernism and the texts of the later interwar period, presenting this as evidence for the consistent influence of a tradition/change dialectic in these writers' work. Another key claim is that all four writers call for an expansion of our conception of modernism, through their challenge to the urban-central/rural-peripheral dichotomy, their emphasis on the past and tradition (particularly the sense of temporal layering within landscapes), and the unorthodox ways in which their work can be considered experimental (for example, through meandering or non-linear structuring).

Chapter One emphasises ambivalence in the work of Lawrence, in terms of the persistence of underlying tensions, and argues that these are inextricably bound up with his intimate, empathic understanding of place. Lawrence longs to return to an idyllic, prelapsarian landscape connected to the Nottinghamshire of his childhood, but recognises the impossibility of doing so, given his exposure to the maelstrom of cosmopolitan and metropolitan experience. These experiences generate the need for a renewed relationship with place, although he struggles to articulate any such vision. In Chapter Two I argue that Powys has a similarly ambivalent relationship with modernity, but defuses this through the deliberate playfulness of his work: his ‘Wessex novels’, written from the USA, reimagine the landscape of home through a fantastical, nostalgic lens that can be described as ‘imaginative realist’. This approach, he suggests, is one way in which the contradictory desires and inclinations of the peripatetic modernist author can be reconciled. Through his complex identity and experience of self-imposed exile, Powys develops a strong sense of the English landscape as layered, expressing a kind of temporal cosmopolitanism.

In Chapter Three, I discuss another vexed relationship with modernity and place, that of Butts, whose work often expresses a dismayed sense that her childhood landscape in Dorset is being invaded by urbanites and tourists. Like Powys she attempts to resolve this through a re-enchantment of place, emphasising a sense of an ‘unseen world’ in the region, but such fantasises are both less self-conscious and more ethically problematic than Powys’. Nonetheless I do note a distinctively cosmopolitan reimagining of rural England, as a potential haven for marginalised communities, in works such as *Armed with Madness* (1928). Finally, Chapter Four posits Woolf as a figure in whom the dialectical tensions between

belonging and place are less troubling. I relate this ability to manage tensions to Woolf's equally strong attachments in childhood (and throughout her life) to both urban and rural environments, reflected in the development of an 'urban pastoral' form in *Mrs Dalloway* (1925). In all four writers there is evidence that modernism's expansion of perspectives can be fruitfully extended to those of place and nonhuman animals, and Woolf's work is particularly sustained and successful in this respect. The central stress in my thesis conclusion, accordingly, is on the need to incorporate such perspectives into understandings of modernism as a community-oriented movement.

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Introduction

Wessex [...] a partly real, partly dream-country.¹

– Thomas Hardy

[T]he real Hardy country [...] is that border country so many of us have been living in: between custom and education, between work and ideas, between love of place and an experience of change.²

– Raymond Williams

To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world – and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are.³

– Marshall Berman

I. Regions, Revenants, Reimaginings

This study focuses on the prose works of four English authors – D.H. Lawrence, John Cowper Powys, Mary Butts and Virginia Woolf – all associated, to differing degrees, with literary modernism in the interwar period, and all of whom explore the relationships between humanity, place and the nonhuman. As my epigraphs indicate, Thomas Hardy in some ways overshadows this project, and not merely because Dorset and Somerset (the central regions of Hardy's Wessex) are a key backdrop in Powys and Butts' life and work. Hardy's fiction is a major influence upon all four writers in its development of a form of environmental description that marginalises the human, and its close-focus, attentive descriptions of the nonhuman world. Most significantly for my purposes, Hardy's protagonists grapple with the

¹ Hardy, Thomas, *Far From the Madding Crowd* (London: Norton, 1986), p. 5.

² Williams, Raymond, *The Country and the City* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), p. 197.

³ Berman, Marshall, *All That is Solid Melts Into Air* (London: Verso, 2010), p. 15.

conflicts and tensions of modernity, characterised by increasing industrialisation, urbanisation and cultural fragmentation: they are caught, as Williams explains, ‘between love of place and an experience of change.’ All of the writers in this study combine a profound sense of attachment to rural place and traditions with an equally powerful interest in modernity, particularly in terms of literary innovation, increasing urbanisation, cosmopolitanism, and developments in technology and transportation. As Berman suggests, this combination creates a set of interrelated tensions and ambivalences. In the present study, these are most pronounced in the work of Lawrence, Powys and Butts, all of whom exhibit strong antipathies towards different facets of modernity, particularly industrialisation and urbanisation. In the case of Butts, critics including Patrick Wright, Jane Garrity and Andrew Radford have also identified a reactionary politics, resistant to the growing democratisation and (in certain respects) cosmopolitanism of English modernity. However, these antipathies rarely reflect a consistent position, and all of the authors in this study suggest ways in which such changes facilitate a sense of renewal and re-enchantment towards the landscapes and traditions of rural England. Berman argues that ‘[m]odern experiences and environments cut across all boundaries’, which creates ‘a paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity: it pours us all into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish.’¹ My thesis posits that these characteristics of modernity – its tendency to challenge boundaries, whether cultural or geographical, and its incessant oscillations between disintegration and renewal – are manifested in new ways of depicting and understanding our relationships with place and the nonhuman. The writers in this study are connected by the instability and fragmentation of their era, and by their shared attempts to reconcile this with their sense of belonging and tradition.

¹ Ibid.

This project is greatly indebted to Jed Esty's *A Shrinking Island* (2003). Esty draws upon Powys, Butts and Woolf in arguing that the cosmopolitan and metropolitan era of high modernism – epitomised by texts like *The Waste Land* (1922), *Ulysses* (1922) and *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) – is succeeded by an 'anthropological turn' in the 1930s. In this period, Esty argues, 'a new and redemptive form of [...] Anglocentrism activated and renationalised certain dissident or marginal modernist values'.¹ Esty identifies a renewed focus upon English landscape, culture and traditions among modernist authors, and discusses several of the texts under consideration here, including Powys' *A Glastonbury Romance* (1932), Butts' *Armed with Madness* (1928) and Woolf's *Between the Acts* (1941).² I have sought to expand the picture Esty presents in three main ways. Firstly, Lawrence is excluded from *A Shrinking Island*, since his death in 1930 comes before the nativist movement had gathered sufficient momentum to assuage his pessimism regarding 'the loss of organic community, rural mystery, and human vitality' (as Esty puts it).³ However, Lawrence's deep sense of connection with place and the nonhuman, and his sensitivity to the upheavals of modernity, make him a significant figure in my narrative. Secondly, Esty's focus is primarily upon developments in the understanding of English culture and identity, while this study emphasises these writers' attempts to explore a world beyond that ordinarily demarcated as human culture. Finally, *A Shrinking Island* posits a fundamental break between high modernism, as a metropolitan movement centred around 'a cosmopolitan subjectivity cut free from the moorings of [...] the nation or the region', and the literature of the anthropological turn.⁴ My study, instead,

¹ Esty, Jed, *A Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), p. 48.

² Alexandra Harris' *Romantic Moderns: English Writers, Artists and the Imagination from Virginia Woolf to John Piper* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2010) is another significant recent work in this context. Harris identifies a 'passionate, exuberant return to tradition' among England's modernist writers and artists in the late 1930s and early 1940s, and argues that this 'turn towards home' is 'partly [...] a response to the fiercely experimental ethos of high modernism.' *Between the Acts*, she argues, is a novel about 'a continuous English way of life that now threatens to break apart, and it asks how it might be possible to hold the pieces together' (pp. 16, 109).

³ *A Shrinking Island*, p. 48.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

focuses upon socio-cultural experiences and literary developments which persist throughout this period. Accordingly, the metropolitan and cosmopolitan focus of high modernism forms a central part of my argument, due to the diverse ways in which it contributes to new literary accounts of the relations between humanity, place and the nonhuman. While I do not challenge Esty's point that a nativist turn is evident in terms of a renewed modernist focus upon 'shared national traditions and public rituals' in the 1930s, I emphasise continuities across representations of urban and rural experience, and argue that these are mutually influential throughout the entire interwar period.¹ Similarly, I argue, cosmopolitan sensibilities are not abandoned following the anthropological turn, but transmuted into new ways of depicting landscape and the nonhuman world.

Although all of the writers under consideration explore metropolitan life in their work, a key set of continuities lies in their persistent interest in regional landscapes, culture and history, from Lawrence's first novel *The White Peacock* (1911) onwards. W.J. Keith's *Regions of the Imagination* (1988) draws parallels between Hardy, Lawrence and Powys in terms of this focus, suggesting overlaps between English regional and modernist fiction. As Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane state in *Modernism* (1976), the movement is characterised by a sense that 'all frontiers [are] in vital and often dangerous flux.'² In several ways, the writers in this study challenge borders and definitions: not only through the kind of stylistic and cultural transgression and experimentation associated with high modernism, but also through expanding our understanding of what can be defined as modernist. Firstly, they demonstrate that clear boundaries between urban modernity and rural tradition cannot be clearly maintained. In recent years, investigations of these authors have contributed to a broader conception of English modernism, challenging the assumption that cities are necessarily

¹ Ibid., p. 54.

² Bradbury, Malcolm, and McFarlane, James (eds.), *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature 1890-1930* (London: Penguin, 1991), p. 13.

central to the movement, while rural place is peripheral. Radford's *Mapping the Wessex Novel* (2010) locates Butts and Powys within a lineage of regional authors guided by 'a sustained engagement with emerging archaeological and anthropological accounts of the cultural past', emphasising connections between regional histories and modernism.¹ Garrity's *Step-Daughters of England* (2003) foregrounds Woolf and Butts' relationships with rural landscape in its exploration of national identity among female novelists; and Wright's *On Living in an Old Country* (1985) explores Butts' work in the context of wider ideological appropriations of English regional culture and history. Secondly, as these critical texts' foci suggest, the writers under consideration also emphasise the significance of the past in their engagements with English culture and landscapes, challenging the notion that modernism is defined by a clear break in literary-historical continuity. In this respect, they represent what Berman calls a 'modernism with ghosts': an attempt to incorporate a sense of engagement with revenants (whether personal or cultural) into their literary innovation.² Thirdly, certain elements of texts discussed in this thesis contribute to a broader understanding of modernist innovation and experimentation. This is particularly true of Powys, whose novels are often stylistically conventional but structurally unusual, possessing a labyrinthine expansiveness and resistance to narrative linearity.³

In response to the authors' explorations of these settings, histories and literary approaches, I devote much of this thesis to aspects of the texts that are not quintessentially modernist in terms of formal experimentation. The connections my research focuses on often relate to imagery, for example, and the commonalities between Lawrence, Butts, Powys and Woolf in this respect reveal their shared attachment to rural landscapes. Two key environments here

¹ Radford, Andrew, *Mapping the Wessex Novel: Landscape, History and the Parochial in British Literature, 1870-1940* (London: Continuum, 2010), p. 12.

² *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*, p. 332.

³ See my discussion of Jerome McGann, Charles Lock, Belinda Humfrey and others in the third chapter.

are coastal regions and forests: in texts by all four writers, the sea and coastline play a central imaginative, symbolic or metaphorical role, with obvious examples being Lawrence's *Sea and Sardinia* (1921), Powys' *Weymouth Sands* (1934), Butts' *Death of Felicity Taverner* (1932) and Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (1927). Throughout these works and others, sea and coast are linked to explorations of ideas including liminal experience, marginality, and the interpenetration of categories, temporalities and species. Forests and trees play similar roles, with key texts in this respect including Lawrence's *Aaron's Rod* (1922), Powys' *Wolf Solent* (1929), Butts' *Armed with Madness* and Woolf's *The Waves* (1931). In this context, my discussion focuses upon childhood experiences, animism and the idea of forests as portals into other temporal or metaphysical realms. As I argue, there are often striking similarities in the ways these writers reimagine such landscapes, suggesting similar formative experiences that resonate throughout their creative lives. Moreover, their evocations of the metropolitan world often draw upon these imagistic foundations; this represents one of the key ways in which the urban/rural boundary is challenged in their work. *Mrs Dalloway*, along with Woolf's 1927 essay 'Street Haunting', presents a metropolitan world that critics describe as 'urban pastoral' (Robert Alter, Hermione Lee) or an instance of 'urban bioregional imagination' (Lawrence Buell), and I connect this with similar passages in Lawrence and Butts.¹ I also note parallels in terms of each author's use of such imagery to blur the line between internal and external worlds.

As I have suggested, childhood experience and nostalgic reflection are central to these authors' reimagining of different environments. Following Hardy, they also conjure 'a partly real, partly dream-country' in their work, whether the ostensible source is Nottinghamshire,

¹ Alter, Robert, *Imagined Cities: Urban Experience and the Language of the Novel* (London: Yale University Press, 2005); Lee, Hermione, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1996); Buell, Lawrence, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).

Somerset, Dorset, Cornwall, Sussex, or Skye; equally significant are the metropolitan environments of Paris, London and New York, and the European and New World landscapes explored by Lawrence. While my predominant focus here is on English place, Lawrence's relationship with these landscapes in texts like *Kangaroo* (1923) and *Sea and Sardinia* also provides insights into his relationship with his native country: as Richard Somers tells himself in the former novel, travel can be a way to '[d]raw your ring around the world, the ring of your consciousness,' ultimately revealing new perspectives on landscapes identified as 'home'.¹ The experience of distance and exile from such places can stimulate strange and dreamlike evocations of them. Powys writes three of the four 'Wessex novels' while living in the United States – *Wolf Solent*, *A Glastonbury Romance* and *Weymouth Sands*; the exception is *Maiden Castle* (1936) – and the resulting fictional worlds wilfully mix fantasy and accuracy, the quotidian and the bizarre, the metaphysical and the empirical. Following Keith and Powys himself, I use the term 'imaginative realism' to describe this blend.² In Butts' work, I connect the pervasive sense of an alternate reality existing alongside the visible world to her anxieties regarding development in Dorset; this threat to the landscape of her childhood prompts the creation of a hermetically sealed imaginative analogue. Woolf plays with the idea of landscapes having an authentic, essential character – what Lawrence calls 'spirit of place' – by relocating the St. Ives of her childhood to a Hebridean island in *To the Lighthouse*, and making the location of Pointz Hall in *Between the Acts* (supposedly 'the very heart of England') conspicuously indeterminate.³ Yet despite this vagueness, at other points Woolf demonstrates a fascination with the power of names, maps, and geographical accuracy, a

¹ Lawrence, D.H., *Kangaroo* (London: Penguin, 1950), p. 381.

² See Keith, W.J., *Regions of the Imagination: The Development of British Rural Fiction* (London: University of Toronto Press, 1988), p. 165.

³ Woolf, Virginia, *Between the Acts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 15. As Lawrence argues in 'The Spirit of Place', from 1923's *Studies in Classic American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003; pp. 13-19): 'Every continent has its own great spirit of place. [...] Different places on the face of the earth have different vital effluence, different vibration, different chemical exhalation, different polarity with different stars: call it what you like. But the spirit of place is a great reality' (p. 17).

characteristic common to all of the writers in this study, along with other modernist authors.¹ Robert Macfarlane notes that this kind of precision assists ‘imaginative journeying within a known landscape’, and I argue that this explains its emergence as a key device for a group of authors seeking to reconcile a deep sense of attachment to place with a peripatetic existence.² In different ways, then, these writers are returning ‘to a locale which has left an ineffaceable imprint on their sense of self’, as Radford describes the typical Powysian protagonist.³ Like Hardy’s Clym Yeobright, they are returning natives, revisiting and reimagining the landscapes of home, having experienced modernity’s ‘maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal’; and these experiences leave their imprint in complex and diverse ways.

II. Cosmopolitan and Technological Perspectives

Developments in transportation during the early twentieth century – recently explored in Andrew Thacker’s *Moving Through Modernity* (2009) – are central to understanding the explorations of landscape and the nonhuman undertaken by these writers. The experience of movement between places cultivates a sense of contrast and juxtaposition, which defamiliarises landscapes and reveals unexpected experiential connections. As Wright argues in his discussion of Butts, her work aims ‘to affront settled and habituated appearances’, and transportation and movement prove to be a key facilitator of this in several texts under

¹ Both Robert Kiely and Charles Lock connect this tendency with *Ulysses*, for example. See Kiely, Robert, *Beyond Egotism: The Fictions of James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and D.H. Lawrence* (London: Harvard University Press, 1980); Lock, Charles, ‘John Cowper Powys and James Joyce’, in Lane, D. (ed.), *In the Spirit of Powys: New Essays* (London: Associated University Presses, 1990), pp. 23-42.

² Macfarlane, Robert, ‘A Counter-Desecration Phrasebook’, in Evans, G., and Robson, D. (eds.), *Towards Re-Enchantment: Place and its Meanings* (London: Artevents, 2010), pp. 107-130 (p. 114).

³ *Mapping the Wessex Novel*, p. 14.

consideration.¹ The relationship with place that emerges can be connected with current debates in ecocriticism. Seminal texts in this field, such as Jonathan Bate's *The Song of the Earth* (2000), often emphasise the epistemological value of being 'rooted' or 'grounded' within an environment; Bate contrasts this state with that of the cosmopolitan modernist writer, characterised as 'the very antithesis of the bioregionally grounded poet.'² Conceptualising authentic belonging in this way recalls the position of figures such as T.S. Eliot and Martin Heidegger (one of Bate's key sources) in the interwar period, both of whom emphasise the value of static dwelling.³ The conservationist and elitist rhetoric of Butts' 1932 pamphlet *Warning to Hikers* can be aligned with this 'back to nature' movement, as Wright and Radford note.⁴ However, her position can be ambivalent or contradictory on such issues, since her writing – like that of Lawrence, Powys and Woolf – also evinces a sensitivity to the epistemological potential of movement, defamiliarisation and outsider perspectives. In all four writers, the exploration of these ideas challenges the claim that to be rooted in a particular place necessarily grants a privileged perspective; rather, their combination of attentiveness to place and exposure to the shifting world of cosmopolitan modernity discloses its own distinctive epistemological value. As the points regarding Woolf's 'urban pastoral' noted above suggest, these writers also explore the possibility that the metropolitan world can be a site characterised by feelings of belonging and interconnection with others. The descriptions of the urban environment in Lawrence, Butts and Woolf – which often create a sense of wildness, animality and sensory intermingling – anticipate the work of ecocritics like Buell and Michael Bennett, both of whom challenge the sense of a clear urban/rural divide

¹ Wright, Patrick, *On Living in an Old Country: The National Past in Contemporary Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 98.

² Bate, Jonathan, *The Song of the Earth* (London: Picador, 2000), p. 234.

³ My discussion of Eliot's position here follows that of Esty in *A Shrinking Island*, p. 124; Heidegger's ideas on literature and dwelling are outlined in 'Building Dwelling Thinking', in Farrell Krell, D. (ed.), *Basic Writings* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993), pp. 343-64; and in '... Poetically Man Dwells ...', in Coupe, L. (ed.), *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 88-95.

⁴ *On Living in an Old Country*, p. 96; Radford, Andrew, 'Excavating a Secret History: Mary Butts and the Return of the Nativist', *Connotations* 17, no. 1 (2007/08), pp. 80-108 (pp. 81-2).

evident in some ecocriticism.¹ In questioning such boundaries, the novelists under consideration in some ways resist the artificial, ideologically-grounded divisions that Williams traces throughout the history of English literature in *The Country and the City* (1973).

There have been several major studies examining cosmopolitan experience, literary culture and modernity in recent years: those of particular significance for my thesis include Jessica Berman's *Modernist Fiction, Cosmopolitanism, and the Politics of Community* (2001); Rebecca Walkowitz's *Cosmopolitan Style* (2006); Amanda Anderson's *The Powers of Distance* (2001); and Judith Walkowitz's *Nights Out* (2012). Berman, Rebecca Walkowitz and Judith Walkowitz all discuss Woolf at length. Berman argues that for Woolf, cosmopolitanism represents 'the best way to resist the cultural systems that both deprive women of direct influence and contribute to the national habit of warmongering'; Rebecca Walkowitz places Woolf within a group of writers who use 'the salient features of modernist narrative, including wandering consciousness, paratactic syntax, recursive plotting, collage and portmanteau language, to develop a critical cosmopolitanism'; and Judith Walkowitz presents a richly detailed portrait of Soho during the early twentieth century, arguing that the area's 'porous geographic identity and borderlands' made it a 'cosmopolis' in its own right that was of distinctive importance in Woolf's metropolitan experience.² Although Lawrence, Powys and Butts receive little or no discussion in these texts, I argue that concepts such as Rebecca Walkowitz's 'cosmopolitan style' – the claim that cosmopolitan experience is

¹ See Buell's *The Future of Environmental Criticism*; and Bennett, Michael, 'From Wide Open Spaces to Metropolitan Places: The Urban Challenge to Ecocriticism', in Branch, M., and Slovic, S. (eds.), *The ISLE Reader: Ecocriticism, 1993-2003* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003), pp. 296-317. Both texts are discussed in Chapter Three.

² Berman, Jessica, *Modernist Fiction, Cosmopolitanism, and the Politics of Community* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 115; Walkowitz, Rebecca, *Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism Beyond the Nation* (Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2006), p. 115; Walkowitz, Judith, *Nights Out: Life in Cosmopolitan London* (London: Yale University Press, 2012), p. 3.

manifested in specific stylistic features of modernism – can be applied to these writers as well as Woolf. Paratactic and repetitive syntax, for example, is common in Butts and Lawrence, while Powys’ narratives often have a wandering or polyphonic character.¹ The influence of cosmopolitanism is also evident in my subjects’ empathy with outsider identities: Helen Wussow’s *The Nightmare of History* (1998), for example, links Lawrence and Woolf in terms of their response to the First World War, which formed one element of a sense of cultural marginalisation in both writers.

Anderson notes that recent analyses of cosmopolitanism emphasise ‘the capacious inclusion of multiple forms of affiliation, disaffiliation, and reaffiliation’; this dialectic between group identification and disengagement, I argue, reflects the balance (or tension) between belonging and exploration that characterises my subjects’ relationship with place.² I also draw upon such ideas in claiming that Powys, Woolf and (at points) Butts all reimagine the rural landscape as a cosmopolitan realm in the broad sense suggested by Anderson, a site in which certain marginalised identities (whether human or nonhuman) are represented. For Berman, a text like *Orlando* proposes an ‘alternative communal past’, reclaiming regional England from hegemonic ideology.³ Christine Sizemore also argues that Woolf’s distinctive cosmopolitan ethic incorporates a strong sense of community.⁴ Anderson warns that the formation of marginalised communities might ultimately be exclusionary towards those outside such groups, and this tension between inclusiveness and elitism is particularly evident in Butts’

¹ See, for example, Jones, Ben, ‘The “Mysterious Word Esplumeoir” and Polyphonic Structure in *A Glastonbury Romance*’, in Lane, D. (ed.), *In the Spirit of Powys: New Essays* (London: Associated University Presses, 1990), pp. 71-85; and Lock, Charles, ‘Polyphonic Powys: Dostoevsky, Bakhtin and *A Glastonbury Romance*’, *University of Toronto Quarterly* 55, no. 3 (Spring 1986), pp. 261-281. Both are discussed in Chapter Two.

² Anderson, Amanda, *The Powers of Distance: Cosmopolitanism and the Cultivation of Detachment* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), p. 30.

³ *Modernist Fiction, Cosmopolitanism and the Politics of Community*, p. 132.

⁴ Sizemore, Christine, ‘Cosmopolitanism from Below in *Mrs Dalloway* and “Street Haunting”’, in Evans, E., and Cornish, S. (eds.), *Woolf and the City: Selected Papers from the Nineteenth Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf* (Clemson: Clemson University Press, 2010), pp. 104-110 (p. 104).

work.¹ While critics have argued that she reimagines the Dorset countryside as a queer space, for example, the marginalised communities she presents there often seem exclusionary towards certain groups defined as other (and even anti-Semitic in the case of *Death of Felicity Taverner*).² Woolf's presentation of minority groups can also be contentious: like Powys, her work situates figures identified as ethnically other within rural England, but while Urmila Seshagiri argues in *Race and the Modernist Imagination* (2010) that this transforms 'an essentialising vision of nonwhite racial identity into an *anti-essentialist* model of modern English selfhood', Garrity believes that Woolf has a 'racial blindspot' which perpetuates 'polarised notions of the primitive and the civilised'.³ Despite such difficulties, I argue that these writers collectively promote a broader, fundamentally inclusive environmental cosmopolitanism: texts including *To the Lighthouse*, *Armed with Madness* and *Weymouth Sands* suggest that coastal regions are conducive to the littoral intermingling of objects, categories, species and temporalities. The distinctive character of these reimaginings of rural England, I claim, is influenced by these authors' engagements with cosmopolitan and metropolitan modernity.

Central to this multifaceted sense of cosmopolitanism is the exploration of multiple narrative perspectives, both within and beyond the human. As Pericles Lewis argues in *Modernism, Nationalism, and the Novel* (2000), the objective, omniscient narrator disappears in modernist fiction, and 'a more "pluralist" conception of reality [is] represented through the use of

¹ *The Powers of Distance*, pp. 24-25.

² On Butts' queering of landscape, see Hainley, Bruce, 'Quite Contrary: Mary Butts' Wild Queendom', *Voice Literary Supplement* (May 1994), pp. 21-24; Rives, Rochelle, 'A Straight Eye for the Queer Guy: Mary Butts' "Fag-Hag" and the Modernist Group', in Durão, F., and Williams, D., *Modernist Group Dynamics: The Politics and Poetics of Friendship* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008), pp. 95-115. On anti-Semitism in Butts' work (particularly *Death of Felicity Taverner*), see Patterson, Ian, "'The Plan Behind the Plan": Russians, Jews and Mythologies of Change: The Case of Mary Butts', in Cheyette, B., and Marcus, L. (eds.), *Modernity, Culture and 'the Jew'* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998); Linett, Maren, *Modernism, Feminism, and Jewishness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

³ Seshagiri, Urmila, *Race and the Modernist Imagination* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010), p. 155; Garrity, Jane, *Step-daughters of England: British Women Modernists and the National Imaginary* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), p. 59.

multiple perspectives.’¹ In Lawrence, I emphasise the permeability of the human-nonhuman boundary in texts like *Kangaroo* and *St Mawr* (1925), and the use of Hardy-esque panoramic landscape description, which marginalises the human presence. Powys uses playful anthropomorphism in *Wolf Solent*, while the device of the ‘invisible watchers’ in *A Glastonbury Romance* allows the creation of a multcentred universe in which no perspective is privileged over any other. The most striking similarities in this respect are between Butts and Woolf. Both authors deploy the Joycean technique of cinematic jump-cutting between characters’ narratives, particularly in an extended section of *Armed with Madness*, and throughout *Mrs Dalloway*; they also deliberately blur distinctions between consciousnesses. As Deleuze and Guattari note in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), *The Waves* ‘intermingles seven characters’, each of whom ‘designates a multiplicity [...] and crosses over into the others.’² This shifting between perspectives not only undermines any sense of narrative centrality; it also serves to challenge the idea of the discrete, unified human personality, and in doing so emphasises continuities and commonalities between human and nonhuman experience and characteristics. Another connection between Woolf and Butts in this respect, a development of Hardy’s panoramic approach, lies in their presentation of extended passages of environmental description in which human presences are entirely absent. Woolf’s most sustained example is the ‘Time Passes’ section of *To the Lighthouse*, which endows ‘certain airs’ with animistic life, creeping through the empty house; while Butts employs a similar approach in *Ashe of Rings* (1925): here the house ‘could be heard, sucking in its sleep, milky draughts, bubbles of quiet’.³ Animistic evocations of landscape are also evident in Lawrence’s work, particularly *The White Peacock* and *Kangaroo*; and Herbert Williams has

¹ Lewis, Pericles, *Modernism, Nationalism, and the Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 43-44.

² Deleuze, Gilles, and Guattari, Félix, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 278.

³ Woolf, Virginia, *To the Lighthouse* (London: Penguin, 1964), p. 144; Butts, Mary, *Ashe of Rings* (New York: McPherson and Co., 1998), p. 53.

noted Powys' strong sense of animistic connection with place, evident in his ritualistic touching of trees and stones.¹ In Chapter Three, I analyse this animistic potency of objects in Butts' work with reference to Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* (2010). For all four writers, apparently inanimate objects have a mysterious vitality which connects us with alternate temporalities and realities.

In a variety of ways, then, the authors in this study develop the modernist principle of perspectival multiplicity to marginalise the human, explore the nonhuman, and suggest continuities between these. In doing so, they also emphasise the principle of interconnection, or what Timothy Morton calls 'the mesh' in *The Ecological Thought* (2010); the kind of rapid movement between perspectives that characterises the narrative of *Mrs Dalloway*, for example, makes the interrelation of beings and events explicit. These elements of the texts under consideration demonstrate that both modernism (as a literary movement) and modernity (as a set of experiences which underlie that movement) have distinctive contributions to make in our understanding of the relations with landscape and the nonhuman. Again, travel and transportation are central here: as Paul Fussell notes in *Abroad* (1980), 'the great flight of writers from England in the 20s and 30s [...] seems one of the signals of literary modernism'; distance and movement are therefore crucial to modernist understandings of place.² Woolf's essays 'Evening Over Sussex: Reflections in a Motor Car' and 'Flying Over London', for example, both suggest that developments in transportation facilitate new insights into the fragmentation of the self. Thacker and Harris investigate descriptions of the London Underground in Woolf, and I connect these with Butts: both authors present underground railway systems as the site of mystical and sometimes threatening experiences, in contrast to their representation as cold, indifferent and mechanical

¹ Williams, Herbert, *John Cowper Powys* (Bridgend: Seren, 1997), pp. 66-67.

² Fussell, Paul, *Abroad: British Literary Travelling Between the Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 11.

in Lawrence and Powys.¹ Relatedly, modernist fiction presents a challenge to the ‘machine in the garden’ trope analysed by Leo Marx: for these authors, new transportation technologies need not be associated with a ‘crude, masculine aggressiveness in contrast with the tender, feminine, and submissive attitudes traditionally attached to the landscape.’² Despite the persistence of these dualistic ideas in some of Lawrence and Powys’ fiction (which I discuss), at other points they embrace the new epistemological potential of developments such as railway travel.

These technological developments are also related to new understandings in the modernist period of the English landscape as a palimpsest of embedded temporalities. Kitty Hauser’s *Shadow Sites* (2007) argues that a generation of British artists and writers in the 1930s and 1940s develop an ‘archaeological imagination’, examining ‘local landscapes marked by time, places where the past is tangible.’³ In Powys’ *Maiden Castle*, this understanding of landscape is linked literally with large-scale archaeological excavation, one of the technology-driven changes of this era; while Bartholomew Oliver in Woolf’s *Between the Acts* notes that, from an aeroplane, the ‘scars’ left by early Britons, Romans and Elizabethans are all evident in the landscape around Pointz Hall.⁴ As with the cinematic inspiration for Woolf and Butts’ use of jump-cutting, then, there are a set of technological developments which underpin the sense of temporal cosmopolitanism – of diverse cultures intermingled within the palimpsest of the English landscape – found in texts including *Wolf Solent* and *Between the Acts*. Transportation and technology are therefore bound up with the distinctively nostalgic,

¹ See Thacker, Andrew, *Moving Through Modernity: Space and Geography in Modernism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003); Harris, Alexandra, ‘Virginia Woolf Underground’, in Evans, E., and Cornish, S. (eds.), *Woolf and the City: Selected Papers from the Nineteenth Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf* (Clemson: Clemson University Press, 2010), pp. 40-46.

² Marx, Leo, ‘The Machine in the Garden’, in Coupe, L. (ed.), *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism* (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 104-108 (pp. 106-07).

³ Hauser, Kitty, *Shadow Sites: Photography, Archaeology, and the British Landscape 1927-1955* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), p. 1.

⁴ *Between the Acts*, pp. 3-4. Radford discusses this aspect of *Maiden Castle* at length in Chapter Four of *Mapping the Wessex Novel*.

historicised presentations of place under consideration (Berman's 'modernism with ghosts'). They are also connected with the ability to imaginatively occupy more temporally and geographically distanced perspectives: in *To the Lighthouse* and *Wolf Solent*, this extends to the astronomical. Morton argues that to see the world from space (as Wolf Solent imagines he does in Powys' novel) is 'the beginning of ecological thinking'.¹ This claim brings out a central facet of my thesis: that the innovations and developments of modernism and modernity often facilitate a more nuanced, defamiliarised and revelatory understanding of our relationships with place and the nonhuman world.

III. Chapter Overview

In my first chapter, I analyse some of the tensions in D.H. Lawrence's work, and consider how these are manifested in his writings on landscape and the nonhuman. Lawrence has a vexed and complex identity, reflecting his specific socio-cultural position: born into a mining family in rural Nottinghamshire, with parents from contrasting class backgrounds, he finds himself torn between rural tradition and cosmopolitan modernity, belonging and adventure, revivalism and experimentation. His work seeks to reconcile conflicting desires for rootedness and exploration by examining the possibility that the latter may ultimately facilitate a richer, more conscious understanding of the former: in *The White Peacock*, for example, London is endowed with a vital intensity which Nethermere lacks; but the novel remains troubled by doubts that modernity can offer a genuinely life-affirming alternative to increasing industrialisation and urbanisation. In my discussion of *Sons and Lovers* (1913), I follow Williams in arguing that the novel's careful grounding in place and dialect moves towards a multivoiced narrative approach, which addresses some of these doubts. The

¹ Morton, Timothy, *The Ecological Thought* (London: Harvard University Press, 2010), p. 14.

instinctive empathy with others (both human and nonhuman) evident in that novel is projected onto new realms in works like *Kangaroo*, and my discussion of animality and aqueous imagery here reveals an increasing frustration with the apparent limits of human culture and experience.

In Lawrence's New World landscapes, animism and a (problematic) sense of human history as absent function as devices to imagine nonhuman perspectives; they are related to his use of Hardy-esque landscape description as a means of marginalising human concerns. I discuss animism with a particular focus on trees and forests: in Lawrence's work, these (like certain animals) are seen as portals to other temporal or metaphysical realms. His sense of animism does not, however, reflect an unequivocal desire for unification with the world or others, as shown by his distaste for communal movements, and recurring use of imagery that presents humanity as a verminous infestation. Much of Lawrence's work prioritises the individual over the community, and texts like *The Rainbow* (1915) and *Women in Love* (1920) suggest a tense divide between these categories. In *Kangaroo*, Cornwall – a geographically marginal region – is alternately presented as a site of liminality and intermingling, and an escape-point from the world of Western contemporary culture. Lawrence's changing uses of aqueous imagery in that novel and *The Lost Girl* (1920) reflect this oscillation between a dualistic and a border-crossing mindset, a dialectic also evident in terms of metaphysical and temporal boundaries in other works. In concluding, I suggest that the ambivalence which pervades much of Lawrence's writing on place and the nonhuman ultimately stems from psychic tensions that are never fully resolved.

Chapter Two initially notes some connections between Powys and Lawrence regarding their representations of urban experience, transportation and industrialisation: both suggest these

aspects of modernity have pernicious elements. However, Powys' works are often characterised by the absence of a stable narrative voice or perspective, which problematises attempts to read them as straightforward polemics against urbanisation or industrial development. I argue that his self-imposed exile from the landscapes of the Wessex novels during their composition cultivates a peculiar combination of the accurate and the fantastical: an 'imaginative realism' which suggests the distinctive value of distance and juxtaposition. Texts such as *Wolf Solent* and the early novel *After My Fashion* (1919) focus upon returning natives in regional England; these protagonists' experiences in London and Paris create a newly 'deracinated spirit' (as Jeremy Hooker puts it) which becomes entwined with their sense of nostalgia in complex ways. Imaginative realism also emerges in the Wessex novels in their mingling of the quotidian and the bizarre, and the metaphysical and empirical. Powys' scepticism towards the value of certain aspects of modernity is mirrored in a mistrust of some formal experimentalism; instead, the innovations of his fiction are often 'atmospheric', using a sense of interpenetration and liminality to convey the commingling of subject and environment, human and nonhuman, internal and external. In Powys' texts, his own status as a peripatetic outsider on the periphery of modernism is connected to a shifting, nomadic imaginative approach, which facilitates a rich understanding of our relationship with place.

To some extent, this sense of transience and fragmentation in Powys' work is anchored by his ritualistic use of names (particularly in *Weymouth Sands*), which makes this temporally and geographically distant world more solid. There is also a sense throughout these novels of engaging in a fictional-historical world (closely linked to Hardy's Wessex). In general, Powys' texts delineate place at least as much as narrative, and the development of distinctive literary techniques is driven by this: hence his use of a polyphonic narrative approach, the entwining of human and nonhuman perspectives, and his refusal to present a strong sense of

narrative resolution in texts like *A Glastonbury Romance*. This resistance to conventional narrative linearity is also evident in the sense of temporal cosmopolitanism in his work, of layers of the past embedded within the landscape. As *Maiden Castle* shows, however, Powys is ambivalent towards the development of large-scale archaeology, and this reflects a more general suspicion towards the desire to excavate and expose (evident also in his writings on psychoanalysis and mining). Nonetheless, technologies such as railway travel do play an epistemologically valuable role in Powys' depictions of landscape; such examples reflect a carefully-qualified acceptance of modernism and modernity's potential to create new understandings of place and the nonhuman.

My discussion of Mary Butts in Chapter Three begins by considering the connections between William Blake and her sense of the dual nature of existence. The 'unseen world' she senses in Dorset comes to function as a means of protecting imagery and values associated with childhood against 'the Tide' of modernity, a term she uses in her memoir *The Crystal Cabinet* (1937). The First World War is a central traumatic event here, but texts like the 1920 short story 'Speed the Plough' indicate a tentative optimism regarding the cultural and ethical possibilities this cataclysmic event might open up. At other points, however, the war is associated with a Lawrentian mechanised consciousness, and opposed to a rural England figured as organic, spiritual and pure. This kind of ambivalence is also evident in Butts' attitude towards modernist literary experimentation. Nonetheless, her work presents a cosmopolitan style which focuses on the revitalisation of landscape through myth and ritual. Her formal innovation can also be linked with a challenge to patriarchal hegemony. In many ways, metropolitan modernism suits Butts, and her descriptions of the urban environment often draw upon wild, sensual and mystical imagery (something also evident in Woolf's work). Most significantly, Butts' empathy with socially marginalised groups (particularly gay

men) is significant here, and in texts like *Armed with Madness* she relocates a cosmopolitan sense of liberty, diversity and difference to the rural environment. As in Powys and Woolf, this realm is also presented as cosmopolitan in a broader sense, a place of transient intermingling between species and groups; and Butts explores it using multiple narrative perspectives and voices.

The rejection of modernity's movement towards mass-production is evident in Butts' sense of empathy and connection with inanimate objects, anticipating theorists such as Jane Bennett. She erodes boundaries between 'natural' and 'artificial' in this respect, and her relations with a seemingly animate landscape echo Powys' re-enchantment of the world through naming and touching. This connects with Butts' exploration of nonhuman narrative perspectives, particularly in *Armed with Madness*; although in Butts' work animism can also be a means of repelling unwanted outsiders. The most epistemologically privileged position often seems to belong to the returning native, a figure who has a sense of being rooted in the landscape but is also defamiliarised to it. Such individuals are able to perceive worlds beyond 'reality', either temporally or metaphysically separate. At points, these realms are associated with an elite, pure Englishness, threatened by figures such as the Russian-Jewish property developer Nick Kralin in *Death of Felicity Taverner*; as in Lawrence, Butts sometimes resorts to a longing for separation and escape (also associated with Cornwall). However, to the extent that these ethically problematic elements can be disentangled, her work represents an innovative attempt to utilise the developments of modernism and modernity in her re-enchantment of rural England.

Chapter Four begins by examining the connections between Woolf's childhood experiences – particularly the intensity of her bonds with St. Ives, and the Stephens' regular movement

between Cornwall and London – in terms of her work’s sense of contrast, defamiliarisation and juxtaposition. Woolf is drawn simultaneously to a peripatetic and a rooted existence, and this is reflected in her relationship with nostalgia and memory; in both cases, I argue, the influence of Cornwall’s shifting, sensual environment underpins an ability to reconcile this kind of tension in her work. Such resolutions are evident, for example, in *The Waves*’ visceral, tactile descriptions of the nonhuman world, which challenge common associations with urban and rural environments. In crossing these boundaries, Woolf creates fictional worlds that emphasise interconnection, something which becomes apparent through defamiliarised ‘moments of being’; and child perspectives are often central to such experiences. Also important is Woolf’s embrace of technological developments, which in her work facilitate new perspectives on landscape, and are used to weave past and present; she uses the spaces and developments of modernity to channel a sense of place grounded in childhood. While railway and car travel, for example, reveal the fragmentary character of the self, aeroplane flight is connected with the ability to imaginatively occupy new perspectives. It also enables Woolf to envision a world without temporal or geographical borders in her work.

The connections between aeroplane flight and Hauser’s ‘archaeological imagination’, evident in the sedimentary landscape of *Between the Acts* (and elsewhere), is also evident in the cluttered layers of objects and language in Woolf’s last novel. In such ways, Woolf challenges dualistic oppositions between ‘artificial’ and ‘natural’, ‘domestic’ and ‘wild’, and urban and rural; hence London’s ‘urban pastoral’ qualities in *Mrs Dalloway* and ‘Street Haunting’. The world presented in such texts is an ever-shifting web of entanglements and interconnections, and Woolf suggests that, in certain ways, metropolitan life is particularly conducive to such understandings. The city is cosmopolitan not just in its social diversity, but in its complex mesh of sensory experience; in this sense, *Mrs Dalloway* and *Between the Acts*

can be seen as following an imaginative thread that Woolf traces throughout her writing life. The latter novel reflects a qualified attempt to celebrate English culture, history and language, but it is nonetheless cosmopolitan and democratic in its mingling of voices, perspectives and sensory experience. *Between the Acts* sees human and nonhuman life as existing on a continuum, and this reflects her sense that ‘behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern’: all life contributes creatively to the novel’s polyphonic web, which shifts incessantly between unity and fragmentation.¹ In Woolf’s final novel, these oscillations between collectivity and dispersity demonstrate her continuing determination to accept and reconcile such tensions.

¹ Woolf, Virginia, ‘A Sketch of the Past’, in *Moments of Being* (London: Triad Granada, 1978), pp. 71-159 (p. 84).

1. Strange Old Feelings Wake in the Soul: Ambivalent Landscapes in D.H. Lawrence

I wished that in all the wild valley where cloud shadows were travelling like pilgrims, something would call me forth from my rooted loneliness. Through all the grandeur of the white and blue day, the poised cloud masses swung their slow flight, and left me unnoticed.¹

– *The White Peacock*

This chapter argues that D.H. Lawrence's relationship with place and the nonhuman world is profoundly influenced by underlying tensions and contradictions in his worldview, in terms of his relationships with family, religion, gender and class. Of all canonical modernists, Lawrence perhaps has the deepest sense of connection with place, and it is therefore in his work that one of the fundamental tensions of modernity – between the need for rootedness, and the need to develop and explore – is most acute and problematic. I begin by tracing the emergence of such tensions in Lawrence's first novel, *The White Peacock* (1911), before examining the development of a multiple perspective, dialogue-heavy approach in *Sons and Lovers* (1913). This style, I argue, hints at the broader potential for such early works to challenge an exclusively human viewpoint. *Sons and Lovers* is also remarkable for its vivid sense of empathic connection with place, and Lawrence's capacity in this respect is later applied to the landscapes and fauna of Australia and North America. As his focus shifts to the nonhuman, another tension which emerges is between unity and fragmentation, or – relatedly – the individual and the communal. New world landscapes are conducive to Lawrence's explorations of fragmentation, which are complemented in certain formal qualities of his later work; and also to the development of Hardy's influence, in terms of animism and the prioritisation of landscape over human narrative. The strain of misanthropy that runs through

¹ Lawrence, D.H., *The White Peacock* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 126.

Lawrence's work lends itself to the development of these themes. In tension with Hardy's influence, however, is Lawrence's profound sense of individual power and possibility, which underlies the aristocrat/herd dualism evident in much of his work. In some ways, works like *Women in Love* (1920) reveal a desire to reject the possibilities of a cosmopolitan, multi-voiced openness and liminality that much of Lawrence's work otherwise suggests. His distinctive socio-cultural position, I argue, means that his work initiates and explores many of the central themes and issues raised by the relationships between English modernity, modernism and place; but its multiple contradictions and dualisms are never satisfactorily resolved or overcome.

I. Everything Has Suffered Change

D.H. Lawrence's ambivalent relationship with the social, cultural and industrial developments of early twentieth-century England has been well documented. His complex socio-cultural position gives rise to an equally complex, and often contradictory, set of identities: Lawrence was a working-class figure whose talent and charm brought him recognition among England's elite; he had a deep attachment to rural life and traditions, but felt compelled to explore the world beyond his Nottinghamshire home; and he was interested in the potential for contemporary literary experimentation to facilitate renewed connections with earlier modes of being. As a result, his work repeatedly discloses tensions, ambivalences and dualisms in different forms, and critics have suggested various psychological underpinnings to these. For Frank Kermode, the fundamental basis of Lawrence's contradictory worldview lies in his relationship with his parents:

The father is associated with a beneficent though mysterious darkness, the mother with a malefic education and culture; between such opposed tendencies he habitually

imagined a third thing, a tension or reconciliation; and in this instance that third force is himself.¹

Or, as Lawrence himself puts it in his essay on Nathaniel Hawthorne in *Studies in Classic American Literature* (1923):

My father hated books, hated the sight of anyone reading or writing. My mother hated the thought that any of her sons should be condemned to manual labour. [...] There is a basic hostility in all of us between the physical and the mental, the blood and the spirit. The mind is 'ashamed' of the blood. And the blood is destroyed by the mind, actually.²

As Kermode suggests, much of Lawrence's creative force derives from a desire to reconcile or overcome this kind of contradictory impulse. For Peter Fjågesund, the fundamental psychic conflict or 'essential flaw' underlying Lawrence's work is his inability to reconcile his 'this-worldliness' with the Protestant emphasis on the afterlife: as a result, Lawrence 'seeks salvation in this world and in this life, but *outside* the confines of the social and historical context into which he was born.'³ Lawrence attempts to reconcile this kind of conflict in his late novella *The Escaped Cock* (1929), which reimagines Jesus' resurrection as a parable illustrating the value of embodied experience: Lawrence's Christ, rather than focusing on spiritual enlightenment, recognises that 'nothing is so marvellous as to be alone in the phenomenal world, which is raging and yet apart.'⁴ His desire to seek the reconciliation

¹ Kermode, Frank, *Lawrence* (Bungay: Fontana, 1973), p. 10.

² Lawrence, D.H., 'Nathaniel Hawthorne and *The Scarlet Letter*', in *Studies in Classic American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 81-95 (p. 83). Rather than pursuing the reconciliation of this dichotomy, Lawrence often adheres clearly to the physical or 'blood' side: in 1913, for example, shortly after completing *Sons and Lovers*, he writes that his 'great religion' is 'a belief in the blood, the flesh, as being wiser than the intellect [...] what our blood feels and believes and says, is always true. The intellect is only a bit and a bridle.' *The Letters of D.H. Lawrence*, vol. I (ed. Boulton, J.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 503-4.

³ Fjågesund, Peter, *The Apocalyptic World of D.H. Lawrence* (Oslo: Norwegian University Press, 1991), pp. 59-60.

⁴ Lawrence, D.H., *The Escaped Cock* (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow, 1978), p. 30. As Allen argues, Lawrence felt that 'Christian philosophy laid the foundation for humans' desire to renounce the flesh in pursuit of the spiritual ideal, thereby breaking down the relationship between themselves and the physical earth'. Allen, Abbey,

of contradictory or dualistic drives thus remains in evidence in this, Lawrence's last complete fictional work. However, his belief in the pervasive nature of such tensions is equally evident in the period. A 1928 letter acknowledges that the recently-completed *Lady Chatterley's Lover* is based upon the conceptual schema of 'the Phallic consciousness versus the mental-spiritual consciousness', and while Lawrence accepts that 'there should be no *versus*', he treats this as a problem which may be grappled with, but cannot be ignored.¹

This fixation upon ambivalence and dualism makes Lawrence quintessentially representative of his era. The context described by Marshall Berman, in which adventure, power, joy, growth and transformation sit alongside the fear that existing cultures and identities will disappear, is pronounced in his work: Berman argues that its 'erotic joy, natural beauty and human tenderness' is 'always locked in moral embrace with his nihilistic rage and despair.'² Lawrence is simultaneously allured and repelled by the developments and possibilities of his time. As W.J. Keith argues, he experiences a 'self-division' that is 'traumatic and complex', and is close to Hardy in this respect: both writers 'were conscious that their own lives would have been stifled by the narrowness of the "provincial," regional life they both escaped and nostalgically missed. [...] Both were deracinated'.³ Place, above all, is central to this. As Mark Schorer notes, there is perhaps 'no other writer in literary history whose works responded so immediately to his geographical environment [...] and certainly there is no other modern writer to whose imagination 'place' made such a direct and intense appeal'.⁴ It

Uprooting Nature and Ourselves: An Ecocritical Perspective on the Works of D.H. Lawrence (M.A. thesis: Dartmouth College, New Hampshire, 2008), p. 33. *The Escaped Cock* can be read as an attempt to address this by reimagining Christianity as a sensual, embodied belief system. Despite Lawrence's distaste for Christianity's disembodied spirituality, his use of language and imagery describing humanity as diseased or polluted (see Section III) often suggests its influence.

¹ *The Letters of D.H. Lawrence*, vol. IV (ed. Boulton, J., Mansfield, E., and Roberts, W.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), p. 340.

² *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*, p. 30.

³ *Regions of the Imagination*, pp. 154, 155.

⁴ Schorer, Mark, 'Lawrence and the Spirit of Place', in Moore, H. (ed.), *A D.H. Lawrence Miscellany* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1959), pp. 280-94 (p. 282).

is the strength of Lawrence's attachment to his home environment, coupled with his equally powerful fascination with new landscapes, that generates a fundamental tension in his work between the need for static rootedness and, conversely, the need to develop and explore.

In this respect, he represents a problematic case for ecocritics like Jonathan Bate, who sees modernism as a 'profoundly, indeed intrinsically, cosmopolitan' literary movement, and opposes the archetypal 'deracinated' modernist writer to the 'bioregionally grounded' poet.¹ While Lawrence is indeed a cosmopolitan figure in terms of his restless exploration of diverse cultures, he combines this with a sensitivity to the Nottinghamshire landscape which often suggests this grounded figure. At times, this need for rootedness eclipses all others in Lawrence's work: in 'The Spirit of Place' (1923) he asserts that '[m]en are free when they are in a living homeland, not when they are straying and breaking away.'² These affinities between Bate and Lawrence are suggested in both writers' use of nests as a central metaphor for home and belonging. In the poetry of John Clare, Bate describes the nest as 'the small round thing which is the natural world's analogue of the human idea of home', and argues that 'to be drawn to a nest, to stoop towards it but still to let it live, is to be gathered into the fabric of the earth and in being so gathered to secure the identity of the self.'³ Lawrence's early fiction follows Clare's poetry in its use of the nest metaphor – although not making specific allusions – and anticipates Bate's analysis. *Sons and Lovers* uses nests to symbolise a domestic intimacy that draws the novel's characters together; while in Lawrence's first novel *The White Peacock*, the protagonist Cyril Beardsall intuitively associates a sense of belonging and security with a birds' nest he encounters exploring the Nottinghamshire landscape.⁴ Cyril sees two lark chicks:

¹ *The Song of the Earth*, p. 234.

² 'The Spirit of Place', p. 17.

³ *The Song of the Earth*, pp. 157, 161.

⁴ See Lawrence, D.H., *Sons and Lovers* (London: Penguin, 1981), pp. 197-8, 279-80.

I gently put down my fingers to touch them; they were warm; gratifying to find them warm, in the midst of so much cold and wet! [...] In my heart of hearts, I longed for someone to nestle against, someone who would come between me and the coldness and the wetness. [...] What did I want, that I thus turned from one thing to another?¹

This encounter occurs during a long, unbroken passage of detailed landscape description, typifying the novel's sense of attentiveness to place. Because of his close engagement with the flora and fauna of his home region, Cyril understands the need for this kind of rootedness; yet at the same time, he is aware of his restlessness, that makes him turn 'from one thing to another'. Lawrence recognises the kind of secure identity that, as Bate argues, arises from close engagement with place, but he also suggests that such identities have their limitations.

As Keith explains:

Lawrence loved the old regional world, the country of his heart, but came to realise that it could not sustain him. [...] Lawrence found that he had to leave his native area, yet he was continually returning to it for his literary inspiration. And he found a major theme in the painful process of separation [...] he chronicles the process of moving out into the wider physical and intellectual environments. He begins in fact where Hardy, in *Jude the Obscure*, ended.²

Lawrence (and the other writers in this study) is in some ways continuing a project begun by Hardy, to articulate the differing ways in which the upheavals of modernity change understandings and representations of regions identified as home. On this reading, transience, separation and cosmopolitanism, in conjunction with memory and a sense of belonging, generate new literary approaches.

From *The White Peacock* onwards, restlessness is a common theme in Lawrence's work. *Sea and Sardinia* (1921) expresses his urge 'to be free of all the hemmed-in life – the horror of human tension, the absolute insanity of machine persistence'; and in *Studies in Classic*

¹ *The White Peacock*, p. 220.

² *Regions of the Imagination*, pp. 146-7.

American Literature, he writes approvingly of Melville's need to 'get away. To get out, out! To get away out of our life. To cross the horizon into another life.'¹ Deleuze and Guattari identify this same impulse in Lawrence's work, and Stefania Michelucci notes that he often seems 'a totally restless soul, uneasy in his home country, victim to an inexplicable, uncontrollable impulse to emigrate again.'² The urge to move solely for movement's sake represents the antithesis to an instinct for rootedness; but more commonly in Lawrence's work, we see an attempt to reconcile these two polarities. The opening of *Sea and Sardinia* expresses this succinctly: 'Comes over one an absolute necessity to move. And what is more, to move in some particular direction.'³ Lawrence is often vehement in claiming that travel should be in pursuit of a particular place or goal. This ultimate aim, in fact, might not be a geographical destination, but a psychological or philosophical one: Lawrence sometimes anticipates T.S. Eliot's understanding of cultural journeying in 'Little Gidding' (1942), which sees 'the end of all our exploring' as being 'to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time.'⁴ This faith in the potential for travel (geographical or otherwise) to provide a revitalised understanding of 'home' is evident, for example, in *Kangaroo* (1923). Towards the end of that novel, the English protagonist Richard Somers – having left Europe for Australia, and now planning to move on to North America – asks himself why he feels this migratory impulse:

'Wait! Wait!' he answered himself. 'You have got to go through the mistakes. You've got to go all round the world, and then halfway round again, till you get back.'

¹ Lawrence, D.H., *Sea and Sardinia* (London: Penguin, 1997), p. 30; 'Herman Melville's *Typee* and *Omoo*', in *Studies in Classic American Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 122-32 (p. 124).

² *A Thousand Plateaus*, p. 207; Michelucci, Stefania, 'L'Espace Perdu: D. H. Lawrence's Travel Writings', *Studies in Travel Writing* 8, no. 1 (2004), pp. 35-48 (p. 40). See also Jack Stewart's claim that 'Lawrence's restlessness recalls R.L. Stevenson's manifesto: "For my part, I travel not to go anywhere; but to go. I travel for travel's sake. The great affair is to move."' Stewart, Jack, 'Movement, Space, and Rhetoric in Lawrence's Travel Writing', in Cushman, K., and Ingersoll, E. (eds.), *D.H. Lawrence: New Worlds* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2003), pp. 151-67 (p. 152).

³ *Sea and Sardinia*, p. 7.

⁴ Eliot, T.S., 'Little Gidding', in *Four Quartets* (London: Faber and Faber, 1959), p. 59.

Go on, go on, the world is round, and it will bring you back. Draw your ring around the world, the ring of your consciousness. Draw it round until it is complete.¹

For Somers, this engagement with unfamiliar landscapes and cultures is part of a journey, the ultimate conclusion of which is a deeper understanding of himself and his home. Keith observes a similar narrative in *Women in Love*, which charts four characters' 'search for being, for something beyond', but ultimately ends with a return to England: with a nod to Eliot, Keith suggests they 'return to where they start from and know the place for the first time.'² Michelucci notes that Lawrence's travel books tend to have a similar circular structure, ending with a return journey: and while each one 'begins and finishes in the same place, at the end the ideological perspective is always changed.'³ Throughout his life, then, Lawrence seeks to reconcile conflicting desires for rootedness and exploration, by examining the possibility that the latter may ultimately facilitate a richer, more conscious understanding of the former.

This epistemological value often takes the form of defamiliarisation, with Lawrence's characters experiencing previously familiar places with a new strangeness or intensity. In his work, as Jack Stewart notes, 'the strange and the familiar throw each other into relief. [...] The stimulus of unfamiliar landscapes can activate the deepest desires, dreams, and values'.⁴ Having spent time in London, Cyril in *The White Peacock* finds his sense of home uncannily altered. This is expressed in 'Laetitia', the early draft of the novel:

Everything has suffered change – everywhere is a subtle alteration. The sound of the dropping sluice is different. When the fishes glide in the pond, their motion has

¹ *Kangaroo*, p. 381.

² *Regions of the Imagination*, p. 155.

³ 'D.H. Lawrence's Travel Writings', p. 37.

⁴ Stewart, Jack, 'Metaphor and Metonymy, Color and Space in Lawrence's *Sea and Sardinia*', *Twentieth-Century Literature* 41, no. 2 (Summer 1995), pp. 208-23 (p. 208).

another meaning; and it calls up a startled ghost of the feeling it used to produce. [...] I am a stranger in the valley that has cradled me and brought me to manhood.¹

Cyril's exposure to a world beyond Nethermere has caused a subtle, yet profound, shift in his consciousness, to the extent that his sensory perceptions are altered. This development has, in some ways, been positive: Cyril now feels that he has "made acquaintance" with himself, and "understand[s] other people better"; *The White Peacock* can be read as a *bildungsroman* insofar as it traces the development of such understandings in its protagonist.² In the novel's final version, however, the effect of Cyril's experience in London is more problematic. The bustle of the metropolitan environment has a 'stupendous poetry' which captivates him: 'I loved the city intensely for its movement of men and women, the soft, fascinating flow of the limbs of men and women, and the sudden flash of eyes and lips as they pass.'³ Here, Lawrence anticipates Virginia Woolf's dreamlike, fluid descriptions of London at night, describing the city in an enraptured, painterly tone rather than in terms of artificiality and mechanisation:

Everywhere at night the city is filled with the magic of lamps: over the River they pour in golden patches their floating luminous oil on the restless darkness; the bright lamps float in and out of the cavern of London Bridge Station like round shining bees in and out of a black hive; in the suburbs the street-lamps glimmer with the brightness of lemons among the trees.⁴

This intensity, however, makes Nottinghamshire feel shrunken and insignificant upon his return:

¹ *The White Peacock*, p. 345.

² *Ibid.*, p. 346.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 286, 264.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 264. Compare Woolf's similarly enchanted description of London at night in 'Street Haunting', 'with its islands of light, and its long groves of darkness [...] high among the bare trees are hung oblong frames of reddish yellow light – windows; there are points of brilliance burning steadily like low stars – lamps'. Woolf, Virginia, 'Street Haunting: A London Adventure', in *Selected Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 177-187 (p. 20).

Nethermere was no longer a complete, wonderful little world that held us charmed inhabitants. It was a small, insignificant valley lost in the spaces of the earth. The tree that had drooped over the brook with such delightful, romantic grace was a ridiculous thing when I came home after a year of absence in the south. The old symbols were trite and foolish.¹

The emotional language which Cyril previously used to engage with the landscape of home no longer feels adequate. Rather than casting the rural environment as a vital zone of physiological engagement, to be contrasted with a sterile, mechanical and hostile cityscape, Lawrence suggests that London has a life-affirming intensity which Nethermere lacks; new experiences may revitalise our relationship with such places, but they can also undermine them. Characteristically, then, the novel searches for a way to reconcile or harmonise two opposing worlds – metropolitan modernity and rural tradition – and although Lawrence identifies a possible resolution to their conflict in the epistemological value of defamiliarisation, his position remains equivocal at best.

Cyril's mournful, elegiac descriptions of his home environment in *The White Peacock* typify the novel's sense of loss. This partly arises through the presentation of a rural world upon which industrialisation is gradually, but inevitably, encroaching: in Nethermere, 'distant hooters and buzzers of mines and iron-works crowded small on the borders of the night'.² But the novel does not merely mourn actual, physical changes to the landscape. A psychic encroachment, too, has occurred: *The White Peacock* is nostalgic for the loss of Cyril's ability to experience the place as he used to, before the 'old symbols' became 'trite and foolish.' As Jed Esty argues, Lawrence struggles throughout his life to see the English landscape as revitalised, rejuvenated, in the ways that Powys, Butts and Woolf often do. Where Esty sees a redemptive conception of Englishness in those writers, he argues that Lawrence remained

¹ Ibid., p. 267.

² Ibid., p. 257.

pessimistic on such matters, experiencing Europe as ‘deshicated and sickened by modernity.’¹ This pessimism is already evident in *The White Peacock*’s elegiac tone, which suggests an irreparable rupture of the human and nonhuman. Relations between these realms, and within the nonhuman world, are often cruel and violent in the novel: Cyril’s sister Lettie is traumatised by the ‘pitiful crying of a hedgehog caught in a gin’, but he sees the animals as ‘fierce little murderers’.² A heavy snowfall later in the novel creates a bleak landscape: ‘The lake was black like the open eyes of a corpse; the woods were black like the beard on the face of a corpse’; and the animals are ‘terrified at the universal treachery of the earth.’³ Lawrence deliberately uses imagery of death and betrayal to convey a sense of a landscape – geographical and mental – devoid of sustenance and vitality. For Helen Wussow, this tone of bleakness and mistrust infects human relations in the novel as well: Lawrence, she argues, ‘represents the inescapable cruelty of human relationships through images of strangulation and the nexus between hunter and prey.’⁴ In his first novel, then, there is a sense of trepidation about the changes modernity will bring to the rural world; but perhaps more significantly, there is a lack of faith in the potential for that world to sustain values or ways of being that offer a vital, life-affirming alternative to increasing industrialisation and urbanisation. Lawrence may want to suggest that travel ultimately allows us to know our home ‘for the first time’, but *The White Peacock*’s insinuations of exactly what we will discover are often gloomy.

This ambivalence regarding place and movement in Lawrence’s first novel, then, is not adequately resolved. Bioregional rootedness cannot be attained by a consciousness exposed to the changes of the period; aimless wandering does not resolve this; and new experiences

¹ *A Shrinking Island*, p. 48.

² *The White Peacock*, p. 44.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

⁴ Wussow, Helen, *The Nightmare of History: The Fictions of Virginia Woolf and D.H. Lawrence* (London: Associated University Presses, 1998), p. 21.

will not necessarily facilitate a harmonious compromise between tradition and modernity. There is a similar strain of pessimism in the novel regarding the possibility of reconciling the values and trajectories of Western culture with the nonhuman world. The character of Annable, the gamekeeper, epitomises this:

He was a man of one idea – that all civilisation was the painted fungus of rottenness. He hated any signs of culture. [...] He was a thorough materialist – he scorned religion and all mysticism. [...] When he thought, he reflected on the decay of mankind – the decline of the human race into folly and weakness and rottenness. ‘Be a good animal, true to your animal instinct’ was his motto.¹

Ecocritical readings of *The White Peacock* have focused upon Annable’s philosophy. Paul Delany suggests that the gamekeeper is ‘perhaps the first literary character to profess deep ecology [...] Lawrence uses him to suggest that we might slough off the burdens of divided consciousness and irksome morality if we could just return to our biological roots’; and Anne Odenbring Ehlert notes that Annable initiates a lineage of Lawrence characters whose embrace of proto-deep ecological ideas leads them to ‘seclude themselves from society and become misanthropic pessimists without any influence on social development.’² The dismissal of ‘civilisation’ as ‘the painted fungus of rottenness’ challenges readings that see the First World War as rupturing a previously-held faith in Western modernity; as Scott Sanders argues, for Lawrence ‘this European bloodbath came as no overnight wonder, no freakish disturbance of a placid world, but rather as the conclusion of a long process of

¹ *The White Peacock*, pp. 146-7.

² Delany, Paul, ‘D.H. Lawrence and Deep Ecology’, *CEA Critic* 55, no. 2 (1993), pp. 27-41 (p. 29); Ehlert, Anne Odenbring, ‘*There’s a Bad Time Coming*’: *Ecological Vision in the Fiction of D.H. Lawrence* (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2001), p. 12. In Bill Devall and George Sessions’ founding text of the movement *Deep Ecology: Living as if Nature Mattered* (Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith, 1985), the authors define deep ecology’s key concept of ‘biocentric egalitarianism’ as follows: ‘all organisms and entities in the ecosphere, as parts of the interrelated whole, are equal in intrinsic worth’ (p. 67). Deep ecology posits the fundamental basis of ethics to be the interrelation of all living things, and furthermore asserts that no species or individual can legitimately command greater ethical consideration than any other.

cultural decay, the death rattle of a moribund civilisation.’¹ Yet we should be wary of assuming Annable’s position reflects an authorial stance. Kermode comments that ‘Lawrence wrote the Annable passages late’, and quotes from a letter to Jessie Chambers: ‘He [Annable] *has* to be there [...] he makes a sort of balance. Otherwise it’s too much one thing, too much me’.² Annable, on this evidence, is not simply a mouthpiece for Lawrence’s own ecological anxieties. Rather, he represents one polarity of a tension in the novel, between Cyril’s sentimental, romantic engagement with the landscape and Annable’s uncompromising anti-humanism; and as with *The White Peacock*’s ambivalence regarding issues of place and belonging, that tension is never resolved.³

II. A Fragment of the Shell of Life

Lawrence’s fear that his first novel may be ‘too much one thing, too much me’ also illustrates the limitations of the first-person narrator, a device not used in his other full-length fictional works. Cyril is often granted an improbable level of insight into other characters’ internal worlds, which are described with the confidence of an omniscient narrator, rather than by a character whose situation within the textual world necessarily limits his knowledge. (Consider, for example, the description of Annable quoted above.) Keith notes that ‘there are a number of occasions [...] when the presence of Cyril is inappropriate, and sometimes even impossible’, and suggests that such moments reveal a fundamental structural inconsistency in Lawrence’s approach.⁴ Michael Bell also argues that the first-person narrative results in

¹ Sanders, Scott, *D.H. Lawrence: The World of the Major Novels* (London: Vision, 1973), p. 96.

² *Lawrence*, p. 13; quoted *ibid.*, p. 13.

³ The passage in which Cyril and George explore Annable’s farm is telling in this respect: their discovery of ‘feathers, bits of animal wreckage, even the remnants of a cat,’ and a bucket ‘so filled with weeds’ that Cyril thinks it ‘part of the jungle’, suggests a way of life not just unromantic, but pathological (pp. 60-61). The passage can be compared with similar descriptions of the natural world as visceral, repellent and tactile in Powys, Butts and Woolf (see later chapters).

⁴ Keith, W.J., ‘D.H. Lawrence’s *The White Peacock*: An Essay in Criticism’, *University of Toronto Quarterly* 37 (1968), pp. 230-247 (p. 237).

Lawrence ‘employing a too conscious or personal register of language for his underlying vision’.¹ We might see these problems as a formal manifestation of the novel’s thematic ambivalence: torn between rootedness and exploration, tradition and modernity, the novel also struggles to represent diverse ethical and experiential perspectives within the constraints of a singular narrative voice. In contrast to the theme of a cruel and violent nonhuman world, for example, Lawrence sometimes wants to present Cyril and Lettie’s engagement with place as restful and idyllic:

We had lived between the woods and the water all our lives, Lettie and I, and she had sought the bright notes in everything. She seemed to hear the water laughing, and the leaves tittering and giggling like young girls.²

In his later work, Lawrence is less inclined to value this kind of anthropomorphic understanding of the nonhuman world. His essay ‘... Love Was Once a Little Boy’ (1925), for example, dismisses Wordsworth’s tendency to mingle his experience of place with his own sense of self: ‘He didn’t leave it with a soul of its own. It had to have his soul. And nature had to be sweet and pure, Williamish. Sweet-Williamish at that! Anthropomorphised!’³ Richard Kerridge suggests that Lawrence, following Hardy, ultimately ‘took nature writing further still from the liberal-romantic tradition of mediating, self-conscious contemplation’; this, for Lawrence, is ‘a distortion brought about by industrial modernity.’⁴ In *The White Peacock*, however, he is still drawn towards idealised and romantic representations of ‘nature’. Michelucci notes that Strelley Mill is experienced by the characters only as an ‘idyllic, picturesque, Arcadian’ zone; they seem oblivious to the

¹ Bell, Michael, *D.H. Lawrence: Language and Being* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 23.

² *The White Peacock*, p. 44.

³ Lawrence, D.H., ‘... Love Was Once a Little Boy’, in *Phoenix II* (London: Heinemann, 1968), pp. 444-59 (p. 449). One way of understanding this tension, Keith suggests, is to read *The White Peacock* as a text in which ‘Nature intrudes into the story in Wordsworthian manner but for anti-Wordsworthian purposes – to demonstrate a basic unhappiness at the heart of things.’ (‘D.H. Lawrence’s *The White Peacock*’, p. 239).

⁴ Kerridge, Richard, ‘Nature in the English Novel’, in Murphy, P. (ed.), *Literature of Nature: An International Sourcebook* (London: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1998), pp. 149-57 (p. 154).

‘biological and economic activities’ that also occur there.¹ Yet the tension between these polarities is evident from the novel’s opening paragraph, in which Cyril, as Michelucci puts it, reflects upon ‘the imminent condemnation of his Eden’: ‘Only the thin stream falling through the mill-race murmured to itself of the tumult of life which had once quickened the valley.’² As Michelucci suggests, *The White Peacock* thus strives to articulate the problematic realities of industrialisation in the rural world, but its scope for doing so is limited by Lawrence’s narrative approach.

These structural and thematic tensions in Lawrence’s first novel explain the shift to the third-person, multi-voiced narrative of *Sons and Lovers*. Here, Lawrence creates a relatively dispassionate, closely autobiographical portrait of Paul Morel, the younger son of a Nottinghamshire mining family.³ The narrative is careful to provide a voice for both of Morel’s parents, as shown in their arguments over whether Paul should follow his father into the mine, or pursue a middle-class vocation:

‘What dost want ter ma’e a stool-harsed Jack on ‘im for?’ said Morel. ‘All he’ll do is to wear his britches behind out, an’ earn nowt. What’s ‘e startin’ wi’?’

‘It doesn’t matter what he’s starting with,’ said Mrs Morel.

‘It wouldna! Put ‘im i’ th’ pit wi’ me, an’ e’ll earn a easy ten shillin’ a wik from th’ start. But six shillin’ wearin’ his truck-end out on a stool’s better than ten shillin’ i’ th’ pit wi’ me, I know.’

‘He is *not* going in the pit,’ said Mrs Morel, ‘and there’s an end of it.’⁴

Passages such as this are marked by the prioritisation of dialogue over description, with Lawrence striving to accurately represent the Nottinghamshire dialect, and by the balancing

¹ Michelucci, Stefania, *Space and Place in the Works of D.H. Lawrence* (London: McFarland, 2002), p. 8.

² *Ibid.*, p. 11; *The White Peacock*, p. 1.

³ Although the narrative does centre around Paul, Lawrence’s determination to progress from the restrictions and insularity of *The White Peacock*’s narrative approach is evident in his decision to abandon the novel’s initial title, *Paul Morel*.

⁴ *Sons and Lovers*, p. 90.

of perspectives, with minimal narrative intrusion. Like *The White Peacock*, *Sons and Lovers* is fundamentally about place, but this now involves less absorbed, emotive and descriptive language, and more attentiveness to the socio-economic character of the setting. Jeff Wallace stresses Lawrence's 'naturalistic deployment of the rhythms and idiom of 'ordinary' colloquial working-class speech'; for Raymond Williams, this emphasis means that the characters, 'before they are or mean anything else [...] are quite radically present'.¹ J.R. Watson contrasts this social attentiveness with the isolated narrative of Lawrence's first novel:

The landscape is thus the setting, as it was in *The White Peacock*, but it is no longer a landscape to be loved and left, but a landscape to be lived with, to be explored and rediscovered, above all to be felt. [...] And as this landscape reflects the central tension between the older countryside and modern industrialisation, so Paul's upbringing encompasses both his father's primitivism and his mother's aspirations. [...] To Paul, the landscape is his experience.²

Sons and Lovers therefore sees Lawrence developing a new way of communicating his close engagement with place. Reacting against the romantic individualism which inhabits the narrative approach of *The White Peacock*, Lawrence uses multiple voices and perspectives to create a more socially-grounded portrait of his home region; one that illustrates, even in this early work, the potential for experimental narrative approaches to manage tensions within the text. The results suggest, perhaps counterintuitively, that portrayals of the nonhuman environment can acquire a distinctive kind of depth and authenticity when the complexities of human relations are focused upon, in contrast to an approach that revolves around a single

¹ Wallace, Jeff, 'Language, Nature and the Politics of Materialism: Raymond Williams and D.H. Lawrence', in Morgan, J., and Preston, P. (eds.), *Raymond Williams: Politics, Education, Letters* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993), pp. 105-28 (p. 108); Williams, Raymond, *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1970), p. 176.

² Watson, J.R., "'The Country of my Heart': D.H. Lawrence and the East Midlands Landscape", in Salgado, G., and Das, G.K., *The Spirit of D.H. Lawrence: Centenary Studies* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), pp. 16-31 (p. 26).

individual's encounter with place. Decentring the single narrative voice hints at the broader potential for this approach to challenge an exclusively human viewpoint.

Sons and Lovers' ability to evoke place through careful attention to detail in its reported speech, along with the balancing of different characters' perspectives, is part of a narrative strategy that includes close attentiveness to place-names within the fictional world. This is evident from the outset. The novel opens with a brief description of the Bestwood region's history, and then traces the introduction of the railway, as it becomes a large-scale mining centre:

From Nuttall, high up on the sandstone among the woods, the railway ran, past the ruined priory of the Carthusians and past Robin Hood's Well, down to Spinney Park, then on to Minton, a large mine among corn-fields; from Minton across the farmlands of the valleyside to Bunker's Hill, branching off there, and running north to Beggarlee and Selby, that looks over at Crich and the hills of Derbyshire.¹

Keith Sagar explains that Lawrence's earlier drafts used real place-names: Bestwood is Eastwood, Nutall is Watnall, and so on.² Despite the alterations, a fastidious attentiveness to the specificities of the region remains apparent; something also evident in Powys' descriptions of Dorset (see Chapter Two). Watson comments that the landscape is consequently 'something which is known and familiar [...] and, above all, understood: we discover how the present landscape came to be as it is, what changes lay behind it, what its history was.'³ Lawrence's intimate acquaintance with the region allows him to convey some of the human activity embedded within the landscape, rather than implying a pure, idealised 'Nature' somehow apart from that activity. For Williams, this represents Lawrence's most

¹ *Sons and Lovers*, pp. 35-6.

² Sagar, Keith, annotation in *Sons and Lovers*, p. 494.

³ 'D.H. Lawrence and the East Midlands Landscape', p. 26.

authentic and successful evocation of place, and he contrasts it with the approach of the later fiction:

[I]f we had to choose between that ordinary naming – the names we all know, that are there and shared between us – and the private rhetoric, the invented and abstract symbolic language of the more critical fiction [...] I know how it would go for me: to where speech is, where community is.¹

In this novel, Williams argues, Lawrence uses both reported speech and place-names to create an intimate and precise portrait of a place, and the community embedded within it. Language is seen as a valuable, democratic means of sharing our experiences of place, of concretising them; whereas Lawrence's later fiction, Williams suggests, evinces suspicion towards the potential for language to mislead us, and seeks instead to use it in a more coded, elitist way.

The intuitive sense of language's democratic, socially communicative potential evident in *Sons and Lovers* – particularly its use of dialect and place-names – is related to Lawrence's potent empathic capability. As John Worthen argues, this imaginative sympathy with others is first evident in his relationship with his mother, whom he felt he connected to 'by instinct': 'Lawrence knew his mother in a way that, both before and after her death, he wished to know others.'² These others include the nonhuman world: his immediate responsiveness to his environment is bound up with the intimacy of his human relations within his childhood universe. Abbey Allen notes that 'the attachment Lawrence felt for his childhood environment lasted a lifetime,' and this is inseparable from the people he associates with that place.³ Characteristically, however, there is a tension here: Worthen explains that Lawrence came 'to distrust his very capacity and need for intimacy, as costing too much, as well as

¹ *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence*, p. 184.

² Worthen, John, *D.H. Lawrence: The Life of an Outsider* (New York: Counterpoint, 2005), p. 10.

³ *Uprooting Nature and Ourselves: An Ecocritical Perspective on the Works of D.H. Lawrence*, p. 11.

inhibiting his need to stand back and be himself.’¹ This is one way of understanding the development Williams traces from *Sons and Lovers* to the later novels: their ‘invented and abstract symbolic language’ might be seen as an attempt to draw away from the instinctive empathy with the Nottinghamshire community of his childhood expressed in the earlier work. Nonetheless, that connective ability is evident, in certain ways, throughout his writing life. Neil Roberts sees it in Lawrence’s disillusion with England, and later Europe as a whole, which he believes is ‘imbricated with his change of allegiance from his mother to his father’; indeed, Lawrence remarks in 1921, of his disenchantment with Europe, that the experience is ‘as if somebody were dying: one’s mother for example’.² Lawrence may feel the need to pull away from the intimacy he feels towards home, but that instinctive empathy remains.

If, as Roberts suggests, Lawrence’s fascination with places and cultures beyond Europe in his later work is connected to his feelings for his father, he is continuing to seek empathic connections with others in a way that is related to his childhood relationships. These others may be places, people, or nonhuman animals. In *Kangaroo*, Somers experiences the Australian bush as a landscape that remains intransigently other, but nonetheless strikingly communicative:

The lonely, lonely world that had waited, it seemed, since the coal age. These ancient flat-topped tree-ferns, these towlsed palms like mops. [...] Strange old feelings wake in the soul: old, non-human feelings. And an old, old indifference, like a torpor, invades the spirit.³

Despite its alien quality, Somers is intensely receptive to this environment, attentive to its qualities. Similarly, the birds in Australia ‘seemed to listen to him: really to listen. [...] [O]ne

¹ *D.H. Lawrence*, p. 10.

² Roberts, Neil, *D.H. Lawrence, Travel and Cultural Difference* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), p. 31; quoted *ibid.*, p. 30.

³ *Kangaroo*, p. 197.

can really communicate with them.’¹ Leo Gurko argues that Lawrence’s receptivity to place in the novel gives the nonhuman a kind of ontological priority over the human: ‘*Kangaroo* has as its hero and controlling element nothing less than the shape of a continent.’² The portrait of Australia that emerges, however, perhaps tells us more about Somers’ (and Lawrence’s) inner world than it does about inherent qualities of the landscape. Višnja Sepčić argues that Lawrence ‘tried to recreate the inner spiritual physiognomy of the landscape’, but inevitably ‘projects his own subjectivity [...] discovering the correspondences between the innermost psychic states, complex and fluid, and details of the outer world.’³ It is this intense and tumultuous inner world that underpins Lawrence’s ability to feel and describe a sense of connection with myriad beings and places. Bell believes this ability ‘to represent dramatically quite different states of being’, and ‘respond to the otherness of other forms of life’, is unique.⁴ The vividness of environmental description in works like *Kangaroo*, then, suggests that they are not so much the work of a writer struggling against his instinctive empathic abilities, but rather that Lawrence is learning to project these onto new realms. Sheila Choudhury suggests that the travel works of this period do not reveal ‘a stranger seeking the *other*’, but rather one ‘attempting to enter into the *otherness* of the *other*.’⁵

This is evident, too, with regard to language and sound: while *Sons and Lovers* demonstrates a remarkable attentiveness to the intricacies of the Nottinghamshire dialect, in *Kangaroo* it is the birds that Somers feels he can communicate with. This kind of connection, however, may

¹ Ibid., p. 98.

² Gurko, Leo, ‘*Kangaroo*: D. H. Lawrence in Transit’, *Modern Fiction Studies* 10, no. 4 (Winter 1964-65), pp. 349-58 (p. 358).

³ Sepčić, Višnja, ‘The Category of Landscape in D.H. Lawrence’s *Kangaroo*’, *Studia Romanica et Anglicana Zagrabiensia* 27-28 (1969), pp. 129-52 (pp. 150-1).

⁴ *D.H. Lawrence: Language and Being*, p. 6.

⁵ Choudhury, Sheila Lahiri, ‘Transcending Boundaries, Crossing the Territories: a Study of Lawrence’s Travel Writings and Fiction’, in Ceramella, N., and de Filippis, S. (eds.), *D.H. Lawrence and Literary Genres* (Naples: Loffredo Editore, 2004), pp. 67-78 (p. 70).

entail abandoning the human altogether. Somers feels that his wife, Harriet, is essentially '[a]nother bird like himself', but laments her insistence on continuing to 'speak, talk, feel':

It was time they both agreed that nothing has any meaning. Meaning is a dead letter when a man has no soul. And speech is like a volley of dead leaves and dust, stifling the air. Human beings should learn to make weird, wordless cries, like animals, and cast off the clutter of words [...] The decomposed body of the past whirling and choking us, language, love, and meaning.¹

Similarly, earlier in the novel Somers longs for 'cold, lovely silence' and feels that 'speech had gone out of him. He wanted to be cold, cold, and alone like a single fish'.² There is a deep-seated scepticism regarding the limitations of verbal communication here: Chris Baldick notes that, in his later work, Lawrence is dogged by a sense that language, 'in its most powerful public forms of slogan and shibboleth, as wielded by politician and journalist, had shown itself to be a deadlier weapon than poison gas.'³ But that scepticism does stimulate a wholehearted attempt to engage with the animal other. The posthumously published *Etruscan Places* (1932) meditates upon the timeless quality of the nightingale's song, which is 'neither preaching nor teaching nor commanding nor urging. It is just singing. And in the beginning was not a word but a chirrup.'⁴ This echoes Rupert Birkin's misanthropic fantasy, in *Women in Love*, of a 'lark rising up in the morning upon a humanless world'; while another late work, *Aaron's Rod* (1922), describes a nightingale's singing as a 'wild, savage nonhuman lurch and

¹ *Kangaroo*, pp. 366-7.

² *Ibid.*, p. 140.

³ Baldick, Chris, *The Modern Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 68-9. The fear that language is no longer of value, or is at least in desperate need of rejuvenation, is forcefully expressed in Connie Chatterley's conviction that 'all the great words [...] were cancelled for her generation'. *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (London: Penguin, 1982), p. 64. Compare Bernard's assertion in Woolf's *The Waves* (London: Vintage, 2000): "'It is curious how, at every crisis, some phrase which does not fit insists upon coming to the rescue – the penalty of living in an old civilisation with a notebook'" (p. 122). Another example is found in *Jacob's Room* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008): 'words have been used too often; touched and turned, and left exposed to the dust of the street' (p. 126). Both writers suggest that the social, political and historical crises of modernity demand a new form of literary expression.

⁴ Lawrence, D.H., *Mornings in Mexico* and *Etruscan Places* (London: Heinemann, 1956), p. 29.

squander of sound, beautiful, but entirely unaesthetic.’¹ In all of these cases, Lawrence’s disillusion with European culture, and even the human species in general, leads him to make vehement, absolutist assertions that seem to deny the possibility of meaningful communication and understanding between species (I argue in Chapter Four that Woolf’s exploration of birdsong and musicality explores this possibility with more optimism).² He often romanticises or objectifies the other, whether human or animal: as Sagar notes, the Etruscans ‘are just “the Etruscans”, undifferentiated.’³ Nonetheless, when Lawrence turns his attention from the language and environment of England, he continues to maintain an insistent engagement with his subjects, and a determination to explore alternative perspectives: in *Kangaroo*, as Bell puts it, he strives to keep ‘a mental window open on to the experience’ of the Australian landscape, and his interactions with its nonhuman animals.⁴

The recurrent sense of a division or opposition between the human and animal worlds, or Western and non-Western cultures, suggests that in these respects Lawrence’s work continues to be underpinned by a dualistic worldview; indeed, as his disillusion with England, Europe, and Western culture grows, this sense of division arguably becomes more entrenched. Yet his exposure to new experiences, places and beings sometimes stimulates a desire to bridge these supposed barriers as well. The 1925 novella *St Mawr*, for example, draws upon Lawrence’s experiences in New Mexico to explore different ways of transgressing or hybridising

¹ Lawrence, D.H., *Women in Love* (London: Penguin, 1960), p. 142; *Aaron’s Rod* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), p. 227.

² Lawrence’s position here is in some ways similar to that of Immanuel Kant, as outlined by David Rothenberg: according to this, birdsong is ‘not really beautiful, but sublime, something wonderfully alien to our understanding – beguiling, but always beyond our reach’. Rothenberg, David, *Why Birds Sing: A Journey Into the Mystery of Birdsong* (New York: Basic Books, 2005), p. 11. At other points, however, Lawrence suggests that birdsong exists upon a continuum of human and nonhuman expression: his essay ‘Whistling of Birds’ suggests that ‘it is in us, as well as without us’. ‘Whistling of Birds’, in *A Selection from Phoenix* (London: Penguin, 1979), pp. 605-09 (p. 607).

³ Sagar, Keith, ‘How to Live? – The End of Lawrence’s Quest’, in Ingersoll, E., and Hyde, V. (eds.), *Windows to the Sun: D.H. Lawrence’s Thought-Adventures* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009), pp. 207-23 (p. 218).

⁴ *D.H. Lawrence: Language and Being*, p. 159.

categories and identities. Lou Witt, the protagonist, suffers a crisis of national identity: ‘what sort of American was she, after all? And what sort of European was she either? She didn’t “belong” anywhere.’¹ One cause of this crisis is an encounter with the titular horse; Lou longs to connect with the ‘older, heavily potent world’ that he represents.² This longing is not diminished by her awareness that ‘half-way across from our human world to that terrific equine twilight was not a small step’.³ When riding St Mawr, Lewis, a groom, “seems to sink himself in the horse”, and when Lou’s mother speaks to him, she is unsure whether she is ‘speaking to a man or to a horse.’⁴ For certain characters, at least, the human-nonhuman boundary feels permeable.

Given Lawrence’s restless temperament, his desire to constantly seek out new experiences and places, it is unsurprising that his fiction should maintain a faith in the possibility of transgressing or bridging identities and categories. To some degree, this can be seen as a reaction to certain new restrictions of his era, such as the introduction of passports. In *Etruscan Places*, Lawrence is infuriated when an Italian official demands to see his passport. This ‘lout’, to Lawrence, represents the state’s desire to control movement and identity, and it is in reaction to such developments that he develops a position which, sporadically at least, embraces ambiguity and liminality.⁵ Bridget Chalk argues that there are direct links between Lawrence’s hatred of bureaucratic intrusiveness and the formal development of his work following the First World War:

Lawrence’s negotiations with national identity and his dissatisfaction with the conventional novel are mutually enforcing anxieties that underwrite his work in this period. [...] [T]he formal and thematic strategies of *Aaron’s Rod* attempt to unravel

¹ Lawrence, D.H., *St Mawr*, in *Collected Stories* (London: Everyman, 1994), pp. 791-926 (p. 791).

² *Ibid.*, p. 805.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 808.

⁵ *Etruscan Places*, pp. 21-2.

the kind of socialisation aimed for by both the traditional novel of development and the passport.¹

As Chalk suggests, *Aaron's Rod* – a novel, as she notes, often criticised for being formally sloppy or incoherent – may in fact represent a conscious attempt to develop a distinctive kind of form, one which undermines the idea of identity as single or stable. Aaron himself is stubbornly insistent on the discrete, self-contained nature of his personality: 'To be alone,' he feels, 'to be oneself, not to be driven or violated into something which is not oneself, surely it is better than anything. [...] That is the only way to final, living unison: through sheer, finished singleness.'² This cannot, however, be read as a simple reflection of Lawrence's own position; the novel, instead, deliberately challenges such assertions, by emphasising Aaron's self-doubt. As Chalk argues, '[p]art of Aaron's malaise is due to his insistence upon a unified and singular self'; Lawrence, she believes, wants to show that 'identity is profoundly contingent'.³ Consequently, the inconsistent behaviour and meandering structure in the novel may be part of a deliberate strategy, intended to challenge the sense of stable identity and narrative purpose which the realist novel perpetuates.⁴

This claim is supported by Kermode, who discusses a letter to Edward Garnett which enunciates a theory of the novel that 'rejects "character", "development" and so forth as so many shibboleths, customary but not essential attributes of the novel'. Lawrence, Kermode explains, 'hated to be told that his books were "formless"; people who said that were talking

¹ Chalk, Bridget, "'I Am Not England": Narrative and National Identity in *Aaron's Rod* and *Sea and Sardinia*', *Journal of Modern Literature* 31, no. 4 (Summer 2008), pp. 54-70 (p. 55).

² *Aaron's Rod*, p. 128.

³ 'Narrative and National Identity in *Aaron's Rod* and *Sea and Sardinia*', p. 63.

⁴ As Bell explains, this aspect of the novel also 'inaugurates a period in which the rhetoric of singleness and authenticity is increasingly incompatible with the language of social and ethical community' – the kind of language that characterises much of *Sons and Lovers* (*D.H. Lawrence: Language and Being*, p. 144).

about “an abstraction that does not exist”.¹ This assertion also illuminates *Kangaroo*, another novel with a structure that can feel incoherent and uncontrolled: Neil Roberts claims that, in that novel, ‘Lawrence explicitly foregrounds contingency, and its disintegration of predetermined notions of plot’.² Ultimately, Bell argues, Lawrence becomes both ‘the culmination of the English novel and the writer in whom it most completely fragments.’³ His determination to produce unprecedentedly vital, sensual fiction, emphasising both the power and the ephemerality of human personality over narrative coherence, leads him to reject conventional novelistic constraints. This conscious rejection of narrative closure and linearity anticipates much of Powys’ work, as I argue in the following chapter.⁴

As *Aaron’s Rod* develops, the protagonist begins to question his faith in the unity or singularity of the self. Lawrence connects this to his encounters with the nonhuman world: sitting ‘for long hours among the cypress trees of Tuscany’, for example, Aaron feels that he can somehow communicate with them:

And his soul seemed to leave him and to go far away, far back, perhaps, to where life was all different and time passed otherwise than time passes now. [...] [O]ur life is only a fragment of the shell of life. [...] Much that is in life has passed away from men, leaving us all mere bits.⁵

¹ Lawrence, p. 28. Kermode’s explanation of Lawrence’s approach is not applied to *Aaron’s Rod* here; in fact, as Chalk notes, he argues later in the text that the novel’s structure simply reflects ‘virtually complete indifference to the form of the novel’, rather than a conscious attempt to experiment with and broaden the form. (‘Narrative and National Identity in *Aaron’s Rod* and *Sea and Sardinia*’, p. 57; Lawrence, p. 80).

² D.H. Lawrence, *Travel and Cultural Difference*, p. 67. Sepčić, conversely, is unconvinced that Lawrence consciously intends to challenge narrative coherence in the novel, claiming that *Kangaroo* suffers from ‘an utter absence of coherence’: Somers’ vacillation between ‘revulsion from the human and back again’, she argues, reveals an unresolved contradiction at the heart of the text, and indeed Lawrence’s philosophy (‘The Category of Landscape in D.H. Lawrence’s *Kangaroo*’, pp. 150-2).

³ D.H. Lawrence: *Language and Being*, p. 12.

⁴ The concept of deliberately inconsistent characters is used by Butts to suggest the ontological equivalence or priority of the nonhuman (Chapter Three); while Woolf, similarly, deliberately blurs the lines between characters in *The Waves* (Chapter Four). Fjågesund notes that ‘Aaron and Lilly are a sort of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, two characters who both carry the traits of Lawrence himself’, and the same point might be made about Woolf’s relation to the ensemble of characters in her novel (*The Apocalyptic World of D.H. Lawrence*, p. 122). All three writers are interested in the idea of characters being driven by a kind of amorphous vitality, rather than developing according to carefully consistent and well-defined personalities.

⁵ *Aaron’s Rod*, p. 265.

Through developing an empathic connection with nonhuman life, Aaron becomes aware of the limitations of a view that emphasises human singularity and unity. We are instead, he feels, ‘mere bits’, fragments of personality which lack an underlying essence, and which interpenetrate with the other lives we encounter, both human and nonhuman. Critical writing on Lawrence often argues that these ideas are central to his work’s interpretation: Gregory Tague, for example, claims that he tends not to pursue character development, but rather ‘an interpretive understanding of the totality of a number of elements in communication with each other, such as the environment, the past, and another individual’; while Bell suggests that the personality, in Lawrence’s fiction, ultimately becomes ‘a dynamic and evolutionary matrix of competing forces rather than an autonomous ethical entity.’¹

On this question of the unified individual, however, Lawrence’s position is particularly ambivalent and complex. A work like *Women in Love* seems to defend what the narrator calls ‘the organic purpose, the organic unity’, which is threatened by the growth of the ‘mechanical principle’; and ‘... Love Was Once a Little Boy’, published three years after *Aaron’s Rod*, sees Lawrence continuing to espouse a faith in the power, persistence and fundamental isolation of the individual self:

Neither man nor woman should sacrifice individuality to love, nor love to individuality. [...] The individual has nothing, really, to do with love. That is, his individuality hasn’t. Out of the deep silence of his individuality runs the stream of desire [...] But it is never *himself* that meets and mingles with *herself*: any more than two lakes, whose waters meet to make one river, in the distance, meet in themselves.²

¹ Tague, Gregory F., *Character and Consciousness: George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, E.M. Forster, D.H. Lawrence (Phenomenological, Ecological, and Ethical Readings)* (Bethesda: Academica Press, 2005), p. 213; D.H. Lawrence: *Language and Being*, p. 5.

² *Women in Love*, p. 260; Lawrence, D.H., ‘... Love Was Once a Little Boy’, p. 452. It is necessary to distinguish *Aaron’s Rod*’s comments on the unity (or otherwise) of the personality from those passages which discuss monism in terms of culture. In the latter context, the novel bemoans the threat of cultural globalisation, ‘the one world triumphing more and more over the many worlds, the big oneness swallowing up the many small

This suggests that Aaron's expression of such sentiments reflects Lawrence's own feelings. Similarly, Birkin in *Women in Love* tells Ursula that he does not love her, but believes together their relations can explore something deeper than this, the "real impersonal me, that is beyond love, beyond any emotional relationship [...] that does *not* meet and mingle, and never can."¹ While Lawrence's work reveals a resistance to the concept of the unified self at points, then, it is equally sceptical towards notions of romantic love that see this, essentially, as an unproblematic mingling of personalities. As Sagar argues, however much Lawrence admires 'birds, dolphins, or Etruscans', he also feels that Western man has 'come too far to submerge his individuality.' Lawrence, ultimately, 'could not bring himself to abandon his belief in the sanctity of the unique individual.'² It is equally true, however, that he could not wholeheartedly commit to the truth or value of that concept. Mark Kinkead-Weekes perhaps grasps the underlying reason for this tension's persistence: for Lawrence, he argues, 'the result of islanding the individual self from others and the other is the death of the self.'³ It may be precisely by vehemently defending the isolated self that Lawrence inadvertently highlights its fragmentary and elusive character.

The sense of self and identity as ephemeral and fragmentary is also strengthened, whether consciously or not, by Lawrence's use of imagery. This is evident, for example, in his depiction of mining: while *Women in Love* characterises this industry as being underpinned by 'the substitution of the mechanical principle for the organic', the miners themselves are

diversities in its insatiable gnawing appetite, leaving a dreary sameness throughout the world, that means at last complete sterility' (p. 153).

¹ *Women in Love*, pp. 161-2.

² 'How to Live? – The End of Lawrence's Quest', p. 219.

³ Kinkead-Weekes, Mark, 'A Lawrence Who Had Loved Islands', in Ceramella, N., and de Filippis, S. (eds.), *D.H. Lawrence and Literary Genres* (Naples: Loffredo Editore, 2004), pp. 187-94 (p. 193).

more symbolically complex.¹ Far from being associated with mechanisation and order, Lawrence sometimes aligns his father's profession with animality, sensuality and darkness – opposing it to the humanist rationality associated with his mother. In the same novel, Gudrun is struck by this 'world of powerful, underworld men', whose voices carry 'the voluptuous resonance of darkness, the strong, dangerous underworld, mindless, inhuman. They sounded also like strange machines, heavy, oiled. The voluptuousness was like that of machinery, cold and iron.'² This combination of sensual and mechanical imagery suggests an amorphous, shifting symbol, resisting fixed or unified understandings.

This use of imagery to create a sense of amorphousness, flux and fragmentation is most prominent in Lawrence's symbolic understanding of the ocean. Like all of the writers in this study, he uses the sea to communicate a sense of movement and liminality, to destabilise categories more generally. *Sea and Sardinia* describes ocean travel as a 'wavering, tremulous, yet long and surging pulsation', and 'the trembling of never-ended space, as one moves in flight! Space, and the frail vibration of space, the glad lonely wringing of the heart.'³ John Alcorn notes that such passages use language which matches their imagery, creating 'an eroticism of touch [...] upon slowly building, rolling rhythms of the ocean'; Stewart, similarly, notes the 'slow wavelike rhythms and rolling repetitions' of *Sea and Sardinia*.⁴ Somers in *Kangaroo* longs to be 'an isolated swift fish in the big seas, that are bigger than the earth; fierce with cold, cold life', and as Sepčić notes, the seashore 'speaks to him with the same language as the Australian bush, luring him outside himself, helping him to flee his own personality, his own preoccupations, his own past.'⁵ This linking of liminality and the

¹ *Women in Love*, p. 260.

² *Ibid.*, p. 128.

³ *Sea and Sardinia*, pp. 30, 47.

⁴ Alcorn, John, *The Nature Novel from Hardy to Lawrence* (London: Macmillan, 1977), p. 91; 'Movement, Space, and Rhetoric in Lawrence's Travel Writing', p. 155.

⁵ 'The Category of Landscape in D.H. Lawrence's *Kangaroo*', p. 144.

aqueous is already evident in *The White Peacock*: Michelucci notes that, in that novel, '[t]hresholds are found particularly in watery places, the marshes and ponds [...] where 'the shadowy fish' slide silently and mysteriously under the surface'.¹ Lawrence's use of oceanic and aqueous imagery sits uneasily with the dualisms which pervade his work, since these assume clear boundaries between categories; yet his preoccupation with such symbols betrays a determination to challenge such barriers. Characteristically, the imagery and techniques Lawrence deploys problematise or undermine the neatly schematic readings of his work that his rhetorical pronouncements tend to invite.

III. If We Had Tree-Speech

One of the crucial tensions in Lawrence's work, then, is between his fascination with the idea of the powerful, unified personality, and a similarly strong interest in the idea of personality as fragmentary and ephemeral. The former concept also sits uncomfortably with Lawrence's intense, animistic sense of landscape. Like Powys and Butts, he is deeply influenced by Hardy in this respect; all three writers use landscape description as a means of marginalising human concerns, shifting the focus of the novel from human narratives to the evocation of place. As Alcorn explains, 'Hardy's novels introduced the *genius loci*, 'spirit of place,' as the predominant symbol of human experience in the new novel.'² He notes that in *The Return of the Native*, Egdon Heath 'registers all the transitory actions of the humans who walk upon it [...] representing a point of view outside man's consciousness, a viewpoint from within the

¹ *Space and Place in the Works of D.H. Lawrence*, p. 12. Ponds have a similar significance for other writers under consideration. In Powys' *Wolf Solent*, the protagonist suffers a crisis in which he feels he no longer has 'any definite personality, no longer any banked-up integral self', and this prompts suicidal thoughts: 'The alternative [...] was the bottom of Lenty Pond!' (p. 543). Stephen Fox has explored the symbolic complexity of the fish pond at Pointz Hall in *Between the Acts*. Fox, Stephen, 'The Fish Pond as Symbolic Centre in *Between the Acts*', *Modern Fiction Studies* 18, no. 3 (Autumn 1972), pp. 467-73.

² *The Nature Novel from Hardy to Lawrence*, p. 20.

sub-human world.¹ Lawrence recognises the significance of the novel's approach early in his career, as his *Study of Thomas Hardy* (1914) shows:

What is the real stuff of tragedy in the book? It is the Heath. It is the primitive, primal earth, where the instinctive life heaves up. [...] Here is the deep, black source from whence all these little contents of lives are drawn. [...] It cannot be futile, for it is eternal. What is futile is the purpose of man.²

Lawrence's powerful sense of place, which both draws upon and develops Hardy's own approach, chafes against his inclination towards heroic, individualist narratives; characters like Aaron strive towards a dramatic self-realisation, yet his vital, animistic landscapes create a sense of such goals as being ultimately insignificant, 'futile'. In *The White Peacock*, Lawrence's environmental descriptions tackle this tension by distinguishing between a cold, distant sky, and an earth that is connected with human concerns:

All the great hollow vastness roars overhead, and the stars are only sparks that whirl and spin in the restless space. The earth must listen to us; she covers her face with a thin veil of mist, and is sad; she soaks up our blood tenderly, in the darkness, grieving, and in the light she soothes and reassures us. Here on our earth is sympathy and hope, the heavens have nothing but distance.³

This is not yet the unforgiving landscape, oblivious to human concerns, that Lawrence identifies in Hardy's work; such descriptions are more common in his evocations of American and Australian landscapes in the later fiction. Watson also sees it in *Women in Love*, in which, he argues, the environment 'becomes a part of the great unexplained other, that world which is not ourselves. [...] The main characters relate to the world around them in ways which make them seem unimportant'.⁴ This is certainly true of Lawrence's 'utterly

¹ Ibid., p. 70.

² Lawrence, D.H., *Study of Thomas Hardy and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 25.

³ *The White Peacock*, p. 194.

⁴ 'D.H. Lawrence and the East Midlands Landscape', p. 29.

silent, frozen world of the mountain-tops', the Tyrolean Alps, in which the novel reaches its climax; although, as with the skies in *The White Peacock*, this cold, indifferent landscape can be contrasted with others in the novel that are associated with warmth and sensuality.¹ The manner in which Lawrence draws upon Hardy's influence, in terms of landscape description, thus varies and develops over time; but that influence is evident from the beginning of his career.

One of the techniques used in Hardy's fiction to convey a sense of human insignificance, prioritising the nonhuman world over human concerns, is that of narrative 'telescoping', oscillating between close-up description and distanced perspectives which provide a sense of wider context. Lawrence's attentiveness to detail is evident from his early work onwards: in *Sons and Lovers*, for example, Mrs Morel's encounter with some lilies is described in intense, close language:

The tall white lilies were reeling in the moonlight, and the air was charged with their perfume, as with a presence. Mrs Morel gasped slightly in fear. She touched the big, pallid flowers on their petals, then shivered. They seemed to be stretching in the moonlight. She put her hand into one white bin: the gold scarcely showed on her fingers by moonlight. [...] Then she drank a deep draught of the scent. It almost made her dizzy.²

Here, Lawrence draws upon Hardy's ability to describe the natural world in sensual, sexualised, and closely-focused terms: like Butts and Powys, as I will argue in later chapters, he shifts the emphasis of his fiction away from linear plotting and temporal progression by emphasising the emotional and psychological significance of such encounters. As Florence Leaver explains, in such passages, nature 'does not merely exist: people respond to it; blend

¹ *Women in Love*, p. 488.

² *Sons and Lovers*, pp. 28-9.

with it, yearn towards it, try to get inside it, wonder about it, live it, hate it.’¹ They therefore demonstrate Lawrence’s ability to empathise closely with the nonhuman world. In his later work, he juxtaposes this approach with zoomed-out landscape description. As the quotation from *Women in Love* above suggests, Lawrence’s travel experiences in mountain regions partly explain the development of this style; *Twilight in Italy* (1916), for example, features the following passage:

So I set off myself, up the valley between the close, snow-topped mountains, whose white gleamed above me as I crawled, small as an insect, along the dark, cold valley below. [...] The valley beds were like deep graves, the sides of the mountains like the collapsing walls of a grave. The very mountain-tops above, bright with transcendent snow, seemed like death, eternal death.²

As Stewart notes, here, the use of a ‘dual perspective on man and mountains allows the writer to rise above his toiling personal self and regard it with wry detachment.’³ The passage recalls *Native*’s cinematic opening description of Egdon Heath, in which a figure traverses a ‘long, laborious road, dry, empty, and white.’ Diggory Venn’s van is ‘the single atom of life that the scene contained, and it only served to render the general loneliness more evident.’⁴ Like the Wessex moors in Hardy’s work, the Alps provide Lawrence with a literal, geographical manifestation for his sense of human isolation, abandonment and insignificance.⁵ By shifting away from the human perspective, portraying himself as ‘small as an insect’, he moves away from the conception of the environment as simply a setting upon

¹ Leaver, Florence, ‘The Man-Nature Relationship in D.H. Lawrence’s Novels’, *University of Kansas City Review* 19 (1953), pp. 241-48 (p. 241).

² Lawrence, D.H., *Twilight in Italy and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 212-13.

³ ‘Movement, Space, and Rhetoric in Lawrence’s Travel Writing’, p. 154.

⁴ Hardy, Thomas, *The Return of the Native* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 13.

⁵ Rosemary Sumner also links the openings of *Native* and *The Rainbow*, noting that ‘there are no characters in the ordinary sense in either chapter. [...] Both are attuned to the continuing cycle of nature and open to the shock of the unknown beyond the earth or in the psyche’. Sumner, Rosemary, *A Route to Modernism: Hardy, Lawrence, Woolf* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), pp. 95-96.

which human narratives are enacted. The stark, cold imagery of death is a characteristically Lawrentian embellishment of Hardy's approach.

The sense in Lawrence's work that landscapes somehow supersede the human narratives which occur upon them is particularly vivid in his writings about non-English or non-European landscapes. *Sea and Sardinia* portrays the titular region as somewhere that has somehow managed to escape the influence of European culture; it has, he claims, 'no history, no date, no race [...] It lies outside; outside the circuit of civilisation.'¹ Later, he returns to this theme: 'There are unknown, unworked lands where the salt has not lost its savour', Lawrence tells us.² This fantasy of the non-humanised environment partly explains Lawrence's fascination with Australian and American landscapes in later life. In *Kangaroo*, he uses the Australian environment to convey a sense that human life simply has no history, influence or connection with the place:

The soft, blue, humanless sky of Australia, the pale, white unwritten atmosphere of Australia. *Tabula rasa*. The world a new leaf. And on the new leaf, nothing. The white clarity of the Australian, fragile atmosphere. Without a mark, without a record.³

As Bell suggests, in Lawrence's fiction these landscapes seem to *impose* emotion upon the characters, rather than reflecting the characters' thoughts and feelings, as the English landscape does in earlier works.⁴ It is easy to understand the appeal of such places for Lawrence, given his desire to escape the constraints of a stifling, constrained English or European culture. For him, this is not a world 'heavily burdened with tradition,' as Sepčić puts it; it consequently 'gives a pleasant sense of relief', but also 'frightens by its vacancy

¹ *Sea and Sardinia*, p. 9.

² *Ibid.*, p. 117.

³ *Kangaroo*, p. 365.

⁴ *D.H. Lawrence: Language and Being*, p. 160.

and its utter absence of human associations and traditions.’¹ Lawrence’s attitude towards Sardinia and the landscapes of the New World, of course, does reveal a deeply Anglo- or Eurocentric mindset, ignorant of the indigenous cultural traditions and histories embedded in these landscapes; they are not ‘[w]ithout a mark’ to the cultures that have inhabited them for centuries.² Yet because of Lawrence’s wilful blindness on this point, they function as powerful sites for the development of a narrative style that emphasises the nonhuman world. As Worthen sees it, it is in *Kangaroo* that this approach is first fully realised: there, ‘a belief is asserted in the nonhuman world rather than in relationship as *the* crucial context for a human being’s sense of self.’³ To make this point is not to dismiss the problematic way in which Lawrence uses these landscapes; but it is to stress that their function, for him, may be primarily heuristic, a fantasy that assists his attempts to see the world from a nonhuman perspective.

This kind of imaginative appropriation of landscape is also evident in Lawrence’s animistic characterisation of place.⁴ The sense of the Australian landscape being alive strikes Somers powerfully when he first ventures into the bush, at the beginning of the novel:

And now, there was something among the trees, and his hair began to stir with terror, on his head. There was a presence. He looked at the weird, white, dead trees, and into the hollow distances of the bush. [...] It must be the spirit of the place. [...] It was biding its time with a terrible ageless watchfulness.⁵

¹ ‘The Category of Landscape in D.H. Lawrence’s *Kangaroo*’, p. 132.

² As Robert Kiely points out, there is also irony here in Lawrence’s use of language to depict the absence of language, particularly since the meaning of *tabula rasa* is ‘so entirely tied to a verbal and philosophical tradition’ (*Beyond Egotism*, p. 38).

³ *D.H. Lawrence*, p. 269.

⁴ Donald Gutierrez argues that the sense of landscape as a living entity in Lawrence’s texts is more accurately characterized as hylozoism, which is distinguished from animism by its ‘sense of interpenetration between man and nature’, as well as ‘a quality of interrelatedness or interchangeability between the animate and inanimate’. Gutierrez, Donald, ‘The Ideas of Place: D.H. Lawrence’s Travel Books’, *University of Dayton Review* 15, no. 1 (Spring 1981), pp. 143-152 (p. 145). In order to make clear the connections between writers in this study, however, I am using the less specific concept of animism.

⁵ *Kangaroo*, p. 19.

As Bell explains, Somers experiences something here that seems to fall ‘outside of human terms altogether’; and, as Gurko notes, this ‘lurking aliveness’ of the Australian continent is evident throughout the novel.¹ Having claimed a sense of the landscape as a *tabula rasa*, Lawrence projects this sense of a mysterious nonhuman presence, the ‘spirit of the place’, upon it. Sepčić notes that the novel’s ‘dramatic agents [...] are not human beings but the night, the moon, the sea, the waves, the sand, the land.’² The passages which decentre the human narrative viewpoint in this way anticipate similar sections in *Armed with Madness* and *To the Lighthouse* (among others). In such examples, animism is not merely a means of expressing nonhuman life, but a way of resisting the occupation of human perspectives.

Lawrence’s fascination with animism is also evident in *Etruscan Places*, where he extols the virtues of this kind of pantheistic belief system:

To the Etruscan all was alive; the whole universe lived [...] and had a great soul, or *anima*: and in spite of one great soul, there were myriad roving, lesser souls: every man, every creature and tree and lake and mountain and stream, was animate, had its own particular consciousness. And has it today.³

Such speculations, characteristically, are not evidentially supported in the text; Richard Aldington notes in his introduction that, as an amateur, Lawrence perhaps ‘blunder[s] in tackling a subject so complicated’ as the Etruscans.⁴ Yet this only highlights the way in which Lawrence uses his imaginative appropriation of landscapes and cultures to explore his own ideas. It explains, for example, the casual yet significant afterthought, ‘[a]nd has it today’: Lawrence is not primarily interested in providing an accurate account of the Etruscan worldview, but rather in considering whether his particular version of that worldview is

¹ *D.H. Lawrence: Language and Being*, p. 158; ‘*Kangaroo*: D. H. Lawrence in Transit’, p. 354.

² ‘The Category of Landscape in D.H. Lawrence’s *Kangaroo*’, p. 146.

³ *Etruscan Places*, p. 49.

⁴ Aldington, Richard, introduction to *Etruscan Places*, p. vi.

illuminating when applied in a contemporary context. Lawrence asks us to consider familiar landscapes from the animistic perspective that he attributes to the Etruscans. There are connections with the other writers in this study in this kind of imaginative appropriation: Powys, Butts and Woolf all seek to reclaim the English landscape as a site in which to realise their particular fictional and ideological aims.

Lawrence's use of animism also bears specific affinities with that of Butts in the way both writers use trees and forests. In *The White Peacock*, trees are described with language that is, in certain ways, humanised, forming a link between animism and the novel's anthropomorphic descriptions of nonhuman animals:

The wood breathed fragrantly, with a subtle sympathy. The firs softened their touch to me, and the larches woke from the barren winter-sleep, and put out velvet fingers to caress me as I passed [...] I looked down on the blackness where trees filled the quarry and the valley bottoms, and it seemed that the world, my own home-world, was strange again.¹

This passage is of particular interest to the present study in its exploration of defamiliarisation: the apparently animate quality of the trees makes the familiar landscape 'strange again' to Cyril, to some extent revitalising it. In contrast to Butts' work, the animistic sense here is entirely benign and comforting. Lawrence's later fiction moves towards the ominous, threatening descriptions of trees and forests found in Butts: in *Sons and Lovers*, the space in front of the house at Bestwood gives the children 'a feeling of night, of vastness, and of terror. This terror came in from the shrieking of the tree and the anguish of the home discord.'² As Michael Black notes, the 'shrieking' of the tree reflects 'the parents' conflict being translated in the child's consciousness into constitutive elements of his world'.³ Butts, similarly,

¹ *The White Peacock*, p. 152.

² *Sons and Lovers*, pp. 98-9.

³ Black, Michael, *Lawrence: Sons and Lovers* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 78.

transposes her youthful fears of the domestic sphere onto the forests near her home in her childhood memoir, *The Crystal Cabinet*: ‘Was it possible that there was a dreadfulness, apart from magic, in the pine-woods? [...] The danger, as I sensed it, lay in minds, at home. Only anyhow it wasn’t there.’¹ For both writers, tensions which arise from their distinctive socio-cultural positions – torn between tradition and modernity, in various senses – are manifested in these understandings of the childhood environment. As Lawrence’s writing develops, this underlying source is no longer made explicit, but trees retain their animate, often sinister qualities: the Tuscan cypress trees from *Aaron’s Rod* noted above ‘seemed like so many ghosts, like soft, strange, pregnant presences’; and in *Sea and Sardinia*, similarly, poplars are ‘like ghosts [...] they seem to have living, sentient flesh.’ Lawrence longs to communicate with one: ‘Ah, if it could but answer! Or if we had tree-speech!’² Again, the resonances with Butts’ work are striking: in *Death of Felicity Taverner*, Scylla has the ‘speech’ of trees; in *Ashe of Rings*, they are described as ‘breathing like tall persons’, like the wood which ‘breathe[s] fragrantly’ in *The White Peacock*, and the ‘tall cypresses breathing and communicating’ in *Aaron’s Rod*.³

Another noteworthy connection here lies in the way forests function, for both writers, as portals to other realms, whether temporal or metaphysical. As noted above, Aaron’s experience with the cypress trees appears to take him back in time, revitalising ‘lost races, lost language, lost human ways of feeling and of knowing. [...] Great life-realities gone into the darkness. But the cypresses commemorate.’⁴ As I will show in later chapters, they therefore play a similar role to forests and houses in Butts’ work, and to ancient earthworks in both Butts and Powys. In Lawrence, this symbolic function is evident throughout the

¹ Butts, Mary, *The Crystal Cabinet: My Childhood at Salterns* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988), p. 61.

² *Sea and Sardinia*, p. 86.

³ Butts, Mary, *Death of Felicity Taverner*, in *The Taverner Novels* (New York: McPherson and Co., 1992), pp. 163-365 (p. 300); *Ashe of Rings*, p. 62; *The White Peacock*, p. 152; *Aaron’s Rod*, p. 265.

⁴ *Aaron’s Rod*, p. 265.

nonhuman world. Lettie in *The White Peacock*, for example, feels that snowdrops are ‘[s]omething out of an old religion, that we have lost. [...] They belong to some knowledge we have lost, that I have lost, and that I need.’¹ Nonhuman animals are particularly significant here: St Mawr, as noted above, seems to connect to an ‘older, heavily potent world’; and Somers encounters an emu in *Kangaroo* which seems simultaneously ‘very wide-awake, and yet far off in the past’, with ‘a remote, alert, sharp gentleness belonging to far past twilight ages. [...] A very remote, dirt-brown gentleman from the lost plains of time.’² As creatures which appear essentially unchanged by the human transformations of culture and place over the centuries, animals seem to offer an access-point to ways of being associated with earlier periods.

Lawrence’s work, then, repeatedly emphasises a sense of mysterious potency which infuses the nonhuman world. Other realms of experience and temporalities may be accessed via the environments of his texts; and the landscape itself is described as a living thing. As I have argued, to some extent these ideas should be seen more as heuristic devices, speculations to defamiliarise our way of seeing the world, rather than metaphysical assertions. As Stewart puts it, ‘[s]ubjectively and psychologically, Lawrence’s animism was a participation mystique’; a way of overcoming the ‘mental illusion of separateness’.³ However, he goes on to claim that a more coherent ecological position can be derived from Lawrence’s animism:

Objectively and scientifically, it was grounded in his studies of botany and biology and his experience of the industrial/agricultural carving-up of the Nottinghamshire countryside. His primitivist quest for a lost sense of oneness with the earth, after

¹ *The White Peacock*, p. 129.

² *Kangaroo*, p. 227. For both Lawrence and Powys (as I discuss in the following chapter), reptilian animals and imagery represent a sense of connection to a prehistoric past.

³ Stewart, Jack, ‘Flowers and Flesh: Colour, Place, and Animism in *St Mawr* and “Flowery Tuscany”’, *D. H. Lawrence Review* 36, no. 1 (Spring 2011), pp. 92-113.

leaving England in 1919, is remarkably in tune with contemporary environmental concerns.¹

In this respect, Stewart can be aligned with a body of criticism that sees Lawrence as a key precursor to environmentalist politics and philosophy.² Aline Ferreira argues that a ‘profoundly ecological posture’ is evident in the following passage from his last major work, *Apocalypse* (1931): ‘I am a part of the great whole, and I can never escape [...] What we want is to [...] re-establish the living organic connections, with the cosmos, the sun and earth, with mankind and nation and family.’³ For Ferreira, this reveals a ‘biocentric poetics’ which underpins a project for intervention in ‘the social and political fabric of society’.⁴ Because of the ambivalence and tensions that run through Lawrence’s work, however, any attempt to derive a coherent philosophical position from it is liable to run into contradictions. The apparent desire for ‘oneness with the earth’, as Stewart puts it, and Lawrence’s sense of being ‘part of the great whole’, is not compatible with the animistic outlook of Native Americans extolled in *Mornings in Mexico* (1927): ‘There is no oneness, no sympathetic identifying oneself with the rest. The law of isolation is heavy on every creature.’⁵ Here, Lawrence contrasts a European desire for mass consciousness with an innocent individualism he associates with ‘primitive’ cultures, echoing Mrs Witt in *St Mawr*: ‘Something just writhed inside her, all the time, against Europe. That closeness, that sense of cohesion, that sense of being fused into a lump with all the rest’.⁶

¹ Ibid.

² See, for instance, Gutierrez, Donald, ‘D.H. Lawrence’s “Spirit of Place” as Eco-Monism’, *Journal of the D.H. Lawrence Society* (1991), pp. 39-51; Delany, Paul, ‘D.H. Lawrence and Deep Ecology’; Allen, Abbey, ‘An Ecocritical Perspective on the Works of D.H. Lawrence’; Ehlert, Anne, *Ecological Vision in the Fiction of D.H. Lawrence*; and Ferreira, Aline, ‘Dreams of the Future, Texts from the Past: Utopia and Ecology in Lawrence’s “A Dream of Life”’, in de Felippis, S., and Ceramella, N. (eds.), *D.H. Lawrence and Literary Genres* (Napoli: Loffredo Editore, 2004), pp. 295-310.

³ ‘Utopia and Ecology in Lawrence’s “A Dream of Life”’, p. 307; Lawrence, D.H., *Apocalypse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 149.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ *Mornings in Mexico* and *Etruscan Places* (London: Heinemann, 1956), p. 64.

⁶ *St Mawr*, p. 869.

Despite his comments in *Apocalypse*, then, there is much evidence for the claim that Lawrence felt an aversion towards communal movements that was ultimately insurmountable. This was brought out by his attempts to engage with Rolf Gardiner's project to revitalise rural English traditions in the 1920s. As Keith notes, Lawrence was unable to wholeheartedly commit to this, despite his shared sense that English culture was in desperate need of reclamation:

Lawrence's doubts are readily understandable. Gardiner's enthusiastic accounts of group hikes, morris dancing and songs around the campfire can all too easily suggest communal heartiness, archaic revivalism or the cavortings of overgrown boy scouts. It can even be associated with the taint of fascist discipline.¹

As Keith suggests, Lawrence's idealistic temperament led to friction upon encountering the practical realities of such projects. He found it difficult to separate them from monism, in the sense of a collective human identity. Paul Fussell notes: 'It was finally his acute instinct for the spirit of place that cured him of earlier hopes for "cosmic unity, or world unison".' Fussell quotes from a 1924 letter to Gardiner: 'The spirit of place ultimately always triumphs. [...] I hate "oneness," it's a mania.'² *St Mawr*, again, articulates some of the anxieties which Keith suggests Gardiner's project raised in Lawrence:

There it was in socialism and bolshevism: the same evil. [...] Fascism would keep the surface of life intact, and carry on the undermining business all the better. [...] mankind would abolish death, multiply itself million upon million, rear up city upon city, save every parasite alive, until the accumulation of mere existence is swollen to a horror.³

As this quotation suggests, despite Lawrence's sense that some kind of revitalisation or regeneration of Englishness is necessary in the interwar period, he remains wary regarding

¹ Keith, W.J., 'Spirit of Place and Genius Loci: D.H. Lawrence and Rolf Gardiner', *The D.H. Lawrence Review* 7 (1994), pp. 127-38 (p. 129).

² Quoted in *Abroad: British Literary Travelling Between the Wars*, pp. 146-7.

³ *St Mawr*, p. 849.

the communal movements which appear to offer solutions. This seemingly pragmatic, rational scepticism, however, may also reflect a more general, instinctive misanthropy. Large settlements and groups of people are described with a sense of repulsion throughout his writing life: London is a ‘heaving, shuddering struggle of black-mudded objects deprived of the elements of life’ in *The White Peacock*; the new mining town of Wiggiston in *The Rainbow* is ‘a red-brick confusion rapidly spreading, like a skin-disease’; in *Aaron’s Rod*, it is ‘revolting’ that ‘so many squirming lives’ live in close quarters in such settlements; and in *Twilight in Italy*, modernity brings ‘great blind cubes of dwellings [which] rise stark from the destroyed earth, swarming with a sort of verminous life’.¹ The sheer volume of such examples throughout Lawrence’s work, and the vehement language of infestation and disease, betrays a revulsion towards humanity as a species; one that goes beyond a mere healthy scepticism towards collective political ideologies. As Baldick sees it, by *Women in Love*, Lawrence has come to regard humanity as a ‘verminous infestation of the earth’, and has consequently ‘become embroiled in fantasies of mass extermination’.² This distaste may, as Fjågesund suggests, stem from Lawrence’s Protestant upbringing; in any case, it illuminates his conflicted position regarding humanity’s potential to reimagine and rejuvenate its relationship with place.

This sense of repulsion towards collective movements also relates to Hardy’s influence upon Lawrence’s conception of place and belonging. The quotations above support Terry Wright’s reading of this relationship, according to which Hardy ‘does not quite sustain the courage to challenge the community’ that Lawrence feels is necessary.³ Lawrence’s characters, Wright argues, develop according to their individual natures, remaining independent of the

¹ *The White Peacock*, p. 281-2; Lawrence, D.H., *The Rainbow* (London: Penguin, 1949), p. 345; *Aaron’s Rod*, p. 39; *Twilight in Italy*, p. 223.

² *The Modern Movement*, p. 230.

³ Wright, Terry R., ‘Hardy’s Heirs: D.H. Lawrence and John Cowper Powys’, in Wilson, K. (ed.), *A Companion to Thomas Hardy* (Blackwell: Chichester, 2009), pp. 465-78 (p. 467).

community and its morality.¹ Keith also endorses this view: in Lawrence, he argues, characters are ‘never overwhelmed by their environment; moreover [...] the individual is invariably supported against the “community”, whether that community is regional or cosmopolitan.’² Wright compares this with Hardy’s influence upon Powys, who maintains a stronger sense of the potential value of the community to promote human flourishing; as I argue in the following chapter, Powys’ project to reimagine the English landscape is entwined with his sense of the community as a comic, carnivalesque and cosmopolitan entity. Such ideas feel distant from the sombre individualism of Lawrence’s later work, in particular. Somers in *Kangaroo* captures this attitude:

He felt broken off from his fellow-men. He felt broken off from the England he had belonged to. The ties were gone. He was loose like a single timber of some wrecked ship, drifting over the face of the earth. Without a people, without a land. So be it. He was broken apart, apart he would remain.³

As I have argued, no clear, consistent position on such issues can be derived from analysing Lawrence’s fiction or personal writings, but there is an increasing predominance of such sentiments in his later work. This also has profound implications for Lawrence’s faith in modernism as an innovative literary movement. Williams, as noted above, finds in *Sons and Lovers* a kind of experimentalism that is rooted in community, and which consequently succeeds in marrying tradition and innovation. While Powys is influenced by Lawrence’s approach in such texts (and develops it further), Lawrence himself moves away from it, as his work becomes less community-oriented. As Aidan Burns explains, the fact that language is a ‘public activity’ is no longer an advantage for Lawrence; because language is shared, it ‘will carry the very disease he is fighting’. Therefore, ‘the individual who would find his true self

¹ Ibid., p. 470.

² *Regions of the Imagination*, p. 152.

³ *Kangaroo*, p. 287.

must find it without the aid of all these old categories'.¹ Yet Lawrence can never completely sever himself from his sense of belonging to the language, culture and place of England and, more specifically, Nottinghamshire; such tensions remain unresolved.

IV. Over the Border

The *Study of Thomas Hardy*, then, is dismissive of its subject's tendency to 'stand with the community in condemnation of the aristocrat.' Hardy, Lawrence tells us, 'must stand with the average above the exception [...] and rule out the individual interest.'² There are echoes of Nietzsche in the idea of the aristocratic personality, a leader whose self-realisation is more significant than the wellbeing of the community. *Aaron's Rod* illustrates this cultish sense in those passages which celebrate Aaron's virility and power: his sexual desire is like 'the strength of an eagle with the lightning in its talons. Something to glory in, something overweening, the powerful male passion, arrogant, royal, Jove's thunderbolt.'³ Like Nietzsche in *On the Genealogy of Morality*, Aaron uses the symbol of the eagle to represent an aristocratic, power-centred ethics.⁴ Fjågesund argues that *Aaron's Rod* represents a new phase in Lawrence's fiction in this respect, being centred around power rather than love, as he argues *Women in Love* and *The Rainbow* are.⁵ For Williams, however, the significant shift occurs earlier, and is between the community-oriented world of *Sons and Lovers* and the isolationist world of the novels which follow it. *The Rainbow* features a 'concentration on isolated relationships', dismissing 'the texture of ordinary life as irrelevant'; and in *Women in*

¹ Burns, Aidan, *Nature and Culture in D.H. Lawrence* (London: Macmillan, 1980), p. 15.

² *Study of Thomas Hardy*, p. 49.

³ *Aaron's Rod*, p. 258.

⁴ See Nietzsche, Friedrich, *On the Genealogy of Morality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 28-9.

⁵ *The Apocalyptic World of D.H. Lawrence*, pp. 121-22.

Love, this becomes ‘a wished-for “singleness”, “pure single being”, “the pure duality of polarisation, each one free from any contamination of the other” [...] which in its very isolation, its barrenness, limits any available fulfillment.’¹ On Williams’ account, these texts reveal a dualistic view of the world, separating their central aristocratic characters – whose quests for fulfilment drive the novels – from the community.

This sense of separation is evident in the misanthropic sentiments that often surface. In *The Rainbow*, Will Brangwen is struck by a feeling that man ‘was terrible, awful in his works’:

Sweep away the whole monstrous superstructure of the world of today, cities and industries and civilisation, leave only the bare earth with plants growing and waters running, and he would not mind, so long as he were whole, had Anna and the child and the new, strange certainty in his soul.²

Brangwen’s disgust here is with humanity’s ‘works’, rather than the species itself; but the solution, it seems to him, is isolationist; to retreat with his family, rather than belong to a wider human community. In *Women in Love*, however, the misanthropy is more explicit: Rupert Birkin finds it ““a beautiful clean thought, a world empty of people, just uninterrupted grass, and a hare sitting up””:

I would die like a shot to know that the earth would really be cleaned of all the people. It is the most beautiful and freeing thought. Then there would *never* be another foul humanity created for a universal defilement. [...] Man is a mistake, he must go.³

Again, the language of infestation and cleansing dominates here. Hence, although these texts do revolve around love, as Fjågesund points out, it is forged in an atmosphere of deep ambivalence regarding the value of humanity as a species. They sometimes seem to embrace

¹ *The English Novel from Dickens to Lawrence*, pp. 179-80.

² *The Rainbow*, p. 193.

³ *Women in Love*, p. 142.

the possibility of connection with nonhuman animals as an alternative. Gerald Doherty argues that the sense that humanity ‘must go’ should be read as a call to abandon the humanist self, since it ‘excludes recognition of the animal being that constitutes the core of the human.’¹ On Doherty’s reading, Birkin is suggesting that a narrow anthropocentrism ‘must give way to a broad biocentrism – the commonality of life shared by all sentient beings’.² If we consider Williams’ reading of *Sons and Lovers* against these texts, however, the lack of a sense of such commonality must be noted. Rather than using nonhuman animals to emphasise continuities of experience which connect living things, Lawrence instead uses them to forward his sense of an aristocratic class; the divide is no longer between human and nonhuman animals, but between Lawrence’s questing, individualist protagonists – who have a sense of connection with the nonhuman world – and outsiders. In *The Escaped Cock*, he endows the titular animal with this sense of noble elevation:

By some freak of destiny, he was a dandy rooster, in that dirty little yard with three patchy hens. [...] He answered with a ringing defiance, never to be daunted. [...] He was tied by the leg, and he knew it. Body, soul and spirit were tied by that string.

Underneath, however, the life in him was grimly unbroken.³

Lawrence’s identification with strong, independent characters, whether human or nonhuman, suggests an instinctive sympathy with the concept of the lone, aristocratic figure, still evident in this late work. As Doherty argues, his texts are insightful and prescient in their sense that engagements with nonhuman animals can provide insight into new realms of human experience, but this strength is limited by the sense that such experiences cannot be connected with the kind of existing human community portrayed in *Sons and Lovers*. Texts

¹ Doherty, Gerald, ‘*Women in Love: Sacrifice, Sadism, and the Discourse of Species*’, in Ingersoll, E., and Hyde, V. (eds.), *Windows to the Sun: D.H. Lawrence’s Thought-Adventures* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2009), pp. 69-98 (p. 75).

² *Ibid.*, p. 96.

³ *The Escaped Cock*, pp. 13-14.

like *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love* may therefore challenge a human/nonhuman dualism, but they sometimes seem to replace it with an individualist/communal, or aristocrat/herd one.

This fault-line in Lawrence's work is already evident, as Kermode notes, in his 1917 essay 'The Reality of Peace', which suggests that the decline of Lawrence's faith in communality as a source of cultural revitalisation can be traced to his feelings on the war. In the essay, he calls for the conflict to 'smash the glassy rind of humanity [...] and make an end of it. Let there emerge a few pure and single men [...] Release me from the debased social body.'¹ Such sentiments are at odds with the sense of a comingling of categories evident – as Chalk argues – in the structure of *Aaron's Rod*, or in *Sea and Sardinia's* depiction of ocean travel. Hence, while Lawrence is ambivalent for much of his literary career regarding the possibility of humanity (as a species) transcending the pathologies he identifies, his presentation of place is often more emphatic in its sense of liminality and shifting categories. Yet even in this respect, the move away from community-inspired pluralism towards a more individualist approach is increasingly evident in the post-*Sons and Lovers* work. Ella Westland notes that Cornwall is significant for Lawrence because of its 'peripherality, its being "not England".'² But in discussing his time there, she also argues that, if 'place-related activity and community integration (rather than landscape appreciation) are crucial measures of belonging, Lawrence is low on the scale.'³ Cornwall, situated at the south-west extremity of England, can be seen as a site of the marginal and peripheral for Lawrence; yet that is closely connected with Somers' sense, in *Kangaroo*, of a place that 'had not been finally swept, submerged by any

¹ Quoted in Kermode, *Lawrence*, p. 83. It is difficult to discern a consistent position on the war's impact, however; as Michelucci argues, in *The Rainbow* and *Women in Love*, this period is presented as 'fragmentary, chaotic, and even tragic, but not without potential for renewal' (*Space and Place in the Works of D.H. Lawrence*, p. 87). As I argue in Chapter Three, Butts' work sometimes reveals a similarly tentative optimism regarding the new possibilities that this crisis may create.

² Westland, Ella, 'D.H. Lawrence's Cornwall: Dwelling in a Precarious Age', *Cultural Geographies* 9 (2002), pp. 266-85 (p. 273).

³ *Ibid.*, p. 278.

English spirit.’¹ At such points, it feels less like a site in which mainstreams and margins can commingle and overcome static identities, and more like a zone upon which Lawrence’s desires for an absolute break, an escape, are projected. Characteristically, as well as providing this sense in geographical and cultural terms, the county does so in a temporal respect as well:

And as Somers sat there on the sheaves in the underdark, seeing the light swim above the sea, he felt he was over the border, in another world. Over the border, in that twilight, awesome world of the previous Celts. The spirit of the ancient, pre-Christian world, which lingers still in the truly Celtic places, he could feel it invade him in the savage dusk, making him savage too.²

In such passages, Lawrence’s protagonists do not explore boundaries between worlds, but long to cross it entirely, to escape the human, the Western, or the present. For Somers here, Cornwall provides a sense of leaving his own period and culture entirely, to return to a romanticised, ‘savage’ world which corresponds to the kind of absolute animality evident in *The Escaped Cock* and elsewhere.

Lawrence’s position on Cornwall is, however, characteristically inconsistent. Like Mary Butts (as I argue in Chapter Three), he vacillates between seeing the region as a realm of oblivion or escape, and claiming it as a marginal, cosmopolitan site. To some extent, the distinction between these positions can be said to correspond to a fluctuation between a romanticised sense of Cornwall and its people, as the exotic other, and a more materially-grounded awareness of the economic and social conditions of the place. Westland, again, is insightful here: she notes Lawrence’s initial disgust with ‘mindless’ Cornish locals, ‘living purely for social advancement’, who fail to cohere with his romantic idea of a primitive, Celtic people, living apart from modernity.³ As Westland points out, even before the war,

¹ *Kangaroo*, p. 251.

² *Ibid.*, p. 263.

³ Quoted in ‘D.H. Lawrence’s Cornwall’, p. 272.

Cornwall's mining industry connected Penwith (where Lawrence settled) internationally, ensuring that most residents would have been engaged in some way with the rest of England and beyond.¹ At the end of the Cornwall section of *Kangaroo*, Westland observes some recognition of the place's material realities: Somers, reminiscing from London, remembers the farm at which he resided, 'grey, naked, stony, with the big, pale-roofed new barn'.² As she notes, there is 'no attempt here to obliterate fields, or the new barn, from the landscape.'³ Although Lawrence still rarely demonstrates a sense of local economic and political issues in the novel, he nonetheless shows here a willingness to engage with the contemporary material realities of the place; and as in *Sons and Lovers*, those realities reveal the influence of modernity upon rural culture and landscape. As Wussow notes, there are affinities between Lawrence and Woolf in terms of their response to the First World War, which led both to adopt the perspective of the marginalised other. For Lawrence, this identity is forged in Cornwall, his place of retreat when he found himself 'declared medically unfit for service, ill, penniless, an author whose work was censored and condemned'.⁴ It is, therefore, a place in which Lawrence was forced to confront the realities of economic and social marginalisation, despite his desire to view it through a more romantic lens.

The fluctuations in Lawrence's engagements with Cornwall illustrate the region's shifting, indeterminate character, its coherence with a range of different symbolic interpretations. In Butts' work, this is particularly evident in her focus on the interpenetration of sea and land in the region, and for Lawrence too, the sea's proximity means that to be in Cornwall is 'like being at the window and looking out of England to the beyond.'⁵ Worthen notes that this

¹ 'D.H. Lawrence's Cornwall', pp. 278-9.

² *Kangaroo*, p. 275.

³ 'D.H. Lawrence's Cornwall', p. 275.

⁴ *The Nightmare of History*, p. 15.

⁵ Quoted in Worthen, *D.H. Lawrence*, p. 168.

represents a move ‘towards the edge, the margin of his world.’¹ Again, however, there is a fine but significant distinction between embracing marginality in the sense of a cosmopolitan challenging of borders, and longing to completely escape, to *cross* a border. A letter to J.D. Beresford demonstrates that the Cornish coast could represent the latter for Lawrence:

It is quite true what you say: the shore is absolutely primeval: those heavy, black rocks, like solid darkness, and the heavy water like a sort of first twilight breaking against them, and not changing them. [...] That is a very great and comforting thing to feel, I think: after all this whirlwind of dust and grit and dirty paper of a modern Europe.²

Here, the ocean does not carry the associations of flux and fragmentation, amorphousness and liminality, seen in the passages from *Sea and Sardinia* discussed above. Categories are not destabilised, but reinforced: the ‘dirty’ modern European world being contrasted with a ‘primeval’, ‘dark’ and ‘heavy’ fantasy of the oceanic, which represents a kind of non-conscious, sensual absorption or oblivion. And as Cornwall represents escape, Lawrence must ultimately leave this edgeland, abandoning England entirely. A 1917 letter to Lady Cynthia Asquith sees England as an ‘accursed and blasted’ country, ‘physically and spiritually.’³ His characters therefore feel compelled to depart, as does Lawrence himself: Gudrun in *Women in Love* is ‘transported, the moment I set foot on a foreign shore. I say to myself: “Here steps a new creature into life.”’ Birkin responds that England ““suffers horribly from a complication of diseases, for which there is no hope.””⁴ Ocean travel encompasses the sense of desperate escape and abandonment, as in these two strikingly similar quotations, from *The Lost Girl* (1920) and *Kangaroo*, respectively:

¹ D.H. Lawrence, p. 168.

² Lawrence, D.H., *The Selected Letters* (ed. Boulton, J.) (Cambridge; Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 117.

³ *The Letters of D.H. Lawrence*, vol. III (ed. Boulton, J., and Robertson, A.) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), p. 92.

⁴ *Women in Love*, p. 445.

England, beyond the water, rising with ash-grey, corpse-grey cliffs, and streaks of snow on the downs above. England, like a long, ash-grey coffin slowly submerging.¹

The free England had died, this England of the peace was like a corpse. It was the corpse of a country to him. [...] England looked like a grey, dreary-grey coffin sinking in the sea behind, with her dead grey cliffs and the white, worn-out cloth of snow above.²

Ocean travel here is not celebrated as a liminal stage between worlds, blurring the boundaries between them, but as a final escape from a ‘diseased’, ‘accursed and blasted’ culture and landscape; Lawrence uses images of death and decline to emphasise the point. England cannot be revitalised, as it is, to different degrees, in the work of Powys, Butts and Woolf; it must therefore be abandoned.

Aqueous or oceanic imagery, then, is used in contrasting ways in Lawrence’s work: sometimes, as in the quotations from *The White Peacock* discussed in Section II, to indicate a threshold between realms. The exploration of such thresholds may be valuable and rewarding; but equally, it may be dangerous. To the extent that Lawrence’s work fantasises about escape from modernity, Western culture, or the human, these portals are problematic, representing the threat of a polluted world leaking into a prelapsarian idyll. Hence, as Michelucci explains, the watery zones in *The White Peacock* force characters ‘to become conscious of the existence of an “other” world, one which is perturbing and distressing’:

At the spatial level, this threat manifests itself in the transformation of the property boundaries into a frontier: at this point, the places around Highclose are studded with ‘no trespassing’ signs, which signal the end of peaceful, harmonious coexistence, and the establishment of struggle between places of ‘us’ and those of ‘others,’ or even between nature and law.³

¹ Lawrence, D.H., *The Lost Girl* (London: Heinemann, 1955), p. 303.

² *Kangaroo*, p. 286.

³ *Space and Place in the Works of D.H. Lawrence*, pp. 12-13.

As Michelucci suggests, Lawrence's ambivalent relationship with the concepts of liminality and transgression can be understood, in part, as a manifestation of materially existing property relations in rural England; to cross into other geographical realms is also to challenge boundaries of class. Butts, as I will argue, is similarly conflicted, although she identifies herself as being on the other side of the class divide to Lawrence; for her, property boundaries are the thresholds through which the proletarian masses may invade her rural idyll, while for Lawrence (in the passages discussed by Michelucci) they represent a fear of the unknown world beyond working-class tradition.

This desire to maintain separation between worlds, more generally, is one way of understanding the persistence of certain dualisms throughout Lawrence's work. In *Women in Love*, Ursula – like Alvina in *The Lost Girl*, and Somers in *Kangaroo* – watches England fade into the distance on a ferry bound for Europe. Aboard, she feels 'conscious only of this pure trajectory through the surpassing darkness'; her 'sense of the unrealised world ahead triumphed over everything'. For Birkin, this movement into the 'unknown' is 'the first time that an utter and absolute peace had entered his heart, now, in this final transit out of life.'¹ While the experience is an adventure savoured by both characters, their fascination is tinged with a sense of fatalism and resignation: the world of 'life', of Western culture, must be abandoned; this retreat into a silent, womblike darkness represents a sealing-off of the boundary between worlds. Somers, similarly, may feel that Australia offers escape from the 'dreary-grey coffin' of England, but as Joseph Davis notes, he ultimately has 'nowhere to go but "far away inside himself", into the void of solipsism.'² Foreign lands, in fact, seem to represent the possibility of escape into a kind of afterlife; a reading also suggested by the imagery of death used in *Kangaroo* and *The Lost Girl*. Delany notes that foreign landscapes,

¹ *Women in Love*, pp. 436-8.

² Davis, Joseph, *Place, Pastoral and the Politics of the Personal: An Exploration of D.H. Lawrence's Kangaroo* (Ph.D thesis: University of Wollongong, 1992), p. 205.

in Lawrence's writing, are often depicted as 'deathscapes', zones in which the escape to nihilistic oblivion becomes possible. The mountain landscape of the Tyrolean alps in which *Women in Love* reaches its violent climax, Delany suggests, is one such realm: a world of forbidding, inhuman beauty, that seems to offer access to another world, but only at the expense of abandoning earthly life.¹ As he argues, during and after the First World War, this association of certain landscapes with oblivion and abandonment becomes increasingly common in Lawrence's writing; they seem to 'presage the actual extinction of humanity – a prospect that Lawrence, in his grimmer moods, seems to look on with relish.'²

Mountain regions have an otherworldly quality throughout Lawrence's work. In *Sea and Sardinia*, Mount Etna seems to be 'beyond a crystal wall. When I look at her,' Lawrence tells us, 'then I must look away from earth, into the ether,' and across an 'invisible border [...] a dividing line.'³ And in *Twilight in Italy*, the association with the afterlife, specifically, is clear: in the 'glamorous snow' of the Swiss Alps is 'the source of death. [...] There, eternally, goes on the white foregathering of the crystals, out of the deathly cold of the heavens; this is the static nucleus where death meets life in its elementality.'⁴ *Women in Love* may appear to celebrate this 'deathscape', in its longing for 'inhuman transcendent death', which 'compensates for all the bitterness of knowledge and the sordidness of our humanity.'⁵ Characteristically, however, Lawrence's position is ambiguous. Ursula rebels against the 'bath of pure oblivion' that escape to the mountains offers:

She had felt so doomed up here in the eternal snow, as if there were no beyond.

¹ 'D.H. Lawrence and Deep Ecology', pp. 31-2.

² *Ibid.*, p. 31.

³ *Sea and Sardinia*, pp. 7-8.

⁴ *Twilight in Italy*, p. 213.

⁵ *Women in Love*, pp. 216-17.

Now suddenly, as by a miracle she remembered that away beyond, below her, lay the dark fruitful earth [...] this utterly silent, frozen world of the mountain-tops was not universal! One might leave it and have done with it. One might go away.¹

In such passages, the mountain realm is not contrasted with an exhausted Western culture, but rather with the realm of the bodily, of warmth and sensuousness. Doherty argues that the ultimate moral of *Women in Love* is found in this apparent failure of this 'beyond':

While Birkin and Ursula (as good biocentrists) progressively incorporate the nonhuman other as essential to their constitution as humans, Gerald and Gudrun (androcentrically) repudiate it through a violent repression that reifies and desensualises the flesh: thus, Gudrun's longed-for 'beyond' is the 'navel of eternal snow' in the Austrian Alps, while Gerald's ultimate 'beyond' is the 'hollow basin of snow' into which he falls down and dies.²

If Doherty is correct, then the novel should not be read as a despairing abandonment of the human, but rather as a call to engage it with nonhuman animality, repudiating the desire for nihilistic oblivion embodied in Gerald and Gudrun. Yet another interpretation is offered by Rebecca Welshman, for whom the novel's 'frozen ending [...] allows for the suspension of time. Even amidst the frozen wastes, Lawrence reassures that the end of a race does not mean the end of life itself.'³ *Women in Love*, on this view, *does* embrace death, but only as a means of ultimately reinventing the human. Both Welshman and Doherty, then, offer more optimistic (although contrasting) readings of the text than that suggested by Delany.⁴

¹ Ibid., pp. 460, 488-9.

² 'Sacrifice, Sadism, and the Discourse of Species', p. 82.

³ Welshman, Rebecca, 'Literature and the Ecological Imagination: Richard Jeffries and D.H. Lawrence', *Victorian Network* 3, no. 1 (Summer 2012), pp. 51-63 (p. 62).

⁴ Urmila Seshagiri contextualises the novel's descriptions of mountain landscapes within a broader modernist recuperation of climactic racial theories, with reference to Birkin's assertion that '[t]he white races, having the arctic north behind them, the vast abstraction of ice and snow, would fulfil a mystery of ice-destructive knowledge, snow-abstract annihilation' (p. 286). Seshagiri's reading suggests that this 'silent, frozen world' is, for Lawrence, inextricably linked with the trajectory of Western history (*Race and the Modernist Imagination*, pp. 18-19).

As Welshman suggests, there is a similar ambiguity in the novel regarding the division of temporal realms. As with Somers' sense in *Kangaroo* that Cornwall offers the possibility of escape into earlier, pre-Christian times, the mountain regions of *Women in Love* seem to allow time to be 'frozen'. Characters are lured by the possibility of an escape from linear temporality, into a sealed-off temporal realm. As I show in the following chapter, Powys' novels often explore the idea of non-linear or cyclical time; and all of the writers in this study are interested in the possibility of certain places functioning as portals – imaginative or literal – into earlier eras. Lawrence, characteristically, seems ambivalent on this point. The silence of Breadalby, Hermione's Georgian house in Derbyshire, makes it seem to Ursula as though there is 'a magic circle drawn about the place, shutting out the present, enclosing the delightful, precious past, trees and deer and silence, like a dream.'¹ Yet to Birkin, this promise of an escape from the present is 'a snare and delusion, this beauty of static things – what a horrible, dead prison Breadalby really was, what an intolerable confinement, the peace! Yet it was better than the sordid scrambling conflict of the present.'² In a later discussion between the pair, Birkin argues that modernity has undermined our ability to use technology in ways that ultimately promote human wellbeing:

'When I see that clear, beautiful chair, and I think of England, even Jane Austen's England – it had living thoughts to unfold even then, and pure happiness in unfolding them. And now, we can only fish among the rubbish-heaps for the remnants of their old expression. There is no production in us now, only sordid and foul mechanicalness.'

[...] 'I'm sick of the beloved past.'

'Not so sick as I am of the accursed present,' he said.

'Yes, just the same. I hate the present – but I don't want the past to take its place – I don't want that old chair.'³

¹ *Women in Love*, p. 93.

² *Ibid.*, p. 108.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 400-1. Birkin's rhetoric here has resonances with Heidegger's views on technology and human wellbeing; there are similar ideas explored in Butts' work, and I discuss these connections with Heidegger in more detail in Chapter Three.

In both of these examples, Lawrence posits an irreconcilable dichotomy, between a retreat to a romanticised, hermetically sealed past, and the ‘sordid scrambling conflict of the present.’ Whereas Powys’ work celebrates the sense of overlapping temporalities that he projects onto the Dorset landscape, Lawrence here suggests that place can only be experienced in either a delusional, escapist past or an ‘accursed present’. Characteristically, then, there is a longing to retreat, but a countering sense that such projects are ultimately inadequate. Lawrence is often inclined towards a dualistic worldview, but is rarely consistent in endorsing a single approach. Fjågesund, as I noted at the beginning of this chapter, sees this as the inevitable consequence of Lawrence’s inability to reconcile Protestantism’s emphasis on the afterlife with his intuitive sense of the value of sensuality: ‘Escapism underlies Lawrence’s claim to offer a set of radically alternative and constructive values, which are in fact nothing but a sprawling, secular set of compromises with the religion he thought he had left permanently behind.’¹ If this reading is correct, the ambivalence, contradiction and dualistic thinking which pervades much of Lawrence’s writing on place and the nonhuman ultimately stems from psychic tensions that are never wholly resolved.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that Lawrence’s distinctive socio-cultural position, coupled with his fascination with place and animality, make him a key figure in English modernist investigations of landscape, transience and cosmopolitanism. Lawrence’s writing introduces or focuses upon several of the key themes, formal innovations and symbols of the present study. Taking as its starting-point the tensions and contradictions that arise from competing desires for belonging and adventure, spirituality and sensuality, individuality and

¹ *The Apocalyptic World of D.H. Lawrence*, p. 60.

communality, unity and fragmentation, Lawrence's work captures the complexity and ambivalence of an English modernism seeking to re-connect with and rejuvenate the English landscape. As this study proceeds, the relationships I am investigating between his work and that of Powys, Butts and Woolf will become clearer: to varying degrees, for example, the threat of the war and the influence of cosmopolitan and metropolitan life leads all four writers to reimagine rural England as a haven for marginalised groups, or as a liminal zone between mainstream English culture and other possible modes of being. Conversely, as I argued in my discussion of *The White Peacock*, Lawrence's grounding in rural England occasionally stimulates him to write about urban experience in a vital, defamiliarised way that anticipates Butts and, most emphatically, Woolf. In terms of symbols, Lawrence uses trees and forests in a similar way to Butts, integrating them into an animistic reimagining of rural landscapes that is, by turns, suggestive of an erosion of human/nonhuman boundaries, and threatening or hostile. The ocean and other aqueous symbols are also significant across the writers in this study. However, Lawrence anticipates Butts in his inconsistent sense of water's symbolic role: while it may represent openness, cosmopolitanism and liminality, it can also be used to suggest and reinforce divisions, between cultures, social groups, or species.

Hardy's influence is central to the contextualisation of Lawrence within the present study. He underpins the sense of an animistic English landscape, and Lawrence uses Hardy-esque techniques in developing his own literary style. Both Lawrence and Powys are also influenced by Hardy's attention to detail in terms of place-names and dialect. For Lawrence, however, Hardy's sense of tradition and community is often eschewed for an instinctive individualism, and correspondingly, the focus on local detail can lose out to a more abstract sense of animality and place. Hence, Lawrence's symbolic appropriations of Cornwall, or of mountain regions: places increasingly become used as sites upon which to project

metaphysical and ideological tensions. There are, however, clear similarities between Lawrence and Powys in their enthusiasm for fragmented and deliberately non-linear plotting and structure. While the underlying tensions in Lawrence's work therefore inhibit attempts to derive a clear position on the relationships between cosmopolitan modernity and the nonhuman world, it does anticipate some of the themes and literary forms which the other writers under consideration will employ in investigating those relations.

2. The Pen of a Traveller, the Ink-Blood of Home: John Cowper Powys' Imaginative Realism

It sometimes happens that a contemplative person, whose head is full of contrary thought-currents, receives, in a quick, unexpected revelation, a view of the world as it exists when many separate, far-off moments of insight, that have caught our landscape under a large and reconciling light, melt and fuse themselves together.¹

– *Weymouth Sands*

John Cowper Powys' relationship with the landscapes of Dorset and Somerset is explored in strange and diverse ways through the 'Wessex novels': *Wolf Solent* (1929), *A Glastonbury Romance* (1933), *Weymouth Sands* (1934) and *Maiden Castle* (1936). The first three were written during Powys' time in the United States, and this chapter focuses upon them, along with *After My Fashion* (1919), in examining the specific influence of his peripatetic, cosmopolitan existence upon the development of his distinctive literary style. Like Lawrence, Powys is ambivalent, at best, towards the developments of modernity: both writers share an opposition towards the increasing urbanisation of human life in the early twentieth century, and the mechanisation of transport and industry. I will argue, however, that Powys' novels tend to ironise such concerns to some extent, recognising the ambiguities of modernity in terms of its potential epistemological benefits. Powys is aware of the problematic character of any attempt to assert essentialist notions of identity and rootedness in place: despite the intensely nostalgic affection for Dorset and Somerset that we find in his works, there is an ever-present recognition that our sense of place is always a dreamlike, imaginative creation rather than some kind of authentic mode of belonging. Consequently Powys emphasises the values of movement, marginality, liminality and comedy: his novels are not tragic narratives of human struggles to belong, but jumbled, bathetic, and 'atmospheric' worlds that

¹ Powys, John Cowper, *Weymouth Sands* (New York: Overlook Press, 1999), p. 473.

deliberately lack a strong sense of linear direction. They engage with perspectival developments of modernity, suggesting a cosmopolitan diversity (in various forms) within the English landscape, and thus represent a distinctively rural form of modernism, the innovations of which lie primarily in structure, narrative style, and atmosphere. Ultimately, I will argue, this represents a specific type of engagement with place that stems, in part, from Powys' particular sense of nostalgia, contrast and distance (geographical, temporal and cultural) – a sense that arises from his particular historical-cultural position.

I. Daydreaming of England

John Cowper Powys shares D.H. Lawrence's antipathy towards certain distinctive characteristics of modernity. Considered particularly pernicious by both writers are the continuing encroachment of industry upon the landscape of rural England in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, and the acceleration of urbanisation evident within Europe and North America over the same period. From 1905 to 1934 Powys spent most of his time in the United States, and the *Autobiography* (1934) vividly describes his concerns about the potential for mass urbanisation in that country to engender psychosocial pathologies. He notes the 'peculiar ghastliness, that sort of *phantasmagoric* horror which is a unique accompaniment of physical brutality in America', and which stems, he argues, from 'the dominance of the big city over the country, and the triumph of youth over age.'¹ The early novel *After My Fashion* (written in 1919, but not published until 1980) is partly an attempt to articulate the psychological experiences that ultimately lead, for Powys, to such pathologies. The protagonist Richard Storm, an Englishman attempting to negotiate the quintessentially

¹ Powys, John Cowper, *Autobiography* (London: Macdonald, 1967), p. 577.

modern labyrinth of early twentieth-century New York, feels himself reduced to ‘a floating straw borne on the tide of great irrepressible forces’:

This feeling was precisely the one most naturally engendered in New York, where the crowds of men and women scourged by economic necessity seemed to dehumanise themselves and become just one more mechanically moving element, paralleled to the iron and steel and stone and marble, to the steam and electricity, whose forces, brutal and insistent, pounded upon it, hammered upon it, resisted it or drove it relentlessly forward.¹

Richard’s wife Nelly has a similar experience at the Times Square subway station:

As she struggled against the crowd, she experienced the queer feeling that her real conscious mind was somewhere out of all this, and that the Nelly thus pushed and jostled was a mere helpless automaton among other automatons. A horrible feeling of mechanical indifference seized her. Her real mind seemed to have escaped out of her flesh, leaving nothing but a mass of quivering exposed nerves that could suffer passively without end but could take no initiative.²

The presence in the novel of extended passages detailing these dehumanising and mechanising effects of modern urban life, and their presentation within the narratives of multiple characters, gives such elements a polemical quality.³ As Denis Lane notes, *After My Fashion* is the only one of Powys’ novels to deal with this kind of metropolitan experience in detail.⁴ When the urban does appear in Powys’ later novels, it tends to be described in similarly suspicious terms: John Hodgson notes that *Wolf Solent*, for example, assumes an opposition between the landscapes of Dorset and Somerset that dominate the novel, and a ‘modern urban wasteland’ associated with psychic dissolution.⁵ It is thus tempting to read the

¹ Powys, John Cowper, *After My Fashion* (London: Picador, 1980), p. 175.

² *Ibid.*, p. 206.

³ These passages bear interesting comparison with the description of an English tourist in Lawrence’s *Twilight in Italy*: ‘I could feel so well the machine that had him in its grip. He slaved for a year, mechanically, in London, riding in the Tube, working in the office. Then for a fortnight he was let free’ (p. 127). For both writers, the development of new forms of transportation is central to modernity’s potential to shape human character in distinctive ways.

⁴ Lane, Denis, Introduction, *In the Spirit of Powys: New Essays* (London: Associated University Presses, 1990), p. 17.

⁵ Hodgson, John, “‘A Victim of Self-Vivisection’ – John Cowper Powys and *Wolf Solent*”, in Humfrey, B. (ed.), *John Cowper Powys’ Wolf Solent: Critical Studies* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1990), pp. 31-53 (p. 44).

New York scenes in *After My Fashion* as a dismissal of metropolitan life as intractably pernicious and inhuman, one that explains Powys' decision to focus upon the rural world in his ensuing work.

Both Lawrence and Powys, then, insinuate that urbanisation poses a threat to a presumed psychic stability that is associated with rural life, organicism and continuity. This corruptive characteristic of modernity is also evident, in Lawrence's work, in his descriptions of industrial encroachment upon the rural world. As noted in the previous chapter, Gerald Crich's mine in *Women in Love* is figured as a synecdoche for the more general 'substitution of the mechanical principle for the organic [...] and the subordination of every organic unit to the great mechanical purpose.'¹ Here, modernity simultaneously invades the psychic and environmental landscapes of a previously stable world; the transformation of the internal and external is essentially a single, indivisible process. In some respects, parallels can be drawn between Crich and the East Anglian industrialist Philip Crow in Powys' *A Glastonbury Romance*. Crow's determination to exploit the tin mines of Wookey Hole, against the will of the locals, becomes an obsession:

For the last month the tin had been pouring forth with such a steady flow that Philip's spirits had mounted up to a pitch of excitement that was like a kind of diurnal drunkenness. He dreamed of tin every night. The metal in all its stages began to obsess him. He collected specimens of it, of every degree of weight, integrity, purity [...] and he began to feel as if a portion of his innermost being were the actual magnet that drew this long-neglected element out of abysses of prehistoric darkness into the light of day.²

Here, the process of mining the earth (which, as I will argue in Section IV, is for Powys synecdochic of a more general drive of modernity, to excavate and expose) comes to transform Crow's way of perceiving the world and his relation to it. Moreover, his belief in

¹ *Women in Love*, p. 260.

² Powys, John Cowper, *A Glastonbury Romance* (London: Picador, 1975), p. 742.

the malleability of humanity, and his determination to manipulate people for industrial ends, is evinced by his assertion earlier in the novel that it is “all too sickeningly easy” to “mould them, to drill them, to dominate them”.¹ The philosophical implications of these passages connect to a position that David Harvey associates with Heidegger in the inter-war period: the rejection of a ‘universalising machine rationality as an appropriate mythology for modern life.’ Heidegger, Harvey argues, proposes ‘a counter-myth of rootedness in place and environmentally-bound traditions as the only secure foundation for political and social action in a manifestly troubled world.’² This emphasis on ‘rootedness’ is linked to an essentialist understanding of place, and disentangling such ideas from Heidegger’s allegiance to the principles of National Socialism is (as Harvey notes) deeply problematic. I want to argue, however, that despite the similarities in the quoted passages, Powys is not inclined towards an essentialism of place, or the need for a ‘counter-myth of rootedness’. Rather, the conception of place that emerges from an analysis of his work is characterised by a fluidity and playfulness that stems, in part, from Powys’ appreciation of the imaginative distance and juxtapositions afforded by the dynamics of cosmopolitan modernity.

A reading which discerns philosophical commonalities between Lawrence and Powys on the basis of the above quotations is problematised by what several critics have identified as the Bakhtinian polyphonic character of *A Glastonbury Romance*.³ Ben Jones, for example, argues that the novel defies attempts to identify a ‘monological’ authorial consciousness overseeing events; as a consequence, there is no sense of a stable narrative position from which

¹ Ibid. p. 550.

² Harvey, David, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989), p. 35.

³ See, for example, Jones, Ben, ‘The “Mysterious Word Esplumeoir” and Polyphonic Structure in *A Glastonbury Romance*’; Lock, Charles, ‘Polyphonic Powys: Dostoevsky, Bakhtin and *A Glastonbury Romance*’ and “‘Multiverse” ... Language Which Makes Language Impossible’, *The Powys Review* 2, no. 1 (Summer 1979), pp. 63-74; Coates, Carol, *John Cowper Powys in Search of a Landscape* (London: Macmillan, 1982); and Lindstedt, Eivor, *John Cowper Powys: Displacements of Voice and Genre* (Ph.D. thesis: Lund University, 2004).

characters like Philip Crow can be ideologically critiqued.¹ In fact, as Carol Coates points out, the portrayal of Crow is not always sketched in the dismissively caricaturing language of the above quotations:

He is a well-drawn and unexpectedly sympathetic character in the same way as his cousin, John Crow, both being possessed of the self-knowledge denied to most of the Glastonbury inhabitants. They both bring a much-needed East Anglian shrewdness to the town.²

This analysis suggests that to read Powys as unambiguously opposed to the developments of industrial modernity on the basis of characters like Crow is an approach liable to oversimplify the issue. It also highlights one of the central characteristics of Powys that I want to discuss: his awareness that ‘rootedness in place’, as Harvey puts it, can be epistemologically limiting, and that the perspectives of outsiders within a region, conversely, can be of distinctive value in understanding our relationship with a place. This sensitivity stems, in part, from Powys’ own experiences of life as an outsider and self-imposed exile, reflecting upon the landscapes of his early life from the culturally and geographically distant world of America. As Glen Cavaliero notes, Powys’ peripatetic existence was not motivated by the same kind of ‘intense inner restlessness’ that drove Lawrence; his move to the USA was, rather, the necessary result of his lecturing career.³ However, as Charles Lock argues – comparing Powys with another literary exile, James Joyce – it is likely that Powys valued the ‘creative use’ of distance, and we might speculate that he ‘chose to perpetuate his exile because it was good for his imagination.’⁴ Malcolm Elwin’s preface to the first novel Powys wrote upon his return to England, *Maiden Castle*, notes the novel’s lack of a ‘vivid evocation’ of place, in contrast

¹ ‘The “Mysterious Word Esplumeoir” and Polyphonic Structure in *A Glastonbury Romance*’, pp. 73-74.

² *John Cowper Powys in Search of a Landscape*, p. 94.

³ Cavaliero, Glen, ‘Phoenix and Serpent: D.H. Lawrence and John Cowper Powys’, *The Powys Review* 1, no. 2 (Winter 1977), pp. 51-58 (p. 51).

⁴ ‘John Cowper Powys and James Joyce’, p. 37. Similarly, H.P. Collins notes the attentiveness of Powys’ recreation of Weymouth in *Weymouth Sands*, and remarks that ‘[i]t is amazingly yet perhaps significantly an exile who recalls these things’. Collins, H.P., ‘The Sands Do Not Run Out’, in Humfrey, B. (ed.), *Essays on John Cowper Powys* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1972), pp. 205-218 (p. 209).

to *Wolf Solent*, *A Glastonbury Romance*, and *Weymouth Sands*; this, Elwin suggests, can be explained by the fact that those novels were written in America, where Powys ‘felt the need nostalgically to evoke for his own satisfaction the atmosphere of scenes he had known so well in the past.’¹ Although such observations are speculative, they cohere with a reading of Powys’ work that emphasises the peculiar combination of the detailed and the fantastical that we find there; a combination that suggests the distinctive value of distance and juxtaposition in literary evocations of place.

Of the four ‘Wessex novels’, then – *Wolf Solent*, *A Glastonbury Romance*, *Weymouth Sands* and *Maiden Castle* – it is the first three that are most relevant to the present discussion. As several critics have recognised, the Hardy-esque figure of the ‘returning native’ recurs throughout these texts, a Powysian protagonist returning to their Wessex home having experienced life in other places.² Gwyneth Miles notes that Powys’ preface to *Wolf Solent* describes the novel as ‘a book of Nostalgia, written in a foreign country with the pen of a traveller and the ink-blood of his home’, and comments that we find throughout his work ‘a pattern of journeys homeward, both actual and spiritual.’³ Several of the novels ‘have as their initial crisis the return of a protagonist to a place with which he has family ties [...] and in all of these novels the locale of the homecoming is a powerful presence and influence upon the action.’⁴ This body of criticism, however, sometimes overlooks the extent to which the protagonists’ experience of an area previously identified as ‘home’ is enriched or complicated

¹ Elwin, Malcolm, Preface to Powys, John Cowper, *Maiden Castle* (London: Macdonald, 1966), p. 8.

² As A. Thomas Southwick notes, *Weymouth Sands* does not feature a literal ‘returning native’, but the ‘oceanic comfort won by the outcasts of Weymouth’ in the novel connects it to this theme on a more general level. For Southwick, all of these novels revolve around ‘rituals of homecoming’ in which Powys’ protagonists ‘recover their essential origins, transcending social and familial identity’. Southwick, A. Thomas, ‘Rituals of Return’, in Lane, D. (ed.), *In the Spirit of Powys: New Essays* (London: Associated University Presses, 1990), pp. 86-111 (p. 111).

³ Powys, John Cowper, Preface, *Wolf Solent* (London: Penguin, 1964), p. 11; Miles, Gwyneth, ‘The Pattern of Homecoming’, in Humfrey, B. (ed.), *Essays on John Cowper Powys* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1972), pp. 219-231 (p. 220).

⁴ ‘The Pattern of Homecoming’, p. 220.

by their consciousness of a world beyond. Thomas Southwick suggests that these characters ultimately ‘recover their essential origins’, but such assertions do not account for the bizarre and fantastical character of the places evoked, the defamiliarised protagonists’ recurrent experiences of Wessex landscapes as strange and uncanny.¹ Jeremy Hooker, however, does recognise this. In an essay on Powys and Hardy, he refers to the former’s ‘deracinated spirit’ – echoing Jonathan Bate’s ‘[n]otoriously deracinated’ cosmopolitan modernist – and notes that characters like Richard Storm, Wolf Solent, John Crow and *Maiden Castle*’s Dud Noman all partially embody this kind of relation to place. These protagonists do not simply ‘seek a specific social settlement or known world’, argues Hooker. Rather, ‘[t]he spirit Powys shares with his heroes seeks to lose – and find – itself in the continuity of life.’² *After My Fashion*, which is centred around Sussex rather than Dorset or Somerset, sees Richard Storm returning to that landscape from Paris with a sense that he has ‘drastically changed’. Storm feels a strong desire to reconnect with Sussex after his experiences of cosmopolitan modernity, and to express this through literature; but those desires stem not so much from an urge to efface the experiences of Paris, as to somehow make them cohere with his sense of home:

What he, Richard Storm, was really ‘after’ now, what he was in search of, what he actually wanted to express, in this poetry he intended to write, he himself could hardly have said. [...] A certain craving for air, for space, for large and flowing movements, for unbounded horizons, had suddenly come upon him and had ruined the peace of his days as he returned to his old haunts. [...] Some queer unexpected stirring in his soul seemed driving him forth into a world larger and more onward-looking, if less clear-cut and complete, than the one had dwelt in contentedly for so long.³

Storm’s thoughts here use the language of progress and innovation associated with cosmopolitan modernity and modernist literature, the ‘unbounded horizons’ and ‘onward-looking’ attitude, to describe his new sense of the region he thinks of as ‘home’. Powys

¹ ‘Rituals of Return’, p. 111.

² Hooker, Jeremy, ‘Thomas Hardy, John Cowper Powys and Wessex’, *The Powys Review* 7, nos. 3-4 (1992-93), pp. 23-32 (p. 27).

³ *After My Fashion*, p. 10.

subverts dominant urban/rural associations, figuring Paris as a restrictive ‘clear-cut and complete’ world, while rural life offers openness and strangeness; yet it is precisely his experience of the former that has facilitated this new understanding of the latter. As Hooker suggests, this kind of protagonist has a distinctively Powysian sense of place and of the literary approach it stimulates or demands: acknowledging the changes and innovations of modernity, Storm cannot return to a nostalgic understanding of Sussex as he previously knew it, but must rather somehow entwine his sense of it with his newly ‘deracinated spirit’.

The protagonist of *After My Fashion* thus engages with the same questions, circling around the relations between literature and place in the modernist era, as Powys himself. This is most apparent in the Wessex novels. Wolf Solent, having recently returned to the region of his youth, feels nonetheless that ‘he was entering into a new world’: an unfamiliar zone in which phenomena do not follow predictable patterns. On a walk to Squire Urquhart’s manor, he senses ‘something uncanny about the way the rain threatened to descend and yet did not descend.’¹ This sense of the region emerges from what Lane calls Powys’ need to answer ‘the call of place’, and ‘to express in story his indelible attachment to the corners of Somerset and West Dorset’.² Lane notes that Powys ‘never entirely escaped the conviction [...] that one wrote for oneself’, quoting from a letter in which Powys declares that he ‘write[s] the sort of book I like best to read’; *Wolf Solent* stems from a need to recreate the landscapes of his youth, but it does so in a way inevitably coloured by Powys’ distance from them, and his experiences since leaving them.³ Thus, Wolf’s ‘mythology’ – his sense of an inner world that maintains the stability of his being – is described using saurian and tropical imagery,

¹ *Wolf Solent*, pp. 37, 418.

² Lane, Denis, ‘The Elemental Image in *Wolf Solent*’, in Lane, D. (ed.), *In the Spirit of Powys: New Essays* (London: Associated University Presses, 1990), pp. 55-70 (p. 57).

³ Introduction, *In the Spirit of Powys*, p. 16.

influenced, as John Hodgson points out, by his experience of Louisiana in 1925.¹ His descents into introspective detachment consequently evoke ‘some wide-winged marshbird from dark untraversed pools [...] full of the faint unsheathing of fern-fronds’; and he imagines himself as an ‘ichthyosaurus’.² The vividness and intensity of the internal and external landscapes in *Wolf Solent*, then, can be seen as the result of Powys’ keenly-felt desire to capture a sense of a culturally, temporally and geographically distant world, married to a similarly strong attentiveness to his contemporary environment and experiences. It is evident that, in synthesising this combination of nostalgia, imagination and close observation, Powys is consciously attempting to create a literary form distinctively suited to his particular situation and sense of place. Morine Krissdottir notes that an unpublished letter to Dorothy Richardson, dating from 1930, helps us to understand the ‘peculiar power’ of the Wessex novels:

I’ve lived here for 25 years, lady, did you know that? For a quarter of a century. No one knows the nuances of America better than I do – none as well! But do you think I’ll write about it? Sideways I always must – for I must see England like a daydream, a brown study, an onanistic (forgive me) ecstasy.³

This comment reveals the imaginative licence that Powys consciously applies in *Wolf Solent* and the other Wessex novels. In some sense, he suggests, his recreation of the landscapes of his childhood is also a ‘sideways’ projection of his impressions of the US. It is a remark that seems to account, among other things, for the combination of ‘daydream’-like fantasy and exactitude found in much of Powys’ work. As W.J. Keith has suggested, this combination might be called ‘imaginative realism’, a term Powys himself coins in an essay on Balzac in

¹ Hodgson quotes from a letter to Marian Powys written in New Orleans on 1 December 1925 – around the time Powys started work on *Wolf Solent* – in which he describes the parks of the city in remarkably similar language to that used in the ‘mythology’ passages (‘John Cowper Powys and *Wolf Solent*’, pp. 33-34).

² *Wolf Solent*, pp. 39, 291.

³ Quoted in Krissdottir, Morine, *Descents of Memory: The Life of John Cowper Powys* (London: Duckworth, 2007), p. 193.

Suspended Judgements (1916).¹ Reading Powys with this concept in mind sheds light on several aspects of his writing, such as its mingling of ‘reality’ with the imaginary, the everyday with the fantastical.

Despite Powys’ ambivalence towards modernism as a literary phenomenon, his approach in the Wessex novels connects him to the modernist canon in various ways. It seeks, for example, to reexamine the imaginative possibilities underlying the everyday and the quotidian, aligning Powys with, among others, James Joyce and Dorothy Richardson.² The re-enchantment of the everyday is particularly evident in *A Glastonbury Romance*; as Andrew Radford argues, this quality of the novel manifests a ‘response to the cultural tensions fostered by rapid material change’, crafting ‘an intensely lyrical feeling of umbilical attachment to the open, undulating grassland, steep-sided valleys and granite moors as ‘the secret of the mystic value of the commonplace’.³ The local dialect is mingled amongst the novel’s myriad voicings, rendered with Hardy-esque phonetic spellings and colloquialisms: ‘orspital’, ‘scamooches’, ‘girt sleepy beast’, ‘impidents’ and ‘trowsies’ all appearing in one passage of dialogue.⁴ Perhaps the novel’s renewal of a quotidian focus is most remarkable, though, in the luxuriant attention given to the flora of the region, and the apparent ‘mystic value’ of this focus. A description of Somerset moss in the ‘May Day’ chapter exemplifies this:

More delicately, more intricately fashioned than any grasses of the field, more subtle in texture than any seaweed of the sea, more thickly woven, and with a sort of intimate passionate patience, by the creative spirit within it, than any forest leaves or any lichen upon any tree trunk, this sacred moss of Somersetshire would remain as a

¹ *Regions of the Imagination*, p. 165.

² Powys published effusive writings on both Joyce and Richardson, two indisputably high modernist writers, and was also a witness for the defence at the 1921 *Ulysses* trial in New York. See Powys, John Cowper, *James Joyce’s Ulysses: An Appreciation* (London: Village Press, 1975); *Dorothy M. Richardson* (London: Joiner and Steele, 1931).

³ *Mapping the Wessex Novel*, p. 2.

⁴ *A Glastonbury Romance*, pp. 185-188.

perfectly satisfying symbol of life if all other vegetation were destroyed out of that country. [...] The magical softness of its presence gathers around the margins of every human dream that draws its background from life in the West Country.¹

Such passages are characterised by an ability to move seamlessly between attentive description, employing the same kind of lush, aqueous imagery used to describe Wolf's 'mythology' in *Wolf Solent*, and meditative comments that pull back to locate the landscape within a larger temporal or metaphysical context. Like the poetry of Richard Storm in *After My Fashion*, Powys' writing is underpinned by 'the subtle and exquisite pleasure that he derived from every stick and stone in England'; but equally important is Storm's sense that these 'many poignant 'little things', bitter and sweet, tragic and grotesque, common and fantastic, such as the earth affords us all in our confused wayfaring' must be connected with 'some dimly conceived immortal consciousness that gave them all an enduring value'.² In some ways, as I have suggested, Storm's literary aims echo those of Powys. Of particular interest in these passages is the combination of a metaphysic that posits beings or worlds beyond the comprehension of a scientific, rationalist worldview, with an emphasis on a rambling, semi-formed, 'confused' everyday; the result is an atmosphere simultaneously otherworldly and quotidian. Powys' evocations of landscape consequently have a kind of hyperreal quality, which David Ride argues renders them 'free from the constraints of reality' in a way that 'extends the boundaries of the imagination'.³

The development of Powys' literary approach, then, with its imaginative realist qualities, can be understood (at least in part) as resulting from his specific epistemological position, one informed by cosmopolitanism, movement, distance and juxtaposition. This promotes a distinctively creative approach to place, one that generally avoids implying the existence of

¹ Ibid., pp. 512-513.

² *After My Fashion*, pp. 221, 89-90.

³ Ride, David, 'The Liminal Landscape of John Cowper Powys', *Time and Mind* 2, no. 1 (March 2009), pp. 71-76 (p. 72).

essential characteristics, or asserting the need to be somehow ‘rooted’ in order to obtain ‘authentic’ engagement with a region. Despite Powys’ evident antipathy towards the form of metropolitan modernity that he associates with the US, his encounters there arguably stimulate these innovative elements of his writing. This complex ambivalence has its analogue in his scepticism concerning the value of certain high modernist traits, particularly within poetry. In *Suspended Judgements*, Powys criticises the ‘over-intellectuality’ of poets like Ezra Pound and H.D., whom he finds ‘too clever, too artistic, too egotistic.’¹ Upon returning to Sussex from Paris, Richard Storm reflects upon this aspect of modernism:

Too long, he decided, had he occupied himself with questions of technique, with problems of style. The work which he would do now, the poetry he would write, should primarily concern itself with some definite vision of things that should be left to evoke its own method of expression, its own music, in accordance with the intensity of its accumulative purpose.²

The sense that certain modernist innovations may actually occlude, rather than facilitate, some sort of authentic ‘method of expression’ is explored, too, in *A Glastonbury Romance*. In that novel, the local poet Ned Athling is attracted to metropolitan modernism, the ‘[n]ew forms [...] coming into art, drawn from inventions and machinery’; while his lover, the cosmopolitan aristocrat Rachel Zoyland, criticises this attitude: “‘You say to yourself, ‘I must be modern,’ when you ought only to say, ‘I want to find out how to express what I feel.’”³ For Rachel, the claim that “‘poetry is an art’” is a “‘horrible modern idea’”; it should, rather, be inseparable from the rhythms and traditions of everyday life.⁴ As Jed Esty notes, the irony

¹ Powys, John Cowper, *Suspended Judgements* (New York: G. Arnold Shaw, 1916), p. 152.

² *After My Fashion*, pp. 22-23.

³ *A Glastonbury Romance*, p. 528.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 529. Rachel’s position here links Powys to Rolf Gardiner and neo-romanticism, insofar as that movement rejected the idea that artists or artworks exist in a discrete, privileged sphere separate from everyday life. As Frank Trentmann explains, Gardiner’s emphasis on “‘authentic’”, communal festivals must [...] be seen as part of the wider neo-romantic reaction against the old romantic cult of the individual artist and of art as an alternative reality. [...] Gardiner hoped to substitute liturgical festivities for individualist art; he deliberately abstained from writing poetry between 1924 and 1938.’ Both within the neo-romantic movement, and in Powys’ work, scepticism regarding the value of modernist developments in literature connects to a more general doubt as to the validity of artistic creation, insofar as it is seen as an enterprise existing in privileged separation from

of this quarrel, in which ‘the farmboy-poet longs for modernity, while the Paris-educated sophisticate longs for the old strong currents of rural England’, forms one of the central tensions of the novel.¹ The polyphonic quality of the novel’s narrative is again relevant here: neither characters’ position in the debate is privileged, and consequently such debates never achieve a sense of resolution. What is clear, however, is that both Rachel and Ned forward notions of cultural value – whether regarding rural tradition or metropolitan modernism – that are informed and inspired by positions of distance and contrast from the cultures in question. In this respect, they both embody the tensions and insights that arise from Powys’ distinctive experiences and impulses as a writer.

II. Phantasmal Worlds

Powys’ ambivalence towards certain facets of modernist literary experimentation stems, in part, from a sense that these tend to wilfully complicate the reader’s ability to engage with the textual world. This is one way of accounting for the childlike simplicity that his novels often display: the animalisation of characters’ names, appearance and personalities in *Wolf Solent*, for example, lends the novel a fairytale atmosphere. As well as the protagonist, with his ‘hawk-like nose’, it features Darnley Otter with his ‘mackerel-dark eyes’, the ‘water-rat featured’ Bob Weevil, the ‘bewildered little pig’s-eyes’ of Lob Torp, the ‘almost saurian’ Squire Urquhart, and countless others.² As Denis Lane notes, animality thus forms a ‘clear pattern of metaphorical language or reference’ in the novel, ‘heightening the correspondence between man and nature’.³ The sheer explicitness of these correspondences can be contrasted

other activities. Trentmann, Frank, ‘Civilisation and its Discontents: English Neo-Romanticism and the Transformation of Anti-Modernism in Twentieth-Century Western Culture’, *Journal of Contemporary History* 29, no. 4 (October 1994), pp. 583-625 (p. 607).

¹ *A Shrinking Island*, p. 64.

² *Wolf Solent*, pp. 74, 35, 276, 179, 189.

³ ‘The Elemental Image in *Wolf Solent*’, p. 66.

with the modernist tendency to create textual worlds that demand multiple readings and decodings. Powys consciously draws attention to the artifice of his metaphorical world in order to undermine potential ‘over-intellectual’ literary-critical readings. This element of Powys’ novels can also be described as imaginative realist, insofar as the geographical details of the textual world are often precise, in contrast to the playfully absurd names of the characters and the metaphorical language used to describe them. As Katherine Saunders Nash notes in her discussion of *A Glastonbury Romance*, Powys does not, in general, use his narratives ‘to encourage the authorial audience’s interpretation’, but seeks rather to intensify ‘attention to the surface details of the text.’ This discourages the reader from making inferences that connect textual detail with meaning or significance.¹

The clearest evidence of this attentiveness to ‘surface details’ in Powys’ texts lies in the careful precision with which he recreates the towns and countryside of Somerset and Dorset in the Wessex novels. In this respect he occupies a characteristically modernist position, one most famously embodied in *Ulysses*’ imaginative reconstruction of Dublin – achieved, as the novel’s final inscription tells us, in ‘Trieste-Zurich-Paris 1914-1921’.² In both Joyce and Powys, as Charles Lock notes, the position of exile generates a ‘passion for accuracy’, which insists ‘that memory be restrained by fact. The directories, maps, guidebooks, and newspapers that Joyce drew on for his recreation of 16 June 1904 [...] represent an unprecedentedly strong-willed and thorough submission of memory and imagination to fact’.³ In noting the parallels between the two writers, Lock draws our attention to a series of letters that Powys wrote to his brother Littleton during the writing of *A Glastonbury Romance* between 1930 and 1932. Powys notes that he is using ‘two Ordnance Maps of Somerset’, and

¹ Nash, Katherine Saunders, ‘Narrative Progression and Receptivity: John Cowper Powys’ *A Glastonbury Romance*’, *Narrative* 15, no. 1 (January 2007), pp. 4-23 (p. 14).

² Joyce, James, *Ulysses* (London: Bodley Head, 1993), p. 644.

³ ‘John Cowper Powys and James Joyce’, p. 37.

‘hope[s] there won’t be any mistakes!’; ‘any pamphlets you may pick up about Glastonbury or Wells or those parts’, he requests, ‘do’ee let me have them!’¹ As Lock notes, this ‘need for accuracy and fear of mistakes is peculiar in imaginative writers.’² Powys’ *Autobiography* suggests that it stems, in part, from the emphasis placed by Powys’ father on ‘the advantages of his native Wessex above all others’: ‘He brought us up to note every undulation, every upland, every spinney, every ridge, every fen and the effect produced upon all these by every variety of season or weather.’³ The nostalgic longing that drives Powys’ recreation of the landscapes of his youth is eventually absorbed into a distinctive literary form that combines the fantastical and the specific. As Keith notes, Powys consequently cannot be comfortably aligned with a tradition of regional realism: he ‘reproduces the details of Glastonbury and Dorchester with unparalleled accuracy’, but ‘superimposes upon them such fantastic creations as Johnny Geard and Uryen Quirm.’⁴

This textual quality is perhaps most clearly evident in *Weymouth Sands*. Powys tells us in *The Autobiography* that Weymouth was ‘always the centre of the circumference of [his] mortal life’, and the novel reveals the vivid, sometimes hyperreal character of his memories.⁵ *Weymouth Sands* features several passages which recite the names of local places in an almost ritualistic fashion, and Magnus Muir’s father – like Powys’ – insists upon the need to understand the specifics of his environment intimately:

The elder Muir had been really remarkable in this one particular, namely that he had endowed each separate one of the material phenomena of the place of his earthly sojourn with a curious mythological identity for his son’s mind. Thus every one of these objects, the White Horse, Hardy’s Monument, the White Nose, the Nothe, the Breakwater, Sandsfoot Castle, and above all this great pebble-bank where he now

¹ See Appendix I in Humfrey, *Essays on John Cowper Powys* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1972) for transcriptions of these letters (pp. 326, 325).

² ‘John Cowper Powys and James Joyce’, p. 38.

³ *Autobiography*, p. 151.

⁴ *Regions of the Imagination*, p. 16.

⁵ *Autobiography*, p. 263.

stood, was seen by Magnus in a different way from the way the others saw it. *It was a piece of his father's life.*¹

This mantra-like recitation of place-names recurs at several points throughout the novel.² To Adam ('Jobber') Skald, these reference points constitute 'hieroglyphs of the spirit', links between the internal and external worlds; the repetition of them throughout *Weymouth Sands* solidifies the sense of a correspondence between psychic and exterior environments.³ The cumulative effect is one of a mystical level of reality that permeates this apparently mundane, comprehensible litany of names and details: as Colin Style notes, 'the cataloguing seems almost obsessive', and this 'complex plaiting of lives and environment, even through the mundane recitation of the minutiae of street directions' reveals the depth and intensity with which the environment of the region interpenetrates human lives.⁴ For Hooker, this method is Powys' way of recalling his 'special place' in 'nostalgia's transfiguring light'.⁵ These passages thus reveal the peculiar atmosphere that arises in *Weymouth Sands* from the combination of Joycean attention to detail and the imaginative distortions of nostalgia, distance and contrast.

This distinctive use of detailed environmental description also emerges in Powys' Wessex novels as a result of Hardy's influence, albeit in a different form. While he shares with Joyce an obsessive need to catalogue place-names, orientations and distances, Powys takes from Hardy (among other things) a fascination with close-focus, tactile, and sensually engaged descriptions of the rural environment. Keith remarks that the passage in *Tess of the*

¹ *Weymouth Sands*, p. 281.

² Similar passages are at pp. 184, 303 and 343.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 343. There is a similar correspondence between interior and exterior environments in the other Wessex novels: Denis Lane notes that through 'replicating in the wanderings of Wolf Solent those of his own early life, Powys displays the landscape of the novel as a series of charged centres of significance so that it becomes possible to speak of it as a symbolic landscape, with the pattern of topographical symbolism following closely the pattern of Wolf's psychological progress' ('The Elemental Image in *Wolf Solent*', p. 57).

⁴ Style, Colin, 'On Hardy's Sacred Ground: John Cowper Powys' *Weymouth Sands*', *The Powys Review* 6, no. 17 (1985), pp. 27-38 (p. 28).

⁵ 'Thomas Hardy, John Cowper Powys and Wessex', p. 29.

D'Urbervilles in which Tess walks towards Clare, 'gathering cuckoo-spittle on her skirt, cracking snails that were underfoot, staining her hands with thistle-milk and slugslime', was one of Powys' favourites.¹ Keith notes the recurring scenes of 'vegetable profusion and decay' in Powys' work, and his 'emphasis on smells and such details as lichen and fungi and the lesser-known flowers and butterflies'.² Thus, in *Wolf Solent*, as Lane notes, 'Wolf is endowed with Powys' acute sensitivity to natural sights, sounds, and smells, and to the distinctive habits of earth and sky'.³ Wolf communes with 'the limp whitish-pink stalks of half-hidden primroses drooped above their crinkled leaves,' with 'hands and knees embedded in the warm-scented earth'; and the narrative details 'the eyes of weasels and the noses of rats and the pricks of nettles and the tongues of vipers and the spawn of frogs and the slime of snails.'⁴ Jerome McGann notes the use of this deliberately repetitive, accumulative technique in the later work *Atlantis* (1954), but it is already evident in *Wolf Solent*, demonstrating Powys' unusual absorption and development of Hardy's style.⁵ Similarly, John Crow in *Glastonbury Romance*, thinking of his mother in the opening pages, feels his thoughts of her mingle with a vivid sensitivity to the sensuality of his surroundings:

How could he know that mingled with their awareness of wet, green mosses, of dry, scaly lichens, of the heady-sweet odours of prickly gorse, of the cool-rooted fragility of lilac-coloured cuckoo flowers, of the sturdy swelling of the woolly calices of early cowslips, of the embryo lives within the miraculous blue shells of hedge-sparrow's eggs, the thoughts

¹ Hardy, Thomas, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 138.

² *Regions of the Imagination*, p. 163.

³ 'The Elemental Image in *Wolf Solent*', p. 68.

⁴ *Wolf Solent*, pp. 127, 325.

⁵ McGann notes the following list in *Atlantis*: 'bits of wood, bits of stalk, bits of fungus, bits of small snail-shells, bits of empty birds' eggs, bits of animals' hair, bits of birds' feathers, bits of broken sheaths of long-perished buds and shattered insect-shards, strewn remnants of withered lichen-clusters, and scattered fragments of acorns and berries and oak-apples that have survived in these lonely trails and tracks to be scurf upon the skin of one world and the chaos-stuff for the creation of another world.' Powys' later writing, according to McGann, is characterised by 'digression, polyphony, improbable events, and the studied meandering pursued so closely by so many of our most impressive recent readers and thinkers, like W.G. Sebald.' He therefore argues that certain Powysian narrative techniques (already present, as I suggested, in *Wolf Solent*) are consciously – and influentially – experimental. McGann, Jerome, 'Impossible Fiction; or, The Importance of Being John Cowper Powys', in McGann, J., *The Scholar's Art: Literary Studies in a Managed World* (London: University of Chicago Press, 2006), pp. 175-189 (p. 183).

of the earth-mother throbbed with a dull, indefinable, unappeasable jealousy of a human mother?¹

Characteristically, the close attentiveness to the flora and fauna of the region gives way, in this passage, to mystical speculations on ‘the thoughts of the earth-mother’. Powys begins with Hardy-esque observations of place, but moves suddenly into metaphysical realms; as Hooker notes of a similar passage in *Wolf Solent*, ‘[i]t is with a Hardyan noticing of little things [...] that Wolf’s vision begins. [...] What would have been alien to him [Hardy] is the apparent assumption of preternatural powers’.² Although the Wessex novels retain a sense of overarching scepticism regarding the supernatural – Hooker notes that ‘the “as if” construction or an equivalent occurs in his novels wherever there is a suggestion of occult powers’ – the sheer frequency with which such passages occur, and their existence alongside this close-focus viewpoint on the nonhuman world, constitutes a significant development of Hardy’s approach.³ This can, again, be seen as a kind of imaginative realism: Powys uses the juxtaposition of the sensual and the supernatural to create a distinctive sense of place, one simultaneously imbued with nostalgia and a heightened sense of scale.

This oscillation between detailed descriptions and metaphysical meditations also dominates the aqueous landscape of *Weymouth Sands*. Characters are moved, by their sense of a close sensual engagement with the oceanic world, to contemplate temporally or metaphysically distant realms. Towards the end of the novel, Magnus Muir again recalls his father, and his love of the enclosed, microcosmic universes that exist within rock-pools. Gazing into one such ‘enchanted fissure’, Muir feels a profoundly close connection to his deceased parent:

[H]e could see purple and amber-coloured sea-anemones, their living, waving antennae-like tendrils swaying gently, as the tide swell took them. And tiny, greenish

¹ *A Glastonbury Romance*, p. 23.

² ‘Thomas Hardy, John Cowper Powys and Wessex’, p. 30.

³ *Ibid.*

fish with sharply extended dorsal fins darted to and fro across the waving petals of those plants that were more than plants! But it was at the motionless shells at the bottom that he now gazed with his strongest sense of the past.¹

In such passages, Powys develops a style that uses the accumulation of carefully-rendered environmental details to suggest a similarly intimate knowledge of inner worlds. From an ecological perspective, this is one of the most significant qualities of his work: it suggests that a close relationship to place is connected to self-knowledge, and to a sense of connection with one's world. Crucially, however, these insights are formulated with the epistemological assistance of nostalgia and distance. The aqueous environment of *Weymouth Sands*, which promotes a sense of atmospheric mingling between worlds, is particularly suited to the presentation of such ideas. They are, however, evident in the other Wessex novels as well. David Ride argues, in fact, that 'no better liminal landscape in literature exists' than that of *Wolf Solent*, with its protagonist surnamed after the strait that separates the Isle of Wight and the mainland: at one level, Ride argues, Wolf 'represents the lupine sea that laps, lusts after, and penetrates the beautiful landscape'.² Powys' hero moves through a 'phantasmal' world of 'chilly twilight', and 'white mist'; of skies covered by 'a grey film of feathery clouds, through which neither moon nor stars were visible except as a faintly diffused luminosity'; and in which even trees seem 'composed of a vaporous stuff that was absolutely liquid.'³ This development of fictional worlds that embody and literalise several levels of marginality and liminality continues in *A Glastonbury Romance*: as J.P. Couch notes, the environment of the novel is one in which '[w]ater has already invaded land', and 'the whole sea is more akin to

¹ *Weymouth Sands*, p. 562.

² 'The Liminal Landscape of John Cowper Powys', p. 74. Compare Gillian Beer's observation that the 'island's identity depends on water. It is the sea which defines the land [...] over and under, inner and outer, stasis and flux, become generalised as motion. Thresholds and boundaries lose definition'. Beer, Gillian, 'The Island and the Aeroplane: The Case of Virginia Woolf', in *Virginia Woolf: The Common Ground* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996), pp. 149-78 (p. 166). Beer uses these ideas to illuminate Woolf's work, specifically *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*, but they also apply to the shifting, watery landscapes of Powys' Wessex novels.

³ *Wolf Solent*, pp. 111, 287 and 349.

earth than to sea.’¹ The deep-sea waves of the Atlantic, Powys tells us, are like ‘the death mounds of some huge wasteful battlefield carried along by an earthquake and tossed up into millions of hill summits and dragged down into millions of valley hollows as the whole earth heaved.’² Interpenetration and liminality are thus central tropes of the Wessex novels, atmospheric devices key to Powys’ creation of worlds in which subject and environment, human and nonhuman, internal and external, all commingle.

The *Autobiography* suggests that Weymouth and its surrounds is, for Powys, the region of Wessex that most potently embodies this sense of place. As he tells us there, recalling childhood holidays at Brunswick Terrace:

To my childish senses there was a constant interpenetration between the whole seashore and the interior of this house; the spray and the foam and the jelly-fish and the starfish floating in and floating out all the while, and carrying my consciousness backwards and forwards with them between objects of art from India and the enchanted sands beyond the donkey-stand.³

The seaside environment, with its intermingling of cultures, smells, sounds, and elements, instils in Powys from a young age a sense of the world as fluid, without stable borders. His evocations of the region of his childhood, therefore, do not tend to assert a sense of rootedness or fixed identities; and that imaginative conception enables his nostalgic recollections to combine fantasy and reality without a sense that this jars with a supposed environmental essence. Anthony Low notes that this childhood experience of Weymouth as a liminal or marginal zone, in which there are no clearly demarcated boundaries between house, town and sea, is manifested in the atmosphere of *Weymouth Sands*.⁴ This is evident in the

¹ Couch, J.P., ‘John Cowper Powys’ *A Glastonbury Romance: A Phenomenological Vision of the Flood*, *Powys Notes* 13, no. 1-2 (Spring 2000), pp. 4-29 (p. 10).

² *A Glastonbury Romance*, p. 1063.

³ *Autobiography*, p. 20.

⁴ Low, Anthony, ‘Dry Sand and Wet Sand: Margins and Thresholds in *Weymouth Sands*’, in Lane, D. (ed.), *In the Spirit of Powys: New Essays* (London: Associated University Presses, 1990), pp. 112-135 (p. 113). This

following passage from the novel's opening chapter, in which Magnus Muir prepares for bed in his room:

And as he undressed himself the familiar smell of dead seaweed kept entering his room; and a strange phantasmal Weymouth, a mystical town made of a solemn sadness, gathered itself about him, a town built out of the smell of dead seaweed, a town whose very walls and roofs were composed of flying spindrift and tossing rain.¹

Here, Powys makes explicit the idea that memories can somehow create or sustain a place: just as Muir's memories of the past seem to form another Weymouth existing alongside the real one, so Powys' evocations of Weymouth, some fifty years on from the childhood holidays that inspired them, create a sense of a world that is simultaneously 'phantasmal' and sensually present. Both temporal and geographical distance lend Powys' reconstruction of place a distinctive imaginative intensity. Thus, while a close attentiveness to the particular characteristics of an environment is central to the power of Powys' novels, this sense of place is not that of a 'rooted' local – Powys is, after all, recalling holidays to Weymouth from his childhood home of Derbyshire – and it undermines notions of 'authentic' belonging.

Hooker suggests that this quality of Powys' novels, their tendency to problematise stable notions of identity and belonging, makes him primarily a novelist of marginality. He explores, says Hooker, the 'margins between earth and water, day and night, man's consciousness and the consciousness he ascribes to all living and to some inanimate things'.² Both Ride and Low connect their discussions of liminality in Powys' work to these explorations of marginality. The close relation between the two concepts indicates that, for Powys, the creation of liminal atmospheres in his novels has a certain political or ideological dimension, albeit one that remains implicit and not fully realised. With his complex mixture of identities,

sense of the coastal home as a liminal space is evident in both Butts and Woolf, as I argue in the following two chapters.

¹ *Weymouth Sands*, p. 26.

² Hooker, Jeremy, *John Cowper Powys* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1973), p. 31.

combining affinities with (among other places) Derbyshire, Somerset, Dorset and Wales, and his experience of life as an exile, Powys is sensitive to the different ways in which cultures ascribe the status of ‘locals’ or ‘outsiders’ – and the implications of being classed as such. As J.R. Williams notes, Powys ‘was always very aware of his English cultural heritage, but aware of it as something from which he was excluded [...] he was the outsider, the exile, the wild card, a persona he never tired of creating in his fiction’.¹ This position aligns Powys with the wider movement of literary modernism: although he was ambivalent, at best, towards the metropolitan focus of high modernism, in a more general sense he embodies the spirit of the era as summarised by Malcolm Bradbury and James McFarlane: ‘Many if not most of its chief creators crossed frontiers, cultures, languages and ideologies’; and modernist art speaks of ‘a time when all frontiers were in vital and often dangerous flux.’² It is, in fact, precisely Powys’ determination to create a distinctively imaginative regional literary form that connects him with this transgressive character of modernism.

The desire to challenge borders partly explains Powys’ love of peripatetic experience, both in regional and global terms. Powys tells us in the *Autobiography* that, during his time at Cambridge, he delighted in following the ‘unpicturesque unromantic highways’ around the town, an activity which stimulated ‘sensation-thoughts’; difficult, if not impossible, to put into words:

[T]he salty taste of half-dried sweat upon my lips, the delicious swollenness of my fingers, the sullen sweet weariness of my legs, the indescribable happiness of my calm, dazed, lulled, wind-drugged, air-drunk spirit, were all, after their kind, a sort of thinking though of *exactly what*, it would be very hard for me to explain. Did I share at such times the sub-thoughts, or over-thoughts, that the old earth herself has, as she turns upon her axis, or that the vast volume of the ocean has, as his tide gathers along his beaches or draws back hoarsely into his gulfs?³

¹ Williams, J.R., Editorial, *Powys Journal* 1999, p. 8.

² *Modernism*, p. 13.

³ *Autobiography*, pp. 168-169. See Radford, *Mapping the Wessex Novel*, for discussion of a literary lineage of Englishness and road travel from Hardy to the late 1920s (p. 5).

Characteristically, sensually-engaged experience of the world is linked to grandiose metaphysical speculations, and an animistic sense of connection with the nonhuman world. For Powys, this kind of intense engagement with place is facilitated by movement.¹ Through exploring the English landscape in this way, as Wolf Solent does in his ‘West-country wandering’ around the ‘marginal tracts’ on the edges of Wessex towns, Powys connects with a marginal tradition of environmental engagement: what Ian Duncan calls a ‘national nomadology’ that can be traced to the work of George Borrow.² This connection is made explicit in *Weymouth Sands*’ Gipsy May and Larry Zed. The former has ‘forsaken her wandering life’ to look after the latter, but they occupy a marginal space within the novel both literally and metaphorically: invisible to most of the town’s inhabitants, and living in a hovel among ‘[r]ushy bogs, where the brackish mud was hidden beneath tall wavy grasses’, and ‘dark stretches of gloomy peat-sod, that bore little or no vegetation at all.’³ Low notes that May and Zed live ‘on the edges of that most marginal and liminal of places, Lodmoor’.⁴ Powys’ presentation of such characters indicates his awareness of the existence of a marginalised nomadic tradition within the history of English rural life. His own love of peripatetic experience, and his sensitivity to the distinctive sensual and epistemological value it carries, suggests that such figures appear in his texts to deliberately challenge the idea that ‘rootedness’ in a single place facilitates a privileged understanding of it.

¹ Cavaliero’s point that Powys lacked the ‘intense inner restlessness of Lawrence’, and ‘settled down instinctively’ when able to do so, is noted in Section I above. While this appears uncontroversial insofar as Powys demonstrated a remarkable ability to connect with places wherever he settled, the variety of different locations in which he did so suggests that his peripatetic explorations were not merely circumstantial. Thus, it is worth considering whether there is some relation between the pleasures of walking he describes in this passage, and the wider epistemological value that larger-scale travel may have had for him.

² *Wolf Solent*, p. 128; Duncan, Ian, ‘Wild England: George Borrow’s Nomadology’, *Victorian Studies* 41, no. 3 (Spring 1988), pp. 381-403 (p. 382).

³ *Weymouth Sands*, pp. 154-155.

⁴ ‘Dry Sand and Wet Sand: Margins and Thresholds in *Weymouth Sands*’, p. 125.

Powys' novels, then, are dominated by a sense of fluidity: they present fictional worlds in which borders between regions, identities, cultures and metaphysical realms are neither clearly visible or stable. Although his characters often grapple with dichotomies – Wolf Solent sees the world in terms of good and evil, ‘a dualism in which every living thing was compelled to take part’ – the atmospheres in the texts rarely reflect this sense.¹ As Eivor Lindstedt argues, ‘Powys did not understand existence at large in dichotomous terms’, and his work accordingly ‘displays a literal preference for twi-light [...] with unforgettable moments of in-between light.’² This characteristic of the novels enables Powys to explore the imaginative possibilities of other metaphysical realities without presenting a sense of opposed, bordered realms. He does this, as I have suggested, by focusing initially upon closely-observed details of the environment, before shifting into dreamlike speculations. Cavaliero notes this technique in discussing a passage from Powys' second novel *Rodmoor* (1916):

This passage is characteristic of its author, moving as it does from the close particularity of the opening, with its clearly-felt physical objects (the cobblestones, the slimy steps) to things clearly seen (the rocking barges, the pallid tide) and then through an increasing fluidity and subjectivity into an invocation of another dimension of reality altogether.³

The general narrative progression described here could be applied to several of the passages quoted above. In Powys, this sense of a continuum between different realms is intimately related to the specific character of places: the beach of *Weymouth Sands*' title, for example, receives ‘warm diffused sunlight which fell from a filmy, feathery sky’, creating an ‘ideal atmosphere, as if the whole crowd, both in and out of the shining water, had been removed several degrees from the pressure of daily reality’. In fact, the whole scene seems ‘out of

¹ *Wolf Solent*, p. 299.

² *John Cowper Powys: Displacements of Voice and Genre*, p. 244.

³ Cavaliero, Glen, ‘John Cowper Powys: Landscape and Personality in the Early Novels’, in Humfrey, B. (ed.), *Essays on John Cowper Powys* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1972), pp. 85-101 (p. 90).

Time altogether’, occupying instead ‘some ideal region of everlasting holiday’.¹ Powys’ recreation of Wessex in these novels, then, has a dreamlike, liminal quality not merely because of the specificity of his distanced, nostalgic perspective; certain landscapes, he suggests, are also *inherently* conducive to that kind of experience. They seem to promise the transcendence of everyday reality by degrees, a gradual dissolution of the supposed boundaries between worlds.

This also brings out one of the ways in which Powys’ fictional worlds sidestep some of the dualistic difficulties of Lawrence’s writing discussed in the previous chapter. Both writers are drawn to the imaginative possibilities of rendering, or hinting at, worlds that exist somehow behind or alongside the immediately perceivable one; in Lawrence, these are often presented as what Paul Delany calls ‘deathscapes’, zones of nihilistic oblivion, and they represent a kind of afterlife insuperably cut off from ‘reality’. Powys, too, is fascinated by ghostly and deathlike imagery in his evocations of alternate realities. As Gwyneth Miles notes, in the Wessex novels water is associated with the afterlife, and the ““watery” towns of Glastonbury and Weymouth have a peculiarly Cimmerian quality; they link this visible world with another, spiritual or ghostly one.”² Thus, the previous quotation reimagines the beach at Weymouth as a kind of heavenly sanctuary, existing outside of or above the physical world, and time itself. The ‘strange phantasmal Weymouth’ that seems, for Magnus Muir, to exist alongside the present world in the novel is also noted above; and in *Wolf Solent*, the protagonist has a similar sensation as he crosses a ‘darkening field’ with Gerda:

Over this cold surface they moved hand in hand, between the unfallen mist of rain in the sky and the diffused mist of rain in the grass, until the man began to feel that they two were left alone alive, of all the people of the earth – that they two, careless of past and future, protected from the very ghosts of the dead by these tutelary vapours, were

¹ *Weymouth Sands*, p. 462.

² Miles, Gwyneth, *The Interaction between Landscape and Myth in the Novels of John Cowper Powys* (Ph.D. thesis: University of British Columbia, 1973), p. 152.

moving forward, themselves like ghosts, to some vague imponderable sanctuary where none could disturb or trouble them!¹

As in *Women in Love*, we find here the sense of a world ‘empty of people’, and the connection between love and a yearning for a ‘sanctuary’ beyond the existing world. The ‘ghosts’ of Powys’ universe, however, move between worlds – as I will argue in Section IV, the temporalities of his landscapes are constantly shifting – and equally, it is implied, his living protagonists might do so. Through the kind of narrative technique identified by Cavaliero, then, Powys creates a fictional world in which multiple realities appear to exist alongside one another; and while Lawrence sometimes seems to suggest insurmountable barriers between them, Powys’ transgressive worldview and narrative approach creates a more open, fluid metaphysical universe.

III. A Thousand Tangents

The sense of multiple co-existent realities that pervades the Wessex novels reflects, as I have argued, Powys’ nebulous yet obsessive flirtations with mysticism and metaphysics. Related to this is their self-conscious awareness of fictionality, of the ways in which the novels present a linguistically-formed universe, and explore an environment that is dense with a sense of literary history. His sense of language’s ability to concretise places that are otherwise present only in imagination or – for the nostalgic exile – in memory, is evident, for example, in the repeated invocations of place-names in *Weymouth Sands* noted in the previous section. By listing the landmarks of ‘St Alban’s Head, the White Nose, the Nothe, Chesil Beach, the Breakwater, the Town Bridge, the White Horse, Hardy’s Monument, King George’s Statue, St John’s Spire, the Jubilee Clock’, *etcetera*, it is as though Powys is using

¹ *Wolf Solent*, p. 157.

language to make this temporally and geographically distant world more solid.¹ He applies the same logic to places, perhaps, that Larry Zed applies to women: ‘He evidently considered’, we are told, ‘that, as in the case of magicians and their attendant demons, to know a girl’s name gave you some special power over her.’²

Robert Macfarlane explores this relation between place and naming in a recent essay, considering its emergence across a diverse range of cultures. As Macfarlane notes, ‘language is vital to the possibility of re-enchantment’ of place; because language ‘does not just record experience stenographically, it produces it. [...] Language carries a formative as well as an informative impulse.’³ Although we should always be aware of the possibility that linguistic and taxonomic classifications of the world can in certain ways restrict our experience of it, language can also be used to maintain a certain mode of relation. Macfarlane notes that precision ‘is a quality in place-names that is openly appreciated by their Apache users,’ for example, ‘in that it invites and permits imaginative journeying within a landscape.’⁴ As we have seen, the sense of movement, of journeying through a semi-fantastical environment, is one of the key elements of Powys’ literary evocations of place. Characters like Wolf Solent engage with the environment of the novels through their peripatetic progress, reliving Powys’ own journeys across the landscape:

It gave him a primeval delight merely to move one foot in front of the other, merely to prod the ground with his stick, merely to feel the flapping of his coat about his knees, when this mood predominated. It always associated itself with his consciousness of the historic continuity – so incredibly charged with marvels of dreamy fancy – of human beings moving to and fro across the earth.⁵

¹ *Weymouth Sands*, p. 184.

² *Ibid.*, p. 196.

³ ‘A Counter-Desecration Phrasebook’, p. 118.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

⁵ *Wolf Solent*, p. 484.

This kind of movement is central to a distinctively Powysian animistic engagement with place: as Herbert Williams explains, '[o]ld posts, old heaps of stones, old haystacks thatched with straw, palings and hedges: these were his confidantes.'¹ Powys' intimate relationship to the landscapes of his youth leads him to devise 'strange rituals involving the touching and embracing of trees and stones which held symbolic significance for him'.² As Powys walks through the landscape, he brings it to life through these sensual engagements with its specific elements. In his time in the US, when the English landscape can no longer be engaged with in this way, that relationship with the physical world becomes transposed into literary forms. Krissdottir notes that during Powys' time at Phudd Bottom (upstate New York) from 1930-31, he developed rituals in his walks around the house's grounds:

An important part of his 'magicking' was to perform Adam's task of naming. Gradually, on his daily walks in their small acreage, every stone, tree, pond he encountered was given a name. There was the Prometheus stone, the Skaian gates, the Mabinogion swamp, Ashgard hill, the Rhea tree. As he has one of his characters in a novel say, 'we give things names to get power over them.' But for Powys, the naming was not just a method of control. It was an invocation; each name gave the inanimate a connection and an expansion. [...] [T]hese rituals were an essential part of his personality, his philosophy, and his belief in his imaginative powers.³

It is in the US, in the middle of the period of the Wessex novels' creation, this enchanting power of language comes to play an increasingly central role in Powys' evocations of place. Along with the physical 'touching and embracing' of his environment noted by Williams, Powys develops a mode of engagement that uses words to bring new imaginative dimensions of the world to life. Thus, in *Weymouth Sands* (written in this period), we see this kind of 'magicking' technique applied to the landmarks of the novel's region. In response to the

¹ *John Cowper Powys*, p. 31.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 66-67.

³ *Descents of Memory*, p. 271. In her discussion of *Weymouth Sands*, Krissdottir elaborates on this point and quotes from a diary entry written while Powys was working on the novel: 'As always for Powys, the act of naming was an act of creation: "characters that emerge out of Limbo, out of airy nothing, to receive these names and lo & behold! as I name them and name their houses they begin to gather to themselves a faint reality"' (p. 273).

particular problems and sensations created by distance and nostalgia, Powys uses this ritualised, obsessive cataloguing of details and names to enchant the textual world.

Powys' specific cultural and geographical position, as an exile with a powerful sense of the places he is seeking to conjure in his fiction, thus leads to the development of a literary form that emphasises the invocatory powers of language. This sense of the centrality of words to our imaginings of place is also crucial to an understanding of the self-conscious fictionality of his novels, their tendency to draw attention to themselves as literary artefacts. In one scene in *Wolf Solent*, the hero sees an elderly woman reading and has 'an indescribable sense of the drama of human life'; this develops into a sensation that she "might be reading a story about [his] own life! She might be reading about Shaftesbury town and yellow bracken and Gerda's whistling! She might be reading about Christie and the Malakite bookshop."¹ Powys self-consciously draws our attention to the artifice and unreality of the fictional world we are inhabiting. *Wolf Solent* is also rife with allusions to English literary history, encompassing Hardy, Swift, Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Sterne.² This list is far from exhaustive: Ian Hughes also notes allusions to Keats, Milton, Dante, Shakespeare and Scott.³ In fact, the density of such references connects the novel to hyperallusive, multivoiced works of canonical modernism like *The Waste Land* and *Ulysses*.⁴ These allusions are consciously scattered throughout the text, Hughes argues, in order to draw attention to its artifice: he notes that 'Wolf's difficulty in coming to terms with reality, and in understanding the nature of illusion, is indicated by his predisposition to fictionalise whatever he encounters.'⁵ Charles

¹ *Wolf Solent*, p. 181. Gerda's whistling is one device through which Powys expresses the sense of a continuum between human and nonhuman experience and creation in the novel: it is, Wolf says, her "way of expressing what we all want to express", and has 'the tone of the hour just before dawn' (pp. 159, 163).

² *Wolf Solent*, pp. 311, 469, 612 and 631-632.

³ Hughes, Ian, 'Allusion, Illusion, and Reality: Fact and Fiction in *Wolf Solent*', in Humfrey, B. (ed.), *John Cowper Powys' Wolf Solent: Critical Studies* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1990), pp. 103-115 (p. 104).

⁴ As I will argue in my chapters on Butts and Woolf, this referential quality is also present in their works, particularly Butts' *Armed with Madness*, and Woolf's *Orlando* and *Between the Acts*.

⁵ 'Allusion, Illusion, and Reality: Fact and Fiction in *Wolf Solent*', p. 104.

Lock, similarly, notes that one of the novel's essential points is that 'we all create stories about ourselves, and some, those who are novelists, happen also to write them down.'¹ Wolf, who is himself writing a history of Dorset for Squire Urquhart in the novel, recognises the sustaining power of fictionalised worlds. Contemplating the life that awaits him as a teacher, and 'how many days and months and years of his life' he was 'destined to spend in that accursed schoolroom', he finds solace in the thought that he is "'god of [his] own mind'": he "'can recreate, out of thin air, the essences of earth, grass, rain, wind, valleys, and hills!'"² Both Powys and Wolf, then, are aware of the compensatory power that language and imagination hold for the nostalgic exile.

This quality of the Wessex novels can be partly attributed to Powys' overarching awareness of the densely-layered fictional universe that seems to hang over the region. Inevitably, Hardy looms larger than any other figure in this respect. His influence upon Powys' close-focus, sensually engaged depictions of the Dorset and Somerset environment has already been noted. Furthermore, the common theme of homecoming in the Wessex novels has its antecedent in Hardy's *Return of the Native* (1878): the hero of that novel, Clym Yeobright, anticipates Wolf Solent, as well as *A Glastonbury Romance*'s John Crow and *Maiden Castle*'s Dud No-man. All of these characters, as Andrew Radford puts it, 'return to a locale which has left an ineffaceable imprint on their sense of self.'³ Countless scenes in the Wessex novels echo Hardy-esque archetypes. Wolf's impression of the Wessex Fair, for example, recalls Michael Henchard's fateful visit to a similar event in *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886):

¹ Lock, Charles, 'Wolf Solent: Myth and Narrative', in Humfrey, B. (ed.), *John Cowper Powys' Wolf Solent: Critical Studies* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1990), pp. 117-130, p. 125.

² *Wolf Solent*, p. 439.

³ *Mapping the Wessex Novel*, p. 14.

The large expanse of meadow-land lying between the castle ruins and the railway was encircled by booths, stalls, roundabouts, fortune-tellers' tents, toy circuses – all the entertainments, in fact, which the annual horde of migratory peddlers of amusement offered, according to age-old tradition, to their rustic clients.¹

In revisiting the themes and landscapes of Hardy's fiction, Powys is self-consciously engaging in the ongoing cultural creation of a literary universe that corresponds to an actual region; and this kind of creation inevitably erodes, to some extent, a sense of a firm, fixed reality. Thus, the region becomes, in literature, Hardy's 'partly-real, partly-dream country'.² If language, in a certain sense, brings the region into being for Powys, then the imaginative recreation of Wessex that he conducts from the USA is also a creative negotiation with a pre-existing fictional world. Margaret Moran argues that, in *Maiden Castle*, Powys quite deliberately plays with this sense of reality being essentially textual. Dud No-man thinks of Hardy's characters as he wanders the streets of Dorchester (Hardy's Casterbridge), and consciously inverts Henchard's action of selling his wife when he 'buys' Wizzie Ravelston early in the novel. As Moran notes:

[Dud] makes the comparison as if he and Henchard had an identical ontological status. [...] By treating his own existence as comparable to that of Henchard, he must either be drawing attention to the artifice involved in his own being or endowing Hardy's character with an extra-literary validity. [...] Hardy himself, in artistic replication, is now a part of that very landscape the perception of which he altered permanently through his Wessex fiction.³

This referencing of Hardy's fictional Wessex, then, represents another way in which Powys perceives and creates differing levels of reality within the environment of his novels. This particular aspect of his imaginative recreation of place anticipates trends in modernist and postmodernist fiction; moreover, it is arguably connected, like so many of the specificities and innovations of these novels, with his position of nostalgic exile. Distance tends to blur

¹ *Wolf Solent*, p. 184.

² *Far From the Madding Crowd*, p. 5.

³ *Maiden Castle*, p. 79; Moran, Margaret, 'Animating Fictions in *Maiden Castle*', in Lane, D. (ed.), *In the Spirit of Powys: New Essays* (London: Associated University Presses, 1990), pp. 180-192 (p. 189).

the distinction between physically present landscapes and those of literary imagination: for Powys, seeking to animate a temporally and geographically distant world, the differing fictional presentations of Wessex come to occupy an equivalent ontological level to the presently existing place.

While this approach does connect Powys to canonical modernism in certain ways, the case should not be overstated. The key to understanding these specific innovatory qualities of Powys' fictional universe perhaps lies in an understanding of the distinctive value he attributes to the work of Dorothy Richardson, the modernist with whom he most closely aligns himself. In his book on Richardson, Powys notes the central emphasis that her magnum opus *Pilgrimage* places upon 'atmosphere':

Perhaps no writer has ever devoted so much attention to the 'atmospheric' aspects of her backgrounds. The way the morning light falls upon furniture and *bric-a-brac* in rooms; [...] the way the mistiness of an autumn afternoon glides through the cracks and crannies of the most shuttered and cluttered boarding-house, bringing with it a smell of dead leaves, of leaves that have travelled far from the trees that shed them; [...] these books gather themselves about London and drink up the atmospheres of London as if they were humming-bird moths at a huge smoky flower.¹

Powys' description of mist gliding through 'cracks and crannies' brings to mind the sense of a shifting, aqueous world that pervades *Weymouth Sands*. As he explains, Richardson's work is challenging not because it is 'grammatically or philologically obscure' – unlike the 'over-intellectualised' works of modernism he finds grating – but rather because it is '*organically*' so.² Both Richardson and Powys challenge narrative convention, but they do so not through creating fictional worlds of dense Joycean complexity, but rather through focusing on the creation of these organically rich atmospheres as the central element of their texts. Jerome McGann compares *A Glastonbury Romance* with *Pilgrimage* in terms of their 'monstrous'

¹ *Dorothy M. Richardson*, pp. 12-13.

² *Ibid.*, p. 20.

expansiveness: not merely in terms of length, but because both texts ‘explore and expose the scene of reading itself, of language as the defining state of human being.’¹

Hence, both writers demonstrate a modernist preoccupation with the world-creating, artificial character of language, but they use this as a foundation for the creation of texts that centre around atmospheres rather than narratives. This is one way of understanding the predominance, in the Wessex novels, of imagery that interweaves internal and external experience. In a typical passage in *Wolf Solent*, the protagonist has the sense that ‘[e]motions, feelings, desires, some exalted, some brutal, whirled up from the bottom of his nature, like storm-driven eels roused and stirred from the ooze of a muddy river’; in *A Glastonbury Romance*, Mary Crow’s thoughts are ‘like a rain of bitterness and a dew of sweetness gathered in the hollows of a tree-root’; and in *Weymouth Sands*, Lucinda Cobbold’s mind is like ‘a vulture carrying off a reeking morsel of carrion to devour at leisure’.² As in Richardson’s work (but via very different patterns of imagery), there is a sense of the tangibility of the internal running through these texts that dissolves the boundary between world and mind. In doing this, the Wessex novels foreground atmosphere rather than conventional narrative plotting.

As Lock notes, much Powys criticism ‘has not argued strongly enough against the common assumption that he is a vestigial Victorian novelist born out of his time.’ Rather, according to Lock, Powys ‘does conform to the expectations of linguistic and formal introspection and innovation’.³ His developments, however, tend to be in terms of structure, narrative approach, tone and focus, rather than grammar, vocabulary or syntax. The use of distinctive internal imagery is one such characteristic that is deployed extensively throughout *Wolf Solent*. In

¹ ‘Impossible Fiction’, p. 175.

² *Wolf Solent*, p. 161; *A Glastonbury Romance*, p. 37; *Weymouth Sands*, p. 144.

³ ““Multiverse””, p. 72.

other respects, however, that text lacks certain innovative qualities of the later Wessex novels. The narrative voice is closely identified with the protagonist throughout, an approach that Powys describes in the *Autobiography* as the ‘Henry James rule of “straining” the whole thing through one character’s consciousness.’¹ Hence, although Woolf contemplates the problems of perspectival relativism when it strikes him that all things “see what they’ve the nature to see”, and “[n]o living thing has ever seen reality as it is in itself”, the narrative parameters of the novel restrict Powys’ ability to animate these themes.² Conversely, *A Glastonbury Romance* (and, to a lesser extent, *Weymouth Sands*) embraces them by constantly shifting the narrative viewpoint and deliberately undermining linearity, plot and coherence. This is evident from the novel’s infamous opening line onwards:

At the striking of noon on a certain fifth of March, there occurred within a causal radius of Brandon railway station and yet beyond the deepest pools of emptiness between the uttermost stellar systems one of those infinitesimal ripples in the creative silence of the First Cause which always occur when an exceptional stir of heightened consciousness agitates any living organism in this astronomical universe.³

From the outset, Powys adopts a style that teeters on the brink of coherence, both in its breathless convolutions, and its disorienting shift from the mundane and concrete to the mystical and metaphysical. No stable narrative viewpoint is established, and no specific linear narrative begins. Similarly, *Weymouth Sands* eschews the human in its opening paragraph, describing instead the waves breaking upon the shore: each being ‘an epitome of the whole body of the sea’, which carries ‘all the vast mysterious quality of the earth’s ancient antagonist.’⁴ These passages establish a narrative approach characterised by several

¹ *Autobiography*, p. 544. Ian Hughes notes that WS is less polyphonic than the other Wessex novels, in that it deals essentially with Woolf’s perspective. As Hughes argues, Powys attempts to mitigate the limitations of this approach through the use of dramatic irony, but he nonetheless is unable to create the sense of a decentred or multcentred ‘multiverse’ that is developed in *A Glastonbury Romance* (‘Allusion, Illusion, and Reality: Fact and Fiction in *Wolf Solent*’).

² *Wolf Solent*, p. 350.

³ *A Glastonbury Romance*, p. 21.

⁴ *Weymouth Sands*, p. 3. This presentation of breaking waves as an archetypally timeless, cyclical phenomenon, utterly indifferent to human concerns, recalls Woolf’s similar use of this image in the interludes of *The Waves*.

qualities that Belinda Humfrey identifies as distinctively modernist, associated as they are with Woolf, Proust and Joyce:

[D]eclining authoritative knowledge of his characters, multipersonal representations of consciousness, exterior events releasing and interpreting inner events (in place of the opposite process), the disintegration of the continuity of exterior events, the shifting of narrative viewpoint, the stratification of time resulting from representation of interior time, and a tendency to represent a very limited portion of time and to hold to minor, random, everyday events.¹

Consequently, Humfrey argues, the Wessex texts can be understood in a certain sense as ‘anti-novels’. In their multipersonality, fragmentation and disintegration, they destabilise common expectations of the novel form. This can be partly understood as arising from Powys’ belief, outlined in the *Autobiography*, that ‘in writing the tale of one’s days’ it is essential ‘not to try to give them the unity they possess for oneself in later life.’ Human stories, if they are to be in some sense ‘true’, must ‘advance and retreat erratically, must flicker and flutter here and there, must debouch at a thousand tangents.’² Although Powys is speaking explicitly of the autobiography form here, this determination to eschew narrative linearity and coherence typifies the Wessex novels, and the *Romance* in particular; as Katherine Nash notes, its use of ‘ellipsis and anticlimax’ asserts a ‘resistance to conventional plot progression’.³ In general, these texts delineate *places* at least as much as they do *stories*, and Powys’ development of distinctive narrative techniques is driven by the need to create a form capable of doing so.

¹ Humfrey, Belinda, Introduction, in Humfrey, B. (ed.), *Essays on John Cowper Powys* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1972), pp. 15-46 (p. 19).

² *Autobiography*, p. 237.

³ ‘Narrative Progression and Receptivity: John Cowper Powys’ *A Glastonbury Romance*’, p. 13.

Central to these innovations in Powys' work, as several critics have noted, is the novels' use of a polyphonic or 'multiverse' narrative approach.¹ Even *Wolf Solent*, despite the limitations of its relatively conventional narrative perspective, undermines anthropocentric understandings of the world: the scene in which Wolf imagines himself engaged in a 'passionate dispute' with his deceased father, for example, sees him suddenly gripped by the idea that he has 'become a lean worm' burrowing into the grave, 'in the darkness of that hollow skull, arguing with it'.² The worm here, of course, remains playfully anthropomorphic, and we can see the development of *A Glastonbury Romance*'s labyrinthine narrative universe as a way of moving beyond this kind of solution to the problem of perspectival limitation. Powys' preface to that novel declares his intention to 'to convey a jumbled-up and squeezed-together epitome of life's various dimensions', which, as Radford notes, accounts for the 'dizzying array of standpoints towards the town's personality.'³ Thus, the novel uses the device of the 'invisible watchers', 'scientific collectors of interesting human experiences in this ancient town', who stand 'at the brink of the deep Glastonbury Aquarium, watching the motions of its obsessed animalculae'.⁴ Such techniques enable the creation of a multcentred universe, in which (as in Richardson's work) the atmospheres of places often take precedence over human narratives: when a staircase is left 'silent and alone', it falls 'into that trance of romantic melancholy which was its invariable mood when the hall lamp was first lit'; rooms have a character of which 'human passers-by catch only the psychic echo or shadow or after-taste, for a single flicker of a second, as if they had caught them off-guard.'⁵ The novel, as Carol Coates explains, 'teems and burgeons with various aspects of conscious life,

¹ Lindstedt, for example, suggests that a polyphonic reading of Powys may 'prevent misunderstandings as to style and tone, and thus promote the understanding of his particular genius'. A full discussion of this critical work is beyond the scope of this thesis (*John Cowper Powys: Displacements of Voice and Genre*, p. 23).

² *Wolf Solent*, p. 325.

³ Preface, *Wolf Solent*, p. xiv; *Mapping the Wessex Novel*, p. 87.

⁴ *A Glastonbury Romance*, pp. 991, 1029.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 65. This passage anticipates the sustained exploration of domestic animism and nonhuman perspectives in the 'Time Passes' section of Woolf's *To the Lighthouse* (see Chapter Four).

subconscious life and superconscious life.’¹ These innovations can be understood within the context of Powys’ distinctive exiled perspective upon the Wessex landscapes of the novels. Their imaginative breadth, the freedom with which he destabilises conventional understandings of ‘reality’ and of narrative, and the willingness to shift between close and distant viewpoints, all reflect the complex ways in which his geographical, historical and cultural distance from the world evoked facilitates a distinctive literary approach.

These characteristics of the Wessex novels also raise the possibility that Powys’ texts have a distinctive proto-ecological value. Joseph Meeker’s seminal work of ecocriticism *The Comedy of Survival* (1974) posits that different literary approaches enact and perpetuate differing ecological worldviews. The tragic mode, Meeker argues, ‘requires that we perceive the world as a contest among warring camps, that we make choices among them, and that we bear full responsibility for the consequences of our choices.’² This, he suggests, is an anthropocentric approach which both perpetuates the idea that human narratives are at the centre of life, and insists upon the need to maintain the coherence of such narratives, even when they have unsustainable consequences. Meeker contrasts this with the comic mode, a literary approach that emphasises reconciliation, multiplicity, relativism, fluidity and above all, practicality and survival. One example cited by Meeker is the picaresque novel:

Its most obvious features are multiplicity and diversity, for within the picaresque world everything is tied to everything else according to complex interdependencies that defy simplification. [...] It is an ecosystem and [the picaro] is but one small organism within it. [...] Picaresque life is infinite play, with no hope of winning much, but endless enthusiasm for keeping the play alive.³

¹ John Cowper Powys in *Search of a Landscape*, p. 93.

² Meeker, Joseph W., *The Comedy of Survival: Literary Ecology and a Play Ethic* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1997), p. 14.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 59-73.

This description brings to mind several elements of Powys' fiction. *A Glastonbury Romance*, in particular, stresses multiplicity and diversity: no narratives are privileged among any others, and the human stories within the text are entwined with the nonhuman world. By continually shifting perspectives, and focusing on the evocation of place more than the delineation of stories, Powys emphasises the sense that each character is 'but one small organism' within the wider textual universe. The *Romance*, accordingly, has no real sense of climax or resolution at its close, despite the flooding of the town. Rather, the scene is used to emphasise the insignificance of human lives, and the inevitable persistence of the nonhuman:

For an eternity of time there had been no Mr Geard of Glastonbury. For an eternity of time there *would* be no Mr Geard of Glastonbury, though there might well be some mysterious conscious Being in the orbit of whose vast memory that particular Avatar was concealed. [...] The days of the years of men's lives are like leaves upon the wind and like ripples upon the water.¹

These events, and Powys' framing of them in terms that emphasise the irrelevance or insignificance of human culture, brings to mind Lawrence's use of apocalyptic themes. The tone here, however, is gently comic rather than tragically eschatological: humanity is not threatened by hubristic flaws upon which nature ultimately avenges itself, but is rather struck by arbitrary events that take no account of anthropocentric conceptions of the universe. Consequently, there is no sense of resolution, since there is no grand narrative to *be* resolved. 'As the waters cover Glastonbury,' Lock explains, 'so the author closes the book, its form less finalised than dissolved.'² More generally, the sense throughout the Wessex novels of a greater temporal universe than the one in which the 'real' events of the novels occur undermines the authority of any attempt to resolve narratives; they are fictional worlds imbued with Meeker's 'endless enthusiasm for keeping the play alive.'

¹ *A Glastonbury Romance*, pp. 1117-1119.

² 'Polyphonic Powys', p. 272.

Coates suggests that Powys' move towards this kind of worldview can be charted in *Wolf Solent*, in which the protagonist initially perceives the world as morally dualistic, but eventually comes to see it as bereft of meaning, a 'universe of chance'.¹ Thus, as the novel closes, Wolf arrives at the realisation that 'it was his own mind that was diseased ... not Nature. Well, diseased or not, it was all he had! Henceforth he was going to take as the talisman of his days the phrase *endure or escape*'.² This motto succinctly captures Meeker's summary of the comic mode, and suggests that Powys is consciously pursuing a literary approach along the lines Meeker suggests in the novels following *Wolf Solent*. As Peter Easingwood puts it, Powys 'cannot finally permit himself or Solent a metaphysical system [...] to account for the condition of the world. [...] [His] vision is not tragic but essentially comic-grotesque.'³ Coates explains this point with a comparison to *Hamlet*:

It is as if Hamlet, instead of being killed, is brought to realise at the end that his father died naturally, hoping Gertrude would marry Claudius, that no-one spies on him or plots his death, that he is assured of the Danish throne. [...] A Hamlet, realising that there is no great evil to revenge [...] is what Wolf is at the end of the novel. He casts no long tragic shadows.⁴

The comparison is apposite, given the novel's allusions to Shakespeare's play. The scene noted above, in which Wolf imagines occupying a worm's body and arguing with his father's skull, bathetically plays out a Shakespearean encounter with the ghost of the father, and simultaneously alludes to *Hamlet's* Yorick scene. Wolf imagines his father mocking his dogged adherence to the idea of a morally-ordered universe: as he argues, 'life is beyond your mirrors and your waters. It's at the bottom of your pond; it's in the body of your sun'.⁵ This diatribe asserts the absence of meaning in the world and the ultimate value of sensory

¹ John Cowper Powys in *Search of a Landscape*, p. 57.

² *Wolf Solent*, p. 633.

³ Easingwood, Peter, 'The Face on the Waterloo Steps', in Humfrey, B. (ed.), *John Cowper Powys' Wolf Solent: Critical Studies* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1990), pp. 55-67 (pp. 59-60).

⁴ *John Cowper Powys in Search of a Landscape*, p. 57.

⁵ *Wolf Solent*, p. 325.

experience. The scene bears comparison with John Crow's imagining of a conversation between two lice in *A Glastonbury Romance*, which eventually prompts reflection upon the 'monstrous arrogance of the human race in lumping together in one clumsy and ridiculous word – 'instinct, instinct, instinct' – all the turbulent drama, full of criss-cross psychic currents and convoluted struggles and desperations of the subhuman world.'¹ In both novels, the playful, daydreaming occupation of imagined nonhuman perspectives lends bathos to the examination of ordinarily tragic themes. Powys thus uses his characters' embodiment within a teeming nonhuman lifeworld to undermine the centrality of human concerns, and to suggest instead a kind of proto-biocentrism, asserting the equivalent value of all life. In various ways, then, the Wessex novels' distinctive innovations, tone and narrative approach place them in Meeker's comic mode. Moreover, the innovations that I have described in this section can all be linked to Powys' position as an exile imaginatively recreating a distant world. These include the novels' self-conscious fictionality; their recognition of the creative force inherent in naming and language; their emphasis on atmosphere rather than linear structures; and their embrace of narrative multiplicity.

IV. Imagination Recreates the World

As noted in the previous section, *A Glastonbury Romance* closes with the description of a flood, in a context that emphasises a sense of temporality exceeding the human scale. By drawing our attention to the relative biological and temporal insignificance of human life, Powys clearly anticipates central strands of ecological thought. The sense of multilayered time that pervades his novels, however, does not generally imply a clear distinction between human culture and an eternal nonhuman world that predates, and will follow, the existence of

¹ *A Glastonbury Romance*, p. 706.

humanity. Powys is interested in both prehistoric and eschatological imagery, but he is equally fascinated by the sense that previously-existing human cultures somehow still inhabit landscapes.¹ Of the Wessex novels, this atmosphere is most explicitly developed in *Maiden Castle* and *Wolf Solent*. In the latter, Wolf and Gerda visit Babylon Hill, a site near Yeovil (the Ramsgard of the novel) associated with multiple layers of history, ranging from pre-Christian civilisations to a Civil War battle. ‘Were they Celts or Romans’, Wolf wonders, ‘who actually, with their blunt, primitive spades, had changed the face of this hill? Was this silent, beautiful girl beside him the descendant of some Ionian soldier who had come in the train of the legionaries?’² Later in the novel, in a reverie brought on, characteristically, by the experience of walking through the landscape, Wolf contemplates the transience of civilisations:

There had fallen upon that portion of the West Country one of those luminous late-summer evenings, such as must have soothed the nerves of Romans and Cymri, of Saxons and Northmen, after wild pell-mells of advances and retreats, of alarms and excursions, now as completely forgotten as the death-struggles of mediaeval hernshaws in the talons of goshawks.³

In *A Glastonbury Romance*, this sense is embodied in the bric-a-brac that fills Bartholomew Jones’ shop: ‘Glastonbury here, layer by layer through the centuries, was revealed in certain significant petrifications, certain frozen gestures of the flowing spirit of life’.⁴ The shop is a microcosmic encapsulation of Glastonbury’s cluttered, chaotic human history; similarly, the chthonic landscapes of *Wolf Solent* bear the traces of centuries of human influence. In neither novel is there a sense of a clear distinction between human and nonhuman temporality.

¹ Like Lawrence and Woolf, Powys often uses striking prehistoric imagery, as when Sylvanus Cobbold’s neck reminds Gypsy May of ‘those other, those non-human necks [...] hundreds of millions of years ago when that indrawn air shivered and yearned between the dawn’s teeth for the red sun to touch the stalks of the pre-historic Mares’-tails, and to gouge great blood-pools out of the whitening swamp’ (*Weymouth Sands*, p. 387).

² *Wolf Solent*, p. 100.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 272.

⁴ *A Glastonbury Romance*, p. 345. In Chapter Four I discuss the similar sedimentary role played by objects in Pointz Hall, the setting of Woolf’s *Between the Acts*.

Powys entwines mythology and history at will: as Hooker notes, he tends to create histories of landscapes ‘in accordance with his own preoccupations’, another example of the creative licence with which Powys reimagines the distant world of Somerset and Dorset.¹ The Wessex novels are thus less interested in historical accuracy than they are in conveying the atmosphere of places in which multiple temporal layers of human culture are somehow embedded. As Colin Style puts it in his discussion of *Weymouth Sands*, Powys seems to view the environment of his novels ‘as part of the living psychic past.’²

The role of ancient monuments in Powys’ writing is central to understanding this sense of temporality. At the end of *A Glastonbury Romance*, we are reminded that ‘[t]he builders of Stonehenge have perished; but there are those who worship its stones still’; such monuments provide a link with previous occupants of the place.³ Stones are also central to the animistic engagement with landscape discussed in the previous section. Dorothee Greenberg notes that ‘they not only represent the self but also become reminders of past races that shared this earth with the present, living generation. [...] [S]tones grant community with the people of the past.’⁴ This suggests another dimension to the understanding of Powys as a cosmopolitan writer, however ambivalent he may be towards the dispersals and urbanisation of modernity: there is a kind of *temporal* cosmopolitanism underpinning his landscapes, an insistence that no single group of occupants can claim an eternal or essential link with a specific spirit of place. Complicating Lawrence’s claim that ‘[e]very people is polarised in some particular locality, which is home, the homeland’, Powys emphasises the diversity of the myriad groups that claim such connections in different historical periods.⁵ Related to this is the linguistic

¹ *John Cowper Powys*, p. 66.

² ‘On Hardy’s Sacred Ground’, p. 35.

³ *A Glastonbury Romance*, p. 1119.

⁴ Greenberg, Dorothee von Huene, ‘Stone Worship and the Search for Community in John Cowper Powys’ *A Glastonbury Romance*, *The Powys Review* 8, no. 19 (1986), pp. 36-42 (p. 37).

⁵ ‘The Spirit of Place’, p. 17.

complexity of the novels: their employment of dialect and colloquialisms (discussed above, Section I) which give voice to those inhabitants of the land that represent older traditions, groups that are becoming increasingly marginalised. Powys tends to use these passages as a means of reimagining and cementing bonds with place. In *Maiden Castle*, this sense of diversity is accentuated by Dud's musings on Welsh, which sounds "as if its rhythm were identical with the orchestration of the planet".¹ Yet another related element of Powys' texts is their challenge to notions of racial purity: Radford notes that the aforementioned novel's Uryen Quirm 'calls the parameters of social, ethnic and organic categories into question.' The narrative 'delights in affronting those who cling to glib taxonomic concepts, and who devise strategies for drawing narrow distinctions. Thuella thinks Uryen is 'more like a Chinaman than a Welshman'; his hair has 'an African look'.² Charles Lock notes that Powys 'was conscious of himself as an uprooted Celt', and argues that he was, as a result, 'intensely aware of racial qualities and differences.'³ For Powys, place is always a palimpsest: a complex tapestry of languages, ethnicities and cultures, with a sense of different, coexisting layers of history which insists that no particular identity can claim dominance over any other.

Powys' emphasis on this rich sense of temporality is one way of understanding his resistance to the mode of high modernist experimentation, particularly in poetry, discussed in Section I. If artworks seek to separate themselves from culture and history, he argues – as certain strands of modernism do – they will be of little value. In the *Autobiography*, Powys relates this point to architecture, explaining his 'nostalgic preference for ancient buildings over modern ones':

To get this sense of 'eternal recurrence' which is to my mind the secret of the most significant poetry of our race [...] what you *must* have is the presence somewhere or

¹ *Maiden Castle*, p. 257.

² *Mapping the Wessex Novel*, p. 112.

³ 'John Cowper Powys and James Joyce', p. 36.

other of buildings old enough to give you this sense of the continuity of the generations. To the modern aesthete all that I am saying now will sound literary, sentimental, *affected*. But it is these moderns themselves, not I, who are the ‘affected’ ones. *They are shutting off the magnetic current* between themselves and the accumulated poetic feeling of our race’s long history.¹

This position allows for Powys’ avowed affiliation with those modernists who recognise the need for this sense of continuity: in his essay on *Ulysses*, he praises the novel for its ‘rhythms [which] are saturated with literary tradition.’² This is also a position which anticipates, in certain ways, the arguments of T.S. Eliot’s 1948 essay *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture*. There, Eliot argues that valuable cultural development requires not that we seek ‘to restore a vanished, or to revive a vanishing culture under modern conditions which make it impossible, but to grow a contemporary culture from the old roots.’³ This illuminates the sense that pervades the Wessex novels of a movement ‘towards some recoverable mystery’, as Dud No-man describes nostalgia in *Maiden Castle*.⁴ Powys insists upon the need to draw inspiration from what Eliot calls ‘the old roots’, but in doing so he nonetheless develops a distinctively modern literary approach, characterised by (among other things) the kind of temporal and linguistic cosmopolitanism discussed above. His writing suggests that these roots, in varying and unpredictable forms, recur throughout cultural history: this, for Powys, is the meaning of Nietzsche’s concept of eternal recurrence, alluded to in the preceding *Autobiography* quotation. Thus, when Dud ‘buys’ Wizzie in *Maiden Castle*, he has a feeling ‘deep down in his soul [...] as if all this had happened before, ages and ages ago’:

He *did* meet her eyes now, as he held that pen, and it was as if out of the remote past of that long-historical spot some reincarnated Bronze-Age invader were selecting from among the girl-captives of the older Stone-Age the particular one that appealed to his erratic fancy, the one, out of them all, that no one else would choose!⁵

¹ *Autobiography*, p. 436.

² *James Joyce’s Ulysses: An Appreciation*, p. 8.

³ Eliot, T.S., *Notes Towards the Definition of Culture* (London: Faber and Faber, 1962), p. 53. Esty also discusses this essay in *A Shrinking Island* (p. 128).

⁴ *Maiden Castle*, p. 236.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

Powys combines here his awareness of the heterogeneous history of the region with a sense of cyclical temporality: diverse groups may have occupied and identified with the places of Wessex, yet certain narratives or situations, he suggests, inevitably recur. Similarly, in *Weymouth Sands* Peg Frampton has the sense that “[e]verything repeats itself! Perhaps everything that’s happening now, at this minute, in all these houses has happened, exactly the same, through all eternity”¹; while Magnus Muir, visiting Chesil Beach, has ‘a queer sensation as if he had walked along this pebbly ridge, on the verge of these ghastly down-sucking gulfs, many a time before!’¹ Different cultures come and go, Powys tells us, but the fundamental human narratives are timeless and cyclical.²

In diverse and mysterious ways, these characters connect with the ‘magnetic current’ of human cultural history; and analogously, Powys’ fiction seeks to somehow express this current in a literary form that is, nonetheless, partly shaped by his specific historical-cultural location and experiences. His work can thus be seen as a form of Berman’s ‘modernism with ghosts’: while earlier movements ‘have wiped away the past in order to reach a new departure’, this kind of approach is grounded in ‘attempts to recover past modes of life that [are] buried but not dead.’³ In contrast to Lawrence’s work, which often implies that neither a return to tradition, nor an attempt to invent entirely new literary forms, can provide an authentic mode of being in the modern era, Powys suggests that revisiting these kinds of recurring cultural forms and archetypes can generate a literature that expresses ‘the secret of

¹ *Weymouth Sands*, pp. 84, 277.

² Another way of understanding this sense of temporality is as what John Hodgson, following Powys, calls ‘Homeric’; this is characterised by a ‘rhythmic continuity’ which emphasises the value and timelessness of everyday experience. As Hodgson explains, ‘Wolf Solent had attained this heightened sense of ordinariness in the early days of his marriage with Gerda’. Moreover, Hodgson continues, the use of this narrative approach aligns Powys with Joyce: ‘[t]he sequence of the narrative, through Wolf’s rising from bed, leaving Gerda still half-asleep, to his making of tea downstairs, a short walk outside, breakfast, and a trip to the backyard privy, follows precisely the early morning of another great sensualist, Leopold Bloom, and reads like a Powysian gloss of *Ulysses*’ (“A Victim of Self-Vivisection”, p. 42).

³ *All That is Solid Melts into Air*, pp. 333, 332,

the most significant poetry of our race', but does so in a mode peculiar to its time and culture. As Esty puts it, Powys' 'wilful affirmation of rural life' sets him apart from the 'nostalgic laments about lost organic community' found in Lawrence. According to this position, it is precisely that optimism in Powys' work which aligns him with distinctively modernist ideas and techniques.¹ As Esty suggests, there is an element of fantasy about this: the imaginative realist Wessex of the novels sometimes ignores or downplays the extent to which industrialisation and urbanisation are impacting upon the region in this period. Again, therefore, it is evident that Powys' position of distance from the world of the novels plays a key role in the character of the universe he creates there, leading to a peculiarly imaginative yet place-centred literary style.

This reading of Powys' work as a haunted modernism, then, is another way of stating that he can be aligned with the wider movement that Esty identifies: a revival of interest in English culture, landscape and history in the interwar period.² His sense of the environment as a palimpsest is one manifestation of that impulse. In *Shadow Sites*, Kitty Hauser connects this revival with the emergence of aerial photography and the development of large-scale archaeological projects; this leads to what she describes as 'topophilia', characterised by 'a visual imagination, but also a wilfully parochial outlook and a reluctance to engage with the homogenising forces of urban modernity'. The 'topophils' of this era are, she argues, united by an interest in landscapes which seem to make the past tangible through their markings.³ This mode of engagement with the environment, and the deliberate refusal to engage with modernity's 'homogenising forces', evokes Powys' relationship with the Wessex landscape. His sensibility, in some ways, can be understood as what Hauser describes as 'archaeological', as opposed to 'preservationist':

¹ *A Shrinking Island*, p. 64.

² See *ibid.*, p. 48.

³ *Shadow Sites*, p. 1.

[W]hile preservationists tend to mourn the disappearance of a historic landscape, campaigning for its conservation, the archaeological imagination perceives the presence of the past in a landscape *despite* the incursions of modernity. [...] Modernity, after all, does not remove the historicity of a place, although it might seem to; it is simply the latest – albeit the most destructive – stage in that place’s history.¹

This sheds light on Powys’ complex and ambivalent relationship with modernity. As we have seen, he is sceptical regarding the value of urbanisation and industrialisation; yet given his sense of the ultimate transience of all human cultures, and the ways in which they engrave themselves upon the palimpsests of history and place, it would be inconsistent of him to dismiss modernity as representing a distinctive and catastrophic break with cultural history. This ambivalence is captured in the fact that the specific epistemological developments Hauser discusses are, of course, precisely *facilitated* by technological developments of modernity: the aeroplane, and the increasing sophistication of archaeological excavation.

In the latter respect, *Maiden Castle* is of central importance, tracing as it does the work carried out at the eponymous site in Dorset by Mortimer Wheeler between 1934 and 1937. Wheeler’s methods were revolutionary, as Barry Cunliffe notes, and ultimately ‘developed the craft of excavation to a level it had never before reached.’² This stemmed from Wheeler’s conviction that, as Cunliffe puts it, ‘the story of a site could only be deduced through the understanding of the sequence of deposits, and the sequence was best appreciated and demonstrated in section.’³ Accordingly, Wheeler developed a method which used plotted grid squares separated by balks of soil, which ‘focus[ed] on the vertical sequence rather than the horizontal; thus it tended to emphasise the linear “story” of a site’.⁴ The Maiden Castle excavations were therefore an example of how advancements in archaeological field

¹ Ibid., pp. 4-5.

² Cunliffe, Barry, ‘Mortimer Wheeler’, in Murray, T. (ed.), *Encyclopaedia of Archaeology: The Great Archaeologists* (Oxford: Abc-Clio, 1999), pp. 371-383 (p. 373).

³ Ibid., p. 376.

⁴ Ibid.

techniques encouraged an understanding of landscape as a site of multiple temporalities. Powys suggests that such work can lead to valuable new ways of experiencing place: as Dud No-man approaches the site, he experiences a sense of ‘absolute timelessness’, and ‘seemed to float rather than walk’ upon ‘a heaving cloud-sea made up of an imponderable substance upon which he was borne forward.’¹ Yet, as Radford notes, any optimism in this respect is tempered by Uryen Quirm’s antipathy towards the excavations: the novel is underpinned by an ambivalence towards archaeology, arising from the question of ‘whether this branch of science actually destroys, rather than “revives” the primeval energies’ of the place.² Powys’ fascination with this excavation is unsurprising, particularly since the beginning of the project coincided with his return to Dorset from the USA in June 1934: as Radford puts it, he would have been ‘forcibly struck by the intense media scrutiny surrounding Wheeler’s audacious undertaking’.³ His perspective on Maiden Castle, moving from geographical distance to closeness, mirrors the excavation’s movement from the present into the distant past, and thus emphasises the value that such dynamic contrasts can have for our understanding. Yet the possibility that such closeness and interrogation can threaten the ‘primeval energies’ Radford discusses is always present for Powys.

This ambivalence is characteristic of his attitude towards several of modernity’s key cultural developments: it is analogous, for example, to Powys’ attitude towards psychoanalysis. As Morine Krissdottir notes, he was fascinated by the idea of the Oedipus complex, and eventually became convinced that he had what Freud called an ‘anal character’.⁴ This absorption of Freud’s ideas is evident throughout the Wessex novels: *Wolf Solent*, for

¹ *Maiden Castle*, p. 237.

² *Mapping the Wessex Novel*, p. 102.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 101.

⁴ *Descents of Memory*, pp. 182, 369.

example, features a tensely sexualised relationship between the protagonist and his mother, as the following scene illustrates:

He fell on his knees in front of her and she let her tousled forehead sink down till it rested against his; and there they remained for a while, their two skulls in a happy trance of relaxed contact, full of unspoken reciprocities, like the skulls of two animals out at pasture, or the branches of two trees exhausted by a storm. [...] [A] peace [...] flowed over him from the dim reservoirs of prenatal life. [...] She raised her hands to his head and held it back [...] finally kissing him with a hot, intense, tyrannous kiss.¹

The explicitness with which such passages explore Freudian themes is unsurprising, given Powys' assertion in his 1923 booklet *Psychoanalysis and Morality* that 'an exhaustive analysis of the subtle and complicated ramifications of the emotional aberration known as incest' should ensure that it is no longer seen as 'an abominable and unspeakable crime'.² Powys welcomes psychoanalytic theory's assertion that so-called sexual deviance is widespread, and should be accepted rather than sanctimoniously dismissed. As D.A.N. Jones puts it, for Powys 'we are all perverts and deviants, in our heads, and [...] there is glee as well as danger in this condition.'³ He is also strongly attracted to the idea of the unconscious and its connection with oceanic imagery: for Magnus Muir in *Weymouth Sands*, "[e]verything [...] is connected with the Sea and with Father. And now this ecstasy with the girl is mixed up with the Sea and with him"; the prevalence of aqueous imagery in this novel, as well as in *Wolf Solent* and the *Romance*, illustrates Powys' belief in its centrality to psychic life.⁴ As H.W. Fawcner notes, water is Powys' favourite element; and consciousness is repeatedly characterised in oceanic terms, as with Sylvanus Cobbold's sense of an

¹ *Wolf Solent*, p. 304.

² Quoted in Krissdottir, *Descents of Memory*, p. 183.

³ Jones, D.A.N., 'The Powyses', *London Review of Books* 2, no. 15 (August 1980), pp. 19-20.

⁴ *Weymouth Sands*, p. 120.

‘inarticulate life-worship in women and girls, which flows round and round about and under their conscious realism, as a stream flows amid the stalks of its sub-aqueous plants’.¹

Yet Powys is also deeply sceptical regarding psychoanalysis’ ability to fully comprehend the workings of the mind, and fearful of its potential consequences upon mental life. Just as Uryen Quirm dismisses archaeology’s attempts to somehow access the life of prior civilisations – ‘these things are like dark-finned fish embedded in ice’; but ‘it is *not* science that can revive them’, as he tells the archaeologist Roger Cask – so Powys rejects psychoanalysis’ reductive pretensions to scientific certainty.² In the *Autobiography*, he dismisses the ‘sharply-cut pathological formulae, such as sadist, masochist, zoophilist, misanthropist, extrovert, introvert, homosexualist, cerebralist, heterosexualist and so forth’ as ‘too neatly scientific to cope with the mysterious impulses of a living soul’.³ The 1933 work *A Philosophy of Solitude*, similarly, asserts that psychoanalysis ultimately ‘depersonalise[s] the soul’, attempting to capture it with ‘a collection of mass production emotions’; and ‘insists that we subject our most sacred feelings [...] to its particular set of ready-made categories.’⁴ Like Perdita Wane in *Weymouth Sands*, Powys demonstrates a ‘preference for the old and darkened over the new and illuminated’: psychoanalysis seeks to reveal the workings of the mind, but the mysteries of psychic life do not submit to this kind of scientific analysis and measurement.⁵ The *Autobiography* also dismisses the tendency of psychoanalysis to see the mind as a passive object of study, from which secrets, like archaeological discoveries, must be brought forth. ‘My theory is that it is with the reason that we attain the irrational,’ he argues, ‘with the will that we change our character, and with the

¹ Fawcner, H.W., *The Ecstatic World of John Cowper Powys* (London: Associated University Presses, 1986), p. 20; *Weymouth Sands*, p. 399.

² *Maiden Castle*, p. 167.

³ Quoted in Jones, ‘The Powyses’.

⁴ Powys, John Cowper, *A Philosophy of Solitude* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1933), pp. 145-146.

⁵ *Weymouth Sands*, p. 28.

imagination that we recreate the world!’¹ Just as the earthworks at Maiden Castle have “‘life in them that can be revived’”, as Uryen puts it, so the mind for Powys is primarily active, creative, and thus defies analysis as a mere object of scientific research.² Despite his instinctive sympathy with certain psychoanalytic concepts, then, he ultimately feels that psychoanalysis cannot account for the kind of creative processes which underlie the imaginative recreations of his fiction.

If Powys is ambivalent towards the value of archaeology and psychoanalysis, he is unequivocally opposed to other practices that represent, for him, intrusive and destructive manifestations of a cultural desire to excavate and expose: mining and vivisection. The pathological obsessions that arise from Philip Crow’s development of the tin mine in *A Glastonbury Romance* was noted in Section I; his desire to “‘electrify the caves of the Druids’”, and “‘carry electricity deeper under the earth than anyone’s ever done’” is portrayed in hubristic terms, and his thoughts are described in violent, mechanistic language, as in his ability to ‘shoot his mind, like a rock-shattering projectile, into those remote caves of Wookey Hole’.³ When the impulse to excavate is pursued solely for material gain, Powys suggests, it can only corrupt the human soul. Such drives are most virulently opposed, however, when they are manifested in the practice of vivisection; as Krissdottir notes, this was, for Powys, ‘the supreme symbol of evil in our “scientific” civilisation.’⁴ *Weymouth Sands* makes the link between psychiatry and vivisection explicit in the figure of Dr Brush, who practises both: Magnus Muir considers his psychiatric work to be “‘the worst of this sort of Science. It feeds a diabolical curiosity. Its passion for pathology is not a passion for

¹ *Autobiography*, p. 275.

² *Maiden Castle*, p. 167.

³ *A Glastonbury Romance*, pp. 50, 233.

⁴ Krissdottir, Morine, *John Cowper Powys and the Magical Quest* (London: Macdonald, 1980), p. 108.

healing, but a passion for experiment.”¹ Vivisection is figured in the novel as the ‘secret horror behind all modern civilisation.’² There is little doubt that such passages articulate Powys’ own feelings: in the *Autobiography*, he attacks this ‘abominable wickedness’, used as it is ‘for the obtaining of what is often entirely irrelevant knowledge, and simply because vivisection is an *interesting thing in itself*’.³

Such passages support Krissdottir’s view that Powys’ career was ‘one long battle against the scientific view of life’, against ‘a world controlled by science and the machine.’ Yet, as she notes, he was ‘attracted again and again to the camp of the enemy.’⁴ This is evident in his ambivalent feelings towards archaeology and psychoanalysis, and we can also see it in the role of mechanised technology in the novels. The opening scene of *Wolf Solent* brings out this tension:

He felt as though, with aeroplanes spying down from every retreat like ubiquitous vultures, with the lanes invaded by iron-clad motors like colossal beetles, with no sea, no lake no river free from throbbing thudding engines, the one thing most precious of all in the world was being steadily assassinated.⁵

The irony of this passage is that these meditations occur while Wolf is travelling on a train, a form of movement that he finds particularly conducive to the contemplative “‘sinking into his soul”” in which he habitually indulges.⁶ Powys complicates his protagonist’s dogmatic resistance to increased mechanisation, and suggests that in certain ways this kind of development facilitates valuable ways of experiencing the world. In *Maiden Castle*, the sound of a train whistle gives Dud ‘a peculiar thrill’:

¹ *Weymouth Sands*, p. 113.

² *Ibid.*, p. 376.

³ *Autobiography*, p. 640 (emphasis in original).

⁴ *John Cowper Powys and the Magical Quest*, p. 23.

⁵ *Wolf Solent*, pp. 15-16.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

For the whistle of a train brought back our friend's earliest memories. It gave him that indescribable feeling we get in childhood when we see a road disappearing over a faraway hill – a road that seems to lose itself in a mystic Past, more magical than any possible Present!¹

Powys here historicises modernity, linking the innovation of the train with nostalgia, and thus demonstrating the crudeness of a position that tries to artificially separate a lost 'golden age' and an artificial, ahistorical modernity. Again, we might be tempted to read the portrayal of Philip Crow's aeroplane flights in *A Glastonbury Romance* as unambiguous authorial attacks on this technology's capacity to intrude and alienate: 'this conquest of air', we are told, 'had reduced those Glastonbury Ruins to nothing'; Crow's brain whirls 'with the vision of an earth-life dominated absolutely by Science'.² Yet this kind of 'telescopic distancing', as Subi Swift calls it, is a narrative technique frequently used not to underscore human hubris, but precisely to emphasise the marginality and insignificance of the human.³ Thus, when visiting Stonehenge, John Crow has the sense of 'becoming inhumanly small and weak [...] so nearly nothing at all – a speck, an atom'.⁴ Technology creates new ways of envisioning and experiencing the landscape, and Powys' narrative techniques, in various ways, reflect the influence of this; consequently, his literary approach often problematises the ostensible ideological resistance to such developments that we see in his texts.

Broadly, therefore, we can connect the examinations of archaeology, psychoanalysis and mechanised transportation in Powys' novels: all of these generate tensions in his thought, between the potential epistemological benefits of these new modes of experience and forms of knowledge, and the dangers represented by their tendency to intrude and alienate. These different facets of modernity, particularly aeroplane travel, express the potential value in

¹ *Maiden Castle*, p. 236.

² *A Glastonbury Romance*, p. 232.

³ Swift, Subi, 'The Pictorial Eye: Thomas Hardy's Influence on John Cowper Powys', *The Thomas Hardy Journal* 2, no. 6 (1990), pp. 35-46.

⁴ *A Glastonbury Romance*, p. 102.

larger-scale comprehension of entities and relations. As Timothy Morton argues, this kind of enlargement of perspective may be central to ecological thinking, which often ‘risks being caught in the language of smallness and restriction.’¹ Morton cites Milton’s use of an astronomical perspective in his poetry as representing an alternative approach:

[H]e offers us one of the most immense viewpoints of all: that of space itself. Seeing the Earth from space is the beginning of ecological thinking. The first aeronauts, balloon pilots, immediately saw Earth as an alien world. Seeing yourself from another point of view is the beginning of ethics and politics.²

Milton’s poetry thus foreshadows the famous 1968 *Whole Earth Catalogue* cover, which featured the first photograph of the earth from space to reach a public audience. Stewart Brand notes that, from this perspective, our habitat ‘looked tiny, fragile and rare. Suddenly humans had a planet to tend to.’³ This encapsulates the ironic tension which we find in much of Powys’ work: the very developments of modernity that, in certain ways, threaten the sustainability of our relationship with our environment, in other ways work to reveal these dangers and therefore militate against them. In this respect, perhaps the most striking image to be found in the Wessex novels also occurs during the opening train journey of *Wolf Solent*:

In the dusty, sunlit space of that small tobacco-stained carriage he seemed to see, floating and helpless, an image of the whole round earth! And he saw it bleeding and victimised, like a smooth-bellied, vivisected frog. He saw it scooped and gouged and scraped and harrowed.⁴

In a single image, Powys uses vivisection, the ‘secret horror behind all modern civilisation’, to presciently imagine the environmental desecration of the earth, as seen from space. Vivisection serves as a metaphor, and astronomical distance as an epistemological tool: in

¹ *The Ecological Thought*, p. 14.

² *Ibid.*

³ Brand, Stewart, ‘Photography Changes Our Relationship to Our Planet’, *Photography Changes Everything* (<http://click.si.edu/Story.aspx?story=31>; accessed 01/05/2013).

⁴ *Wolf Solent*, p. 16.

different ways, the practices and potentialities of modernity allow Powys to envision the possibility of environmental catastrophe. His anticipation of the 1968 photograph is uncanny, but should not be seen in isolation from the technological developments of his time: the exploration of aerial perspectives in the Wessex novels prefigures this image. Ultimately, Powys therefore implies that the developments of modernity facilitate new ways of understanding the recurring narratives that connect humanity with place, and the diverse histories embedded in the landscape. This recognition is inspired by, and analogous to, the perspective of geographical, temporal and cultural distance that he holds upon the Wessex environment. It is the specificity of that gaze that enables Powys to envision new ways of articulating and imagining the timeless connections to place that his novels explore.

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to show that, despite a deep-seated ambivalence towards both modernity (as a social, technological and industrial phenomenon) and modernism (as a literary movement), John Cowper Powys' writing provides an insightful and unique perspective upon the problems of the human relationship with environment in his era. Powys' novels rarely imply the possibility of any kind of authentic, rooted relationship to place: with his position of nostalgic distance upon the Wessex landscapes, he intuitively recognises the ways in which such relationships are inevitably mediated, by (among other things) time and geography. He thus suggests that the peripatetic and cosmopolitan character of his existence while writing the Wessex novels, far from being a source of alienation from place, facilitates the development of specific insights into our relationship with it. Powys embraces the creative potential of language and naming, rather than seeing this as a barrier between people and place. His form of imaginative realism enables him to develop narrative techniques that

marginalise the human, and anticipate ideas of biocentrism, suggesting that the interconnection of species and the sustainability of ecosystems are of central ethical value. Perhaps their most obvious ecological relevance lies in their use of what Meeker calls the 'comic mode', undermining anthropocentric notions of narrative integrity and meaning.

Powys emphasises what he sees as the cyclical, recurrent character of human narratives while articulating these within innovative narrative forms, and uses intense and dreamlike imagery. Modernism, here, does not represent a catastrophic break with previous traditions: it is, rather, an era with its own distinctive surface developments, which provide the possibility of imagining new perspectives upon apparently archetypal narratives. This willingness to engage with modernism and modernity also allows Powys' work to suggest the new epistemological possibilities inherent in archaeology and aerial perspectives, while simultaneously recognising the problematic tendencies of such developments, their questionable desire to reveal and expose. Although his eccentric and deeply personal sense of place does not offer any grand solutions to the problems engendered by fragmentation, dispersal and alienation, it does suggest that these changes are not unambiguously pernicious. There is value in the perspectival shifts afforded by peripatetic cosmopolitanism. Moreover, in his intimations of a 'national nomadology', and in the atmosphere of linguistic, temporal and ethnic multiplicity that characterises much of his work, Powys suggests that notions of authentic rootedness in place have always been reductive and problematic. Modernity represents an opportunity to recognise and articulate these complex, transgressive and marginal identities and relationships with rural England, an area often symbolically appropriated in the enforcement of existing hegemonies. There is no clear barrier between 'reality' and Powys' phantasmal, dreamlike impressions of place: in this respect, his work connects to that of Mary Butts, whose sense of overlapping realities in the Dorset region is

discussed in the next chapter. The transgressive qualities of Powys' work also anticipate Virginia Woolf, whose work problematises urban and rural associations (and the characterisation of these environments in dichotomous terms), and reimagines the English landscape without clear ethnic, cultural or geographical boundaries. Despite his idiosyncrasies, therefore, and his reluctance to subscribe fully to modernist literary culture, Powys can be connected with other writers of his era in his determination to use the insights of his specific socio-cultural position to explore relations to the English landscape.

3. In Two Worlds at Once: Animism, Borders and Liminality in Mary Butts

A trackless, sheep-wandered land, savage with thistles; bird-flown, sea-hammered,
a desolation of loveliness whose 'visible Pan' has not yet found its real name.

– *Death of Felicity Taverner*¹

In many respects, Mary Butts' work echoes that of John Cowper Powys. Both writers' examination of place derives its central vitality from a grounding in the landscapes of Dorset (and also, in Powys' case, Somerset); and both consciously deploy imaginative license in their recreations of those landscapes. However, while Powys' playfully nostalgic landscapes deliberately resist exclusionary tendencies, Butts' attempts to re-enchant the rural world by drawing upon myth and mysticism often become entangled with a more ideologically problematic position. Like that of Lawrence, Butts' project is fundamentally ambivalent: both writers have a deep sense of attachment to an area identified as home, but a similarly strong desire to reinvent that area, motivated in part by antagonistic and stifling family relations. The aftermath of the First World War is also key to this sense of ambivalence, since for both writers the cultural and historical break it represents is seen simultaneously as a catastrophe, and an opportunity to reimagine the English landscape. As I argue in this chapter, such reimaginings, in Butts' work, take complex forms: sometimes expressing a deracinated sensibility that reclaims rural England as a cosmopolitan zone in which marginalised socio-cultural groups can thrive; and typically emphasising the landscape's animistic qualities, its central role within a fictional project that often seeks to undermine boundaries between the human and nonhuman, the animate and inanimate. In such respects, the influence of modernity upon Butts' distinctive vision of place – both in terms of the innovations of literary

¹ *Death of Felicity Taverner*, p. 354.

modernism, and her exposure to cosmopolitan and metropolitan experience – is clear. In her later work, however, Butts tends to foreclose the potential of her work to celebrate liminality, marginality and cosmopolitanism: increasingly, rather than blurring or transgressing boundaries, she draws upon her sense of living ‘in two worlds at once’ to create imaginary cultural, temporal and geographical realms that are beyond the influences and developments of her period, accessible only to initiates.¹

I. The Sacred Game

As with both Lawrence and Powys, Mary Butts’ writing expresses a complex, and often ambivalent or contradictory, relationship with place. These complexities arise, in part, from the struggle to reconcile a deep sense of attachment to a regional English home with the intellectual and experiential allure of cosmopolitan modernity. Moreover, the sense of regional belonging is itself, in each case, complex, and sometimes problematic. For Butts, it is closely bound-up with a sensibility that she associates, from a young age, with the William Blake watercolours housed in her Dorset family home, Salterns.² In her impressionistic childhood memoir *The Crystal Cabinet* (which takes its name from a Blake poem), Butts writes that her aesthetic sense was formed ‘unconsciously and profoundly’ by ‘the kind of seeing that there was in William Blake’.³ As Roslyn Reso Foy notes, these paintings suggested a way of looking ‘beyond the external world into an ‘unseen world’ that would help define her poetic and artistic vision’; Butts’ work comes to be preoccupied with a sense

¹ *The Crystal Cabinet*, p. 13.

² Butts’ great-grandfather, Captain Thomas Butts, was Blake’s patron and friend. For further discussion of Blake’s influence on Butts, see Foy, Roslyn Reso, ‘Mary Butts’, *Dictionary of Literary Biography* 240, pp. 14-22, (p. 15); and Radford, Andrew, ‘Salvaging the Roots of Romanticism in Wordsworth, Hardy, and Mary Butts’, *Interactions* 20, nos. 1-2 (2011), pp. 111-24 (p. 113).

³ *The Crystal Cabinet*, p. 34.

of ‘the dual nature of existence’ that has its roots in Blake’s visionary Romanticism.¹ Foy also suggests that Butts’ sense of ‘the sacredness of the natural environment’ aligns her with Wordsworth.² Indeed, as Andrew Radford notes, *The Crystal Cabinet* is ‘replete with undisclosed textual borrowings from *The Prelude*’; and like that poem, the memoir traces the development of an authorial self intimately connected to the rural environment.³

The centrality of the Romantic poets to the formation of Butts’ sense of place helps to explain the virulence of her attacks upon an urbanised class, increasingly keen to explore the rural landscape in the interwar period. In her articles of the early 1930s, Butts dismisses ‘the Boom, with ‘hiking’ for its catchword’, which she fears is ‘breed[ing] a new type of man, with a new type of consciousness’; and she rails against the glut of literature this movement generates, apparently written for ‘the new “motoring class” one meets today with the summer [...] a whole new set of people one finds oneself unable to place socially or intellectually’.⁴ Butts’ 1932 polemical pamphlet *Warning to Hikers* dismisses such groups for their supposed adherence to a ‘fake’, watered-down Wordsworthian sensibility, which leads them to treat the country ‘as an opera or a picture-gallery’.⁵ As Patrick Wright suggests, Butts’ perception that the true insights and values of Romanticism were being betrayed by ‘the lies of urban pastoralism’, with its ‘sentimental reading of Wordsworth’, is crucial to understanding the continuing centrality to her work of the Blakean idea that another world underlies the perceivable one.⁶ As I will argue in Section IV, this ‘unseen world’ comes to function, for Butts, as a repository of imagery and values hermetically sealed against ‘the Tide’ of

¹ ‘Mary Butts’, pp. 15, 16.

² Foy, Roslyn Reso, “‘Nothing But Spiritual Development’: Mary Butts’ *Ashe of Rings* and *Scenes from the Life of Cleopatra*”, in Groover, K. (ed.), *Things of the Spirit: Women Writers Constructing Spirituality* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), pp. 181-199 (p. 184).

³ ‘Salvaging the Roots of Romanticism’, p. 117.

⁴ Butts, Mary, ‘This England’, *The Bookman* 83: 495 (December 1932), pp. 274-280 (pp. 276, 274); ‘Our Native Land’, *The Bookman* 84: 503 (August 1933), p. 252.

⁵ Butts, Mary, *Warning to Hikers*, in *Ashe of Rings and Other Writings*, pp. 267-95 (p. 278).

⁶ *On Living in an Old Country*, p. 94.

modernity, with ‘its influx of people, upsetting the balance of an old rural constituency.’¹ Butts’ relationship with regional place, therefore, cannot be separated from her sense of that place as something increasingly besieged by various facets of modernity.

Relatedly, Blake’s pictures, and the ideas Butts associates with them, come to be significant in defining her relationship with her family, and the ways in which that influences her wider attachment to the region of her childhood. Butts’ relationship with her mother, in particular, was difficult. She states in *The Crystal Cabinet* that Mary senior simply ‘did not like’ her daughter; and Ruth Hoberman argues that Butts retaliated with a ‘hatred [that] surfaces in all her work’.² The gulf between the pair, Butts suggests, became unbridgeable at the age of fourteen, when her father died, and her mother sold the Blake collection, partly to cover the funeral expenses. For Butts, this was part of an ‘un-making’ carried out by her mother, ‘the undoing in less than half a lifetime of the work of centuries’.³ As Laura Marcus puts it, the loss of the paintings represented to Butts ‘a kind of death, which increasingly became bound up with the destruction, as she saw it, of the landscape in which she had grown up’.⁴ These artworks, the inspiration behind Butts’ belief that her family have ‘a secret common to [their] blood [...] to live in two worlds at once, or in time and out of it’, thus come themselves to be part of another world, which the older Butts repeatedly seeks to reconstruct or recover.⁵ She becomes, as Ian Patterson explains, a ‘psychological exile’ from the world of her childhood, ‘estranged from a culture which is nevertheless felt intensely to be both a homeland and the source of spiritual and intellectual nourishment’; Butts effectively becomes an ‘expatriate

¹ *The Crystal Cabinet*, p. 245.

² *Ibid.*, p. 98; Hoberman, Ruth, *Gendering Classicism: The Ancient World in Twentieth-Century Women’s Historical Fiction* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), p. 44. Hoberman argues that Butts’ hatred for her mother is evident throughout her work: ‘In her transparently autobiographical novel *Ashe of Rings*, Butts speculates that her mother began an affair with her stepfather-to-be before her father’s death. In *The Crystal Cabinet* [...] her mother accuses her of inviting sexual attention from her stepfather and younger brother Tony. The alienation of daughter from mother is complete’ (p. 44).

³ *The Crystal Cabinet*, p. 13.

⁴ Marcus, Laura, ‘Playing the Sacred Game’, *Times Literary Supplement* (24th August 2001), pp. 3-4.

⁵ *The Crystal Cabinet*, pp. 12, 13.

from an imaginary England'.¹ Thus, her deep attachment to the countryside around Salterns must be understood within the context of her resentment towards her mother, and her sense of a lost world. Although Butts has a profound sense of regional belonging, the Dorset evoked in her writing is a landscape that either exists in, or borders upon, this other level of reality; an 'unseen world' that facilitates a dissociation from the personal conflicts and wider socio-cultural developments of Butts' everyday present. Her work therefore expresses an ambivalence towards both the landscape around Salterns, and the family life she associates with it.

The sense of a world being lost was forcefully underlined for Butts, as it was for Lawrence, with the onset of the First World War. Her writings during and after the war often register its influence through dark intimations of the conflict's threat to the health or authenticity of English culture and values. Jascha Kessler explains that Butts and Lawrence 'came to similar conclusions about what had happened to the world,' and were also 'congruent in imagining what they believed might, indeed must, be done to remedy the present'.² The changes that accompany the war, she suggests, are often subtle, but no less insidious and significant for that. Her first novel, *Ashe of Rings* (1925), introduces a young London-based couple, Judy and Serge, arguing in their flat:

It was the year before the end of the war, when there was very little to eat; and along with the strengthless food and the noises at night, friendship had lost its generosity and passion turned *à rebours*.

Some essential oil had gone, a minute secretion, infinitely slow to replace, and without which anything evil between human beings is possible.³

¹ "'The Plan Behind the Plan'", pp. 126, 127.

² Kessler, Jascha, 'Mary Butts: Lost... and Found', *The Kenyon Review* 17, no. 3/4 (Summer-Autumn 1995), pp. 206-218 (p. 211). Kessler argues that Butts 'has much to say about what "values" can still be found in the contemporary wasteland', and argues that she has this in common with D.H. Lawrence, particularly his later work (p. 212). I would argue that, while this question is central to both writers, Butts is more optimistic about the possible ways in which modernity and modernism can be directed towards a reinvigoration of the English landscape and culture than Lawrence.

³ *Ashe of Rings*, p. 57.

The everyday privations of the war, even for civilians, are accompanied by the inexorable loss of something less tangible, but ultimately more valuable and difficult to replace, an ‘essential oil’ that maintains human communication and empathy. Similarly, for Vanna Ashe in the same novel (a figure who can be closely aligned with Butts herself, in a novel Hoberman describes as ‘transparently autobiographical’), the “‘years we are living through’” are bringing about “‘a state, a turn of the soul’”.¹ As Mary Hamer argues, Butts never stops writing about ‘what had caused the war and the damage the war had done’: her characters, like the “‘shell-shocked lump of carrion’” Peter Amburton in *Ashe of Rings*, are often suffering from ‘a kind of post-traumatic stress that is referred back constantly to the war.’² Her early short story ‘Speed the Plough’ (1920) establishes this focus: centring around the convalescence of a nameless injured soldier, haunted by ‘the remembered scream of metal upon metal’, it emphasises his longing for a ‘rare delicate life’ associated with cities and artificiality; the memory of the “‘good old show’”, the theatricality of London life, is what psychically sustains the protagonist.³ Thus, as Hamer notes, it seems likely that ‘conventional thinkers were meant to find this mocking tale utterly provoking’, in its apparent celebration of frivolity and glamour amidst the austerity and urgency of war.⁴ Although the authorial position on the ethics of the soldier’s desires is ambiguous, the story suggests that the distinctive beauty and experiences of metropolitan life may provide a source of value in the postwar world: Tracy Bilsing claims that it ‘offers an alternative, regenerative order through which [Butts] hoped to reveal a force to offset the dehumanising effects of the war’.⁵ In some

¹ Ibid., p. 86.

² Hamer, Mary, ‘Mary Butts, Mothers, and War’, in Raitt, S., and Tate, T. (eds.), *Women’s Fiction and the Great War* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), pp. 219-240 (pp. 223-4); *Ashe of Rings*, p. 116; ‘Mary Butts, Mothers, and War’, p. 224.

³ Butts, Mary, ‘Speed the Plough’, in *With and Without Buttons and Other Stories* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1991), pp. 9-16 (pp. 10, 14, 13).

⁴ ‘Mary Butts, Mothers, and War’, p. 225.

⁵ Bilsing, Tracy, “‘Rosalba and all the Kirchner Tribe’: Mary Butts’ “Speed the Plough” and the Regenerative Image of the Feminine’, *Essays in Arts and Sciences* 34, no. 1 (2005), pp. 61-73 (p. 61).

ways, then, Butts' fiction is imbued with a tentative optimism regarding the cultural and ethical possibilities that the cataclysm of the war has inadvertently opened up.

However, that sense of optimism must always be weighed against her sense that the war represents only one element of a modernity that she feels to be pernicious in myriad respects; indeed, as Hamer notes, the war for Butts 'had not been an aberration but the likely outcome of ordinary ways', less a cause than a symptom of the 'dis-ease', the 'sense of broken continuity', that she insinuates to be threatening English culture in her novel *Armed with Madness* (1928).¹ Such rhetoric can be aligned with that of T.S. Eliot and others, for whom 'urbanisation of mind' explains what is 'fundamentally wrong' with popular attitudes towards landscape in the period.² In her most reactionary novel, *Death of Felicity Taverner* (1932), Butts echoes Lawrence's fears that increasing urbanisation and industrialisation threaten to instil a kind of mechanical consciousness within the populace:

The timeless active life of lover and sister and brother had been changed – for something which seemed to them to be like the cold arms and legs and abstractions of machinery, an abstract of the cerebral life of towns. For the realities that held them in activity and in vision, realities of the blood and the nerves and the senses and what is meant by the spirit, was to be substituted contact with the chill, the purpose, the strength of a machine, and of the impure values begotten by the machine upon raw human nature and re-begotten by them in turn.³

There are striking similarities here with the anxieties expressed in *Women in Love* towards a 'new world, a new order, strict, terrible, inhuman', which arises from 'the substitution of the

¹ 'Mary Butts, Mothers, and War', p. 223; Butts, Mary, *Armed with Madness*, in *The Taverner Novels* (New York: McPherson and Co., 1992), pp. 1-162 (p. 9).

² Eliot, T.S., 1938 *Criterion* commentary, quoted in Esty, *A Shrinking Island*, p. 124. Eliot shares Butts' dismay at what both writers perceive to be the co-opting of Wordsworth by the urban population: 'To have the right frame of mind it is not enough that we should read Wordsworth, tramp the countryside with a book of British Birds and a cake of chocolate in a ruck-sack [...] it is necessary that the greater part of the population [...] should be settled in the country' (Esty, p. 125). Both Wright and Radford note that Butts' mentality is in many ways typical of the 'back to nature' movement of the era, placing her alongside Eliot as well as Hilaire Belloc, John Buchan, E.M. Forster, the Powys brothers, Rolf Gardiner and A.E. Housman (see *On Living in an Old Country*, p. 96; and 'Mary Butts and the Return of the Nativist', pp. 81-2).

³ *Death of Felicity Taverner*, p. 300.

mechanical principle for the organic', as well as in the form, with both passages being lexically repetitive and littered with conjunctions.¹ Butts' novel asserts the existence of various binaries between country and city, the former being associated with the organic, active, sensual, spiritual and pure; the latter with the mechanical, cerebral, abstract, utilitarian and impure. In the same year, Butts published *Warning to Hikers*, a polemical pamphlet that scorns the groups of 'town-bred' people who, like 'mindless sheep', visit the countryside 'to escape from themselves [...] and from town-reality into another reality', to which they are 'essentially not fitted'.² As Radford notes, in such passages Butts betrays 'an almost pathological disdain for a socially mobile underclass', and seeks 'to marshal a lofty English heritage which she hopes will offset an urban taint.'³ For Foy, the 'intrusion of tourists and technology' threatens 'the destruction of the natural world'; her response is to unite 'Blake, Yeats and Wordsworth [...] in her apocalyptic vision of the future'.⁴ Again, there is a sense that new values may be forged from these crises of modernity: the 'broken continuity' of *Armed with Madness* may in fact herald the 'end of an age, the beginning of another. Revaluation of values. [...] Discovery of a new value, a different way of apprehending everything.'⁵ Yet how these new values, and a re-shaped English culture, might be pursued – and whether they *should* be pursued – are always ambiguous and problematic questions in Butts' work.

Thus, Butts' relationship with modernism as a literary movement, like her attitude towards the social, cultural, economic and political upheavals of her time, is always complex. As with Powys, for whom much modernist poetry is stunted by an austere intellectualism that renders it 'too clever, too artistic, too egotistic', Butts tends to hold the movements of metropolitan

¹ *Women in Love*, p. 260.

² *Warning to Hikers*, p. 288.

³ 'Salvaging the Roots of Romanticism', p. 117.

⁴ *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, p. 20.

⁵ *Armed with Madness*, p. 9.

modernism at a wary distance.¹ Her short story ‘In Bloomsbury’ mocks the contrivance, godlessness and complacency of a fictionalised version of the eponymous group, who are ‘taken in by nothing’, yet move, ‘without knowing it, in as rigid a convention as any other’; another story, ‘From Altar to Chimney-Piece’, is a thinly-veiled attack on Gertrude Stein’s salon in Paris, cast as a hotbed of ‘parasites on all the arts and all the passions’.² In a letter to Hugh Ross Williamson, Butts describes this story as ‘The Gertrude-Stein-Song’, and explains: ‘I’d like to learn that depraved old creature not to monkey with the English language!’³ Yet Butts’ writing is often formally daring: particularly *Armed with Madness*, her most innovative novel in this respect. Here, the use of free indirect discourse and first-person interior monologue aligns Butts with writers like Woolf and Dorothy Richardson; her willingness to switch rapidly between such narrative modes is particularly striking. The novel is also noteworthy, like much of Butts’ other work, for its staccato rhythms and use of paratactic syntax; and it draws upon a wide range of collage and quotation, recalling canonical modernist works like *Ulysses*.⁴ The novel’s style might thus be called cosmopolitan in its diversity and multiplicity.

Moreover, Butts’ work is often challenging in less explicit ways. Another letter to Williamson expresses a desire to present a ‘series of ideas, re-statements, which will put life or validity or kick into our spirits and so into our institutions again’; this Nietzschean interest

¹ *Suspended Judgements*, p. 152.

² Butts, Mary, ‘In Bloomsbury’, in *From Altar to Chimney-Piece: Selected Stories* (New York: McPherson, 1992), pp. 39-57 (p. 40); ‘From Altar to Chimney-Piece’, in *With and Without Buttons and Other Stories* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1991), pp. 158-184 (p. 160). See Butts’ 1936 essay ‘Bloomsbury’ for further clarification of her attitude towards the group. Butts, Mary, ‘Bloomsbury’, *Modernism/Modernity* 5, no. 2 (1998), pp. 32-45.

³ Quoted in Blondel, Nathalie, *Mary Butts: Scenes from the Life* (Kingston: McPherson, 1998), p. 305.

⁴ On the novel’s narrative modes, see Garrity, *Step-Daughters of England*, p. 192; on its shifts in syntax, see Anderson, Elizabeth, ‘“The Knight’s Move”: Fluidity of Identity and Meaning in Mary Butts’ *Armed with Madness*’, *Women: A Cultural Review* 18, no. 3 (2007), pp. 245-56 (p. 246); and on its collage technique, Rainey, Lawrence, ‘Good Things: Pederasty and Jazz and Opium and Research’, *London Review of Books* 20, no. 14 (July 1998), pp. 14-17.

in the possibility of a ‘revaluation of values’ is experimental in the deepest sense.¹ As Foy argues, even when it eschews ‘an emphasis on technique, Butts’ modernist thrust is such that it confronts and reinterprets reality in extraordinary ways. [...] Hers is a perplexing style that forces her readers to reevaluate incomprehension’.² Both Butts and Powys disorient and challenge the reader through the cultivation of tone and atmosphere, and the disruption of generic conventions. Rainey, again, notes *Armed with Madness*’ ‘productive tension [...] between the fulfilling closure promised by romance and the sense of a pervasive horror that refuses resolution.’³ Like *A Glastonbury Romance*, Butts’ novel plays with the conventions of the romance: both novels draw their thematic energy from the grail myth, and both ultimately resist the kind of narrative linearity and closure associated with that form. As Radford explains, Butts finds herself at a ‘cultural crossroads: responsive to the nervous antipathies of metropolitan modernity, yet impelled by a solemn historical duty to recall and reanimate arcane and occult lore’; it is this tension that underpins her work’s distinctive blend of innovation, spirituality and rootedness in place.⁴ Because of this complex mixture, it can be misleading to see Butts’ focus on rural landscapes as necessarily expressing what Esty terms a ‘culture of retrenchment’.⁵ Tom Slingsby counters this claim with reference to *Armed with Madness*, which he sees as ‘representing the zenith of Butts’ modernism as an expansive continental practice’; in Butts’ work, as Slingsby’s comment suggests, rural settings are often effectively deployed as culturally and ideologically challenging sites precisely *because* of their position on the periphery of modernity, both in terms of geography and culture.⁶

¹ In Wagstaff, Christopher, (ed.), *A Sacred Quest: The Life and Writings of Mary Butts* (New York: McPherson and Co., 1995), p. 149.

² Foy, Roslyn Reso, *Ritual, Myth, and Mysticism in the Work of Mary Butts: Between Feminism and Modernism* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2000), p. 12.

³ ‘Good Things’.

⁴ *Mapping the Wessex Novel*, p. 15.

⁵ *A Shrinking Island*, p. 50.

⁶ Slingsby, Tom, *The Sacred and the Esoteric: Locating Mary Butts’ Modernism* (Ph.D thesis: University of Sussex, 2009), p. 170.

Butts is therefore interested in modernism's potential, in terms of literary innovation, to support her attempts to 'recall and reanimate arcane and occult lore'. Her sense of a possible 'reevaluation of values', which the war has created a new space for, imbues her work with an optimistic tone regarding certain forms of modernist literature, and the ends towards which they might be employed. This is linked to her determination to challenge orthodox readings of Wordsworth (among others): in a 1933 book review, Butts challenges the contemporary view that, in later life, the poet retreated into a narrow-minded conservatism. She argues instead that 'those years see him finally in that small band of men, the Christian mystics [...] it was in the life proper to the highest order of mystic that Wordsworth ended his life'.¹ This period of his work sees 'Paganism and Christianity [...] fused at that white heat which alone puts an antithetic good into men's possession'; and this spiritual commingling is evident in *Ashe of Rings*, which Foy characterises as 'a union of Christian and Pagan symbolism' which forms a 'modernist vision [...] that is consistently optimistic in the midst of a culture flawed by circumstances.'² Butts' vision of literary and cultural evolution is therefore guided at least as much by an impulse to revisit and revise the literary past as it is by a desire to develop genuinely new forms of expression.

The sense of a recapitulation of spiritual ideas and energies that lie beneath the surface of contemporary culture, for Butts, is central to the development of a reinvigorated value-system; one that often sounds Aristotelian in its emphasis on essences and capacities. In a 1927 journal entry, Butts declares her project to be 'spiritual development, the soul living at its fullest capacity'; while her response to a 1929 *Little Review* questionnaire states her approval of '[e]verything, living and growing or static, which is "according to its kind," a bad kind or a

¹ Butts, Mary, 'The Real Wordsworth', *Time and Tide* 14, no. 28 (1933), pp. 1446-48 (p. 1448).

² *Ibid.*; 'Mary Butts', p. 18.

good, but “good” in relation to what it is.’¹ Indeed, Aristotle himself appears in *The Macedonian*, stressing the need to “distinguish the natures of things: the qualities that are in one thing and not in another, and how each thing has the virtue proper to it, according to its kind.”² For Butts, certain approaches to literature have the potential to facilitate this kind of ethical rejuvenation; and literary modernisms are only of value to the extent that they assist the diagnosis and treatment of a contemporary ‘dis-ease’. The war represents the inevitable culmination of a misguided ethical-spiritual trajectory that fails to attend to the authentic character of beings; but as such, it also represents an opportunity to change that trajectory. In *Death of Felicity Taverner*, the narrative notes that ‘we have lost the habit of stating problems in moral terms’; yet argues that sinfulness, nonetheless, is ‘there, risen in their green pastures, writhing through their sun-pierced copses’.³ The rural landscape, here, is a stage upon which the recovery of values in the postwar world can be enacted.

Central to this recovery is the intimate connection in Butts’ work between her heroines and the Dorset landscape. Scylla, the protagonist of the Taverner novels, has a sense in *Armed with Madness* of her body’s ability to ‘translat[e] the stick and leaf’ of the forest ‘into herself: into sea: into sky. Sky back again into wood, flesh and sea.’⁴ This animistic merging with the landscape reflects Scylla’s position as an embodiment and protector of place; Butts, as Anderson explains, ‘reinterprets the connection between the feminine and the landscape, giving her heroines agency and sacred power.’⁵ The gendering of the Dorset environment is thus key to Butts’ ethical project, and to what Foy sees as ‘the notion of a *sacred* past that

¹ Blondel, N., *The Journals of Mary Butts* (London: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 248; Butts, Mary, ‘Questionnaire’, in Wagstaff, Christopher (ed.), *A Sacred Quest: The Life and Writings of Mary Butts* (New York: McPherson and Co., 1995), pp. 126-28 (p. 127).

² Butts, Mary, *The Macedonian*, in *The Classical Novels* (New York: McPherson and Co., 1994), p. 12. In this passage, Aristotle stresses that ‘each thing has the virtue proper to it’, claiming that ‘man is the only animal that has thought’. To the extent that Butts adheres to this position, it sheds light on her sense of the relationship between the human and nonhuman worlds as a ‘sacred game’ characterised by difference rather than affinities.

³ *Death of Felicity Taverner*, p. 297.

⁴ *Armed with Madness*, pp. 67-8.

⁵ “‘The Knight’s Move’”, p. 250.

would help explain and define [Butts'] present.'¹ For Foy, Butts can be aligned with Eliot as a writer 'who sought a way to give meaning and shape to a world which she believed had lost its soul', and the creation of priestess-like heroines who symbolically guard and commune with the landscape is one element of this. As Butts explains in *The Crystal Cabinet*, after the war, '[a]ll standards seemed gone, all values discredited'; her generation found itself 'thigh-deep in the mud of the Waste Land.' Yet she responded to this by joining 'the number of those who did not stay in it, who were due to travel another road.'² Anderson explains that Butts' writing, as a result, is 'more interested in the positive side of mythology, in the regeneration of the wounded land rather than Eliot's bleak vision.'³ Scylla's sense of herself as intimately entwined with the place is thus fundamentally ethical in its meaning; it is through this kind of activity that the sin 'writhing through' this threatened world can be neutralised.

The suggestion that the war may have provided certain valuable opportunities is unsurprisingly a source of ambivalence in Butts' work. Her conflicted position is evident in a 1933 review of Vera Brittain's wartime memoir *Testament of Youth*, which describes the war as 'a cross that has never before been raised for man' in its horror and magnitude, but also stresses 'the antique, timeless, ageless magic' of violent engagement, and 'what man would lose if the essence of that passion were denied him'.⁴ Something of this attitude towards conflict is evident, too, in her understanding of human relationships. In *Armed with Madness*, the shell-shocked veteran Clarence attacks Scylla with a bow and arrow in a fit of insane jealousy, after Scylla begins a relationship with Clarence's former lover Picus. Yet the aftermath feels cathartic, or even post-coital; to the American outsider Carston, who sees

¹ *Ritual, Myth, and Mysticism in the Work of Mary Butts*, p. 6.

² *The Crystal Cabinet*, p. 178.

³ "'The Knight's Move'", p. 245.

⁴ Butts, Mary, 'It Was Like That', *The Bookman* 85: 505 (October 1933), p. 44.

them together when both have recovered, the scene is ‘like an idyll: a young lover making a present for his sweetheart, sitting on her bed.’¹ Jennifer Kroll notes that such violent confrontations in the novel bring ‘the potential for moments of self-realisation, healing, and love’; Clarence’s act ‘seems to trigger a sort of restoration of harmony among the friends.’² Conflict and violence are thus woven into the ethical worldview of Butts’ fiction, and the process of rupture and reconciliation that drives such events is synecdochic of the broader possibilities for the war to reshape English culture.

More generally, the human-nonhuman relation is figured in much of Butts’ work as adversarial, but in a manner which often stresses the supposed nobility or sacredness of conflict. *Warning to Hikers* characterises human engagement with the environment in terms of ‘conquests and familiarities’ which either ‘honour’ or ‘dishonour’: humans fight ‘wars’ which a feminised nature (‘she’) ‘has imposed; which are part of what can be called the game, and occasionally the sacred game.’³ At points, it seems as though the trauma of the war is seeping into Butts’ sense of the English landscape: the epistolary story ‘Lettres Imaginaires’ sees ‘the shadow of the war [...] [rise] out of’ an unnamed English moor, a place which is ‘cold as death’, and somehow ‘a repetition of the war.’⁴ Yet such experiences can also, more fundamentally, be traced back to Butts’ childhood. *The Crystal Cabinet* describes an encounter with an invisible ‘column of energy, vile and hateful’, on a Fife beach; and connects her sense of a hostile nonhuman world to Wordsworth, whose ‘interpretation of fear’

¹ *Armed with Madness*, pp. 157-8.

² Kroll, Jennifer, ‘Mary Butts’ “Unrest Cure” for *The Waste Land*’, *Twentieth Century Literature* 45, no. 2 (Summer 1999), pp. 159-73 (p. 169).

³ *Warning to Hikers*, p. 289.

⁴ Butts, Mary, ‘Lettres Imaginaires’, in *With and Without Buttons and Other Stories* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1991), pp. 100-111 (pp. 108, 109). Butts’ sense of division or conflict between the human and nonhuman worlds could be seen to align her with a Cartesian narrative of mastery and possession, of the kind critiqued by environmentalist philosophers like Michel Serres, for whom such attitudes reflect a ‘fundamental relationship with objects [that] comes down to war and property’. Serres, Michel, *The Natural Contract* (trans. Elizabeth MacArthur and William Paulson; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), p. 32. Although Butts grants the nonhuman world an autonomy and agency that Serres argues is lacking in Cartesian understandings, she nonetheless characterises the relation as an adversarial one.

is of central importance in her reading.¹ Like the fiction of Hardy and Powys, Butts' childhood memoir relishes the powerful sensuality of her environment, of 'the world you came upon when you suddenly turned over a stone', but for her this world is also horrifying: she recalls a hollow in a forest where 'corruption went on quietly [...] a cabbage stalk, an apple on the ground with wasps writhing out of it; a dead bird, the white breast-bone showing foul feathers and worms feeding on it.'² For Butts as a child, 'the wounds in the earth's body [...] when they closed, were scarred and scabbed over only with savage growths.'³ In such passages the powerful, eroticised sensuality of Hardy's 'thistle-milk and slugslime' is inverted, becoming grotesque and repellent; such experiences go some way to explaining the hostility of the Dorset landscape in *Armed with Madness*, 'stuck with yuccas and tree-fuchsias, dripping season in, season out, with bells the colour of blood.'⁴ For Rochelle Rives, this world is 'an inhospitable sublime that is irreducible to copy [...] strategically designed to fend off human intruders.'⁵ The environment also feels hostile to Melitta in *Ashe of Rings*:

On the valley path she struggled with the sun. The sphere which had broken and bubbled in the house shot out and beat her with golden rods. The turf closed round empty shells. The path was sharp with flints, the heat like an army with banners.⁶

This militarised lexical connotations of this passage ('shot', 'shells', 'army') are striking; again, it is as though the violence of the war has invaded the rural environment, and become entwined with the rejuvenation of values which Butts hopes to enact there. Similar passages

¹ *The Crystal Cabinet*, pp. 192, 23. The supernatural elements of the 'column of energy' passage are discussed in Matless, David, 'A Geography of Ghosts: The Spectral Landscapes of Mary Butts', *Cultural Geographies* 15, no. 3 (July 2008), pp. 335-357 (p. 346).

² *Ibid.*, p. 24.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 72.

⁴ *Armed with Madness*, p. 3.

⁵ Rives, Rochelle, "'No Real Men": Mary Butts' Socio-Sexual Politics: A Response to Andrew Radford', *Connotations* 18, 1-3 (2008/2009), pp. 246-258 (p. 250). Following Radford, Rives notes that this sense of hostility is deployed by Butts as a barrier against specific elements that she seeks to exclude from the Dorset landscape (something I discuss in Section III). But it is important to stress the influence of Butts' childhood experiences (at least insofar as *The Crystal Cabinet* can be taken as reliable) in forming the aesthetic sense which she later uses in this ideologically charged way (see Radford, 'Mary Butts and the Return of the Nativist', and also Rives, 'A Straight Eye for the Queer Guy', p. 111).

⁶ *Ashe of Rings*, p. 15.

occur in the short stories: ‘Green’, for example, describes a ‘march of elms, open hands with blood inside them, tipped with saffron fire.’¹ Marching, blood and fire are all used to describe a subject more commonly associated with a pastoral and romantic lexicon.

Butts’ writing can, in fact, be hostile even on a formal level: John Ashbery notes her ‘disjointed, dislocated style’, which deliberately confounds attempts to read in a linear way, as well as a ‘fondness for double and even triple negatives’.² Butts’ fictional world, like the region of her childhood, is a realm that is often both threatening and difficult to access. This kind of wilful formal difficulty is, of course, common in modernist writing, but there is a sense in Butts’ work that it reflects a broader ideological determination to exclude unwanted outsiders. As Patterson notes, her later fiction in particular feels concerned with ‘the incapacity of European culture and an apotheosised England to defend itself from defilement’; this, he argues, is ‘an animism that takes literally the metaphor of the Waste Land’. Butts’ belief that an ethical rejuvenation of landscape and culture is possible, on this reading, makes her a literary counterpart to the right-wing ecological movements of Rolf Gardiner and the Springhead Ring.³ Thus, in *Death of Felicity Taverner*, Scylla effortlessly negotiates the kind of hostile landscape that threatens Melitta Ashe: despite being ‘[d]elicately dressed and made-up’, she easily crosses a ‘valley through the young corn’s crystal spikes.’⁴ Patterson vehemently rejects Foy’s reading of Butts’ work, which sees its blend of ritual, myth, and mysticism as essentially benign. For him, this is a position of ‘staggering naivety’, and one which mistakenly characterises Butts as a ‘New Age activist, an affiliation which she would

¹ Butts, Mary, ‘Green’, in *With and Without Buttons and Other Stories* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1991), pp. 71-84 (p. 74).

² Ashbery, John, preface to Butts, Mary, *From Altar to Chimney-Piece: Selected Stories* (New York: McPherson, 1992), p. ix.

³ “‘The Plan Behind the Plan’”, p. 132.

⁴ *Death of Felicity Taverner*, p. 291.

in fact have hated with a passion.’¹ Patterson reads the *Felicity Taverner* character Nick Kralin, a Russian-Jewish property developer, as an embodiment of ‘deracinated urbanism [...] mass-production, vulgarisation, [and] the lack of care for beauty in small things’, and believes there is an ‘intrinsic’ anti-Semitism in his presentation.² This is echoed by, among others, Maren Linett, who argues that the novel ‘uses a Jew to figure the destruction of rural life – described through the metaphor of sexual defilement – and to represent urban soullessness, mechanisation, commercialisation, and negation.’³ Scylla describes Kralin as “‘the man who would sell the body of our land to the Jews’”, a figure who threatens to deprive the ‘freshest earth’ of Dorset of its ‘maidenhood’.⁴ Yet Butts is not a straightforwardly reactionary figure: Radford notes that the xenophobia and anti-Semitism increasingly evident in her later fiction works against the ways in which her writing ‘affirms modernity’s cosmopolitan and progressive verve’.⁵

Hoberman suggests that Butts’ contradictory position as a woman desirous of ‘challenging traditional female roles and values’, yet in other ways ‘profoundly conservative’, is what underlies these tensions.⁶ Expressing this marginalised identity, Butts uses the shifting narrative voice of *Felicity Taverner* to attack the objectification of women, but in doing so forwards an attack on another marginalised group: Kralin, we are told, sees ‘a woman’s body’ as a ‘blood-driven engine for secretion and excretion’.⁷ The association of the female body with the land, too, is problematic. As in *Wolf Solent*, with its sense of the sea as lusting after

¹ Patterson, Ian, Patterson, Ian, ‘Anarcho-Imperialism, Modernism, Mystification and Muddle’, *The Cambridge Quarterly* 30, no. 2 (2001), pp. 183-190 (pp. 187, 188).

² “‘The Plan Behind the Plan’”, pp. 136, 137.

³ *Modernism, Feminism, and Jewishness*, p. 82. Further discussion of anti-Semitism in Butts’ work is in Radford, ‘Mary Butts and the Return of the Nativist’, pp. 90-91; and Rose, Jacqueline, *On Not Being Able to Sleep: Psychoanalysis and the Modern World* (London: Chatto and Windus, 2003), p. 91.

⁴ *Death of Felicity Taverner*, pp. 346, 249.

⁵ ‘Mary Butts and the Return of the Nativist’, p. 102.

⁶ *Gendering Classicism*, p. 43.

⁷ *Death of Felicity Taverner*, p. 214.

and penetrating the landscape, Butts' fiction feminises and sexualises the Dorset coastline.¹ Felicity Taverner herself, dead before the novel opens, embodies the land for the other characters: “the hills were her body laid-down, and ‘Felicity’ was said, over and over again, in each bud and leaf.”² Slingsby notes that *The Macedonian* features the ‘inter-penetration of the body with a range of natural objects [which] facilitates a transference of sexuality into an eternal realm’, via the ‘attuning of the woman’s mind to the metaphorical properties of the coastline.’³ And in *Ashe of Rings*, earthworks are suggested to look like ‘two grey nipples on a green breast’ of a hill; again, there are echoes of *Wolf Solent*, with its sense of a ‘strange non-human eroticism’ in the contact between Gerda’s sleeping body and the ‘heathen soil’ of the Poll’s Camp earthwork.⁴ For Radford, Butts’ feminisation of the landscape ‘is rooted in an essentialised conception of the female body as an inexhaustible wellspring of natural ripeness and racial replenishment’.⁵ Consequently, to read her heroines (as Foy sometimes does) as unproblematically feminist figures, who use ‘ancient, secret knowledge in a society usually controlled by male hegemony’, can risk overlooking the pernicious aspects of those essentialist and racialising elements.⁶

At other points, however, Butts challenges the kind of dichotomous mindset that identifies the rural landscape as feminine and contrasts it with an aggressive, masculine urban world: the story ‘Mappa Mundi’, for example, identifies Paris as one of ‘the great feminine places’, both ‘dazzling’ and containing ‘profound reserves.’⁷ Typically, then, any attempt to discern a coherent philosophical position on the issue of gender is confounded by a broad survey of

¹ See Ride, David, ‘The Liminal Landscape of John Cowper Powys’, p. 74 (discussed above, Chapter Two).

² *Death of Felicity Taverner*, p. 191.

³ *The Sacred and the Esoteric*, p. 182.

⁴ *Ashe of Rings*, p. 18; *Wolf Solent*, p. 326.

⁵ Radford, Andrew, ‘Defending Nature’s Holy Shrine: Mary Butts, Englishness, and the Persephone Myth’, *Journal of Modern Literature* 29, no. 3 (Spring 2006), pp. 126-49 (p. 131).

⁶ *Ritual, Myth, and Mysticism in the Work of Mary Butts*, p. 32.

⁷ Butts, Mary, ‘Mappa Mundi’, in *With and Without Buttons and Other Stories* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1991), pp. 188-201 (p. 188).

Butts' work. This applies to its other political and ethical implications as well: ultimately, her sense of the possibility of some sort of rejuvenation of English culture and landscape following the First World War is (as the existing critical work demonstrates) complex, and often contradictory and ethically problematic. The ideologies of class, race and gender entangled within it have been shown to have disturbing elements and implications. In what follows, however, I want to examine the extent to which these pernicious elements of her position can be separated from the valuable insights it might offer, particularly concerning the relationship between humanity and landscape. If these are present, they often go against the grain of Butts' explicit positions; she may assert, in *Warning to Hikers*, that urban life promotes a 'craze for forgetfulness, for escape, from self or any other kind of reality', but in her own life, and in much of her fiction, the urban is a source of epistemological and political liberation.¹ As Slingsby argues, for many scholars, Butts' writing is irrevocably tainted by 'a negative, deterministic politics of exclusion and determinate identities'; while for critics like Hoberman and Rives, she stands as a 'socially progressive modernist, seemingly using experimental aesthetic forms to promote the cause of groups rendered "other" by the social hegemonies of her day.'² In the following section, I will consider some of these debates in more depth.

II. Their World and His Own

Butts' involvement with the cosmopolitan bustle of metropolitan literary culture in the most productive period of her writing life makes her, in some ways, a quintessentially modernist figure. As Foy notes, between 1921 and 1932 Butts spent most of her life in London or Paris; she was close to Isadora Duncan and Jean Cocteau, among many others. Butts 'moved easily

¹ *Warning to Hikers*, p. 284.

² *The Sacred and the Esoteric*, pp. 26, 28.

among fellow modernists', although her dislike of cliques, and her sense of being rooted in another world, meant that she tended not to identify herself with any specific group or movement.¹ That sense of attachment to Dorset also meant that Butts' relationship with urban environments was always complex, often contradictory. 'Mappa Mundi' captures some of this ambivalence, describing Paris as follows:

Perhaps the only place in the world that is really and truly both a sink of iniquity and a fountain of life at one and the same time; in the same quarter, in the same place, at the same hour, with the same properties – to even the same person.²

Such paradoxes, which also underlie the soldier's desire for the glamour and theatricality of the city in 'Speed the Plough', explain the fascination the urban environment holds for Butts, with her longing to overcome the stifling conservatism of her mother's Victorian mindset. Amanda Anderson argues that cosmopolitanism 'places a value on reciprocal and transformative encounters between strangers', but simultaneously has 'strongly individualist elements, in its advocacy of detachment from shared identities, its emphasis on affiliation as voluntary, and its appeal to self-cultivation.'³ As such, its appeal for Butts, who was fascinated by the possibility of 'transformative encounters' with others, but equally determined to resist any sort of group identity, is clear.

As with Lawrence and Woolf, Butts' interest in both the individualism and the transformative potential offered by urban environments is manifested in a sense of wildness experienced by characters within them. In *Ashe of Rings*, she quite deliberately re-situates tropes and imagery normally associated with rural wilderness in central London:

On Primrose Hill the trees, breathing like tall persons, fluttered their twigs. In Regent's Park a beast called. The sky had risen a few feet. Another mountain settled across their

¹ 'Mary Butts', pp. 17-18.

² 'Mappa Mundi', p. 188.

³ *The Powers of Distance*, pp. 31-32.

eyes, a house, with its roof wedged against the sky, its feet in the abyss. [...] A cat jumped out of the area. Judy skipped away from the charging eyes.¹

In this passage, a domestic cat becomes a 'beast' with 'charging eyes'; while a house is now a 'mountain' poised above an 'abyss'. In the short stories, this kind of imagery is more common. 'The Golden Bough' sees London metaphorically submerged beneath a sense of passing time that seems to acquire a physical reality:

She felt the year-stream winding about the streets. Solid, vibrating, it ebbed at morning, but by three in the afternoon it rose, lapped up the steps of the houses till the rooms brimmed, always moving, moving its huge stream.²

There are echoes here of the fluid, aqueous quality that characterises much of Powys' writing, and of his sense of the fictional world as an aquarium into which the reader gazes. For Butts more than Powys, the urban environment has its own distinctive value and vitality in stimulating this kind of imaginative digression. Occasionally the stories detail transcendent, mystical experiences within this world, as in 'Lettres Imaginaires', with its sense that '[t]here are no more [...] buses grinding up the Tottenham Court Road. There are only masses and spears of light, coloured, interchangeable. All things are dissolved in their elements, all things dance.'³ In each of these examples, the imagery and experiences draw upon Butts' sensitivity to the qualities of the rural environment, but the city becomes a site in which these can be momentarily, potently manifested; often seeming the more intense for their contrast with the ostensible artificiality and domesticity of urban life. As Slingsby argues, Butts is simultaneously critical of the city while suggesting that 'the very destabilisation identified with the modern metropolis can free the subject from habituated perceptual norms, awakening forgotten layers of mythopoeic consciousness.'⁴ Radford notes that 'Mappa

¹ *Ashe of Rings*, p. 62.

² Butts, Mary, 'The Golden Bough', in *Speed the Plough and Other Stories* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1923), pp. 167-190 (p. 169).

³ 'Lettres Imaginaires', p. 111.

⁴ *The Sacred and the Esoteric*, pp. 33-34.

Mundi' and 'From Altar to Chimney-Piece' both explore 'an elliptical twilight terrain' within the city, characterised by a 'beguiling ambiguity'.¹ Particularly in the short stories, then, there is a sense of the city's vital, defamiliarising power, of the possibility that it offers access to the kind of transcendent, mystical consciousness that Butts remains fascinated by throughout her life.²

Butts' work also explores this kind of juxtaposition on a literal, physical level, as in *Warning to Hikers*. This relocates the kind of viscerally repellent descriptions of the natural world that occur in *The Crystal Cabinet* within the urban environment, in which she describes '[r]ubbish heaps of Nature and burial grounds and try-outs and rankness':

It is possible to see that in a town, where a house has been pulled down and not rebuilt, and if you look in between the builder's boards, you will find a savage wilderness for version of the waste-land, dock and elder and sorrel, a mixed coarseness it is sometimes hard to name separately; not lovely, chiefly alarming.³

This is the urban counterpart of the 'desolation of loveliness [...] savage with thistles', that Scylla negotiates in *Felicity Taverner*.⁴ Thus, despite the explicit rhetoric of *Warning*, its insistence that this 'hideously fabricated world' creates new pathologies within those who grow up in it, the pamphlet suggests that the dynamism of a peripatetic existence, shuttling between these environments, may have a distinctive epistemological value. Contemplation of the coexistence of the human and nonhuman worlds within the urban environment is suggested to provide a valuable means of challenging the romanticised, pastoral view of

¹ Radford, Andrew, 'Mary Butts and the "Secret Map" of Interwar Paris: Exile on Queer Street', *Journal of Modern Literature* 35, no. 1 (Fall 2011), pp. 79-98 (p. 80).

² Oliver Conant argues that the presentation of mysticism within the urban world in the story 'Widdershins' is not suggestive of the value of London in stimulating this kind of experience; rather, the 'embittered mystic' who makes an 'apocalyptic call for a return to nature against the stony indifference of London life' here achieves this state of mind *despite* the pressures of modernity. This feels more reflective of Butts' avowed position; yet her stories, as I have argued, often seem to contradict this. Conant, Oliver, 'Countryside Modern', *New York Times Book Review* (26th July 1992), p. 23.

³ *Warning to Hikers*, p. 282.

⁴ *Death of Felicity Taverner*, p. 354.

nature that Butts attacks; and yet, this insight emerges within a text that blames urbanisation precisely for the growth and perpetuation of that conception. Despite herself, then, Butts anticipates calls within contemporary ecocriticism to engage with the experience of the metropolitan world. As Michael Bennett rhetorically asks, '[i]s there no such thing as urban nature? Do cities somehow exist separately from the ecosystems of which they are a part?'¹ Lawrence Buell, similarly, notes that 'we are starting to see the beginning of incorporation of urban and other severely altered, damaged landscapes – "brownfields" as well as greenfields – into ecocriticism's accounts of placeness and place-attachment.'² Hence, Butts' tacit acknowledgement that our encounters with 'urban nature' carry their own distinctive ecological value anticipates more recent attempts to challenge divides between concepts of the urban and rural, or artificial and natural. While early ecocriticism tended to focus upon Romanticism and solely rural or wilderness-based literature, Butts presciently anticipates the limitations of such an approach, and the necessity of any environmentalist philosophy engaging with urban life.

Butts' examination of the psychic potentialities of urban life can possess nuances occasionally lacking in Powys or Lawrence's work. Although her pamphlets and articles express a more unambiguously politicised attitude towards urbanisation than those writers commit themselves to, she is less inclined, for example, to view the city as a site of artificial or mechanical forces fatally opposed to the vital, spiritual currents of rural environments. Rather, Butts tends to see these currents at work in all places, although they are distorted and refracted in unpredictable ways depending on the site. With regard to underground railway systems, for example, Lawrence (as noted in the previous chapter) characterises these as part of an urban 'machine' that deprives individuals of autonomy; while Powys similarly sees

¹ 'The Urban Challenge to Ecocriticism', p. 306.

² *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, p. 88.

them as dehumanising, mechanising, ‘brutal and insistent’. Butts’ story ‘In the Street’ includes a visit to a London Underground station as part of a hallucinatory first-person, present-tense passage that recalls Woolf’s *The Waves* in its disorienting crowd of impressions:

‘In the Charing Cross Road we shall meet, a glass ghost, but clear, clear through. Smoke in autumn in the old woods, and a grey plume. That is *so*. Oh, there, you are. We pass sideways together, and in the million-needed branches brush off the raindrops, and in that seas’ light clashing, step off into the boat called millions of years. [...] Good God, what is it? I’m inside the station, and I can’t find that money. It was sixpence. There, that’s done. Sink down into the yellow heat.’¹

The narrative here mingles internal and external experience: the unnamed protagonist’s memories of ‘old woods’ and the sea seem interchangeable with her navigation of Charing Cross Road; and her trip into the Underground station’s ‘yellow heat’ feels mystical, even infernal, but not mechanised and artificial. Time, again, seems to move perceptibly through the urban environment, in ‘the boat called millions of years’. Such passages delineate this quintessentially metropolitan site as a rich source of experience and stimulation, often dark and confusing, but also potentially valuable.

These observations, however, should be held within the wider context of Butts’ literary output. The novels, as Rives argues, are more likely to turn upon a clearer rural-urban dichotomy, centring around ‘explicit distinctions between a sublime, raw beauty and the more urban, domestic milieu of London.’² Radford notes that the novels variously present London and Paris in terms of ‘nervous antipathy, a drab “machine” culture and economic privation’; while the short stories tend to move beyond this, particularly in their rendering of Paris as ‘a rich stimulus for the private, aesthetic sensibility.’³ Marcus sees this mindset, as expressed within the short stories, as ‘deracinated’, avoiding the lure of racialism and essentialism to

¹ Butts, Mary, ‘In the Street’, in *Speed the Plough and Other Stories* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1923), pp. 157-166 (pp. 164-5).

² ‘Mary Butts’ Socio-Sexual Politics’, p. 248.

³ ‘Exile on Queer Street’, p. 82.

which the novels often succumb. For Slingsby, the distinction is between the later work, characterised by ‘resignation to the delimiting effects of modernity upon the sacred’, and *Ashe of Rings* and the early short stories, which ‘develop a ritual visuality which moves through fractal, shell-shocked metropolitan perspectives’.¹ There is, therefore, a critical consensus which recognises the epistemological and psychic value of the urban as presented in some, but not all, of Butts’ work. Even within those presentations, there are both valuable and problematic elements. ‘Mappa Mundi’ sees Paris as a zone, like Dorset, in which ‘all sorts of mixed pasts’ overlap, but as Foy notes, these pasts are not accessible to all; the story follows a young American boy who disappears, leaving a shadow of himself to haunt those who explore Paris’ underworld: it is, Foy explains, ‘a cautionary tale, a parable warning those unfamiliar with what [Butts] terms ‘the other side of the shadows’ to be careful of their footing in this city of “profound reserves.”’² As with the rural environment in *Felicity Taverner*, then, Paris here is a landscape with a mystical connection to different temporalities and states; but for the uninitiated, those other realms are threatening and mysterious. Typically, Butts reserves the right to restrict access to only those deemed authentically attuned.

Butts’ willingness to explore the potential value of increasing urbanisation and mechanisation, despite these caveats, stems in part from her sensitivity to the crudeness of the humanity/nature distinction. The narrative of *Felicity Taverner* acknowledges that machines ‘are ultimately a work of nature, since they are a work of man, the work of her cleverest animal, devising tools to meet his special needs.’³ Butts stresses that the development of

¹ *The Sacred and the Esoteric*, p. 95.

² Foy, Roslyn Reso, “‘Brightness Falls’”: Magic in the Short Stories of Mary Butts’, *Studies in Short Fiction* 36 (1999), pp. 381-399 (p. 383).

³ *Death of Felicity Taverner*, p. 302.

technology must be teleologically underpinned by these ‘special needs’; if they are not ‘true needs’, this development will not promote human well-being:

Tools and machines are not like thought or art of love. They do not exist for themselves, but to do something. Once they do not fit their proper use, or their use is an unwholesome one, they become a curse. [...] Hence the unparalleled faith shown today in the expert, forgetting that the man who knows all about one thing, may know nothing about anything else. This is particularly true of the applied sciences.¹

This polemical passage anticipates the argument of Heidegger’s ‘The Question Concerning Technology’ (1953), which claims that Western scientific rationalism guides our understanding of the relation between technology and the landscape; technology is seen as a means of pursuing the maximisation of material gain, and consequently the ground ‘reveals itself as a coal mining district, the soil as a mineral deposit.’² Yet the essence of technology, Heidegger argues, does not contain within it this kind of exploitative conceptualisation, and consequently our relationship with it can be changed. Similarly, Butts argues that increasing industrialisation is not an inherently pernicious development, but stipulates that it must be guided by the right criteria; if driven by scientism alone, it will not be sensitive to our need for ‘magic’ (as Butts puts it in the story ‘Widdershins’).³ Modernity has the power to enchant, but this must be controlled: as Garrity notes, Kralin is the paradigm example of those elements in society who ‘blindly worship’ machines as ends in themselves.⁴ Through ‘the secret power of finance’, as Patterson puts it, Kralin channels a mysterious force of modernity, but his ‘alchemy’, which he calls ‘scientific’, is not directed towards valuable ends.⁵

¹ Ibid., pp. 302-3.

² Heidegger, Martin, ‘The Question Concerning Technology’, in Farrell Krell, D. (ed.), *Basic Writings* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 1993), pp. 307-41 (p. 320).

³ Butts, Mary, ‘Widdershins’, in *From Altar to Chimney-Piece: Selected Stories* (New York: McPherson, 1992), pp. 192-202 (p. 148).

⁴ *Step-Daughters of England*, p. 228.

⁵ “‘The Plan Behind the Plan’”, p. 136; *Death of Felicity Taverner*, p. 213.

However, as Butts recognises, such powers are also of potential epistemological value. The passage from ‘In the Street’ discussed above, as well as echoing *The Waves* in its formal qualities, brings to mind Woolf’s *Orlando* in its recognition of this enchanting quality of modernity; both texts see lifts as archetypal inventions of the era in this respect:

Then she got into the lift, for the good reason that the door stood open; and was shot smoothly upwards. The very fabric of life now, she thought as she rose, is magic. In the eighteenth century, we knew how everything was done; but here I rise through the air; I listen to voices in America; I see men flying – but how it’s done, I can’t even begin to wonder. So my belief in magic returns.¹

Armed with Madness also identifies this kind of power in film, which is used as a metaphor to describe the way in which the group’s ‘grail quest’ illuminates their understanding of their environment: it causes the land to be ‘enchanted and disenchanting with the rapidity of a cinema.’² As Marcus notes, the world of *Armed with Madness* is one in which ‘mystical animism and modern life appear on the same level’.³ For both Woolf and Butts, then, modernity has the potential to undermine a narrow, scientific rationalist view, and promote a mystical or enchanted understanding of reality. Butts argues in *Traps for Unbelievers* that this way of relating to the world is latent to the human condition, ‘something to do with a sense of the invisible, the non-existent in a scientific sense’; the pamphlet analyses ‘the collapse of religion as the bearer and legitimator of meaning, and the apparent inadequacy of science to replace it’, as Patterson explains.⁴ When her characters have mystical experiences, then – whether in urban or rural contexts – they are connecting with a latent capacity to relate to the

¹ Woolf, Virginia, *Orlando* (London: Penguin, 1993), p. 207.

² *Armed with Madness*, p. 140. Woolf and Butts arguably anticipate the thought of Bruno Latour here, who notes that it is misleading to simply characterise science as rational and comprehensible, and to thus oppose it to religion; rather, ‘it is science that reaches the invisible world of beyond, [...] is spiritual, miraculous, soul-fulfilling, and uplifting’, and religion that is ‘local, objective, visible, mundane, un-miraculous, repetitive, obstinate, and sturdy’. Latour, Bruno, *On the Modern Cult of the Factish Gods* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 111. As scientific knowledge grows and becomes more complex, so does its ability to enchant or mystify the world in a way that contrasts with the quotidian, habitual character of organised religion.

³ ‘Playing the Sacred Game’.

⁴ Butts, Mary, *Traps for Unbelievers*, in *Ashe of Rings and Other Writings*, pp. 297-330 (p. 312); “‘The Plan Behind the Plan’”, p. 133.

world in ways that transcend the boundaries of scientific rationalism; and Butts suggests that certain developments of modernity are of distinctive value in facilitating such connections.

Perhaps the most significant factor underlying Butts' ambiguous attitude towards cities is her empathy with socially marginalised groups. As noted above, her conservatism is offset by her awareness of the barriers she faces as a woman; and similarly, her fears of metropolitan expansion conflict with her sensitivity to the experiential possibilities offered by the liberty and anonymity of urban life. Foy explains that, as a woman, Butts identified with gay men, and 'in her own nurturing way, joined forces with them.'¹ This is reflected, she notes, in Butts' writing: *Imaginary Letters* writes about homosexuality with 'an openness and compassion that was not prevalent at the time'; Ashbery makes a similar observation regarding the short stories.² Butts' female characters, too, often reject norms of gender and sexuality: Slingsby notes that the autobiographical Vanna Ashe in *Ashe of Rings*, described as having 'odd learning', and a 'man's hat of wide black felt', embodies the 'visual symbology of the urban androgyne'.³ *Armed with Madness* also plays with stereotypes of masculinity and heterosexuality: to Scylla, male friends are 'the peacocks of her world', figures like Carston, who is described in one scene 'beautifying himself, scrupulously and elaborately as a cat.'⁴ This lineage begins with the soldier in 'Speed the Plough', who loves the theatre and beautiful fabrics, 'crepe velours, crepe de Chine, organdie, aerophane, georgette', and considers the 'rare delicate life' of these things as 'the quintessence of cities'; his outlook is provocative not just in its insistence on the beauty of the urban environment, but also in its challenge to norms of masculinity.⁵ This is also a distinctively cosmopolitan aesthetic sensibility, since, as Hamer notes, it is 'girls with foreign names and foreign fashions that the

¹ *Ritual, Myth, and Mysticism in the Work of Mary Butts*, p. 116.

² 'Mary Butts', p. 18; *From Altar to Chimney-Piece*, preface, p. xii.

³ *Ashe of Rings*, p. 60; *The Sacred and the Esoteric*, p. 117.

⁴ *Armed with Madness*, pp. 11, 13.

⁵ 'Speed the Plough', pp. 10, 14.

recovering soldier yearns for. [...] This male identity that is held in place by a fiction of the female', she argues, is clearly not 'uncompromisingly heterosexual'.¹ For Hamer, this beauty is located by Butts 'in the world of artifice, not the world of nature'; it is 'shamelessly unnatural'.² Since we empathise with the character, however, and understand the value and authenticity of his aesthetic sensibility, I would argue that Butts is deliberately undermining this kind of natural/unnatural distinction, just as her story challenges gender stereotypes and urban/rural divisions.

The metropolitan environment, then, is often presented in Butts' work as a haven for figures whose identities chafe against mainstream norms and values. This is true in terms of culture and ethnicity, as well as gender and sexuality: Boris in *Imaginary Letters* represents an archetype which recurs repeatedly throughout Butts' fiction, of a noble, cosmopolitan white Russian making a life in London or Paris, having escaped revolution at home; the Boris of the Taverner novels is, to Felix, a '[l]ovely, ugly, helpless, high-born thing'.³ In contrast to the presentation of Kralin in *Felicity Taverner*, Butts' narrative is often sympathetic towards these figures. Serge in *Ashe of Rings*, for example, is granted a narrative voice in passages of free indirect discourse, allowing us to grasp his own perspective on his affairs with Judy and Vanna: 'What do girls think about? They do all we do, and still we ask that. She was quite happy. He preferred to think so. An outlet for her immense energy, he had provided that.'⁴ In *Armed with Madness*, Boris is granted the last words of the novel, as the Dorset landscape reminds him of 'something he remembered: the smell of fruit bubbling in copper pans [...] in a country-house, in Russia, in a pine forest.'⁵ Butts suggests that Boris' strong sense of Russian place renders him attentive to the character of Dorset as well; as a defamiliarised

¹ 'Mary Butts, Mothers, and War', pp. 225, 226.

² *Ibid.*, p. 226.

³ *Armed with Madness*, p. 161.

⁴ *Ashe of Rings*, p. 96.

⁵ *Armed with Madness*, p. 162.

outsider, he may in fact perceive qualities in the landscape that the locals do not. His family, he claims, “like the English best of all races.”¹ Yet these figures are also tortured by that distance. Boris senses ‘a bloody curtain between him and his land’, and feels that his ‘torn roots [are] not fed by the transplanting’.² Serge, as a cosmopolitan, has ‘town-tuned nerves’, and feels that the Dorset landscape of Vanna’s home is ‘her show, not his.’³ In Butts’ work, there is theatricality and artifice in both rural and urban contexts, but those characters ‘tuned’ to the latter often cannot engage with the former. Serge finds the Rings of the title, an ancient earthwork which for Vanna is infused with *mana*, to be ‘drearier than Praed street’ in London.⁴

For Garrity, this kind of emphasis on the need for rootedness is matched by a conservatism in Butts’ portrayal of rural England. Boris is an ‘improbable projection screen for the Taverners’ indigenous values,’ she argues.⁵ Yet even given the presence of a sympathetic foreign and cosmopolitan character, Garrity resists the idea that Butts is consciously defending marginalised groups in *Felicity Taverner*:

Butts’ choice of a homosexual advocate for the Taverners against Kralin is fundamentally mysterious, given the text’s otherwise fascistic ideas of pure citizenship, which should necessarily exclude homosexuals. Beyond the biographical fact that Butts adored gay men, one might speculate that Boris is the national and sexual exception – a Russian homosexual – who proves the rule that white racial purity is of primary importance.⁶

The novel’s anti-Semitic elements notwithstanding, however, we should not necessarily assume that Butts’ fascistic leanings in certain respects automatically entail her adherence to a homophobic principle of citizenship or belonging. Other critics have argued that the

¹ Ibid., p. 135.

² Ibid.

³ *Ashes of Rings*, pp. 137, 145.

⁴ Ibid., p. 214.

⁵ *Step-Daughters of England*, p. 231.

⁶ Ibid.

prevalence of homosexual characters within Butts' rural landscapes constitutes a consciously radical attempt to challenge hegemonic associations of heterosexuality and mainstream gender roles with the countryside. Bruce Hainley calls Butts 'an ecologist of the queer'.¹ He also notes that Butts would have been aware of the homosexual meaning of the term: thus, when Julian in her late story 'Look Homeward, Angel' states that it is "a queer universe [...] and we live in one of its queerest patches", Butts links marginalised sexualities with rural England (in this story, Cornwall).² For Rives, *Armed with Madness* deliberately creates a dynamic between 'women, gay men, aesthetic community, and ultimately narrative structure', in which 'both the group and the individual resist individuation into the kind of set personality that would enhance authority rather than vulnerability.'³ She argues that Butts contrasts a rural world, in which desire and identity are open to new possibilities, with a restrictive notion of personality that 'resides within the conventional sociability represented by the city, a place of humanistic safety.'⁴ The presence of sexual or cultural difference within this environment is often crucial: 'the stranger is the lifeblood of an aesthetic community, and a rural countryside, that, in a modernist vein, refuses to offer itself for realist copy.'⁵ This insight illuminates the complex and conflicted nature of Butts' re-imagining of the Dorset landscape: the centrality of liberty, diversity and difference to that project arises from the very forces of cosmopolitanism and metropolitanism that her emphasis on rural life seems, in other ways, to protest against.

¹ 'Quite Contrary: Mary Butts' Wild Queendom', p. 21.

² Butts, Mary, 'Look Homeward, Angel', in *Last Stories* (London: Brendin, 1938), pp. 9-17 (p. 10). Radford notes a similar usage in *Felicity Taverner*, where Dorset is described as 'very queer country' (p. 247; see *Mapping the Wessex Novel*, p. 152).

³ 'A Straight Eye for the Queer Guy', pp. 101, 103.

⁴ 'Mary Butts' Socio-Sexual Politics', p. 256. There is, then, a conscious challenge to the idea of the coherent personality in Butts' work, which connects to her undermining of distinctions between the human and nonhuman, and the animate and inanimate (see Section III).

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 257.

As Rives shows, Butts' engagement with the landscape is at least in part about a challenging of boundaries, sexual or otherwise, and the embrace of cosmopolitan diversity. As in Powys' work, this variety sometimes seems to be embedded within the landscape, both in terms of temporal layering (discussed below, Section IV), and in ecological terms. The English Channel off the Dorset coast, for example, can play a similar role for Butts to that described by Powys in his *Autobiography*, where it creates a sense of a 'constant interpenetration' between the marine world and the domestic life of Powys' childhood home. In *Ashe of Rings*, the house by the sea has a 'walled garden', where 'the air was filtered from the sea wind, and made a mixing bowl for scents, for bees, coloured insects and noisy birds.'¹ For both writers, the coast is a littoral, cosmopolitan zone in a broad sense, a place of transient intermingling between species and groups. On the level of form, both writers use the rural landscape as a site of multiple perspectives: where Powys conveys what he calls a 'jumbled-up and squeezed-together epitome of life's various dimensions', Butts deploys modernist techniques like jump-cutting between contemporaneous scenes to convey this perspectival multiplicity (see, in particular, the section in *Armed with Madness* which covers eleven different brief sections, most named after the character followed, over twenty-eight pages).² Slingsby notes a similar diversity of narrative perspective in *Ashe of Rings*, as shown by the shifts into Serge's voice noted above, for example.³ In *Scenes from the Life of Cleopatra*, Butts presents the titular figure only through the perceptions of those around her, and breaks up the narrative with letters supposedly written by Iras, Charmian, and Marc Antony; as Hoberman explains,

¹ *Ashe of Rings*, p. 5.

² *Armed with Madness*, pp. 104-134. In describing the land as 'enchanted and disenchanted with the rapidity of a cinema', Butts may be consciously drawing attention to this jump-cutting technique, thus aligning form and content in terms of cinema's potential to promote vital, defamiliarised modes of interpreting the world. The section noted itself borrows from the 'Wandering Rocks' chapter in Joyce's *Ulysses* (pp. 280-328), and anticipates Woolf's use in *The Waves* of a multi-perspectived narrative.

³ *The Sacred and the Esoteric*, p. 121.

the result is an undermining of the idea that ‘any single version of history can [...] aspire to Truth.’¹

I am arguing, then, that Butts’ relocation of marginalised communities within the rural environment arises from her engagement with the liberty, diversity and cosmopolitanism of urban modernity. This is evident both in the exploration of sexual and cultural difference within the Dorset landscape, and in her work’s development of techniques that reflect the influence of metropolitan modernism. In reimagining the rural world in this way, Butts illuminates one of the central questions regarding the value of cosmopolitan distance: as Amanda Anderson explains, cosmopolitanism can be understood as ‘the capacious inclusion of multiple forms of affiliation, disaffiliation, and reaffiliation, simultaneously insisting on the need for informing principles of self-reflexivity, critique, and common humanity.’² Queer theory, for example, ‘valorises certain forms of detachment in its radical anti-essentialism, [and] in its paradoxical conception of communities of disidentification’.³ Yet, Anderson continues, attempts to establish distance or marginality as being of political or epistemological advantage carry their own risks: they can be delusional in their denial of their own situatedness, disavowing the implicit ‘violence and exclusivity’ that goes with marking out a distinctive territory (be it cultural, geographical, or both); they may ultimately be ‘erected as the exclusive province of elite groups.’⁴ These warnings are particularly apposite in the case of Butts, whose attempt to reclaim the rural landscape as the province of marginalised cultural groups mingles problematically with her instinctive conservatism and elitism, her desire to protect that environment from those elements deemed undesirable. This tension is evident in her presentation of American characters, for example. Dudley Carston in

¹ *Gendering Classicism*, p. 146. Butts, Mary, *Scenes from the Life of Cleopatra*, in *The Classical Novels* (New York: McPherson and Co., 1994).

² *The Powers of Distance*, p. 30.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 26.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 24, 25.

Armed with Madness sometimes appears to overcome the difficulties in interpreting the landscape that Butts associates with transience:

[H]e stepped into another world, their world and his own. At its largest, airiest, and freest. He had never been there before. He had always been there. He would always be there, never the same apprehensive, gifted, rootless man.¹

Similarly, Paul in the story ‘The House-Party’ is distinguished, in his ‘virgin energy and high intelligence’, from those Americans ‘who made a cult of Europe, a cult and a career, not quite perfect in their transplanting’.² Yet the latter archetype is ultimately more pervasive in Butts’ work, in those Americans described in ‘From Altar to Chimney-Piece’ as ‘the least finished kind of man’, driven ‘by fear, by over-indulgence, and sometimes by the intolerable repression of American life.’³ This kind of rhetoric illustrates Butts’ suspicions towards cosmopolitan, metropolitan modernity, and explains why her attempts to reclaim the rural landscape for marginalised groups are confused and contradictory. As Rives explains, in the Taverner novels, Scylla ultimately retreats to ‘an insular environment in which what is truly human can make itself apparent only in the inhuman atmosphere of flint rock and barbed wire.’⁴ The following section looks more closely at the distinctive presentation of that environment in Butts’ work.

III. Wonder Is the Answer

Butts’ representations of the Dorset landscape, then, are often problematic in their exclusionary or essentialist elements; but they also demonstrate a consciousness deeply

¹ *Armed with Madness*, p. 96. A journal entry from 1926 indicates Butts’ initial intention to have Carston as the protagonist of the novel, illustrating her interest in the potential value of American perspectives on the English landscape (*Journals*, p. 223).

² Butts, Mary, ‘The House-Party’, in *With and Without Buttons and Other Stories* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1991), pp. 25-46 (p. 25).

³ ‘From Altar to Chimney-Piece’, p. 160.

⁴ ‘A Straight Eye for the Queer Guy’, pp. 110.

sensitive to certain characteristics of that environment. Her intimate connection with place is related to the pervasive awareness of the sensuality and beauty of physical objects in her work. In a chapter of *The Crystal Cabinet* entitled ‘Stones’, Butts recalls having, from a young age, an appreciation of ‘bright pebbles and shells’, which continued into adulthood: ‘Today I cannot touch a lump of crystal, coral or amber, lapis or jade, without the deepest sensual joy.’¹ Later, she expands on these ideas:

I went back to my pebbles, and in their chink and shine and colour and lick, or the hot smell and the flash that came when you knocked one kind called a fire-stone on a flint, began to learn the meaning of stone. The life, the potency that lives in the kind of earth-stuff that is hard and coloured and cold. Yet is alive and full of secrets, with a sap and a pulse and a being all to itself.

So that now, living in a country with all its bones showing, whose fabric and whose whole essence is stone, which is dominated and crowned by stones [...] neither stone nor flesh are without contact one with the other.²

This vibrant, animistic sense of the ‘potency’ and ‘pulse’ of objects and the land, then, reveals a profound pleasure in haptic engagement with the world. Ross in *Armed with Madness* is particularly attentive to this mode of being: he is ‘a man content with the tangible, piece by piece, to whom no single object was dumb’; able to think of ‘the brickness of a brick until he seemed aware of it throughout, not side after side or two or three, but each crumb of its body’.³ If we attend closely to the distinctive physicality of objects, Butts suggests, they will in a sense speak to us. Gerrit Lansing describes her ‘reliance on Earth and the numinous powers of *things*’, noting that she was a passionate collector of ‘the lovely found junk of the tides of living’; ‘in the solidities and embodiments of the past she found reconciling symbols which enabled her to persevere’.⁴ Butts uses this sense of concrete persistence to shore up her

¹ *The Crystal Cabinet*, p. 8.

² *Ibid.*, p. 12.

³ *Armed with Madness*, p. 92.

⁴ Lansing, Gerrit, Foreword, in Wagstaff, Christopher (ed.), *A Sacred Quest: The Life and Writings of Mary Butts* (New York: McPherson and Co., 1995), pp. xvii-xix (p. xix; emphasis in original). Compare the similar role played by collections of miscellaneous objects in *Wolf Solent* and *Between the Acts* (discussed in Chapters Two and Four respectively).

vision of Dorset against the encroachments of modernity: we can contrast it with the ‘mass-production, vulgarisation, [and] the lack of care for beauty in small things’ that Patterson identifies in her depiction of Kralin.¹ She suggests there is a kind of empathic relation we can develop with objects, one that is threatened by the homogenising drives of modernity. Rives argues that Butts’ understanding of empathy challenges the idea that ‘objects must be elusive or even ‘disappeared’, must lack private grounding, in order to avoid their inevitable reification.’² Rather, she suggests, attentiveness to the qualities of objects is essential in maintaining a sense of deep connection to place.

For Butts, that kind of attentiveness occurs, too, at the level of language. Like Powys, she communes and engages with the landscape through careful detailing of its features, and depicts its qualities in her linguistic style. This is evident, for example, in her story ‘The Warning’:

There, at the pull of the moon, the tides draw out half a mile. Draw back across lion-bright sand, a delicate flat-race, sea babies at the water’s lip, coral and crimson weed and a starring of shells, pearl beads and glass and yellow stone. In every colour but the sea colours. Each one smaller than the last. A perfectness.³

This passage is typical in its presentation of a landscape in which humans are absent. Like the opening paragraph of *Weymouth Sands*, it places the animate, transient world of the seashore at its narrative centre; and Butts also bears affinities with Powys in her use of a telescoping technique: the passage begins at the cosmic level, with ‘the pull of the moon’, and zooms in, to stones that grow gradually smaller. The long second sentence evokes the long drawing-out of the tide, and is followed by two that, like the stones, are of progressively decreasing size.

¹ “‘The Plan Behind the Plan’”, p. 136.

² Rives, Rochelle, ‘Problem Space: Mary Butts, Modernism, and the Etiquette of Placement’, *Modernism/Modernity* 12, no. 4, pp. 607-627 (p. 624).

³ Butts, Mary, ‘The Warning’, in *From Altar to Chimney-Piece: Selected Stories* (New York: McPherson, 1992), pp. 117-131 (p. 118).

Butts handles the words as she handles the stones in *A Crystal Cabinet*, focusing on their detail and solidity. In such passages, objects have what Jane Bennett calls ‘Thing-Power’: ‘the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle.’¹ The recognition of this character, Bennett argues, enables us to grasp our interrelation with the nonhuman world, or as Butts puts it, to reveal that ‘neither stone nor flesh are without contact one with the other.’ For Rives, Butts’ attentiveness to objects is a form of empathy, encouraging an attendance to the actual physical persistence and vitality of things; something that, as Bennett notes, actually challenges the logic of capitalism, which is ‘antimateriality’ in its dependence upon consumers ‘buying ever-increasing numbers of products purchased in ever-shorter cycles’.² By resisting this logic, Butts’ work insists upon our embeddedness within the landscape, and our entanglement with the nonhuman world.³

Rives’ reading of Butts here challenges the claim that this kind of deep connection to objects is necessarily bound up with a pernicious adherence to capitalist property relations. Other critics, however, find the role of objects in Butts’ work to be problematic in other ways: for Garrity, objects’ tendency to ‘resonate with ancestral meaning’ in her work is ‘central to her concept of cultural homogeneity.’⁴ On this reading, Butts uses objects as a way of maintaining a narrow, exclusionary sense of belonging. It is important to note, however, that the meanings acquired by objects are not fixed, and do not always appear to issue from this kind of ancestral source. In *Armed with Madness*, Scylla’s group appear to impose their own meanings upon the jade cup; when Picus asks a vicar about the artefact, he articulates this:

¹ Bennett, Jane, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (London: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 6.

² *Ibid.*, p. 5.

³ This specific sense of a certain vitality or life persisting within the inanimate world, an awareness of objects’ capacity to impact upon realms which Western thought tends to segregate as exclusively human, is apparent in Powys’ work as well; his ritualistic touching and embracing of trees and stones, noted in the previous chapter, indicates a similar sensitivity to the specific physicality of the inanimate world.

⁴ *Step-Daughters of England*, p. 194.

‘This story as I see it [...] is true Sanc-Grail. The cup may have been an ash-tray in a Cairo club. But it seems to me that you are having something like a ritual. A find, illumination, doubt, and division, collective and then dispersed.’ [...] Wonder was the answer, and familiar objects out of their categories.¹

By placing the jade cup outside of its understood cultural category, the group thus use it to generate meanings it did not previously possess. Nonetheless, these resonances remain, in some sense, within the broader ‘ancestral meaning’ of the grail myth. Perhaps more challenging to Garrity’s claim is the story ‘The Saint’, in which an old woman steals a holy cup from her church, intending to sell it and give the proceeds to charity. Here, the Christian associations of the cup fall away, and the woman sees ‘its beauty, not as a sacred vessel, but as a piece of jewellery’.² She thus seems to identify an intrinsic quality of the artefact that transcends any single cultural meaning. Anticipating Bennett, Butts suggests that objects possess an essential vitality or animate power which works upon us in our engagements with them. For Butts, as Elizabeth Anderson puts it, ‘an object has value both as a thing-in-itself and also for the other meanings that may be ascribed to it.’³ As things-in-themselves, objects may not therefore be reducible to the ‘ancestral meaning[s]’ Garrity discusses. When placed ‘out of their categories’, removed from prescribed cultural understandings, they may instead function like the emu in Lawrence’s *Kangaroo* – ‘very wide-awake, and yet far off in the past’ – that is, as thresholds to another cultural, temporal or geographical world.⁴

These intrinsic qualities are evident in those passages of Butts’ work which list and describe objects. This cataloguing often undermines attempted distinctions between ‘artificial’ and ‘natural’ objects, or at least suggests that the former are as worthy of aesthetic valorisation as the latter. Hence, the soldier in ‘Speed the Plough’ longs for the sensuality of expensive

¹ *Armed with Madness*, p. 140.

² Butts, Mary, ‘The Saint’, in *Speed the Plough and Other Stories* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1923), pp. 103-115 (p. 112).

³ “‘The Knight’s Move’”, p. 254.

⁴ *Kangaroo*, p. 227.

fabrics; and for the Taverners, the ‘polish on a horse’s coat, the china-red lacquer of Adrian’s car, two shots at a half-mirror, were [...] surfaces as pleasant as petal or silk or fruit.’¹ As Rives explains, such passages see the world as comprised of ‘empirical surface[s], perceptible to touch, sight and smell [...] In describing these surfaces, Butts’ prose lovingly creates its own still-life’.² This cataloguing of the world is also evident in the journals. An entry from June 1927 records a visit to Gertrude Stein’s; but rather than describing the events of the evening, Butts obsessively lists the furniture in her apartment (‘two red engraved glass candlesticks holding two candles embossed in a lattice of red & green & gold wax’, among around twenty other items); while another entry, from 1929, details new acquisitions in Butts’ own flat, including ‘a powder-box like a grey alabaster ball’.³ As with Powys’ ‘hieroglyphs of the spirit’, his ritualistic touching and reciting of the landscape, these lists seem to function for Butts as a way of enchanting and animating her world, of naming it in order to establish and remember the intrinsic qualities and powers of objects and place.

Through enchanting the world of her fiction in this close-focus, detailed way, Butts is able to create a wider sense of an animistic landscape, in which nonhuman entities often occupy the narrative centre. *Ashe of Rings*, for example, describes the moon rising over the eponymous earthwork:

A bodiless shadow whipped round the barrow and skipped on its pale cone. The faintly clashing boughs accompanied it, and ceased as it darted into their shadows. To a light clapping it spun out, to reel and trip over a moon shaft, and gather, and prick the earth, and stab, and stab.⁴

This sense of nonhuman activity also applies to Melitta and Anthony’s home:

¹ *Death of Felicity Taverner*, p. 301.

² ‘Problem Space’, p. 607.

³ *Journals*, pp. 253, 315.

⁴ *Ashe of Rings*, p. 35.

In the summer the house swooned, in winter slept like a bear. Through the afternoons it could be heard, sucking in its sleep, milky draughts, bubbles of quiet, drunk against the future when it should become a wrath.¹

Such passages anticipate the sustained animism of the ‘Time Passes’ sequence in *To the Lighthouse* (1927), published two years after *Ashe of Rings*. Butts uses energetic, forceful verbs (‘whipped’, ‘skipped’, ‘darted’, ‘prick’, ‘stab’) to convey a sense of a restless, turbulent landscape; while the house, in contrast, is soft and languorous. Blondel notes the supernatural quality to Butts’ animism, which stems from a ‘perception of an organic existence, in which everything is interrelated’; Rose, too, emphasises this, arguing that for Butts the sacred ‘is not a psychological projection onto the external world, it is [...] something which inheres in, and then arises out of things.’² Butts’ animism, then, is distinctively supernatural, in a way that stems from her intimate connection to the sensuality and vitality of objects. Moreover, as noted above, it is often threatening: Vanna Ashe, lying outside at night, feels the ground beneath her like ‘a mosaic of large pieces, opening, relocking, carrying her. Trees ran up and down. The ground was like a moving staircase.’³ There is a sense, in such passages, of a ceaselessly active nonhuman world, indifferent to human ends at best, and with the power to absorb us within it at any moment. In *Armed with Madness*, a teeming world exists beneath the pine-needles that cover the forest floor, ‘a black scented life, full of ants, who work furiously and make no sound’; and in *Felicity Taverner*, the land is capable of a self-renewing ‘exfoliation’.⁴ As Robin Blaser explains, in Butts’ fiction, ‘a tale is told of human characters inside an action both older and other than themselves’; as a result, the ‘expected

¹ Ibid., p. 53.

² Blondel, Nathalie, afterword to Butts, Mary, *With and Without Buttons and Other Stories* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1991), p. 214; *On Not Being Able to Sleep*, p. 98.

³ *Ashe of Rings*, p. 185.

⁴ *Armed with Madness*, p. 48; *Death of Felicity Taverner*, p. 300. I discuss Butts’ sense of the purity of the landscape further in Section IV.

psychological centre is displaced', and the human narrative recedes into the background.¹ In environmentalist terms, this can be seen as a kind of biocentrism, an insistence on the equivalent significance of the human and nonhuman.

Trees, as the *Ashe of Rings* quotation above suggests, are central to Butts' animistic vision.

The Crystal Cabinet traces this link to her childhood, when a fear of woods was instilled:

Quiet in the woods is a very real magic, a tangible daimon to a child [...] Worst of all was that over these grown-up alarms [...] hung a faint flavour of sex. [...] Was it possible that there was a dreadfulness, apart from magic, in the pine-woods? [...] The danger, as I sensed it, lay in minds, at home.²

This quotation demonstrates that forests are particularly significant for Butts in establishing linkages between sexuality and the rural world, as well as illustrating the way in which she projects her own psychic unease onto the environment. She expands upon the eerie power of silence in forests in *Warning to Hikers*; quietness there is 'like no other quiet. High wind in the tree-tops and the groaning, pitching branches is not an easy thing.'³ Forests become portals to other realms, or vestiges of those realms that remain in our world. Robert Macfarlane notes the power of the deepwood: this has vanished in England, but 'we are still haunted by the idea of it. [...] Woods have always been a place of in-betweenness, somewhere one might slip from one world to another, or one time to a former'.⁴ Butts follows Hardy in articulating this sense of woods' vestigial power: in *Tess*, Hardy's narrator tells us, '[t]he forests have departed, but some old customs of their shades remain.'⁵ Radford notes some of the links between Hardy and Butts in this context, and also hints at connections with Lawrence, in Butts' 'primal, perennial and sentient spirit of place which is 'watching man'

¹ Blaser, Robin, "Here Lies the Woodpecker who was Zeus", in Wagstaff, Christopher (ed.), *A Sacred Quest: The Life and Writings of Mary Butts* (New York: McPherson and Co., 1995), pp. 159-223 (p. 167).

² *The Crystal Cabinet*, p. 61 (emphasis in original).

³ *Warning to Hikers*, p. 282.

⁴ Macfarlane, Robert, *The Wild Places* (London: Granta, 2008), p. 98.

⁵ *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, p. 19.

closely.’¹ The working title for *Armed with Madness* was ‘In the Wood’, indicating forests’ centrality to Butts’ creation of a watchful environment in that novel.² The impression of sentience is created, among other ways, by intimations of music or language heard within these zones. The wind in the pines in *Felicity Taverner* makes ‘harp sounds’, and for Scylla, ‘there were times when the trees and stone and turf were not dumb, and she had their speech’.³ There is also an absence that is, paradoxically, pervasive, and which itself seems to speak, a ‘quietness [...] like no other’. Hence the experience of Serge in *Ashe of Rings*: ‘The quiet struck his town-tuned nerves as sinister. He listened again, and heard the oak-trees rubbing their branches in the running air.’⁴ The silence, which is ‘intolerable’ to Carston in *Armed with Madness*, coming ‘straight from London, Paris and New York’, is one of the weapons deployed by Butts’ hostile, threatening landscape in repelling such ‘town-tuned’ outsiders.⁵

This vision of a communicative barrier between the human and nonhuman worlds – at least for those with ‘town-tuned’ nerves – creates an environment that is often more forbidding and alienating than Lawrence’s rural landscapes. Where Lawrence sees a nightingale’s song as a ‘wild, savage’ sound, incapable of indicating affinities with humanity, Butts goes further when describing English forests in *Warning to Hikers*:

They can be very quiet when a wind from nowhere lifts in the tree-tops and through the pine-needles, clashing the noise of a harp runs down the trunks into the earth. *And no birds sing.*⁶

¹ ‘Salvaging the Roots of Romanticism’, p. 120.

² See Blondel, *Scenes from the Life*, p. 156.

³ *Death of Felicity Taverner*, pp. 304, 300. Radford suggests that Butts is evoking the Aeolian Harp, ‘whose unprompted responsiveness to the surrounding wind becomes [...] a symbol of the mind’s openness’ (‘Salvaging the Roots of Romanticism’, p. 118).

⁴ *Ashe of Rings*, p. 137.

⁵ *Armed with Madness*, p. 12.

⁶ *Warning to Hikers*, p. 295 (emphasis in original).

Radford notes the quotation from Keats' 'La Belle Dame Sans Merci'; Butts pointedly references a Romanticism that resists using birdsong in the creation of a bucolic rural idyll.¹ This stony silence signifies the landscape's refusal to even engage with outsiders, in contrast to the cacophonous intermingling of humanity and birdsong in Woolf's *Between the Acts*. Butts' fiction often runs against the rhetoric of works like *Warning for Hikers*, however, and it is Carston, the American, who has some of the most profound engagements with a seemingly communicative environment in *Armed with Madness*:

He began to live again in moments of insight [...] like obstructions removed, revealing a landscape that had always been there.²

He was in a state of consciousness unique to him. Not vision, but wonder become a state, an impregnation of being: that excited and held him in absolute rest. An expectancy more real than the old furniture, the two men with him, the shallow stream that tore past the window, water whistling to itself, a running trap for light.³

Wright argues that defamiliarisation is a key concept in Butts' work; her intention, he proposes, is 'precisely to affront settled and habituated appearances, to break through the pseudoconcrete so as to shock the everyday world into a disclosure of deeper, more authentic meaning.'⁴ She sometimes suggests that Carston, as an outsider, is actually better situated to achieve this kind of perceptual shift; it enables him to hear the landscape, the 'water whistling to itself', and it is remarkable that such sensations are rarely articulated within the other characters' narrative sections. Butts echoes Carston in a journal entry of 1932, which describes 'water-voices' in a stream; and 'The Warning' describes 'the conversation of the sea', which 'sang, swore, snored, shouted, whispered, yelled.'⁵ She does, therefore, have a strong sense that some sort of communication with this animistic world *is* possible, and explains her childhood longing to somehow speak the language of her environment in *The*

¹ 'Salvaging the Roots of Romanticism', p. 118.

² *Armed with Madness*, p. 78.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

⁴ *On Living in an Old Country*, pp. 98-99.

⁵ *Journals*, p. 388; 'The Warning', p. 117.

Crystal Cabinet: there was, she felt, a ‘soundless sound [...] going on the whole time if you could hear it [...] ‘Translate! Translate! My mortal being cried.’¹ And occasionally the birds *do* sing, or ‘speak’, with Butts employing the same playful anthropomorphism seen in *The White Peacock*: “‘Chuck!’ said the bird at them’ in *Armed with Madness*; “‘Rook – kook – kook – kook,” said a pigeon’, in ‘The Guest’.²

Like Woolf, Butts is also interested in the musicality of birdsong. A 1933 diary entry describing a radio broadcast connects the two:

Stravinsky tonight. Who would not sooner hear his Nightingale music to the best bird solo or chorus? Nature has her place, a pretty big one; but there are times when Art can beat her on her own ground.³

In contrast to the tone of *Between the Acts*, the relation is characterised here as an adversarial one, but the thematic links between Woolf and Butts’ thinking are nonetheless evident. Marcus notes that *Armed with Madness* and Woolf’s novel both connect music and the nonhuman world in their use of gramophones. A player is present at the opening of Butts’ novel: ‘A large gramophone stood with its mouth open on the verandah flags. They had been playing to the wood after lunch, to appease it’.⁴ The human invention acquires its own animate life, and is used to communicate with the novel’s other nonhuman, animistic presences; Butts’ granting of life to the supposedly inanimate world extends to human technology. As Marcus puts it, ‘mystical animism and modern life appear on the same level in a single clause, as in the novel as a whole.’⁵ Rainey identifies this synthesis of the animate

¹ *The Crystal Cabinet*, p. 212.

² *Armed with Madness*, p. 57; Butts, Mary, ‘The Guest’, in *Last Stories* (London: Brendin, 1938), pp. 18-45 (p. 35).

³ *Journals*, p. 421.

⁴ *Armed with Madness*, p. 4.

⁵ ‘Playing the Sacred Game’. See also Slingsby, who discusses the mingling of gramophone music and the sounds of the landscape in *Armed with Madness (The Sacred and the Esoteric*, p. 155). Carston discerns a melody from the sound of rushing water, and considers: ‘Syncopation, magic, nature imitating Mozart? Carston came to hear it as an overture, for some private earth-life, mercifully and tiresomely apart from his’ (*Armed with*

and inanimate at the level of Butts' style, which 'is often evocative of automatic writing – automation is suggested by the gramophone [...] and is itself reflected in the songs that course through the characters' minds.'¹ The repetition of song lyrics in the novel emphasises the limitations of conscious control, thus connecting us to the world of non-conscious beings. For Wright, Butts' downplaying of characters' agency and depth makes them 'ciphers [...] without substantial interiority', 'figures rather than characters'.² If this is the case, however, it should not necessarily be seen as a flaw of her approach, but rather as evidence of a deliberate eschewal of human narrative centrality and agency. When Vanna Ashe enters her London flat in a scene in *Ashe of Rings*, Butts describes her like an inanimate object, using 'the' where 'her' would be expected: 'Tap-water streaked black the cropped scarlet hair. Powder weighted the translucent skin and lay like pollen on the purple eyelids and bright fringes.'³ As Barbara Wagstaff notes, in *Ashe of Rings*, '[l]ittle is inanimate [...] now the characters and now the scenery – gods, nature, objects – are centre stage.'⁴ Butts' marginalisation of the human thus forms part of a broader project, emphasising our embeddedness within an active and powerful nonhuman world.

This weave of the animate and inanimate is also evident in Butts' story 'In Bayswater', in which a book is found 'burning to death', suffering 'mutilation'.⁵ The choice to describe a repository of language as an animistic object here hints at the complexity of Butts' position. Her belief in the power of ritual and mysticism to enchant the nonhuman world often seems rooted in a faith in the invocatory powers of language, and books therefore possess a

Madness, p. 36). Butts' intimations of an ancient creative link between music and environmental sound anticipates more recent work in this field, such as Bernie Krause's *The Great Animal Orchestra: Finding the Origins of Music in the World's Wild Places* (London: Little Brown, 2012).

¹ 'Good Things'.

² *On Living in an Old Country*, p. 105.

³ *Ashe of Rings*, p. 59.

⁴ Wagstaff, Barbara, afterword to *The Taverner Novels* (New York: McPherson and Co., 1992), p. 370.

⁵ Butts, Mary, 'In Bayswater', in *With and Without Buttons and Other Stories* (Manchester: Carcanet, 1991), pp. 112-147 (p. 126).

distinctive significance. The landscape itself, Butts suggests, is a text which needs to be interpreted in order to be enlivened or engaged with; she describes this in a 1931 journal entry discussing England's 'secret history in letters too large to read':

Secrets whose simplicity appals. People bred there go away & do different things, but at some time they have read the too large letters, & it becomes their business to re-write them legibly & in characters of whatever it is that they have to do.¹

This comment suggests that, for Butts, there is a distinctive epistemological privilege accorded to those figures who been raised in a rural environment, but have also been exposed to other cultural contexts which enable them to obtain a defamiliarised perspective on their home. For such individuals, attempting to capture the relationship with landscape is essentially a 're-writing' of the 'too large letters'. This process is evident in Butts' Powysian cataloguing of place; and also in her sense of the landscape as a vocal world of 'water-voices' and speaking birds, which she longs to 'translate'. Like Powys, Butts anticipates Macfarlane's point that language is a vital tool in the re-enchantment of place. Her adventurous literary style suggests a faith in the ability of language to not merely describe the world, but in a certain sense to *create* it; to determine the way in which we encounter our environment. Heidegger explains this constitutive power in his essay "'... Poetically Man Dwells ...'":

Man acts as though he were the shaper and master of language, while in fact language remains the master of man. [...] Strictly, it is language that speaks. Man first speaks when, and only when, he responds to language by listening to its appeal.²

In *The Crystal Cabinet*, Butts anticipates this point, in her recognition that she 'could make words do things. But words could do things to me. Words could make me use them.'³

Language, in this sense, can be seen as a form of nonhuman life, a force that moulds our

¹ *Journals*, p. 360.

² "'... Poetically Man Dwells ...'", p. 89.

³ *The Crystal Cabinet*, p. 120.

engagement with and understanding of the world. Discussing *Felicity Taverner*, Patterson identifies Butts' 'contradictory feelings about her text and its access to forces beyond her powers to understand, which she figured as occult.'¹ Scylla's re-enchantment of the land in the novel, her attentiveness to the 'speech' of 'trees and stones and turf', is a 'century-in, century-out dance'; as Hoberman explains, this dance 'attributes animation to an inanimate landscape'.² In Butts' work, language often acquires a literal solidity: as Rose puts it, it 'turns figure into object. It concretises.'³ The landscape of the texts is enchanted, brought to life, by this invocatory power of words, and by characters' attempts to deploy this – although they can never control it. Clarence in *Armed with Madness*, enraged by Scylla taking Picus from him, seems to see 'the names he called her take body and walk to meet him out of the wood. Vanity, lechery, falsehood and malice lolled along together across the grass, out of the trees.'⁴ This hallucination, presaging Clarence's insane attack on Scylla, hints at the dangerous potency of language, its ability to warp our perception of the world, and defy our attempts to use it in a controlled way.

As Clarence's experience suggests, naming is particularly significant for Butts here. She explains in *The Crystal Cabinet* that, from the age of seven, she was gripped by a need to find 'an instrument for a sense that was working in me – a need, a powerlessness and a power – that had something to do with the names of things.'⁵ Wright notes the centrality of naming to her depiction of landscape, in a passage which evokes Powys' ritualistic cataloguing of place:

Then there are names – of villages, plants, landmarks, birds, stones and the accoutrements of rural life [...] which aren't used to describe a world so much as anxiously to conjure one up. Things are *invoked* into being through a process of naming which is enacted in a deliberate and conscious assertion of itself. To get the

¹ "'The Plan Behind the Plan'", p. 135.

² *Gendering Classicism*, p. 50.

³ *On Not Being Able to Sleep*, p. 94.

⁴ *Armed with Madness*, p. 89.

⁵ *The Crystal Cabinet*, p. 37.

name right is everything. It is as if the answer to urban modernity was for everyone to learn the names of the plants and places again.¹

As Wright suggests, there is an anxiety and defensiveness about Butts' examination of the power of naming, one that is largely absent from Powys' work. There is again, a sense of an adversarial relationship, of a 'sacred game' between the human and nonhuman. James Hamilton-Paterson has remarked that the desire to name the world might be traced to a desire to subjugate the object named:

In a sense things do not exist until they are named. Before that, everything partakes of a state of undifferentiated chaos which is never a neutral matter to human beings but carries a degree of menace. To name something is to take control of it.²

Perhaps the clearest example of this desire to 'take control' of the world in Butts' fiction is Anthony Ashe's demand that Muriel, upon marrying him, not only takes his surname but also changes her first name, to Melitta.³ His objectification of her as the 'great goddess' Mylitta denies Muriel her autonomous identity, insisting instead upon her subsumption within a mythological world that unrelentingly overshadows the present throughout Butts' work.⁴ Similarly, Valentine, the son of Melitta's second husband, Morice Amburton, is nonetheless made by his mother to adopt the Ashe name, for reasons unexplained.⁵ This depiction of a social world in which individuals seek to dominate one another through the control of identities is often paralleled in the adversarial sense of human-nonhuman relations discussed in Section I. For Butts, objects and landscape possess a vital potency which can be engaged with, through language and ritual; but that power is rarely benign, and is not something that can be easily merged with. Despite her occasional suggestion that outsiders like Carston are

¹ *On Living in an Old Country*, pp. 100-101.

² Hamilton-Paterson, James, *Seven-Tenths: The Sea and its Thresholds* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007), p. 39.

³ *Ashe of Rings*, pp. 9-11.

⁴ *Ashe of Rings*, p. 14.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 52-3. The implication, characteristically, is that the Ashe name possesses some kind of mystical value; while the more prosaic motivation behind such narratives within Butts' work sometimes appears to be an attachment to notions of aristocratic racial superiority.

well-situated to perceive or interact with these nonhuman forces, Butts is more likely to insist upon the point that individuals ‘bred’ within the rural world have a privileged epistemological position in this respect. In the final section of this chapter, I will examine the extent to which her work facilitates the blurring or transgression of this human-nonhuman boundary, among others.

IV. On All Sides But One

As I have argued, Butts’ creation of animistic landscapes is connected to a sense of liminality in her work, of the attempt to undermine boundaries; the claim that ‘[w]onder was the answer, and familiar objects out of their categories’ is one of the central philosophical underpinnings of her fiction, whether those categories are of place, species, gender or sexuality.¹ It is evident, for example, in her exploration of sexual and cultural difference within rural England. And as Hamer notes, Butts’ writing style deliberately encourages readers ‘to give up their old patterns of thought, the grammar of assumptions by which they held together their former picture of the world.’² In *Ashe of Rings*, for example, she develops a distinctive approach to interior monologue characterised by short, staccato, and often verbless sentences, a repetitive lexicon, and a kind of free-associative progression:

She looked at him. He had been her lover. Long, unnatural tale. He was made of wax. Men should be made of iron and flesh. He was of wax. Fat of dead men, melted and poured. Become flesh again. Out of a great torment. *The Word was made flesh*. The Word of a great torment. He’ll melt again into his dead man’s wax. Forever my floor will shine. Wax. Of no terrestrial bees.³

¹ Butts’ novella *Imaginary Letters* establishes the Russian esotericist thinker P.D. Ouspensky as the source of this comment, quoting from his work *Tertium Organum* (1922): ‘It is necessary to understand that all objects known to us exist not only in those categories in which they are perceived by us, but in an indefinite number of others in which we do not and cannot sense them. And we must learn first to think things in other categories, and then, so far as we are able, imagine them therein.’ Butts, Mary, *Imaginary Letters* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 1979), p. 47.

² ‘Mary Butts, Mothers, and War’, p. 220.

³ *Ashe of Rings*, p. 78.

In such passages, literal meanings tend to become subsumed within a broader narrative logic; the repetition and ambiguities here encourage an attendance to the phonetic qualities of the words over their meanings, and thus increase the sense of a world both more immediate and less comprehensible, in which the categories by which we normally make sense of the world are destabilised. Butts, as Elizabeth Anderson explains, ‘transforms language to provide a new vision of meaning which points beyond the words she employs’.¹ Hoberman argues that she aligns herself ‘with formlessness and jouissance against plot, purpose, and male hegemony.’² This comingling of categories thus occurs at the level of both form and content.

Regarding the latter point, the landscapes of Butts’ fiction, like many of those in Powys’ work, are often infused with a sense of liminality. In *Armed with Madness*, the Dorset cliffs – the zone where earth meets sea – are one such area:

Gault cliff hung over them, a terror to look up at, its seamed head raw in the light, but dark underneath and broken into bog and scree, interlude between the earth of pure stone, and the earth of wood and spring. No interval between the wood and the sea, it was that made the place incomparable. [...] A fountain where saga and love were mixed.³

Characteristically, the cliff is imbued with an animistic, mysterious potency. Its visible geological strata, the mixture of bog, stone and wood, embodies the comingling of categories that Butts pursues throughout her work; it thus functions as an appropriate metaphorical setting in a novel that mixes genres, ‘saga and love’. When Scylla feels herself shifting between ‘wood, flesh and sea’, it represents, as Rives puts it, ‘a complete communion with nature’.⁴ Butts’ characters often seem capable of osmotically merging with the

¹ “‘The Knight’s Move’”, p. 254.

² *Gendering Classicism*, p. 54.

³ *Armed with Madness*, pp. 57-8.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 68; ‘A Straight Eye for the Queer Guy’, pp. 104.

landscape, as when Anthony Ashe walks through a forest: ‘mud curled over the toes of his boots. A springing bramble reversed its hooks across his nose. The blood dripped through the thin skin.’¹ As noted in Section I, there are affinities between these elements of Butts’ work and Powys’ merging of body and ‘heathen soil’: Vanna Ashe, like Gerda in *Wolf Solent*, lies upon an ancient earthwork that seems ‘alive’, and ‘melds her body with the sacred stone’, as Foy puts it.²

Of central importance to the creation of this atmosphere of liminality and commingling in Butts’ Dorset novels is the constant proximity of the sea. Thus the house in *Ashe of Rings*, which features a ‘green-washed passage [...] like a corridor under the sea,’ is a site of littoral aqueousness in which boundaries – between the physical and the mental, the solid and the fluid, the animate and inanimate – are no longer solid:

[T]he house dropped behind her its sheet of crystal, and the floor of the library might have been a pool of the unstirred sea. He would look down and one day his bones would dissolve and we would dive forward into its glimmering well. *Full fathoms five*.³

The ocean forms the predominant metaphorical paradigm in Butts’ descriptions of the house: when ‘a wave of laughter’ runs through it, the house ‘ripple[s] with its currents.’⁴ The Taverner novels, too, feature a house beside the ocean, and Scylla envisions the possibility that Felicity ‘might swim in’ through its windows, re-crossing the boundary into the realm of the living; the thought of her loss, to her cousins, is ‘like a small tide mounting and retreating, reversing the usual formula for death’.⁵ Again, the parallels with the liminal seashore zones in Powys’ work are clear, particularly with regard to the ‘strange phantasmal Weymouth’ that

¹ *Ashe of Rings*, p. 8.

² *Ibid.*, p. 189; “Nothing But Spiritual Development”, p. 189.

³ *Ashe of Rings*, pp. 177, 30.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

⁵ *Death of Felicity Taverner*, p. 221, 166.

seems to enter Magnus' room. This influence works upon characters' bodies, too: Vanna Ashe seems to become 'crustacean', with 'ragged hair like coral fingers', and thinks of herself as a '[m]arsh-king's daughter.'¹ Thomas McEvilley, in his preface to *The Classical Novels*, identifies this aqueous quality in Butts' writing style, which is 'limpid, lightly jewelled, like a wind flaw on water. [...] The rise and swell of her phrases and sentences at once strokes, excites and soothes with an oceanic rhythm.'² Butts develops a literary approach which mimics the character of her shifting landscapes, in order to emphasise the sense that categories, in these fictional worlds, are not stable. Borders are challenged or eroded: whether between the outside environment and the 'artificial' world of the house, human and nonhuman bodies, or life and death.

Perhaps the most significant borders explored or transgressed in Butts' work are those between temporalities. These are linked to the role of houses as liminal zones: as Garrity notes, the home for Butts embodies 'temporal and spatial simultaneity', and as such, can function as a portal to other periods, or a zone in which different temporalities overlap.³ And again, the proximity of these houses to the sea is often crucial. Just as, for Lawrence, the Mediterranean in *Sea and Sardinia* represents a 'trembling of never-ended space' that offers escape from both temporal and geographical attachments, for Butts, the English Channel signifies the point at which human history and culture merge with the ineffable nonhuman world.⁴ In *The Macedonian*, the ocean has an atemporal quality reflected in the novel's disconcerting sense that its events occur in the recent past.⁵ Butts describes the sea's movement and colour in careful detail:

¹ *Ashe of Rings*, pp. 105, 130.

² McEvilley, preface to *The Taverner Novels* (New York: McPherson and Co., 1992), p. ix.

³ *Step-Daughters of England*, p. 193.

⁴ *Sea and Sardinia*, p. 47.

⁵ This sense is created, among other ways, by Butts' use of colloquial, contemporary English in conversations between ancient historical figures, as in the discussion between Aristotle and Philip regarding the organisation

[I]t swam back, drowning the rocks again, curving proudly along its tidemark, high up the beaches. Long and wonderful beaches, to a land the sea had bleached; as if the sea had taken all the colour there was and drawn it into the blue. Dawn and midday and evening and night blue. Blood-blue and wine-blue, and blue. Fire-blue sky the sun raged in, low-hung at night with star-eyes, whose lashes swept the sea.¹

The sea's animistic or personified qualities, combined with the repetition of 'blue' and the use of verbless sentences, bears affinities with Lawrence's style and emphasises a sense of historical continuity similar to that found in texts like *Etruscan Places*; the ocean's sense of existing outside of time, or remaining unchanging for eternity, facilitates the effacement of temporal barriers.² In the world of *The Macedonian*, '[e]ach day was like the next day or the day before. Sun and salt whitened planks and sails and hair and skin also.'³ Butts emphasises close, still-life descriptions, rather than narrative progression, to create a sense of an atemporal world. The landscape, notes Elizabeth Anderson, functions for Butts as 'an archetypal setting for myth-making activity that is outside of time.'⁴

Like Powys, Butts is sensitive to the specific potency of Dorset in this respect. Radford notes that Butts sees herself as a successor to Hardy in her role as an 'imaginative archaeologist', and she is aware of the ways in which developments in archaeological research and aerial photography contribute to our understanding of the rural environment.⁵ Butts thus anticipates works like W.G. Hoskins' *The Making of the English Landscape* (1955), and their effect

of the Macedonian infantry: "They're coming on well down there" [...] "Not bad," said Philip. "I've shifted the formation a bit at your suggestion" (*The Macedonian*, p. 17). Butts combines this colloquial speech with an attention to historical detail which reminds us of the temporal gap in other respects, thus making a past in some ways distant seem otherwise disorientingly close.

¹ *The Macedonian*, p. 98.

² The influence of the rural environment upon Butts' metropolitan writings is again evident here: the sense of time as fluid and oceanic within the city is evident in short stories like 'The Golden Bough' (discussed in Section II), with its 'year-stream' that 'lapped up the steps of the houses till the rooms brimmed' ('The Golden Bough', p. 169).

³ *The Macedonian*, p. 99.

⁴ "The Knight's Move", p. 253.

⁵ 'Mary Butts and the Return of the Nativist', p. 81.

upon the collective conception of the English countryside.¹ As Hauser notes, such works have ‘a defamiliarising effect [...] as those familiar hedges, fields, and lanes are revealed to be the compound effect of historical processes, where the actions and traces of past inhabitants may still be discernible.’² Butts’ works are rife with passages in which previous uses and appearances of the land seem to intermingle with those of the present. When Scylla introduces Carston to the Dorset countryside, she is quick to point out that ““this country was given its first human character in the late stone age. That’s all the earthworks and barrows you see.””³ She experiences the land as a place where ‘ruins rose again and the sunk foundations, and copse and clearing and forest changed places’; events ‘not happening in our kind of time’, which provide her with a ‘thread to the use of the historic imagination.’⁴ The titular earthwork of *Ashe of Rings* is, in a sense, the main character of that novel. Butts is therefore a precursor to the mid-twentieth century historical re-evaluation of the English landscape, and recognises the consequent defamiliarising effect upon perceptions of our environment. In *Armed with Madness*, Picus’ father strikes Carston as only semi-animate, like a ‘stone idol that walks’, and he seems ‘to have come out of the Roman world’; something ‘difficult to understand, except on a theory that times are grouped otherwise than in sequences.’⁵ Thus the intermingling of animate and inanimate is linked to a disruption of linear temporality, and again, objects – or objectified persons – function as portals to another time.

Butts also creates a sense of temporal destabilisation in her work through the use of formal techniques. The jump-cutting between scenes in *Armed with Madness* (discussed in Section II), for example, allows her to create a sense of events occurring contemporaneously, rather

¹ Hoskins, W.G., *The Making of the English Landscape* (London: Penguin, 1985).

² *Shadow Sites*, p. 53.

³ *Armed with Madness*, p. 13.

⁴ *Death of Felicity Taverner*, p. 300.

⁵ *Armed with Madness*, pp. 75, 78.

than following a linear progression. Ashbery notes that Butts' 'dramatic cutting in the cinematic sense' is one of the formal qualities of her work that anticipates late-twentieth century fiction; a point echoed by Foy, who argues that the short stories' 'cinematic and elliptical style' anticipate late-twentieth century fiction.¹ Such techniques generate fictional worlds that, like Powys' *A Glastonbury Romance*, centre around the creation of atmosphere rather than the development of plot; that are about being rather than becoming.² As Slingsby notes, parataxis (a central element of Rebecca Walkowitz's 'cosmopolitan style') is a key tool for Butts in this respect. The 'no terrestrial bees' passage in *Ashe of Rings*, and the '[b]lood-blue and wine-blue' passage in *The Macedonian*, both exemplify this: Butts lists nouns in an imagistic way, and holds back from providing narrative links between them. For Slingsby, discussing the latter novel, Butts' 'proportioning of one clause to every visual image is an essentialising method which portrays their power to reach out [...] from the day-to-day temporal flow of the realist novel.'³ Hoberman argues that Butts' historical fiction is of particular significance in this respect: *The Macedonian* tells the story of Alexander the Great, 'a story so familiar she need not tell it.'⁴ This enables her to go 'where the energy is most intense, where human motives seem least relevant, the incursion of nonhuman forces most probable.'⁵ The novel is thus able to eschew linearity and plot, focusing instead upon evoking atmosphere, the vitality of place; and this narrative approach connects with the downplaying of human agency noted in Section III, since 'the shifting scenes and characters indicate the non-existence of [Alexander's] self, except as a site where various energies merge.'⁶ In myriad ways, then, Butts' fiction confounds the idea of linear temporality, presenting the

¹ *From Altar to Chimney-Piece*, preface, p. xii; *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, p. 20.

² Bradley Buchanan argues that Butts also interrupts narrative linearity through her use of the interrogative mode, which foregrounds issues of gender identity over plot. Buchanan, Bradley, 'Armed with Questions: Mary Butts' Sacred Interrogative', *Twentieth Century Literature* 49, no. 3 (Autumn 2003), pp. 360-87.

³ *The Sacred and the Esoteric*, p. 182.

⁴ *Gendering Classicism*, p. 51.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

⁶ *Ibid.*

landscape instead as a site in which different periods overlap or coexist; it thus possesses the potential to embody the kind of ‘temporal cosmopolitanism’ noted in Powys’ work, particularly in its descriptions of the English landscape. Yet, as Radford notes, Butts remains fixated upon the idea of a ‘pure’ Englishness, under threat from the metropolitan ‘new kind of barbarian’ that she attacks in *Warning to Hikers*; and as a result, she resists a ‘sense of Englishness as irretrievably mixed,’ and negates the ‘vivid panoramic vistas of ancient civilisation’ that her work might otherwise present.¹

One way to understand Butts’ disruption of accepted understandings of time is through the idea of cyclical temporality. Like Powys’ work, her fiction sometimes projects a sense that certain narratives or situations inevitably recur, a feeling that ‘old patterns repeated themselves’, as Scylla puts it.² Butts’ use of a narrative voice that draws upon the conventions of folktales and fairytales is one method used towards this end. The story ‘The House’ begins like a children’s story, presenting its modern setting in archetypal terms: ‘Once there were four friends who shared a house between them: a husband, a wife, and two sisters.’³ There are parallels, too, in both writers’ creation of characters who practice historiography: Radford notes the links between Wolf Solent’s history of Dorset and Scylla’s ‘distinctive historiography [of] the Taverner family estate’, which emphasises aesthetic grace, culture and civility.⁴ However, whereas Powys’ engagements with mythology and history tend to be playful, foregrounding their own fictionality, Butts herself often mirrors Scylla’s attempts to control historiography for ideological purposes; she seeks, Radford explains, to ‘reclaim, consolidate, and enshrine her birthplace as a locus of memory and revelatory vigour,

¹ *Warning to Hikers*, p. 291; ‘Mary Butts and the Return of the Nativist’, p. 103.

² *Armed with Madness*, p. 16.

³ Butts, Mary, ‘The House’, in *From Altar to Chimney-Piece: Selected Stories* (New York: McPherson, 1992), pp. 3-21 (p. 3).

⁴ ‘Mary Butts and the Return of the Nativist’, pp. 98-9.

evoking a carefully historicised English past' against the incursions of metropolitan values.¹ Scylla, Butts' narrator tells us, has 'access to sources, histories of houses, histories of families, to memories that were like visions, to visions which seemed to have to do with memory.'² Butts seeks to privilege the historical understanding of those characters she deems to be authentically rooted within the land. As Garrity explains, her sense of 'temporal and spatial simultaneity [is] embodied in the ancestral home'; it is not, therefore, accessible to all.³ Throughout Butts' work, there is a sense that, as Vera puts it in *Ashe of Rings*, "'we are spectators of a situation which is the mask for another situation, that existed perhaps in some remote age, or in a world that is outside time'"'; but the question of *who* is able to witness this 'other situation' remains unsettled.⁴ Patterson suggests that, if there is a sense of recurring temporality in Butts' work, this reflects her belief in a 'timeless, cyclical pattern of land-holding that she sets against her vision of the democratic world. [...] There is something, a secret (which is also a family secret), that has to be defended from the voyeuristic tide of mass democracy'.⁵ Hence, where Powys creates a sense of eternal recurrence in order to maintain a sense of openness – of past and present as equally accessible, with no clear boundary between them – Butts strives to present the past as a separate, elevated realm, accessible only to initiates.

Thus, the undermining of boundaries in Butts' work, the passages which appear to privilege liminality and marginality, must be set against the essentialist rhetoric that characterises some of her fiction, particularly *Felicity Taverner*. In that novel, Kralin is disdainfully described as 'a wolf that tried to turn house-dog, and became neither wolf nor dog'; his lack of a fixed

¹ Ibid., p. 81.

² *Death of Felicity Taverner*, p. 300.

³ *Step-Daughters of England*, p. 192.

⁴ *Ashe of Rings*, p. 44.

⁵ "'The Plan Behind the Plan'", p. 134.

identity is seen as a weakness, a sign of impurity.¹ This is connected to Kralin's association with grey, a colour that represents the mingling of categories in the novel: his eyes are 'two almonds of grey jelly'; 'there's a something, a quality you can call grey about Nick Kralin, a grey that repeats itself.'² This suspicion of impurity mirrors an obsession, identified by Garrity, with 'the whiteness of the English landscape': *The Crystal Cabinet* venerates the 'white, white and mighty' cliffs of Dorset, while the opening paragraph of *Ashe of Rings* associates this colour with the earthwork.³ As a result, it is often difficult to separate Butts' ideas about alternative temporalities from her desire to claim a privileged or authentic epistemic position, associated with cultural or ethnic purity. The idea of a 'world that is outside time' becomes entangled with essentialist notions of an elite Englishness or rootedness beyond prosaic everyday reality.

These dualistic inclinations are evident, too, in other conceptions of 'another situation' that exists behind the 'real' world: of the sense of another material world, or a realm beyond that of the living. Butts' Dorset is infused with an atmosphere she articulates in *The Crystal Cabinet*:

[T]hat this coast I knew so well, bay by bay, cape by cape, could be seen double. That there were two versions of it. Or that it had an existence in two worlds at once. [...] In 'another world'? What world? In one sense the rest of my life was to be a search for the answer to that.⁴

As Foy notes, this concern with the 'dual nature of existence' stems, in part, from Butts' early exposure to Blake's work.⁵ It can be understood as a sensitivity to the experiential and epistemological possibilities that exist beyond circumscribed cultural boundaries. As Butts

¹ *Death of Felicity Taverner*, p. 177.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 215, 179.

³ *Step-Daughters of England*, p. 199; *The Crystal Cabinet*, p. 25; *Ashe of Rings*, p. 5.

⁴ *The Crystal Cabinet*, p. 136.

⁵ 'Mary Butts', p. 21.

puts it, she is concerned with investigating ‘the invisible, the non-existent in a scientific sense’; she has a sense of a ‘supernatural quality, lying as it were behind the natural world, visible only in a translation’, and believes that our attempts to analyse such qualities can provide ‘no explanation of the thing itself, or substitute for our direct experience of it.’¹ For Christopher Wagstaff, Butts’ writing consequently tends to ‘suggest rather than to define a noumenal realm beyond formulated thought and words.’² This realm might be aligned with the Lacanian concept of ‘the real’. As Catherine Belsey explains, psychological experiences like those described by Butts suggest an attentiveness to possibilities beyond accepted cultural limitations: we sense them ‘as a gap, or alternatively as a limit, the point at which culture fails us.’³ This captures the pervasive sense in Butts’ writing of a tentative exploration of the limits of language and culture. By indicating these points of transgression, literature can raise our awareness of the limitations of our cultural consciousness, not least its assumptions regarding our relation to our environment. Butts’ sense of an alternate reality existing alongside the visible world, then, might reflect an intuitive sensitivity to these limitations. The kind of reactionary rhetoric found in *Felicity Taverner*, however, impedes the full realisation of these ideas. Her sense of an imperilled Englishness, threatened by the impurity that Kralin represents, means that the alternate temporalities and materialities which underlie her texts cannot clearly be disentangled from the desire to preserve a ‘pure’, hermetically sealed realm, accessible only to those deemed to have an authentic relationship with the landscape. On this reading, the emphasis on a world behind the tangible one does not so much reflect an awareness of possibilities beyond one’s own culture, as the desire to preserve a sense of that culture which is protected from the ‘tide’ of undesirable

¹ *Traps for Unbelievers*, p. 312; *The Crystal Cabinet*, p. 35.

² Wagstaff, Christopher, preface to *A Sacred Quest: The Life and Writings of Mary Butts* (New York: McPherson and Co., 1995), p. xii.

³ Belsey, Catherine, *Culture and the Real: Theorising Cultural Criticism* (London: Routledge, 2004), p. 14. For Radford, this sense of something underpinning the tangible world is connected to Butts’ interest in *mana*, that which is ‘proper to the thing itself’, as she puts it in *The Crystal Cabinet* (p. 81; ‘Salvaging the Roots of Romanticism’, p. 121).

developments. As Wright notes, in Butts' work, the 'hard political reality' of her time is 'always elsewhere', conspicuous by its absence: the imaginary Dorset she constructs seems, at least in part, to be motivated by an unwillingness to acknowledge contemporary socio-cultural change.¹

Butts' tendency to vacillate between an embrace of liminality, and the desire to maintain a sense of a world irretrievably beyond the tangible one, is reflected in the unstable metaphorical role of the sea and aqueousness in her work. As with Lawrence, the sea can represent a deliberate resistance to fixed identities; but the focus on the oceanic can also feel more nihilistic, a last desperate alternative to a land that, as Lawrence puts it, 'has no answer to the soul any more.'² It is this kind of imaginative function that the sea often performs for Butts in *The Crystal Cabinet*, providing a haven from the development of the Dorset coastline:

Salterns was cut off. [...] On all sides but one – the Harbour side. A flowing world, flood and ebb, ribbons of the tides' pure silver, the green weed-knots at ebb. [...] Your back turned to your own place the evil tide had cut off. [...] The Tide with its influx of people, upsetting the balance of an old rural constituency.³

The ocean, here, is not a liminal space which might serve as a metaphor for the cosmopolitanism with which Butts' rural landscapes are sometimes invested. Rather, it represents the possibility of escape from a land and culture polluted by invasive forces; Butts stands with her 'back turned' to England, rejecting the increasing urbanisation and development of her time. For both Butts and Lawrence, moving to Cornwall represents a retreat from such changes; as Slingsby notes, the county was for Butts 'another country', 'not

¹ *On Living in an Old Country*, p. 112. In this sense, Butts' sense of two worlds coexisting anticipates Marshall Berman's point that the contrast between tradition and modernity creates 'a sense of living in two worlds simultaneously' (*All That is Solid Melts Into Air*, p. 17).

² *Sea and Sardinia*, p. 48.

³ *The Crystal Cabinet*, pp. 244-5.

in the least like England', as she herself puts it in a 1932 letter to Angus Davidson.¹ Lawrence's desire for the 'primeval darkness' he associates with the region is echoed in Butts' obsession with its 'terrible green-black' sea detailed in her journals.² In *Kangaroo*, Cornwall is associated with the 'ancient, pre-Christian world', and for Butts too, the sense that the 'further west [you] travel in Cornwall, the further back [you] go to earlier days and earlier ways', is key to its appeal.³ As Blondel notes, Sennen, where Butts spent the last years of her life, is the most westerly inhabited place in England.⁴ The possibility of geographical and temporal marginality that Cornwall represents, then, feels less like part of a project to commingle temporalities, spaces and identities, and more like the abandonment of that project; the retreat of a writer who comes to see herself, as Slingsby explains, as 'combatively anti-modern', having shifted from 'a centrifugal, easterly outlook, to a mournful gaze into a West Country past'.⁵ Slingsby notes that this sense of withdrawal does not diminish the formal adventurousness of Butts' work, which continues to employ 'a textuality that is simultaneously mystical and modernist'.⁶ The animistic qualities of the ocean remain a central inspiration, or even obsession: Butts' last short stories, such as 'Look Homeward, Angel' and 'The Guest', describe the 'eternally angry seas' off the Cornish coast; while in her journals it is portrayed 'like a blue tiger lying on its side, stretching out a paw', with Butts captivated by its 'blue & green peacock flow', or its 'ink-purple & ink-indigo & ink-slate'.⁷ Yet the sublime fascination it holds for her is now disengaged from the possibilities of cosmopolitanism and liminality with which it is sometimes associated in earlier work. This

¹ *The Sacred and the Esoteric*, p. 60; quoted *ibid.*

² Quoted in Blondel, *Scenes from the Life*, p. 283.

³ *Kangaroo*, p. 263; quoted in Slingsby, *The Sacred and the Esoteric*, p. 61.

⁴ *Scenes from the Life*, p. 278.

⁵ *The Sacred and the Esoteric*, p. 24.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ 'Look Homeward, Angel', p. 13; *Journals*, pp. 379, 385, 461. Butts' fascination with whiteness is again evident in her descriptions of the Cornish coast; but it represents, here, not a idealised Englishness, but a more Lawrentian, inhuman otherness, akin to the 'whiteness in *Moby Dick*', as she herself notes. Butts describes the 'waves roaring in, incandescent – on a moonless night – with their own whiteness', and 'the dreadful whiteness of the surf' (*Journals*, pp. 461, 433, 460).

realm, a crucial metaphorical zone in expressing Butts' shifting understanding of the relations between culture and place, is therefore in these final years associated primarily with escape and separation.

Conclusion

The recurring sense throughout Butts' work of a world beyond this one (in temporal, geographical, metaphysical or cultural terms) is rooted in two key sources: Blake's visionary Romanticism, and Butts' impulse to dissociate her consciousness from an everyday reality that is pervaded, for her, with familial conflict and the undesirable socio-cultural developments of her era. From Blake, Butts acquires a confidence in the power and validity of imaginative license, of the possibility of recreating her home landscape in order to re-imbue it with those values she feels have been lost. As Patterson notes, she is, like Powys, a 'psychological exile' from 'an imaginary England', and the combination of a sense of loss, and a confidence in the validity of imaginative re-enchantment, is key to understanding both writers' depictions of landscape. Butts' exposure to the liberty and cosmopolitanism of metropolitan modernity provides a crucial source for the renewed values that her work proposes. By reimagining the landscape of Dorset as a cosmopolitan zone in which diverse and marginalised groups can thrive, she challenges urban-rural boundaries, moving towards an ethics which cuts across these and celebrates diversity. Her work also suggests, at times, that the potential for psychic destabilisation and defamiliarisation available to peripatetic, cosmopolitan figures like Carston has a distinctive epistemological value. Modernity's potency in such respects has its analogue in the literary innovations that Butts applies to her depictions of the rural environment, particularly her use of collage, quotation, repetition, parataxis and jump-cutting. Her work also seeks to disorient and challenge her readers

through undermining generic conventions, imbuing her texts with tones and atmospheres that subtly defy expectations. Collectively, these elements create a fictional world pervaded with a sense of animistic potency, challenging boundaries between the human and nonhuman, the animate and inanimate.

Yet these qualities can also be deployed to resist increasing urbanisation, industrialisation and mass production: the imaginative license Butts employs is used to create a sense of another world that does not mingle with this one, but is rather set beyond it, and accessible only to initiates. She seeks to protect her vision of the English landscape through establishing linguistic and thematic defences, and it is more often those who have read England's 'secret history', through being 'bred' within the rural world, who are deemed capable of accessing the world beyond 'reality' and re-enchanting the landscape. Butts understands language's power to recreate our world, but she often seeks to contain this power within the hands of this elite. Her instinctive conservatism in this respect explains Butts' tendency to use formal difficulty as an exclusionary tool, reflecting an ideological determination to exclude unwanted outsiders; and it also underpins the hostile, forbidding qualities of her animistic landscapes. Butts' work may erode the boundaries between the human and nonhuman, in a way that suggests new ways of understanding our relation to the material world, but it does so while creating a sense of a hostile nonhuman presence which is used towards reactionary ends. On the other hand, the prevalence of aqueous imagery can demonstrate an openness and cosmopolitanism, although the sea later comes to be associated with a retreat to a hermetically-sealed world. Boundaries, therefore, are not always transgressed, and a fictional world that promotes openness between categories does not consistently emerge from her work. In the final chapter, I will argue that Virginia Woolf's work succeeds more consistently

in generating an imaginative vision of the English landscape that does maintain this kind of openness.

4. All Boundaries Are Lost: Travel, Fragmentation and Interconnection in Virginia Woolf

‘I walked in a new world, never trodden; brushing new flowers, unable to speak save in a child’s words of one syllable; without shelter from phrases – I who have made so many; unattended, I who have always gone with my kind’.

– *The Waves*¹

Virginia Woolf’s childhood, punctuated by long visits to Cornwall each summer, was characterised by certain contrasts and juxtapositions: between urban and rural, movement and belonging, past and future, human and nonhuman. These influences are evident in her work in various ways: particularly through a balance between nostalgic reflection and an acceptance of the inexorable transience of human existence and sensation. As *To the Lighthouse* demonstrates, Woolf’s imaginative sensibility is deeply influenced by her childhood experiences within a coastal environment. She is also interested in the ways in which new developments in travel and technology can defamiliarise us to the world, and reveal interconnections with other beings and things. This is seen, for example, in her exploration of temporality: Woolf’s attentiveness to the sedimentary layering of the past within rural landscapes is applied to her reimagining of the urban environment in *Mrs Dalloway* and other works. The urban-rural dynamic of her childhood is maintained throughout her writing life in a steadfast focus on the character of place, and the development of descriptive modes that demonstrate the influence of both metropolitan life and the nonhuman world. While Woolf’s rural landscapes are often the site of marginalised communities and identities normally associated with urban cosmopolitanism, her evocations of the city draw upon richly sensual language and pastoral associations. The metropolitan world is also portrayed as a site within which both fragmentation and interconnection –

¹ *The Waves*, p. 192.

modes of being which are not mutually exclusive, for Woolf – are made explicit. That sense of interconnection extends to nonhuman animals in *Between the Acts*, a novel which emphasises our shared sensory and communicative experiences. Ultimately, this portrayal of a world in which all experience and activity is part of a ‘work of art’ underlies the theme of unity in Woolf’s final novel; but that theme nonetheless remains balanced by the novel’s exploration of dispersal and fragmentation. This kind of shuttling, dialectical presentation of themes and experiences is therefore a characteristic that remains present throughout Woolf’s writing life.

I. Nothing Settles or Stays Unbroken

Movement between and within differing environments was central to Virginia Woolf’s experience of the world from the beginning of her conscious life. In ‘A Sketch of the Past’ (written from 1939-40), Woolf recalls her earliest memory:

This was of red and purple flowers on a black ground – my mother’s dress; and she was sitting either in a train or in an omnibus, and I was on her lap. [...] Perhaps we were going to St Ives; more probably, for from the light it must have been evening, we were coming back to London.¹

Each summer, the Stephen family relocated from London to Talland House in St. Ives, and the sense of moving between worlds, comparing and contrasting the experience of each, became a powerful influence in the development of Woolf’s consciousness and sensibility. As Bonnie Kime Scott explains, this ‘annual migration [...] offered young Virginia contrasting urban and seaside settings, with differing balance and mixture of nature and

¹ ‘A Sketch of the Past’, p. 74.

culture.’¹ Later in ‘A Sketch of the Past’, Woolf notes that the distance from London meant these visits could only take place over the summer, a limitation which ‘made the country more intense. And, in retrospect, probably nothing that we had as children was quite so important to us as our summer in Cornwall.’² Woolf grew up with a strong sense of being grounded in the city, but an equally intimate connection with this seaside environment – a combination which helps to explain the emphasis in her work upon the value of contrast, juxtaposition and defamiliarisation.

Her two most well-known novels, *Mrs Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927), are in this sense companion pieces; both passionate portraits of places, the former of London, the latter of a thinly-disguised Cornwall. In *Mrs Dalloway*, Clarissa is keenly aware of the heightened sensitivity to place that contrast can bring. Walking into St. James’ Park at the beginning of the novel, leaving the noise of the city streets behind, she feels it ‘strange, on entering the park, the silence; the mist; the hum; the slow-swimming happy ducks; the pouched birds waddling’.³ Later, the ‘earthy garden sweet smell’ in the florists prompts a nostalgic reverie of rural childhood, when ‘girls in muslin frocks came out to pick sweet peas and roses after the superb summer’s day’.⁴ Woolf threads symbols of the world beyond London throughout her descriptions of the city; or, more precisely, she draws our attention to facets of urban experience (parks, flowers) more commonly associated with the rural or ‘natural’ world, thus destabilising sharp urban/rural or artificial/natural divisions.⁵ Justyna

¹ Scott, Bonnie Kime, *In the Hollow of the Wave: Virginia Woolf and Modernist Uses of Nature* (London: University of Virginia Press, 2012), p. 111. Although Scott’s usage here implies a problematic nature/culture dichotomy, she is careful in the text under consideration to note the difficulties with this formulation, and advocates the use of Donna Haraway’s term ‘naturecultures’ for its challenge to ‘the binary division between nature and culture that was long encouraged by Enlightenment philosophy, the rise of Western science, and the Industrial Revolution, fuelled by capitalism’ (p. 2).

² ‘A Sketch of the Past’, p. 128.

³ Woolf, Virginia, *Mrs Dalloway* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 5.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 13, 14.

⁵ For an investigation of the ecological significance of flowers in the novel, see Wood, Andelys, ‘Buying Flowers and the Ecology of London in *Mrs Dalloway*’, *Literary London* conference (London: 2011).

Kostkowska explains that, in *Mrs Dalloway*, ‘Woolf erases the artificial boundary between the human and the natural and shows how much they have in common.’¹ *To the Lighthouse* also emphasises the power of defamiliarisation: Lily notes that ‘[l]ife was most vivid’ after ‘coming back from a journey, or after an illness, before habits had spun themselves across the surface’; she feels like ‘a traveller [...] looking out of the train window,’ who senses ‘that he must look now, for he will never see that town, or that mule-cart, or that woman at work in the fields, again.’² As Woolf’s simile implies, technological developments in transportation, often associated with urbanism or industrialism, provide new ways of seeing and experiencing the ‘natural’ landscape as well. Neither novel, then, is exclusively ‘urban’ or ‘rural’ in a simple way: Woolf uses her experience of difference, contrast and movement to illuminate each environment.

Again, Scott is instructive here: she notes that we ‘frequently find a shuttling dialogic between city and country, culture and nature, in Woolf’s life and writing’, and argues that Woolf ‘develops a sense of blending a city with a country consciousness.’³ More than any other writer in this study, Woolf grew up with a sense of connection to both urban and rural environments, and this balance underpins the powerful openness and responsiveness to place evident throughout her work. While *Mrs Dalloway* uses language and imagery associated with the rural world to reimagine the metropolitan landscape as a site of connection, *To the Lighthouse* articulates an intimacy with the rural environment without resorting to the rhetoric of rootedness or authenticity. Her texts seem intimately connected to their settings without being constrained by them: as Katherine Hill-Miller argues, for Woolf, ‘the idea of place acts as a fulcrum for the creative imagination [...] a stimulus to experiences of

¹ Kostkowska, Justyna, ““Scissors and Silks,” “Flowers and Trees,” and “Geraniums Ruined by the War”:
Virginia Woolf’s Ecological Critique of Science in *Mrs Dalloway*’, *Women’s Studies* 33 (2004), pp. 183-198 (p. 189).

² *To the Lighthouse*, pp. 217, 220.

³ *In the Hollow of the Wave*, pp. 5, 121.

connection, continuity and union with something beyond the confines of the single self'.¹ Rather than forwarding a narrow sense of belonging, Hill-Miller suggests, Woolf uses her feeling of communion with place to expand her perspective and experiences. Although Woolf was troubled by such tensions – a characteristic diary entry asks ‘is life very solid, or very shifting? I am haunted by the two contradictions’ – her experiences of movement and contrast in early life assist her in accepting them.² As Hermione Lee argues, this explains Virginia and Leonard’s love of travel:

They are like Ursula and Birkin in *Women in Love* [...] who decide that they will ‘wander about on the face of the earth’. The paradox for Virginia and Leonard was that though both liked the idea of wandering about on the face of the earth, they were also very responsive to particular places.³

Like Lawrence (as well as Powys and Butts), Woolf is attracted both to nomadism and to the idea of belonging. Her work suggests, however, that these are not necessarily contradictory or incompatible impulses. As the quotations from *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* above suggest, close engagements with place can transport or expand consciousness in her work. A sense of balance between such tensions is characteristic: Hill-Miller notes that Lily needs ‘the right spot in the Ramsay family’s garden to complete her painting – a spot that looks towards Mrs Ramsay sitting in the window, but that also looks outward, over the sea and towards the lighthouse.’⁴ The juxtaposition of sea and coastline helps Woolf, and her characters, to maintain an equilibrium between movement and stillness, homelessness and belonging.

Woolf’s return to Talland House in 1905, following a break of ten years brought on by her mother’s death, was recounted in an article in *The Guardian* that year, ‘A Walk by Night’. The essay emphasises her sense of the place as shifting and indeterminate: the road

¹ Hill-Miller, Katherine, *From the Lighthouse to Monk’s House: A Guide to Virginia Woolf’s Literary Landscapes* (London: Duckworth, 2001), p. 5.

² Woolf, Virginia, *Diary III*, p. 218.

³ *Virginia Woolf*, p. 315.

⁴ *A Guide to Virginia Woolf’s Literary Landscapes*, p. 3.

approaching the village is engulfed by ‘the trackless ocean of the night’, and the rays of her lamp seem feeble against ‘the immeasurable waves of darkness surging round them’.¹ Woolf emphasises the changing character of the environment through such imagery: she has no illusions about the recoverability of our past relations with place. The essay is not, however, inconsolably melancholy; rather, it reflects Woolf’s ability to accommodate herself to such changes, to accept the ever-present tension between our memories of places and our current experiences of them.² Cornwall in 1905 thus becomes, as Barbara Lonnquist puts it, ‘the site of Woolf’s embrace of a simultaneous sense of homelessness and belonging on earth that would inform her writing over a lifetime’.³ Her acceptance of these changed relations to a site of such personal significance demonstrates Woolf’s capacity to embrace both movement and belonging. Lonnquist argues that her return to St. Ives represents ‘the genesis of a realisation’ fully expressed in *To the Lighthouse*, that ‘seemingly stable constructions such as family, home and solid land are somewhat flimsy illusions of stability.’⁴ As in Butts’ work, there is an implication of dual or multiple overlapping layers of reality here – in keeping with the narrator of *Orlando*’s (1928) suggestion that ‘[o]ne can only believe entirely, perhaps, in what one cannot see’ – but Woolf’s voice tends to be less troubled by this sense.⁵ A diary entry from Land’s End during the 1905 visit laments the intrusion of mass tourism, which means that ‘the cliffs, & the romantic line of coast are the property nowadays of a hundred eyes’, but the tone is one of acceptance, rather than a desire to retreat into an earlier, purer or

¹ Woolf, Virginia, ‘A Walk By Night’, in McNeillie, A. (ed.), *The Essays of Virginia Woolf I* (London: Hogarth Press, 1986), pp. 80-82 (pp. 81, 82).

² Julia Briggs also notes that Woolf’s diary entry describing the 1905 trip, which anticipates the content of the *Guardian* article, bespeaks the sense of ‘a decade having slipped by as if it were no more than a few hours’. The elasticity of Woolf’s conception of time can thus also be linked to the shuttling relationships with place that characterised her early life. Briggs, Julia, *Virginia Woolf: An Inner Life* (London: Allen Lane, 2005), p. 162.

³ Lonnquist, Barbara, ‘Homeless in Nature: Solitary Trappings and Shared Errantry in Cornwall, 1905’, in Czarnecki, K, and Rohman, C. (eds.), *Virginia Woolf and the Natural World: Selected Papers from the Twentieth Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf* (Clemson: Clemson University Press, 2011), pp. 169-73 (p. 171).

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 169.

⁵ *Orlando*, p. 138.

more authentic version of the place.¹ Woolf is able to reconcile these two realities. Anna Snaith and Michael Whitworth argue that her work implies ‘the inseparability of “real” and imagined spaces’; while Susan Dick suggests that, for Lily in *To the Lighthouse*, ‘reality is both the solid world and the intangible one behind it.’² Woolf’s narratives are able to move among these layers at will, and they tend not to imply hierarchies of authenticity or ontological status in doing so.

Related to this fusion of ‘solid’ and ‘intangible’ realities in Woolf’s work is her strong sense of a correlation between internal and external experience, and her use of imagery reflecting this – also a key element of Powys’ fiction, as discussed in the second chapter. For Andrew Thacker, Woolf ‘charts psychic life via her use of stream of consciousness, criss-crossing the liminal regions of inner and outer with “ease and dash” to reveal how this division itself is somewhat false.’³ The occurrence of imagery that blends internal and external worlds in *To the Lighthouse* demonstrates the particular significance of the Cornish coast for this aspect of Woolf’s work, as in the passage in which Cam takes the boat to the lighthouse with James and Mr Ramsay:

Her hand cut a trail in the sea, as her mind made the green swirls and streaks into patterns and, numbed and shrouded, wandered in imagination in that underworld of waters where the pearls stuck in clusters to white sprays, where in the green light a change came over one’s entire mind and one’s body shone half transparent enveloped in a green cloak.⁴

Woolf here exploits the protean, amorphous character of the ocean to blur the boundary between Cam’s inner experience and the shifting waters through which she trails her hand.

¹ Morris, Jan (ed.), *Travels with Virginia Woolf* (London: Hogarth Press, 1993), p. 52.

² Snaith, Anna, and Whitworth, Michael, ‘Approaches to Space and Place in Woolf’, in Snaith, A., and Whitworth, M. (eds.), *Locating Woolf: The Politics of Space and Place* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 1-28 (p. 4); Dick, Susan, ‘Literary Realism in *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, *Orlando* and *The Waves*’, in Roe, S., and Sellers, S. (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 50-71 (p. 62).

³ *Moving through Modernity*, p. 153.

⁴ *To the Lighthouse*, pp. 207-8.

Robert Macfarlane notes the power of coastal environments to influence our internal landscapes in this way, suggesting that ‘there are ways of feeling and thinking that are inspired and conditioned by the fact of long-term living on an ocean edge.’¹ The oceanic or aqueous qualities that characterise much of Woolf’s imagery suggest the powerful influence of her childhood experiences at St. Ives; indeed, her memories of those summers are themselves like ‘little corks that mark a sunken net’, which she seeks to ‘pull [...] to shore’ in ‘A Sketch of the Past’.² As Rebecca McNeer puts it, ‘the underwater spring of creativity that hydrated Woolf was the time spent at Talland House’.³ This spring flows throughout Woolf’s work, regardless of setting. Even the form of her writing is often said to reflect its influence: Jessica Berman, discussing *The Waves* (1931), notes the novel’s ‘untrammelled, oceanic impulse’, ‘an unceasing current of powerful change that [...] respects no boundaries, whether between natural realms or between individual characters.’⁴ *Between the Acts* (1941), although set inland, uses the aqueous ‘black heart’ of a fishpond (like Lenty Pond in *Wolf Solent*) as a central symbol of internal experience.⁵ Yoshiki Tajiri argues that this pool ‘represents something beneath the reality of our ordinary conscious life’; and at the end of the novel, when Miss La Trobe feels ‘something [rise] to the surface’ when contemplating the pond, Woolf ‘suggests that the new idea came from the unconscious depths of her mind’.⁶ Bodies of water thus remain central to Woolf’s comingling of internal and external experience throughout her work.

¹ Macfarlane, Robert, *The Old Ways: A Journey on Foot* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 2012), p. 94. Macfarlane is discussing Kenneth White here.

² ‘A Sketch of the Past’, p. 136.

³ McNeer, Rebecca, ‘Virginia Woolf: Natural Olympian: Swimming and Diving as Metaphors for Writing’, in Czarnecki, K, and Rohman, C. (eds.), *Virginia Woolf and the Natural World: Selected Papers from the Twentieth Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf* (Clemson: Clemson University Press, 2011), pp. 95-100 (p. 95).

⁴ *Modernist Fiction, Cosmopolitanism, and the Politics of Community*, p. 152.

⁵ *Between the Acts*, p. 40. Woolf uses the indeterminate distance of Pointz Hall from the coast – said to be anywhere between 150 and 35 miles from the sea – to suggest the sea’s unpredictability and potential to engulf the land. “‘Once there was no sea [...] between us and the continent’”, Lucy Swithin points out, emphasising the text’s sense of English culture in the pre-Second World War period as fragile and vulnerable (p. 27).

⁶ *Between the Acts*, p. 189; Tajiri, Yoshiki, ‘Fiction, Reality and Prehistory: A Study of *Between the Acts*’, *Hitotsubashi Journal of Arts and Sciences* 36 (1995), pp. 59-72 (pp. 59, 69). For a detailed analysis of the pond’s role in the novel, see also Stephen Fox, ‘The Fish Pond as Symbolic Centre in *Between the Acts*’.

The prevalence of this kind of imagery extends to Woolf's descriptions of cities and rural landscapes. Her essay 'Street Haunting' (1927) presents the urban experience as one that 'floats us smoothly down a stream'; while an early diary entry (1903) likens the downs of Wiltshire to 'the long curved waves of the sea':

It is as though the land here, all molten once, & rolling in vast billows had solidified while the waves were still swollen & on the point of breaking. From a height it looks as though the whole land were flowing.¹

This observation also illustrates Woolf's ability (discussed in more depth later in this chapter) to imagine views of landscapes from positions other than that of the typically human, grounded perspective. Aerial views of landscape can work to undermine our sense of fixed borders, creating a sense of the solid environment as oceanic, amorphous and open. Again, this is linked to Woolf's attachment to coastal regions. In *Jacob's Room* (1922), Jacob watches the sea from a Cornish cottage:

Opposite him were hazy, semi-transparent shapes of yellow and blue [...] and among the pear-shaped leaves of the escallonia fishing-boats seemed caught and suspended. [...] Nothing settled or stayed unbroken. Like oars rowing now this side, now that, were the sentences that came now here, now there, from either side of the table.²

The colours, movement and shapes of the sea view mingle with those of the garden, and categories no longer seem fixed, 'settled'; even language itself seems to partake in this erosion of distinctions, as the sentences Jacob hears blend with the visual elements of the scene. Like the seaside environment of Weymouth evoked in Powys' *Autobiography*, with its intermingling of smells, sights and sounds, the coastal world here is particularly conducive to the destabilising of categories. Woolf describes one such experience at Talland House as a formative early memory in 'A Sketch of the Past':

¹ 'Street Haunting', p. 178; *Travels with Virginia Woolf*, p. 102.

² *Jacob's Room*, p. 75.

Everything would be large and dim; and what was seen would at the same time be heard; sounds would come through this petal or leaf – sounds indistinguishable from sights. [...] The quality of the air above Talland House seemed to suspend sound, to let it sink down slowly, as if it were caught in a blue gummy veil. The rooks cawing is part of the waves breaking [...].¹

Woolf suggests, then, that the specific character of the domestic environment at St. Ives was a crucial element in the development of her synaesthetic experience of the world. Hence the jumble of human and nonhuman debris in *To the Lighthouse*: the sun indiscriminately lights upon ‘bats, flannels, straw hats, ink-pots, paint-pots, beetles, and the skulls of small birds,’ and draws from the ‘long frilled strips of seaweed pinned to the wall a smell of salt and weeds, which was in the towels too, gritty with sand from bathing.’² The visual, olfactory and haptic are united by the sun’s rays. As in Powys and Butts, the seaside home is figured in Woolf’s work as a liminal site, within which worlds, senses and categories blend together. The idea of differing sensory experiences being intermixed became something she could apply to diverse places, and it feels particularly suited to the crowded London streets of *Mrs Dalloway*, with ‘the carriages, motor cars, omnibuses, vans, sandwich men shuffling and swinging; brass bands; barrel organs’, and so on.³ Woolf uses a sensibility born in the quiet, gently protean world of Talland House to step back and observe the intermingled cacophony of modern urban experience.

As the language of ‘A Walk by Night’ indicates, with its sense of the ‘trackless ocean of the night’, and a village ‘exposed [...] to the unfathomed waters of darkness’, Woolf’s experience of Cornwall in 1905 suggested to her a kind of negative capability: of the creative potency of that which we don’t know, or cannot perceive.⁴ Elizabeth Waller argues that the essay’s ‘fading definitions of solid substance and visibility [...] ultimately decentre the

¹ ‘A Sketch of the Past’, pp. 76-7.

² *To the Lighthouse*, p. 11.

³ *Mrs Dalloway*, p. 4.

⁴ ‘A Walk by Night’, pp. 81-2.

human protagonist into the murky diffusion of all embodied participants.¹ The sense of crossing both physical and temporal space explored in the essay facilitates a feeling of ‘diffusion’ with others.² Again, this fascination with the potential of darkness is later transposed to Woolf’s descriptions of the urban environment. For Jinny in *The Waves*, darkness forms part of London’s alluring web of sensations:

I feel the cold iron railing and its blistered paint beneath my palm. Now the cool tide of darkness breaks its waters over me. We are out of doors. Night opens; night traversed by wandering moths; night hiding lovers roaming to adventure. I smell roses; I smell violets; I see red and blue just hidden. Now gravel is under my shoes; now grass.³

The city’s blend of sensory inputs is enhanced by darkness, which heightens and mingles Jinny’s other sensations. Darkness is also experientially important in Lawrence’s work, but its presentation is more often ambivalent: in *Kangaroo*, for example, Derby is ‘very dark, like a savage town, a feeling of savagery’; the region lies under a ‘heavy, cold, savage, frustrated blackness’.⁴ There are parallels here with other elements of childhood landscapes shared by the writers in this study: trees, as noted in previous chapters, are powerful and fear-inducing animistic presences in both Butts and Lawrence, and Woolf too associates them with disturbing phases of her childhood. Following the death of her half-sister Stella in 1897, Woolf says:

I always see when I think of the month after her death the certain leafless bush; a skeleton tree in the dark of a summer night. [...] The leafless tree was a very painful element in our life. [...] By that image I would convey the discomfort and misery and the quarrels [...].⁵

¹ Waller, L. Elizabeth, ‘Writing the Real: Virginia Woolf and an Ecology of Language’, *Bucknall Review: A Scholarly Journal of Letters, Arts and Sciences* 44, no. 1 (2000), pp. 137-56 (pp. 138, 141).

² This anticipates the work of ecocritics like Neil Evernden, who asks ‘[w]here do we draw the line between one creature and another? Where does one stop and the other begin?’ Evernden, Neil, *The Natural Alien: Humankind and Environment* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), p. 40. Similarly, as Berman’s description of *The Waves* noted above demonstrates, that novel intentionally blurs the boundaries between its characters.

³ *The Waves*, pp. 117-18.

⁴ *Kangaroo*, pp. 254, 285.

⁵ ‘A Sketch of the Past’, p. 141.

As with Lawrence, who dramatises similar anxieties from his own childhood in the *Sons and Lovers* scene (discussed in Chapter One) that associates ‘the anguish of the home discord’ with a tree’s ‘shrieking’, Woolf projects her fears onto the tree. This process is also evident earlier in ‘A Sketch of the Past’, when she recalls hearing of a suicide at St. Ives. Woolf felt that the apple tree in the garden of Talland House was somehow ‘connected with the horror of Mr Valpy’s suicide. [...] I stood there looking at the grey-green creases of the bark – it was a moonlit night – in a trance of horror.’¹ As with the influence of the coastal environment, the pervasive influence of childhood landscapes (whether idyllic, or sinister and threatening) upon the work of these writers is evident in such examples.

These fearful qualities of trees and forests are related to the sense of a visceral, tactile nonhuman world encountered in childhood. As previously noted, Butts and Powys are influenced by Hardy’s ‘slugslime’ passage in *Tess* in this respect; both writers are simultaneously attracted and repelled by the intense sensuality of such experiences. In *The Waves*, the children explore a wood, Elvedon, which is transfigured into a ‘malarial jungle’: ‘Here come warm gusts of decomposing leaves, of rotting vegetation. [...] There is an elephant white with maggots, killed by an arrow shot dead in its eye.’² Like Powys’ relocation of imagery associated with the swamps of Louisiana in *Wolf Solent*, Woolf reimagines the English landscape as a lush tropical forest. Such passages combine the fantastical with intensely close and detailed description. Similar language appears in one of the novel’s italicised interludes, which shifts the narrative perspective to a group of birds:

Then one of them [...] spiked the soft, monstrous body of the defenceless worm, pecked again and yet again, and left it to fester. Down there among the roots where the flowers decayed, gusts of dead smells were wafted; drops formed on the bloated

¹ Ibid., pp. 82-3.

² *The Waves*, p. 12.

*sides of swollen things. The skin of rotten fruit broke, and matter oozed too thick to run. Yellow excretions were exuded by slugs [...].*¹

This passage combines Woolf's deployment of nonhuman narrative perspectives with sickly, visceral imagery; it recalls the childhood world of forests in which 'corruption went on quietly' evoked by Butts. Despite the often repellent qualities of such passages, however, *The Waves* emphasises its characters' sense of fascination and connection with the world they describe. Louis, as a child, feels his body seemingly merge with this vegetative realm: "My roots go down to the depths of the world [...]. My hair is made of leaves. I am rooted to the middle of the earth. My body is a stalk."² Again, the inspiration for Woolf's use of such imagery can be traced to childhood experiences of St. Ives recounted in 'A Sketch of the Past'. She recalls looking at a flower in the garden of Talland House, when 'it seemed suddenly plain that the flower itself was a part of the earth; that a ring enclosed what was the flower; and that was the real flower; part earth; part flower.'³ From a young age Woolf's writing is underpinned by this sense of interconnection, and by a belief that categorical separations between species are arbitrary and misleading. As Kelly Sultzbach explains, this passage suggests an 'innate consciousness of interconnected ecological systems', which is manifested in the consistent sense throughout Woolf's work that she 'values humans not as a superior species, but instead as a single component jostling in a matrix of larger natural forces.'⁴ In this sense too, Woolf's childhood connection with the environment of St. Ives influences the form and themes of her fiction.

¹ Ibid., p. 47.

² Ibid., pp. 4, 5.

³ 'A Sketch of the Past', p. 82.

⁴ Sultzbach, Kelly, 'The Fertile Potential of Virginia Woolf's Environmental Ethic', in Southworth, H., and Kay, E. (eds.), *Woolf and the Art of Exploration: Selected Papers from the Fifteenth Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf* (Clemson: Clemson University Press, 2006), pp. 71-8 (p. 75).

For Woolf, this kind of intuitive insight is one of the characteristics of what she calls ‘moments of being’.¹ Lily’s sudden sense in *To the Lighthouse* of ‘this silence, this emptiness, and the unreality of the early morning hour’, which is brought on by defamiliarisation (‘before habits had spun themselves across the surface’), is one such epiphany.² As the examples from *The Waves* and ‘A Sketch of the Past’ above suggest, they might involve an intensified perception of place, or of a character’s interconnection with it. The improbable clarity with which Woolf recalls childhood memories in her memoir illustrates the intensity of these experiences. Like Magnus Muir gazing into the ‘enchanted fissure’ of a rock-pool in *Weymouth Sands*, Woolf absorbs her environment with a vivid intensity, such that it forms part of her being. Lisa Larsson sees this process fictionalised in *To the Lighthouse*, with what she calls an ‘epiphany of perspectives’ experienced by Nancy, one of the Ramsay daughters, also when gazing into a rock-pool:

Looking at the tiny creatures in it she feels gigantic, like a God able to bring darkness (putting her hand over the pool) and light (removing it) to millions of beings. While doing this she looks out to the sea and becomes hypnotised by the simultaneous feeling of vastness (in comparison to the tiny creatures in the pool) and tininess (in comparison to the world).³

As Larsson explains, the passage in question combines intense attention to detail with a characteristic shifting of perspective and scale, decentring the human narrative. Both Woolf and Powys suggest that this focused attentiveness to place (particularly the coastal environment) can facilitate this sense of context and interconnection. ‘Moments of being’ are connected with Woolf’s attempts to imagine nonhuman perspectives. She uses the fantastical tone of *Orlando* to endow her protagonist with impossibly powerful senses:

¹ ‘A Sketch of the Past’, p. 81.

² *To the Lighthouse*, pp. 217, 218. As Lisa Larsson explains, the term is never precisely defined: “‘Moment of being’ and ‘moment of vision’ are used alongside each other in Woolf’s writings, “‘moment of being’” apparently suggesting a focus on the strong emotion and “‘moment of vision’” a focus on the revelation. The different terms do, however, denote basically the same idea, that of a significant moment of experience’. Larsson, Lisa, “‘That Fluidity Out There’: Epiphanies and the Sea in Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*” (M.A. thesis: Lund University, 2005), p. 6. For my purposes, it is important to note that these moments are often connected to defamiliarisation, and involve a heightened sense of one’s interrelation with place.

³ ‘Epiphanies and the Sea in Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*’, p. 11.

Here the shadows of the plants were miraculously distinct. She noticed the separate grains of earth in the flower beds as if she had a microscope stuck to her eye. She saw the intricacy of the twigs of every tree. Each blade of grass was distinct and the marking of veins and petals.¹

The clarity of Orlando's vision here suggests an ability to engage with the world at the level of birds or insects. Just as Woolf uses Orlando's ability to travel through time to critique historiography, and her ability to change sex to challenge gender essentialism, she here uses the idea of preternatural perceptual abilities to shift the narrative perspective away from the human. Within the character of Orlando, Woolf continues the kind of experiments with nonhuman narrative seen in *Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* (and which continue in *The Waves* and *Between the Acts*), but in a more playful, fantastical way.

The Elvedon passage in *The Waves* also illustrates Woolf's interest in the specific epistemological value of child perspectives on the world. The characters' complete absorption within their environment, combined with their physical closeness to the ground, gives them a distinctive way of looking: "Everything is strange. Things are huge and very small. The stalks of flowers are thick as oak trees. Leaves are high as the domes of vast cathedrals."² Charlotte Walker notes that such passages 'contemplate the human interrelationship with the nonhuman through subtle shifts of perspective.'³ By focusing upon, and defamiliarising us to, the details of environments in this way, Woolf disrupts narrative linearity. Patrizia Muscogiuri discusses a 1928 diary entry describing her intentions for the novel: Woolf explains that she wishes 'to eliminate all waste, deadness, superfluity: to give the moment whole; whatever it includes. Say that the moment is a combination of thought; sensation; the voice of the sea.' Woolf dismisses the 'appalling narrative business of the

¹ *Orlando*, p. 220.

² *The Waves*, p. 12.

³ Walker, Charlotte Zoe, 'Letting in the Sky: An Ecofeminist Reading of Virginia Woolf's Short Fiction', in Parham, J. (ed.), *The Environmental Tradition in English Literature* (London: Ashgate, 2002), pp. 172-85 (p. 177).

realist', focusing instead upon place and 'the moment'.¹ As Muscogiuri notes, the sea is again a central influence upon Woolf's writing here: she aims to 'infuse life into [the text] by re-creating that essential element of existence that, for Woolf, is "the voice of the sea."' ² Larsson, similarly, notes that in *To the Lighthouse*, the sea is used to disrupt narrative linearity: 'the moment is rendered as an image; imagery supplanting plot. [...] [T]he sea becomes the unifying element'.³ These observations all suggest that Woolf's childhood experiences – her peripatetic movement between places, and close connection with the coastal environment – remained a central source of creativity throughout her career. As with the other writers in this study, such experiences were influential in Woolf's challenge to the idea of the privileged human narrative perspective, and to the supposed overriding value of narrative linearity in novelistic form.

II. Shells, Bones and Silence

Woolf's writing, then, demonstrates a willingness to embrace nonhuman perspectives, and a challenge to the assumption that being permanently grounded within a particular environment facilitates a privileged epistemological position. Both of these aspects of her work, I have argued, can be connected with her peripatetic childhood; the contrasting experiences it offered, with its regular movement between London and Cornwall, cultivated the development of a temperament unusually attentive to place. This openness to such experiential possibilities extends to the presentation of contemporary technological

¹ Quoted in Muscogiuri, Patrizia, "'This, I Fancy, Must be the Sea": Thalassic Aesthetics in Virginia Woolf's Writing', in Czarnecki, K, and Rohman, C. (eds.), *Virginia Woolf and the Natural World: Selected Papers from the Twentieth Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf* (Clemson: Clemson University Press, 2011), pp. 101-07 (p. 103).

² 'Thalassic Aesthetics in Virginia Woolf's Writing', p. 103. See also Frederik Tygstrup on Woolf's disruption of linear plotting, who notes that, in her novels, 'the interesting thing is no longer where the situation will lead the action, but how the many possibilities latent in a situation can be brought forth'. Tygstrup, Frederik, 'Still Life: The Experience of Space in Modernist Prose', in Eysteinnsson, A., and Liska, V. (eds.), *Modernism: Volume I* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing, 2007), pp. 253-69 (p. 259).

³ 'Epiphanies and the Sea in Virginia Woolf's *To the Lighthouse*', p. 9.

developments in Woolf's work. In many ways Woolf develops a form of Berman's haunted modernism: her examinations extend backwards, into her own childhood experiences, and draw upon the power of nostalgia and reflection. Woolf's work demonstrates that such trajectories are not necessarily in tension with technological developments; rather, these changes can facilitate engagement with the past. This is one way of understanding the intermingling of sensory experience in the urban environment seen in 'Street Haunting' and *Mrs Dalloway*: Woolf discovers, in the metropolitan world, a kind of 'urban pastoral' (as Robert Alter puts it) that echoes her childhood experiences of the rural world.¹ In *Between the Acts*, even the ominous presence of warplanes overhead can still be assimilated into the teeming patchwork of life that novel presents: 'Twelve aeroplanes in perfect formation like a flight of wild duck came overhead. *That* was the music. The audience gaped; the audience gazed. Then zoom became drone. The planes had passed.'² Although the aeroplanes are intrusive, they also become part of the scene, seeming to fit in like ducks, and harmonise like music. Vanessa Manhire notes that 'the threatening zoom and drone of the planes passing overhead [...] does not erase the "song making instinct" [...]; rather, its defamiliarising effect can actually provoke a return to the active and engaged audiences of the past.'³ Woolf uses technology to further *Between the Acts*' exploration of England's history. Contemporary literature, she suggests, must remain engaged with the past: as Rebecca Walkowitz notes in a discussion of *Mrs Dalloway*, 'Woolf knows that a style of consciousness that abandons predictable conventions will tend to seem foreign'.⁴ Consequently, she forges connections between English cultural history and the turbulence and fragmentation of the present. This is particularly true of *Between the Acts*, which Alexandra Harris notes has an 'impure, inclusive, and very English eye'; in the single day charted by the novel, 'all the past seems to have risen

¹ *Urban Experience and the Language of the Novel*, p. 105.

² *Between the Acts*, p. 174.

³ Manhire, Vanessa, 'Not Regularly Musical': *Music in the Work of Virginia Woolf* (Ph.D thesis: Rutgers University, 2010), p. 236.

⁴ *Cosmopolitan Style*, p. 93.

to the surface [...] to be consciously felt in the present.’¹ The interpenetration of past and present evident in this novel, and elsewhere, is a way of engaging with the world analogous to Woolf’s peripatetic shuttling between places in her childhood.

The aeroplanes in *Between the Acts* can be seen as an instance of Leo Marx’s ‘machine in the garden’ trope; but, unlike Lawrence’s train in *The Rainbow*, Woolf undermines the artificial/natural distinction which their intrusion upon a traditional village scene may suggest, by comparing them with ducks. Similarly, in *The Waves* Bernard encounters the roar of traffic within the city, but rather than announcing the presence of an alien modernity, this has an enchanting, transporting effect:

‘The growl of traffic might be any uproar – forest trees or the roar of wild beasts. Time has whizzed back an inch or two on its reel; our short progress has been cancelled. I think also that our bodies are in truth naked. We are only lightly covered with buttoned cloth; and beneath these pavements are shells, bones and silence.’²

Woolf suggests here that the urban environment is particularly conducive to a sense of engagement with the prehistoric past. In this respect, Bernard’s experience echoes the passage in *Orlando* when the protagonist shares a carriage with Alexander Pope in London: the city then seems like a ‘stark desert land’, and its occupants ‘naked, solitary, and defenceless.’³ There are also parallels with Lawrence’s work: in *The Rainbow*, Will Brangwen imagines the historical development of London, and thinks of ‘naked, lurking savages on an island, how these had built up and created the great mass of Oxford Street or Piccadilly.’⁴ In *Aaron’s Rod*, Aaron and Josephine encounter a square in Bloomsbury during a night walk which seems ‘dark and deserted, dark like a savage wilderness in the heart of

¹ *Romantic Moderns*, pp. 109, 113.

² *The Waves*, p. 73.

³ *Orlando*, p. 144.

⁴ *The Rainbow*, p. 193.

London.’¹ Both writers, then, suggest that the modern city – the purported apex of Western culture – is precisely the realm in which the precariousness and fragility of Western civilisation is liable to be exposed. Temporal boundaries are dissolved, but so too is the artificial/natural distinction: the traffic Bernard hears could be “forest trees or the roar of wild beasts.” As I have argued, the sea is central to Woolf’s work in challenging such boundaries: Alter notes that in *Mrs Dalloway*, the city is experienced as a ‘pulsating tide’ either on an explicit metaphorical level, or in ‘the sheer rhythm of the prose’.² In such ways, Woolf uses the archetypal spaces and technologies of modernity to channel the sense of place forged by her childhood experiences.

This is perhaps most clearly illustrated by Woolf’s writings on the experience of modern transportation. In *To the Lighthouse*, Lily notes that railway travel makes it seem as if everything is ‘happening for the first time’, and Woolf’s 1908 essay ‘Château and Country Life’ argues that ‘someone should sing the praises of express trains’: ‘Their comfort, to begin with, sets the mind free, and their speed is the speed of lyric poetry, inarticulate as yet, sweeping rhythm through the brain, regularly, like the wash of great waves.’³ As Thacker notes, this passage features a characteristic oscillation between the external and internal, with ‘the speed of express trains transformed into the rhythms of the brain’, and also returns to Woolf’s ‘familiar symbol, waves of the sea.’⁴ Cars tend to have similar experiential value: the essay ‘Evening over Sussex: Reflections in a Motor Car’ praises that mode of transport’s ability to rapidly blend diverse images and sensations. This creates a sense of multiple selves co-existing:

¹ *Aaron’s Rod*, p. 69.

² *Urban Experience and the Language of the Novel*, p. 106.

³ *To the Lighthouse*, p. 220; Woolf, Virginia, ‘Château and Country Life’, in McNeillie, A. (ed.), *The Essays of Virginia Woolf I* (London: Hogarth Press, 1986), pp. 222-224 (p. 222).

⁴ *Moving through Modernity*, p. 153.

There they sat as the car sped along, noticing everything: a hay stack; a rust red roof; a pond; an old man coming home with his sack on his back [...]. Let me see; there was a great deal of beauty brought in today: farmhouses; cliffs standing out to sea; marbled fields; mottled fields; red feathered skies; all that. Also there was the disappearance and the death of the individual.¹

Again, the landscape matches Woolf's internal experience; and this transient experience of that landscape seems to reveal or accentuate a similarly fragmentary, protean self. This parallel is also evident towards the end of *Orlando*, when the protagonist drives out of London: a process which, the narrator tells us, 'so much resembles the chopping up small of identity which precedes unconsciousness and perhaps death itself that it is an open question in what sense Orlando can be said to have existed at the present moment.'² For Woolf, the self is unarguably fragmentary, multiple and elusive, and at such points the experience of modernity serves to make this explicit. Jessica Berman argues that this passage illustrates *Orlando*'s function as 'a fictional model for the kind of community that refuses [...] nostalgia for a bygone era of wholeness or communion', suggesting an 'alternative communal past'.³ Thacker, discussing a 1927 diary entry, notes that for Woolf 'the car symbolises an absolutely modern experience'; but it also 'allows a glimpse into a past world [...] a sedimented spatial history that might be excavated further.'⁴ In facilitating a chopped-up, rapidly shifting perspective on landscape, motoring can provide unexpected insights into the past as well as the modern era.

Woolf's writings on the London Underground are more ambivalent. In *The Waves*, Neville experiences the descent into the underground network "like death"; he feels "cut up [...] dissevered by all those faces and the hollow wind that seemed to roar down there over desert

¹ Woolf, Virginia, 'Evening Over Sussex: Reflections in a Motor Car', in *Selected Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 204-206 (pp. 205-206).

² *Orlando*, p. 212.

³ *Modernist Fiction, Cosmopolitanism, and the Politics of Community*, p. 132.

⁴ *Moving through Modernity*, p. 175.

boulders.”¹ Jinny’s narrative uses similarly infernal imagery: “‘Millions descend those stairs in a terrible descent. Great wheels churn inexorably urging them downwards. Millions have died.’”² The Underground, then, is associated in *The Waves* with social disconnection and death. Thacker connects these passages with a similarly negative description in Woolf’s diary in 1924, commenting on the ‘grey, sodden, brave, disillusioned’ faces she sees on the trains.³ As Harris notes, however, Thacker’s description of Neville and Jinny’s experiences as ‘gloomy’ and ‘dismal’ may underestimate the force and complexity of Woolf’s imagery: these passages, she argues, are ‘much more than dismal. They are raging and epic; they are a matter of paradise versus hell.’⁴ It is also worth noting that the underworld they describe is not one of mechanised artificiality, unlike the associations with underground railway systems sometimes evident in Powys and Lawrence (see Chapter Two). Woolf’s hallucinatory, mystical descriptions are closer to those noted in Butts. The ‘hollow wind’ and ‘desert boulders’ of Neville’s narrative may be harsh and forbidding, but they nonetheless subvert understandings of modern transport as unnatural, and thus dehumanising. Moreover, as Harris notes, the Underground is sometimes described by Woolf in a more playful, affectionate register, and she also tried to use the network in subversive, idiosyncratic ways: one part of this rebellion, Harris explains, was ‘to engage with the most unmechanical and unregulated aspects of the Underground, especially with the vagrants and buskers who congregated at Tube stations.’⁵ Characteristically, Woolf adapts the developments of her era towards her own ends, using these technological developments to challenge social and cultural divides.

Perhaps the most significant transportation development of Woolf’s era, in terms of its influence on her work, is that of the aeroplane. Although Woolf herself never flew, her

¹ *The Waves*, p. 118.

² *Ibid.*, p. 128.

³ Quoted in *Moving through Modernity*, p. 168.

⁴ ‘Virginia Woolf Underground’, p. 44.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 40, 42.

posthumously published essay 'Flying over London' imagines the experience vividly, 'how blindly the tide of the soul and its desires rolled this way and that, carrying consciousness like a feather on the top'.¹ It is fitting that the essay is only an exercise in imagination, since Woolf's ability to project her consciousness into new realms is also what underlies her experiments with nonhuman points of view. Woolf's interest in bird perspectives may stem, in part, from the imaginative inspiration that aeroplane flight generates. *Mrs Dalloway* makes the link explicit, in a scene that shifts from two old women watching an aeroplane to a thrush:

[...] away and away the aeroplane shot; soaring over Greenwich and all the masts; over the little island of grey churches, St. Paul's and the rest, till, on either side of London, fields spread out and dark brown woods where adventurous thrushes, hopping boldly, glancing quickly, snatched the snail and tapped him on a stone, once, twice, thrice.²

By juxtaposing aeroplane flight with a sudden close-up focus on the birds, Woolf draws connections between new technological developments and the apparently unchanging rhythms of the nonhuman world; Gillian Beer notes that in *Between the Acts*, too, the bird is 'linked in sequence with the aeroplane.'³ Diane Gillespie discusses the 1938 essay 'The Moment: Summer's Night', in which Woolf imagines being able to 'take wing, with the owl, over the earth, and survey the quietude of what sleeps [...] with broad wings and with softness'.⁴ As Gillespie notes, the tone here is 'creative and unifying, unclassifiable and humbling'.⁵ Flight is tied to new creative and connective possibilities. This potential, and the

¹ Woolf, Virginia, 'Flying Over London', in *Selected Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 207-212 (p. 208).

² *Mrs Dalloway*, p. 30.

³ 'The Island and the Aeroplane', p. 171. Beer's influential essay discusses various symbolic facets of aeroplanes in Woolf's work, most of which are beyond the scope of this thesis: 'Menace, community, eroticism, warfare, and idle beauty: the aeroplane moves freely across all these zones in her writing', as Beer explains (p. 152).

⁴ Quoted in Gillespie, Diane, "'The Bird is the Word": Virginia Woolf and W.H. Hudson, Visionary Ornithologist', in Czarnecki, K, and Rohman, C. (eds.), *Virginia Woolf and the Natural World: Selected Papers from the Twentieth Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf* (Clemson: Clemson University Press, 2011), pp. 133-142 (p. 135).

⁵ 'Virginia Woolf and W.H. Hudson, Visionary Ornithologist', p. 135.

dissolution of natural/artificial or human/nonhuman categories, is also evident in the closing sequence of *Orlando*, when the protagonist hears Shelmerdine's aeroplane approaching:

The wind roared in her ears. But in the roar of the wind she heard the roar of an aeroplane coming nearer and nearer. [...] The aeroplane rushed out of the clouds and stood over her head. It hovered above her. Her pearls burnt like a phosphorescent flare in the darkness.¹

Floriane Reviron notes of this passage: 'Space is unified again: the aeroplane is a link between the sky and the earth'. Moreover, she continues, the passage achieves a sense of unity between 'the material or technological order of things and the natural order of things, thanks to the image of the wild goose which takes flight as soon as the plane lands, like its ghostly spirit.'² The aeroplane is again paralleled with the bird, and both represent perspectives charged with unifying or boundary-crossing power.

This effacement of borders is also evident in 'Flying over London':

Here are winds tapering, vanishing [...] and nothing permanent, but vanishing and melting at the touch of each other without concussion, and the fields that are with us are meted into yards and grow punctually with flourishes of rain and flights of hail and spaces tranquil as the deep sea, and then all is chop and change, breeze and motion.³

Aeroplane flight creates a sense that there are no fixed, stable boundaries between objects or categories; the world of the sky is removed from the arbitrary organisations of terrestrial life. Beer notes similarities between Gertrude Stein's *Picasso* (1938) and Woolf's work in this respect: Stein 'comments on the formal reordering of the earth when seen from the aeroplane – a reordering which does away with centrality and very largely with borders.'⁴ This is a perspective akin to that of Miss La Trobe as night falls after the pageant in *Between the Acts*,

¹ *Orlando*, p. 227.

² Reviron, Floriane, 'The Nature of Things in *Orlando*', *Etudes Britanniques Contemporaines* 17 (Autumn 1999), pp. 91-105 (pp. 100-01).

³ 'Flying over London', p. 207.

⁴ 'The Island and the Aeroplane', p. 150.

when England seems to be ‘land merely, no land in particular.’¹ The exploration of aerial perspectives is one element of a strategy to undermine the idea that the nation-state fully constitutes place. This principle can be extended to astronomical distance. Just as Powys’ ‘vivisected frog’ image imagines earth seen from afar, Woolf too is inspired to consider cosmic perspectives upon human life, as in the following diary entry, quoted by Lee:

I remember lying on the side of a hollow [...] seeing a red hare loping up the side & thinking suddenly, ‘This is Earth Life’. I seemed to see how earthly it all was, & I myself an evolved kind of hare; as if a moon-visitor saw me.²

Relatedly, Lily in *To the Lighthouse*, gazing at sand dunes in the distance, feels a mysterious sadness, ‘because distant views seem to outlast by a million years (Lily thought) the gazer and to be communing already with a sky which beholds an earth entirely at rest.’³ In both of these examples, the principle of imagining a perspective on human life beyond the earthbound is extended to the astronomical. Like Powys, Woolf anticipates the epistemological value of technological developments that will eventually make such perspectives upon the earth a reality. As with the views of birds or aeroplanes, these passages suggest an overcoming of socio-culturally limited conceptions of landscape as bordered, clearly categorised spaces; and in the above examples, these borders are temporal as well as spatial. Cosmic distance discloses temporal distance: our evolutionary history is revealed in the diary quotation, while Lily seems to have a vision of a future, post-human earth. In ‘Flying over London’, aeroplane travel has a similar effect within the urban context: ‘the River Thames was as the Romans saw it, as paleolithic man saw it [...]. So immortally fresh and virginal London looked and England was earth merely, merely the world.’ The essay thus echoes Miss La Trobe’s sense of England as ‘land merely’.⁴ These ideas also recur in *Mrs Dalloway*, when Rezia imagines England ‘when all boundaries are lost’: ‘the country reverts

¹ *Between the Acts*, p. 189.

² Quoted in *Virginia Woolf*, p. 379.

³ *To the Lighthouse*, p. 25.

⁴ *Between the Acts*, p. 208.

to its ancient shape, as the Romans saw it [...] and the hills had no names and rivers wound they knew not where'.¹ Such passages suggest the urban environment profoundly influenced Woolf's sense of historical depth.

This sense of landscape's temporal depths being revealed by aerial perspectives is, as Kitty Hauser has noted, a powerful strain within English art and literature of the 1920s and 1930s. Flight is connected literally with temporal travel in the passage from *Orlando* quoted above, and Merry Pawlowski notes that *The Years* (1937) uses a narrator who 'voices a virtual experience of flying' to communicate 'an earthly pattern, the ceaseless passage of time across the sky'.² Woolf, along with Lawrence, Powys and Butts, discloses Hauser's 'archaeological imagination', a sense of the histories of place revealed by (among other developments) the advancement of aerial photography. We are made aware of this power at the beginning of *Between the Acts*, a novel which casts a panoramic eye over the history of English landscape and culture: 'From an aeroplane,' Bartholomew Oliver explains, 'you could still see, plainly marked, the scars made by the Britons; by the Romans; by the Elizabethan manor house; and by the plough, when they ploughed up the hill to grow wheat in the Napoleonic wars.'³ As Robert Kiely explains, this is a landscape 'imprinted with hieroglyphic markings to be read and deciphered in terms of the present.'⁴ Aerial perspectives reveal a temporal cosmopolitanism within the palimpsest of place; Beer notes that the aeroplane, here, 'allows history to surface in the landscape and be seen anew.'⁵ Woolf's understanding of landscape thus works against misguided essentialist notions of English purity; borders and categories

¹ *Mrs Dalloway*, p. 26.

² Pawlowski, Merry, "'Where Am I?': Feminine Space and Time in Virginia Woolf's *The Years*", in de Lange, A., Fincham, G., Hawthorn, J., and Lothe, J. (eds.), *Literary Landscapes: From Modernism to Postcolonialism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 75-91 (p. 81).

³ *Between the Acts*, pp. 3-4.

⁴ *Beyond Egotism*, p. 225.

⁵ 'The Island and the Aeroplane', p. 171.

are dissolved.¹ Writing about Somerset in 1908, Woolf sees the land not in terms of territorial demarcation, but ‘great bones of green & brown earth’.² Relatedly, as Scott explains, Woolf is fascinated by ‘invasions of the orderly, cultured garden’: she ‘traverses such barriers to think like a moth, take in the perceptions of a snail, or the motion of a flock of birds.’³ Woolf’s resistance to restrictive, hegemonic conceptions of the landscape is related to her disdain for taxonomic classifications of the nonhuman world. Christina Alt notes that *Orlando* satirises ‘the pedantry of those whose focus on minutiae impedes their ability to take a wider view’; while Kostkowska posits that *Mrs Dalloway* ‘conducts an ecological critique of science’.⁴

Woolf’s sense of the landscape as a palimpsest, like her fascination with liminality, transgression, fragmentation and defamiliarisation, can be traced (at least in part) to her childhood experiences in Cornwall. As Lonquist argues:

Walks along the towering Cornish cliffs, with their history of often unregarded devastation, inspired in Virginia what might be called a ‘geological view’ of human history – not unlike that of an Arnold or Hardy, except that in Woolf’s case the ‘long

¹ The association of English land with purity is also connected to the symbolic significance of grass in *A Room of One’s Own*, in which the male guardians of Oxbridge tradition are fastidious in the ‘protection of their turf’ (p. 5). By writing from marginalised perspectives (either those of women, or nonhuman animals), Woolf looks to subvert such associations: for Flush, trees and grass are ‘signals of freedom’ (p. 22). Woolf, Virginia, *A Room of One’s Own / Three Guineas* (London: Penguin, 2000); *Flush: A Biography* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1978). For further discussion, see Ryan, Derek, ‘Uprooting Trees and Becoming-grass in Virginia Woolf’s *To the Lighthouse*’, *Woolf Contemporaine* conference (Aix-en-Provence: September 2010).

² *Travels with Virginia Woolf*, p. 123. This way of apprehending landscape is also connected, in Woolf’s imagination, with animism: an early journal quotation compares the landscape of Wiltshire to ‘some vast living thing [...] all its insects and animals, save man, are exquisitely in time with it. If you lie on the earth somewhere you hear a sound like a vast breath, as though it were the very inspiration of earth herself, and all the living things on her’; quoted in Brown, Jane, *Spirits of Place: Five Famous Lives in Their English Landscape* (London: Viking, 2001), p. 28. There are echoes here of the animistic currents that run through Powys’ work: in *Wolf Solent*, as Gerda sleeps at Poll’s Camp, Wolf wonders if her slumber is ‘so deep and happy because of some occult affinity between her nerves and this historic hill [...] He felt as if he were actually looking on at some legendary encounter between the body of Gerda and the crafty superhuman desire of some earth god’ (p. 326).

³ Scott, Bonnie Kime, ‘Virginia Woolf, Ecofeminism, and Breaking Boundaries in Nature’, in Burrells, A., Ellis, S., Parsons, D., and Simpson, K. (eds.), *Woolfian Boundaries: Selected Papers from the Sixteenth Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf* (Clemson: Clemson University Press, 2007), pp. 108-15 (pp. 111, 108).

⁴ Alt, Christina, *Virginia Woolf and the Study of Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 77; ‘Virginia Woolf’s Ecological Critique of Science in *Mrs Dalloway*’, p. 186.

view' was inflected not so much with Victorian doubt as with a chastened perception of a self decentered in the vast reaches of natural history.¹

Lonnquist recognises Hardy's influence upon this element of Woolf's writing, something also evident in her use of aerial perspectives in narrative. These represent a progression from Hardy's panoramic landscape descriptions, in their rapid shifts between beings, perspectives and level of focus. Woolf, as Lee notes, was intensely conscious from an early age of 'a pre-history underlying the civilised world which makes it seem fragile and evanescent.'² In *Between the Acts*, Mrs Swithin is reading H.G. Wells' *An Outline of History*, imagining 'rhododendron forests in Piccadilly', and a landscape populated by 'elephant-bodied, seal-necked, heaving, surging, slowly writhing, and, she supposed, barking monsters; the iguanadon, the mammoth, and the mastodon; from whom presumably, she thought, jerking the window open, we descend.'³ As in Lawrence (as well as *The Waves* and *Orlando*, as discussed above) Woolf's sense of a timescale beyond the human prompts an imaginative juxtaposition of urban modernity with the prehistoric; but the tone here is gentle, contemplative, even playful. This is characteristic of *Between the Acts*, which tentatively examines the contingency and precariousness of Western civilisation without offering unambiguous judgements on its value. The novel is overshadowed by the imminent onset of the Second World War; and, as Hilary Newman argues, this partly explains Woolf's suggestion that 'all people retain something of their primitive ancestors, which could at any time erupt to submerge civilisation and reduce humanity to a state of chaos' and 'a resurgence of barbarism.'⁴ Tajiri also sees the prehistoric in the novel 'in the form of natural phenomena or animals, suggesting that it permeates the present'; and Lee notes that Mrs Swithin bears similarities with Woolf, who liked 'to imagine palaeolithic man living on the

¹ 'Solitary Trampings and Shared Errantry in Cornwall, 1905', p. 169.

² *Virginia Woolf*, p. 225.

³ *Between the Acts*, p. 8.

⁴ Newman, Hilary, 'Continuity and Destruction in *Between the Acts*', *Virginia Woolf Bulletin* 3 (January 2000), pp. 21-5 (p. 23).

Downs, or iguanadons on the Weald.’¹ She was surrounded, at Rodmell, by relics of passing civilisations: ‘the Iron Age barrows on the Downs, the traces of the Romano-British fort on Mount Caburn, the supposed line of the Roman Road on the highway.’² The fascination with the prehistoric running through Woolf’s work, then, reflects a sensitivity to landscape that begins in Cornwall, and is connected with the development of aerial photography.

Temporality and technology, then, are connected in Woolf’s work in complex ways. *Orlando*’s fantastical parade through centuries of history is another example of the sense that remaining within the present, or within a human sense of temporality, is epistemologically limiting. Orlando’s experience of the world slows down and speeds up to express the different rates with which consciousness apprehends the world at different times: at one point, a leaf falls ‘so slowly that one could watch it for half an hour fluttering and falling till it came to rest at last, on Orlando’s foot.’³ *The Waves*, as Dick notes, features ‘continual shifts from an omniscient perspective to one tied to a particular character, shifts that often take us from “actual time” into “mind time”’.⁴ In *To the Lighthouse*’s ‘Time Passes’ section, such temporal changes reflect a nonhuman perspective, expressing the inexorability of seasonal progression, and indifference to the human drama of the First World War: ‘Night, however, succeeds to night. The winter holds a pack of them in store and deals them equally, evenly, with indefatigable fingers.’⁵ Rosemary Sumner argues that, in this section, Woolf ‘creates the flight of time; she makes entropy “vividly visible”’.⁶ As in Butts’ work, the development of cinema also seems to have influenced Woolf’s use of temporality, with its ability to present

¹ ‘Fiction, Reality and Prehistory’, p. 66; *Virginia Woolf*, p. 429.

² *Virginia Woolf*, p. 429.

³ *Orlando*, p. 77. *Jacob’s Room* employs a similar time-travelling narrative approach to *Orlando* at points, as in a passage which surveys the changes in women’s fashions in the nineteenth century: ‘Fix your eyes upon the lady’s skirt; the grey one will do – above the pink silk stockings. It changes; drapes her ankles – the nineties; then it amplifies – the seventies; now it’s burnished red and stretched above a crinoline – the sixties; a tiny black foot wearing a white cotton stocking peeps out’ (p. 19).

⁴ ‘Literary Realism in *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, *Orlando* and *The Waves*’, p. 52.

⁵ *To the Lighthouse*, p. 145.

⁶ *A Route to Modernism*, p. 151.

different places at the same moment in time. Kate Flint notes how Woolf's narrative technique in *Jacob's Room* allows 'rays of light to strike both the Scilly Isles and tombs of crusaders in cathedrals in the same sentence.'¹ *Mrs Dalloway*, with its use of rapid cuts between scenes, is similar to *Armed with Madness* and the 'Wandering Rocks' chapter in *Ulysses* in this respect: as Elaine Showalter notes, these 'transitional devices would have been familiar to [Woolf's] readers, who were flocking to the new cinema houses and seeing the latest American silent films.'² The technological developments of modernity, then – whether in terms of transportation, urban experience, aerial photography, or cinema – influence Woolf's depiction of landscape, and certain characteristics of those landscapes, such as their residues of previous histories, are an inherent part of these depictions.

III. Odd Affinities

The sedimentary, temporally shifting landscape of *Between the Acts* is mirrored in the novel's domestic environment, as Harris explains: 'the house, like the landscape, is archaeological, harbouring layer upon layer of human experience.'³ Like Butts, with her sense of the 'potency' and 'pulse' of objects, Lucy Swithin believes that "[w]e live in things"; Pointz Hall's agglomeration of furniture and possessions provides a link to the layers of our collective past.⁴ A reminder exists, too, in the churchyard, where 'the old families who had all intermarried [...] lay in their deaths intertwined, like the ivy roots, beneath the churchyard wall.'⁵ The past shadows the present in both the human and nonhuman spheres, eroding distinctions between them. This technique is applied to the urban environment in *Mrs Dalloway*, with its beggar woman whose voice 'bubbled up [...] through the knotted roots of

¹ Flint, Kate, Introduction to *Jacob's Room* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. xxvi.

² Showalter, Elaine, Introduction to *Mrs Dalloway* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. xxi.

³ *Romantic Moderns*, pp. 113-14.

⁴ *Between the Acts*, p. 64.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

infinite ages, and skeletons and treasure'.¹ As Harris argues, it is significant that this figure is standing 'opposite Regent's Park Tube Station': the Tube network consequently becomes 'an image of archaeology below the pavements, the strata of human existence that Woolf so often imagined below the surface of London'.² Critics have also noted that the beggar's 'voice of an ancient spring spouting from the earth' locates the prehistoric in the heart of the city, anticipating Lucy Swithin's vision of a pre-urban landscape populated by 'the iguanadon, the mammoth, and the mastodon'.³

Woolf therefore applies the idea of temporal sedimentation to 'artificial' and 'natural', domestic and 'wild', urban and rural alike; and in doing so, she questions the clarity of such distinctions. The mixing of temporalities within the urban context is paralleled by a mingling of sensory experience in that environment in texts like *Mrs Dalloway* and *The Waves*, as discussed in Section I above. In 'Street Haunting', Woolf combines the auditory and visual in her description of a London street at night, 'with its islands of light, and its long groves of darkness, and [...] those little cracklings and stirrings of leaf and twig'.⁴ This way of being is stimulated for Woolf (and for Clarissa, with her belief that walking in London is "'better than walking in the country'"), by travel on foot through the city. Lee argues that Woolf's need 'to make the world dance' was stimulated by such experiences, and David Bradshaw explains that they 'offered Woolf deliverance from the bookish captivity she so deeply loved but

¹ *Mrs Dalloway*, p. 89.

² 'Virginia Woolf Underground', p. 43.

³ *Mrs Dalloway*, p. 88. Alter notes that the beggar woman 'carries us back to the prehistoric era of the mammoths and forward to the extinction of life on earth', while Louise Hutchings Westling explains that she 'suggests the continuation of elemental forces from ages past when the same place was a swamp full of mammoths'. *Urban Experience and the Language of the Novel*, p. 118; Westling, Louise Hutchings, 'Virginia Woolf and the Flesh of the World', *New Literary History* 30, no. 4 (Autumn 1999), pp. 855-75 (p. 859). The novel also anticipates a post-human urban environment, 'when London is a grass-grown path and all those hurrying the pavement [...] are but bones with a few wedding rings mixed up in their dust and the gold stoppings of innumerable decayed teeth' (pp. 17-18). Like *Between the Acts*, the novel draws upon prehistoric imagery to bring out this apocalyptic element, suggesting parallels between the distant past and the future.

⁴ 'Street Haunting', p. 178.

from which she occasionally felt the need to escape.’¹ Her walks around London are a synecdoche of the broader peripatetic movement that characterises Woolf’s life; all such experiences promote a sense of unstable, fluid identity. As Rebecca Solnit argues, the solitary walker is ‘unsettled, between places, drawn forth into action by desire and lack, having the detachment of the traveller rather than the ties of the worker, the dweller, the member of the group.’² Walking is essentially defamiliarising, and conducive to engagement with new perspectives: in ‘Street Haunting’, Woolf argues that, when ‘rambling the streets of London [...] [w]e are no longer quite ourselves [...] we shed the self our friends know us by and become part of that vast republican army of anonymous trampers’.³

For Woolf, as Solnit explains, walking is a relief from ‘the confining oppression of one’s own identity’; while Hill-Miller suggests that Woolf (like Clarissa Dalloway) sees London as ‘capable of expressing the very power of “life itself”’.⁴ The city’s magic for her is expressed in a 1924 diary entry: ‘London is enchanting. I step out upon a tawny coloured magic carpet [...]. And people pop in and out, lightly, divertingly like rabbits [...]. Faces passing lift up my mind; prevent it from settling’.⁵ Like the protagonist of Lawrence’s *Aaron’s Rod*, who feels ‘like a fox slipping alert among unsuspecting cattle’ among London’s ‘streaming of people who meant nothing to him’, Woolf transposes the world of nonhuman animality onto the nighttime cityscape.⁶ Both writers find in the urban environment a vitality and mystery which stimulates an imaginative interior world formed, in part, by childhood experiences in

¹ *Virginia Woolf*, pp. 597-8; Bradshaw, David, Introduction to Woolf, Virginia, *Selected Essays* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. xix.

² Solnit, Rebecca, *Wanderlust: A History of Walking* (London: Verso, 2006), p. 26.

³ ‘Street Haunting’, p. 177.

⁴ *Wanderlust*, p. 187; *A Guide to Virginia Woolf’s Literary Landscapes*, p. 64. For more discussion of the ways in which walks around London stimulated creativity for Woolf, see Thacker, *Moving through Modernity*, who argues that the ‘external spaces of the metropolis were a crucial stimulus for Woolf’s own psychic space’ (p. 157); and Plate, Liedeke, ‘Walking in Virginia Woolf’s Footsteps: Performing Cultural Memory’, *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 9, no. 1 (2006), pp. 101-120, which also discusses Solnit (p. 110).

⁵ *Travels with Virginia Woolf*, p. 35.

⁶ *Aaron’s Rod*, p. 111.

rural England. The two environments are not in tension in such examples: rather, the surface contrasts serve to illuminate deeper connections and similarities. This is made explicit when Woolf writes from the perspective of nonhuman animals, as in *Flush*, whose canine protagonist sees the city as ‘a forest where wild beasts prowled and venomous snakes coiled’, but it is often evident in her human narratives as well. Jinny in *The Waves* experiences London’s “heterogeneous crowd”, as a “forest”, in which “all is nocturnal, and the parrots go screaming through the branches.”¹ Again, this imagery is central to the atmospheric evocation of the city in ‘Street Haunting’, which casts urban walking as a method of blurring the line between psychological and environmental exploration: it enables us to ‘leave the straight lines of personality and deviate into those footpaths that lead beneath brambles and thick tree trunks into the heart of the forest where live those wild beasts, our fellow men’.² *Mrs Dalloway*, characteristically, is the novel in which this animalised element of the urban environment is explored in greatest depth. As with the novel’s use of parks and flowers to soften the urban/rural boundary, Woolf – like Powys in *Wolf Solent* – describes characters in nonhuman animal terms. Kostkowska lists several quotations which compare characters to birds, animals capable of rapid shifts in place and perspective: Clarissa, for example, has ‘a touch of the bird about her, of the jay, blue-green, vivacious’; Septimus is ‘beak-nosed’; Peter is ‘hawklike’; and Rezia feels ‘like a bird sheltering under the thin hollow of a leaf’.³ Through the repeated uses of this imagery, Woolf subtly interweaves urban and rural, human and nonhuman, and challenges the archetype of the urban environment as cold, sterile and mechanical.

¹ *Flush*, p. 67; *The Waves*, p. 116.

² ‘Street Haunting’, p. 187.

³ *Mrs Dalloway*, pp. 4, 15, 179, 72. See Kostkowska’s discussion in ‘Virginia Woolf’s Ecological Critique of Science in *Mrs Dalloway*’, p. 188.

In such ways Woolf creates the ‘urban pastoral’ of *Mrs Dalloway*. For Maisie Johnson, the city is teeming with vitality and life, both human and nonhuman: she is entranced by this ‘breeze-kissed company – squirrels perching and preening, sparrow fountains fluttering for crumbs, dogs busy with the railings, busy with each other, while the soft warm air washed over them’.¹ Alter argues that the novel’s intermingling of such elements suggests ‘the sense of invigoration, harmony with one’s surroundings, and enrapturing aesthetic revelation that is traditionally associated with the green world of pastoral.’² Lawrence Buell’s ecocritical reading of the novel posits that, in the profound sense of belonging and entanglement with London felt by its characters, *Mrs Dalloway* might be classed as a rare example of ‘urban bioregional imagination’; while Lee claims that Woolf’s urban novels are ‘the most pastoral city novels ever written.’³ When Clarissa feels Big Ben’s ‘lead circles dissolve [...] in the air’, the synaesthetic comingling of sound and touch indicates a kind of bucolic serenity, rather than suggesting a discordant confusion of perceptions.⁴ As Miroslav Beker argues:

[F]or Clarissa Dalloway the city (and Westminster in particular) has a profound meaning, a fascination that is not fully explicable in rational terms, amounting to a mystical communion with the *locale*. [...] London has a somewhat similar effect on Clarissa Dalloway that nature had on Wordsworth; even amidst all the commotion of the metropolis she feels ‘a particular hush, a solemnity, an indescribable pause; a suspense [...] before Big Ben strikes.’⁵

Woolf’s depiction of the urban landscape as benign, even idyllic, is therefore unusual; while the other writers in this study are also influenced by romanticism, they rarely (if ever) apply such tropes to the urban environment in the rapturous, celebratory way that *Mrs Dalloway* does.

¹ *Mrs Dalloway*, pp. 28-29.

² *Urban Experience and the Language of the Novel*, p. 105.

³ *The Future of Environmental Criticism*, p. 86 (the other example cited by Buell is *Ulysses*); *Virginia Woolf*, p. 421.

⁴ *Mrs Dalloway*, p. 4.

⁵ Beker, Miroslav, ‘London as a Principle of Structure in *Mrs Dalloway*’, *Modern Fiction Studies* 18, no. 3 (Autumn 1972), pp. 375-85 (pp. 376-77).

The exploration of nonhuman or inanimate perspectives, and the sense of places as alive or interconnected, occurs throughout Woolf's fiction. In *Jacob's Room*, spaces are described with no human presence, but a sense of a nonhuman perspective upon things: 'Listless is the air in an empty room, just swelling the curtain; the flowers in the jar shift. One fibre in the wicker armchair creaks, though no one sits there.'¹ The italicised intervals in *The Waves* create sudden shifts into disembodied and seemingly atemporal positions; while 'Time Passes' explores these ideas at length:

Only through the rusty hinges and swollen sea-moistened woodwork certain airs, detached from the body of the wind (the house was ramshackle after all) crept round corners and ventured indoors. Almost one might imagine them, as they entered the drawing-room, questioning and wondering, toying with the flap of hanging wallpaper, asking, would it hang much longer, when would it fall?²

As this section indicates, the sensitivity to the nonhuman environment cultivated by Woolf's childhood experiences facilitates an ability to imaginatively occupy other perspectives. This animistic sense of the world is applied to the urban environment in *Mrs Dalloway*: as the narrative tells us, 'Arlington Street and Piccadilly seemed to chafe the very air in the Park and lift its leaves hotly, brilliantly, on waves of that divine vitality which Clarissa loved'; and Septimus feels that 'leaves were alive, trees were alive. And the leaves [were] connected by millions of fibres with his own body.'³ Such passages suggest an urban environment in which all life is not just interconnected, but part of a single organism that also incorporates the apparently inanimate.

These moments of holistic unification with the metropolitan world are less common in Woolf's work, however, than a more ambiguous, fragmentary and protean sense of

¹ *Jacob's Room*, p. 49.

² *To the Lighthouse*, p. 144.

³ *Mrs Dalloway*, pp. 7, 24.

connection. This can be illuminated by Orlando's experience of driving out of London. As she returns to the countryside, Orlando's regains 'the illusion of holding things within itself and she [sees] a cottage, a farmyard and four cows, all precisely life-size.'¹ Orlando's identity is no longer 'chopped up', as it is in the city. Raymond Williams draws upon this passage to illustrate a continuing tendency within literature to separate urban from rural experience: the discontinuity and atomism of the city, Williams argues, are experienced as a form of perception, one which raises problems of identity that are 'characteristically resolved on arrival in the country'.² Woolf's point, however, is not so much that the problems are *resolved* – since they reflect an inescapable truth about the nature of human personality – but merely that rural experience makes it easier to ignore them. The returning sensation of Orlando's mind 'holding things within itself' is an 'illusion'. What the passage therefore suggests is that what Williams calls 'metropolitan perception' facilitates a more sophisticated understanding of the fragmentary, interdependent character of self. To feel a sense of connection with the city's objects, places and inhabitants is to accept the ever-shifting nature of such relations. In *Mrs Dalloway*, Alter notes a 'dialectic interplay between isolation and connection', between 'private realms built with metaphors and personal associations' and 'moments of sharing'.³ As Clarissa walks through the city at the beginning of the novel, she muses on such connections:

[S]omehow in the streets of London, on the ebb and flow of things, here, there, she survived, Peter survived, lived in each other, she part, she was positive, of the trees at home; of the house there, ugly, rambling all to bits and pieces as it was; part of people she had never met.⁴

Urban experience illuminates the fragmentary, ever-shifting and interconnected nature of the self: Clarissa senses connections not just with Peter, but with the places of her childhood, her

¹ *Orlando*, p. 212.

² *The Country and the City*, p. 241.

³ *Urban Experience and the Language of the Novel*, pp. 107-8.

⁴ *Mrs Dalloway*, pp. 9-10.

immediate environment, and the strangers that make up London. She is not 'rooted' to places or beings in any essentialist way, but aware of a mesh of interdependent connections. As Thacker puts it in his discussion of this passage, Clarissa's 'singular identity passes away':

The conventional urban fears of isolation and separation are thus overcome if the subject surrenders to the city. Here movement through modernity constitutes identity rather than representing a threat to it [...]. Becoming is thus intrinsically linked to social space, rather than rejecting it for a Heideggerian place of dwelling.¹

The dynamic, transient experience of the modern metropolitan environment, Woolf suggests, promotes an understanding of belonging as something similarly shifting and fragmented. Cosmopolitan experience creates or reveals its own identities and connections; and in Woolf's case, the pastoral or 'bioregional' (as Buell puts it) style in which they are evoked indicates the influence of experiences beyond the urban world.

Woolf therefore presents a conception of place which challenges the idea that 'authentic' belonging is about being 'rooted' within it. Rather, as Carol Cantrell argues, she rejects 'an identification of place with stability, with permanence'; in her work, 'place is as unstable as the horizon.'² In Woolf's texts, Cantrell finds the principle that a place has 'an open-ended identity negotiated by multiple voices, not just one, and not just by human voices.'³ As Jessica Berman argues, Woolf's work forms part of a modernist cosmopolitanism in which 'community is constantly created, re-worked, and perpetuated'.⁴ *Mrs Dalloway*, with its opening image of Clarissa's 'plunge' into the urban world, is (as Alter puts it) 'very much concerned with crossing thresholds.'⁵ Woolf creates a conception of the modern city as a

¹ *Moving through Modernity*, p. 159.

² Cantrell, Carol H., "'The Locus of Compossibility': Virginia Woolf, Modernism, and Place", in Branch, M., and Slovic, S. (eds.), *The ISLE Reader: Ecocriticism, 1993-2003* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2003), pp. 33-48 (p. 36).

³ *Ibid.*, p. 38.

⁴ *Modernist Fiction, Cosmopolitanism, and the Politics of Community*, p. 19.

⁵ *Urban Experience and the Language of the Novel*, p. 105.

place in which overlapping voices and experiences are ceaselessly generating particular modes of belonging. Peter Walsh recalls a bus journey with Clarissa, in which she speaks of her sense that personality is diffused among people and places:

But she said, sitting on the bus going up Shaftesbury Avenue, she felt herself everywhere; not 'here, here, here'; and she tapped the back of the seat; but everywhere. She waved her hand, going up Shaftesbury Avenue. She was all that. So that to know her, or any one, one must seek out the people who completed them; even the places. Odd affinities she had with people she had never spoken to, some woman in the street, some man behind a counter – even trees, or barns.¹

The metropolitan environment, then, is conducive to this awareness of fragmentation and interdependence. The journey, Thacker argues, 'illustrates a sense of identity in transit, existing 'everywhere' rather than in one settled location'; while Hill-Miller notes Clarissa's 'palpable connection to living things as diverse as trees and people.'² This atmosphere of aqueous diffusion is, as I have argued, influenced by Woolf's childhood encounters with the nonhuman world, as expressed in works like *To the Lighthouse* and *The Waves*. In the former, Mrs Ramsay muses on the sense that, 'if one was alone, one leant to things, inanimate things; trees, streams, flowers; felt they expressed one; felt they became one; felt they knew one, in a sense were one'.³ In such sentences Woolf balances the human and nonhuman, or internal and external, through her use of semicolons, giving the 'trees, streams, flowers' the same weight as Mrs Ramsay's reflections on her emotions. Her sense of connection with these recalls Clarissa's feeling of diffusion among her surroundings. For both characters, the nonhuman world also forms similar mental images at such points: Mrs Ramsay feels a mist rise 'up off the floor of the mind [...] from the lake of one's being'; while Clarissa feels herself 'laid out like a mist between the people she knew best, who lifted her on their

¹ *Mrs Dalloway*, p. 167.

² *Moving through Modernity*, p. 171; *A Guide to Virginia Woolf's Literary Landscapes*, p. 66.

³ *To the Lighthouse*, p. 74.

branches as she had seen the trees lift the mist'.¹ The imagery used to blend internal and external worlds is thus one key connection between Woolf's rural-set and urban-set works.

If much of this imagery and style evokes a childlike fascination with 'natural' landscapes, in the city Woolf finds an environment which brings that out in unexpected ways. In *Mrs Dalloway* (and other urban-centred writings), the metropolitan world is used to present what Andelys Wood calls a 'web of connections [that] is a kind of ecology.'² The novel reflects Woolf's conception of place as, in Hill-Miller's words, 'a stimulus to experiences of connection, continuity and union with something beyond the confines of the single self'.³ London (as Woolf puts it in 'Street Haunting') has the power to create 'the illusion that one is not tethered to a single mind, but can put on briefly for a few minutes the bodies and minds of others.'⁴ This endless diversity of perspectives found within the urban environment is characteristically modernist, and as Rebecca Walkowitz argues, expresses a distinctive value of cosmopolitan experience: she notes that Septimus' 'multiplication of perspectives' in *Mrs Dalloway* is pathologised by the establishment, represented in Sir William Bradshaw.⁵ However, Woolf's depiction of a multiperspectived world differs in certain key respects to those of her peers: Donna Reed argues that the novel's 'fluid narration [...] merges the multiple voices of modernism which, in the hands of Faulkner or Joyce, for example, remain discrete. [...] [I]t is not just events that are woven together, but consciousnesses.'⁶ This tension between unification and separation with others is articulated, characteristically, through aqueous imagery in *To the Lighthouse*: Lily Briscoe, desiring a sense of personal

¹ Ibid., p. 74; *Mrs Dalloway*, p. 10.

² 'Buying Flowers and the Ecology of London in *Mrs Dalloway*', p. 2.

³ *A Guide to Virginia Woolf's Literary Landscapes*, p. 5.

⁴ 'Street Haunting', p. 187.

⁵ *Cosmopolitan Style*, p. 94.

⁶ Reed, Donna, 'Merging Voices: *Mrs Dalloway* and No Place on Earth', *Comparative Literature* 47, no. 2 (Spring 1995), pp. 118-135 (pp. 121-22). As Reed explains, although 'Faulkner intersperses a variety of voices in *As I Lay Dying*, he clearly sections them off, labelling each with a name' – the same approach used in Butts' *Armed with Madness* (pp. 104-134).

connection with Mrs Ramsay, longs for a means of ‘becoming, like waters poured into a jar, inextricably the same, one with the object one adored’.¹ Lawrence, as noted in the previous chapter, uses similar imagery to reject such ideas: two selves cannot meet ‘any more than two lakes, whose waters meet to make one river, in the distance, meet in themselves.’² As Dominic Scheck argues, *To the Lighthouse* ultimately suggests a position similar to that of Lawrence: ‘Woolf consistently evinces the impossibility of communicating the intimate knowledge of the mind’; yet her characters nonetheless create ‘an illusory yet functional communion with others through the perception of mutually exterior objects.’³ Woolf asserts the possibility of making tentative, ephemeral connections through shared experience of place.

In various ways, then, the experiences and engagements that characterise Woolf’s depiction of urban life can be traced to her distinctive understanding of place and movement, and to her encounters with the nonhuman world from childhood onwards. The sense of a liberating fragmentation and transience within the city, for example, is echoed in *The Waves*’ depictions of landscape, which connect this to the shadowy, elusive nature of personality. When Bernard asks how to “describe the world seen without a self”, it is a reflection upon the illusory character of personhood prompted by the nonhuman world: “the landscape returned to me; so I saw fields rolling in waves of colour beneath me, but now with this difference; I saw but was not seen.”⁴ The novel emphasises the sense that we are not discrete, essential and enclosed personalities: Bernard feels that “it is not one life that I look back upon; I am not one person; I am many people; I do not altogether know who I am – Jinny, Susan, Neville,

¹ *To the Lighthouse*, p. 60.

² ‘... Love Was Once a Little Boy’, p. 452.

³ Scheck, Dominic, ‘Sundered Waters: Isolated Consciousnesses and Ostensible Communion in Woolf’s Narration’, in Czarnecki, K., and Rohman, C. (eds.), *Virginia Woolf and the Natural World: Selected Papers from the Twentieth Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf* (Clemson: Clemson University Press, 2011), pp. 208-13 (p. 208).

⁴ *The Waves*, p. 192.

Rhoda, or Louis; or how to distinguish my life from theirs.”¹ In ‘A Sketch of the Past’, Woolf describes her childhood sense of being ‘hardly aware of myself, but only of the sensation. I am only the container of this feeling of ecstasy, of the feeling of rapture.’² As in Butts’ work, if Woolf’s characters sometimes feel like ciphers or composites, this should not necessarily be seen as a flaw: in emphasising the shifting, intangible character of the self, both move the focus of their narratives away from anthropocentrism, and onto the complex web of influences that interpenetrate human life. Theresa Albin argues that *The Waves*’ central metaphorical source, the sea, ‘symbolises Woolf’s sense of self. [...] Thus, the waves metaphorically might represent its dissociated sectors from countless fragments to disparate identities.’³ The influence of Woolf’s coastal childhood experiences, then, is again a significant influence here, and these ideas are transposed onto Woolf’s conception of the urban world. Rory Ryan argues that the eschewal of individual agency and discreteness is expressed, in *Mrs Dalloway*, by foregrounding ‘the singularity of the social corpus’, presenting characters as ‘elements, effects and agents of conformity or disruption rather than individuals with a high degree of volition and interdependence.’⁴ This analysis emphasises human social entanglements, but the principle applies to mutual influence and interdependence across the human and nonhuman worlds in the novel.

Where Butts’ re-imagining of the English landscape as a haven for marginalised communities is influenced by her experiences of urban cosmopolitanism, the emphasis in Woolf is often on the converse: experiences of the nonhuman world influence her distinctive evocation of the city. For all of the writers in this study, however, there is a reciprocal influence. Jessica

¹ Ibid., p. 185.

² ‘A Sketch of the Past’, p. 78.

³ Albin, Theresa, ‘Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*: A Lyrical “Sense of Continuity” in a Sea of Dissociation’, *Journal of Trauma and Dissociation* 8, no. 3 (2007), pp. 57-84 (p. 67).

⁴ Ryan, Rory, ‘Peculiarly Festooned with Prepositions: Aspects of Liminality in *Mrs Dalloway*’, *Journal of Literary Studies* 17, no. 1 (2001), pp. 58-71 (p. 58).

Berman's point that *Orlando* suggests an 'alternative communal past' in rural England echoes Butts' reclamation of the landscape for what Amanda Anderson calls 'communities of disidentification'.¹ Where these communities, in Butts, can seem inevitably exclusionary, Woolf's emphasis on the transience and fragmentation of identity arguably addresses this problem: Emily Hinnov sees in her work a 'sense of waxing and waning inherent in the creation of communities that welcome outsiders into the fold, from an individual consciousness revealed as necessarily a fragment, to a coherent and unified natural world.'² This underlies what Harris calls the 'impure, inclusive' character of the rural world evoked in *Between the Acts*, for example.

As in Butts' work, urban cosmopolitan experience plays a key role in allowing Woolf to envision such marginalised communities. Christine Sizemore (following Pheng Cheah) sees Woolf's urban writings as presenting a 'cosmopolitanism from below', marked by a 'plurality of identities combined with attentiveness to otherness.'³ Alter notes that '[c]hange is in the air' in *Mrs Dalloway*, evident in 'an insouciant flouting of old conventions in public behaviour, dress, the things people write about.'⁴ As Bradshaw explains, 'wandering the streets of London enabled Woolf to shed the restrictive harness of her gender and the handicap of her class'.⁵ In 'Street Haunting', she makes what Sizemore calls an 'imaginative excursion into the lives of others', imagining herself as 'a washerwoman, a publican, a street singer'; and

¹ *Modernist Fiction, Cosmopolitanism, and the Politics of Community*, p. 132; *The Powers of Distance*, p. 26.

² Hinnov, Emily, "'To Give the Moment Whole': The Nature of Time and Cosmic (Comm)unity in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*", in Czarnecki, K, and Rohman, C. (eds.), *Virginia Woolf and the Natural World: Selected Papers from the Twentieth Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf* (Clemson: Clemson University Press, 2011), pp. 214-20 (p. 215).

³ 'Cosmopolitanism from Below in *Mrs Dalloway* and "Street Haunting"', p. 105.

⁴ *Urban Experience and the Language of the Novel*, pp. 104-05. Judith Walkowitz has recently detailed the extent to which Soho, in particular, influenced Woolf's sense of the capital as a site of marginalised and transient social groups. As London's 'cosmopolis', the area was 'a space of intimate and sometimes tumultuous interaction between men and women of many walks of life: rich and poor, unschooled émigrés and Bloomsbury literati, moral purity campaigners and libertarian anarchists, undercover police and dance hostesses, fascists and anti-fascists, queers and heterosexuals, Italians, Jews, Greeks, Americans, Germans, Swiss, black GIs, and white Britons' (*Nights Out*, p. 3).

⁵ Introduction to Woolf, Virginia, *Selected Essays*, p. xix.

Mrs Dalloway presents an interconnected web of such excursions, while drawing our attention to socially marginalised figures like the singing beggar.¹ Kate Flint notes that Woolf was fascinated by ‘those who live on the actual margins of society, the flower-sellers and old blind women whose only apparent home is the street’; such figures ‘appear timeless, outside the precise stratification of contemporary class organisation.’² They have a liminal quality, reflecting Woolf’s sensitivity to fragmentation, transience, and a realm of experience beyond the socially circumscribed. Ryan sees Septimus in a similar way: with his animistic experience of the world as a ‘pattern’, he stands ‘outside the loop of meaning, seeking (in a shamanistic, liminal fashion) to [...] uncover reality, a system of meaning beyond – and untainted by – culture and social structure.’³ For Woolf, the city is cosmopolitan not just in its social diversity, but in a broader sense: its complex mesh of sensory experience encourages awareness of our interconnection with the nonhuman. On this point, my emphasis differs from that of Jed Esty, who argues in *A Shrinking Island* that *Between the Acts* is partly motivated by Woolf’s sense of ‘the failure of interwar cosmopolitanism’, which led her to focus on ‘the possibilities embodied in shared national traditions and public rituals.’⁴ As I have argued, *Mrs Dalloway* (and Woolf’s other urban writings) evince a particular conception of stylistic and social cosmopolitanism that is influenced by close engagement with the nonhuman world, and movement between urban and rural landscapes. In some ways, then, *Between the Acts* (and other rural-set works) can be seen as a continuation of this project: Woolf develops a sense of interconnection with the nonhuman evident throughout her career; and urban cosmopolitanism is a significant influence upon this.

¹ ‘Cosmopolitanism from Below in *Mrs Dalloway* and “Street Haunting”’, p. 108; ‘Street Haunting’, p. 187.

² Introduction to *Jacob’s Room*, p. xxii.

³ ‘Aspects of Liminality in *Mrs Dalloway*’, p. 62.

⁴ *A Shrinking Island*, p. 54.

IV. We Are the Thing Itself

The amorphous adaptability of Woolf's style and imagery – in terms of being influenced by, and applicable to, both rural and urban contexts – partly reflects a resistance to cataloguing and delineating place. After receiving a letter from the naturalist Lord Olivier calling her descriptions of Hebridean fauna and flora in *To the Lighthouse* 'totally inaccurate', she offered ironic thanks in the preface of *Orlando* to an unnamed 'gentleman in America, who has generously and gratuitously corrected the punctuation, the botany, the entomology, the geography, and the chronology of previous works of mine and will, I hope, not spare his services on the present occasion.'¹ *Orlando*'s playful flouting of realist convention, with its time-travelling, gender-switching protagonist, underlines the gentle mockery of Woolf's statement. Alt argues that, for Woolf, 'the act of naming alters and restricts identity in trying to express it.'² Her position, however, is complex. *Orlando* emphasises the mysterious power of names, just as Lawrence, Powys and Butts' fiction does: Shelmerdine's second name Bonthrop, for example, 'signifie[s], mystically, separation and isolation and the disembodied pacing the deck of his brig in unfathomable seas.'³ In an early diary entry, Woolf notes that 'homesickness will feed on names, so that the simple word Devon is better than a poem'; and Harris observes that *Between the Acts* 'delights in the naming of fields and villages'.⁴ It is also important to note that, while *Orlando* disdains accuracy in terms of physical possibility, it juxtaposes this with attention to detail in terms of historical events and figures. Federico Sabatini sees a similar contrast in *The Waves*, which despite being 'the most abstract and impersonal of Woolf's novels', refers to numerous real streets and landmarks.⁵ Like Powys,

¹ *Orlando*, p. 6. See Alt, *Virginia Woolf and the Study of Nature*, p. 77.

² *Virginia Woolf and the Study of Nature*, p. 104.

³ *Orlando*, p. 179.

⁴ *Travels with Virginia Woolf*, p. 4; *Romantic Moderns*, p. 113.

⁵ Sabatini, Federico, "'Dark Pours Over the Outlines of Houses and Towers": Virginia Woolf's Prismatic Poetics of Space', in Evans, E., and Cornish, S. (eds.), *Woolf and the City: Selected Papers from the Nineteenth Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf* (Clemson: Clemson University Press, 2010), pp. 77-86 (p. 85).

Woolf was drawn to maps – her essay ‘Portraits of Places’ states that ‘there is more of the character of a place in this sheet of coloured paper, with its hill of shaded chocolate, its seas of spotless blue, and its villages of dots and punctures than in all the words of an ordinary vocabulary’ – and critics have noted her use of them in the creation of *Mrs Dalloway*.¹

Woolf is also similar to Powys, however, in her willingness to take imaginative liberties in her evocation of place. Kiely connects her with Joyce and Lawrence in her capacity to ‘make a world’, using language’s invocatory power: ‘Bloom’s Dublin, Mrs Dalloway’s London, the Nottinghamshire of the Morels and Brangwens are highly particularised places, regional, circumscribed, unique, and, at the same time, infinitely accessible and familiar habitations of a common human spirit.’² This capacity to create worlds that transcend their specific location illustrates Woolf’s conviction, expressed in her essay ‘Literary Geography’, that a ‘writer’s country is territory within his own brain; and we run the risk of disillusionment if we try to turn such phantom cities into tangible brick and mortar.’³ Geographical detail was important in Woolf’s creative process, but she was wary of its potential to inhibit the reader’s imaginative connection with a fictional world. A key factor here may be Woolf’s formative experiences of transience and movement in relation to place. Specificity of location in her work often seems less significant than the intensity with which an atmosphere is conjured: *To the Lighthouse* contains inaccuracies regarding fauna and flora because, despite being set on Skye, the landscape of the novel is in many ways the Cornwall of Woolf’s childhood. As Hill-Miller explains, Woolf ‘transforms the literal Cornish landscape [...] by abstracting the

¹ Woolf, Virginia, ‘Portraits of Places’, in McNeillie, A. (ed.), *The Essays of Virginia Woolf I* (London: Hogarth Press, 1986), pp. 124-127 (p. 124). See Thacker, who argues in *Moving through Modernity* that *Mrs Dalloway* can be read as an attempt to produce ‘a textual space whose language accurately renders “the heart of the land” as Woolf felt a map does (p. 154); and Wood, ‘Walking the Web in the Lost London of *Mrs Dalloway*’.

² *Beyond Egotism*, p. 13.

³ Woolf, Virginia, ‘Literary Geography’, in McNeillie, A. (ed.), *The Essays of Virginia Woolf I* (London: Hogarth Press, 1986), pp. 32-36, p. 35.

topography of St Ives and Talland House, and reducing them to their essential elements.’¹ Dick argues that the novel’s ‘lack of specificity about time and place’ anticipates the ‘highly selective treatment of realistic detail in *The Waves*’.²

Hill-Miller also notes a diary entry in which Woolf recalls walking through Russell Square, and suddenly seeing ‘mountains in the sky [...] & the moon which is risen over Persia; I have a great & astonishing sense of something there, which is “it”’.³ Such experiences may have inspired the passage in *Orlando* where the protagonist has a vision of her home against a mountainside in the Turkish wilderness: ‘a great park-like space opened in the flank of the hill [...] and then there appeared the roofs and belfries and courtyards and towers’.⁴ They suggest that the peripatetic, transient elements of Woolf’s life stimulated an ability to imagine mysterious, ineffable connections between places: we might compare Powys’ use of Louisiana-inspired imagery in *Wolf Solent*; or Lawrence’s feeling in *Sea and Sardinia* that a steamer in the Mediterranean is ‘laid up in some land-locked bay away at Spitzbergen, towards the North Pole: a solemn, mysterious, blue-landed bay, lost, lost to mankind.’⁵ For all of these writers, the juxtapositions, contrasts and defamiliarising power of travel cultivates a tendency to perceive such connections, and to imagine sudden geographical or temporal leaps.

This facet of Woolf’s writing perhaps explains the indeterminate location of Pointz Hall in *Between the Acts*: we are told it is in ‘the heart of the country’, a ‘remote village in the very

¹ *A Guide to Virginia Woolf’s Literary Landscapes*, p. 21.

² ‘Literary Realism in *Mrs Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, *Orlando* and *The Waves*’, p. 62.

³ Quoted in *A Guide to Virginia Woolf’s Literary Landscapes*, p. 76.

⁴ *Orlando*, p. 106.

⁵ *Sea and Sardinia*, p. 160.

heart of England', but the clues Woolf provides as to where this might be are inconsistent.¹ England's 'heart', Woolf implies, is not a particular place, but a mode of experiencing the landscape. As Sei Kosugi argues, in the novel Woolf attempts to develop 'an "Englishness" which is both vernacular and universal'.² This sheds further light on the conception of England in the novel as 'land merely, no land in particular': Woolf seeks to defamiliarise our understanding of the country by removing the markers that maintain existing associations. Helen Southworth argues that the English landscape consequently becomes 'a place for its inhabitants to explore anew [...] [and] assumes a savage, foreign quality'.³ As the novel closes, the married couple Giles and Isa find themselves alone together at the end of the day:

Alone, enmity was bared; also love. Before they slept, they must fight [...] as the dog fox fights with the vixen, in the heart of darkness, in the fields of night. [...] The window was all sky without colour. The house had lost its shelter. It was night before roads were made, or houses. It was the night that dwellers in caves had watched from some high place among rocks.

Then the curtain rose. They spoke.⁴

The prehistoric imagery noted above is again evident here; and the reference to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* evokes the threat of a descent into nihilistic chaos that hangs over much of the novel. These themes are linked to animality, the 'dog fox' and the vixen. Woolf's use of such tropes, again, allows her to defamiliarise the reader's experience of the English landscape, reimagining it as darkly atavistic. This quotation also illustrates the symbolic role of the house as the novel's centre (Woolf originally planned to call the novel *Pointz Hall*). Where the role of the home in *To the Lighthouse* recalls Powys and Butts, figuring it as a liminal site, Pointz Hall is instead a haven from an outside world marked by a sense of

¹ *Between the Acts*, pp. 34, 15. As Hill-Miller notes, the characters themselves disagree on this point: 'Lucy Swithin says they live one hundred and fifty miles from the sea; her rationalist brother Bartholomew insists the correct number is thirty-five' (*A Guide to Virginia Woolf's Literary Landscapes*, p. 257).

² Kosugi, Sei, 'Representing Nation and Nature: Woolf, Kelly, White', in Snaith, A., and Whitworth, M. (eds.), *Locating Woolf: The Politics of Space and Place* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 81-96 (p. 95).

³ Southworth, Helen, 'Virginia Woolf's "Wild England": George Borrow, Autoethnography, and *Between the Acts*', *Studies in the Novel* 39, no. 2 (Summer 2007), pp. 196-215 (pp. 205-06).

⁴ *Between the Acts*, p. 197.

foreboding. As Harris argues, the house ‘is meant as a stable centre’, maintaining a fragile unity in the novel.¹ This might suggest that *Between the Acts* is pessimistic regarding the future of English culture and civilisation: Tajiri argues that, in this ending, ‘[r]eality is *completely* swallowed up by prehistory’, since Giles and Isa ‘have literally become two primitive figures.’² Yet the novel’s two final words ultimately link English cultural renewal with language: humans, Woolf suggests, will continue to communicate and connect. Such references are also sometimes more playful than foreboding: when Lucy Swithin’s imaginative journey through ‘primeval forest’ is interrupted by her maid, Grace, she looks at her with an expression ‘half meant for a beast in a swamp, half for a maid in a print frock and white apron.’³ The gently comic tone here suggests a tentative optimism: as Julia Briggs puts it, the novel’s ‘dark leitmotifs’ are placed in a ‘comic genre of country-house and village-life fiction.’⁴ This contrast between tone and subject contributes to the novel’s persistent sense of ambiguity.

That ambiguity operates, too, in terms of how the novel’s imagery is to be interpreted. References to prehistoric life may presage the destruction of human civilisation, but as Hill-Miller argues, they also encourage ‘a broad perspective on human life: that human life is only a small part of “life itself”, and that “life itself” will somehow survive even an unprecedented worldwide armed conflict.’⁵ Consequently, she argues, the novel ‘struggles towards and achieves an affirmative vision.’⁶ Alex Zwerdling cautions against reading the novel as an optimistic text in terms of the continuity of English cultural tradition, however. Rather than being an ‘essentially celebratory work affirming unity and continuity’, he argues, it seems at

¹ *Romantic Moderns*, p. 113.

² ‘Fiction, Reality and Prehistory: A Study of *Between the Acts*’, p. 70.

³ *Between the Acts*, p. 8.

⁴ Briggs, Julia, ‘The Novels of the 1930s and the Impact of History’, in Roe, S., and Sellers, S. (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 72-90 (p. 88).

⁵ *A Guide to Virginia Woolf’s Literary Landscapes*, p. 262.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 257.

best uncertain about the survival of the literary and cultural history it documents, as indicated by the gramophone's refrain: '*Dispersed*, it wailed, *Dispersed are we*.'¹ Esty believes there is a political ambivalence at the heart of the text, driven by Woolf's concern that 'it might not be possible to celebrate the right kind of English civilisation without fuelling the wrong kind of British patriotism.'² Nonetheless, the fact that the novel even engages with this difficulty problematises readings of Woolf which cast her as completely resistant to English identity. As Jessica Berman notes, what is possibly Woolf's most celebrated phrase (in *Three Guineas*) seems to advocate a kind of cosmopolitan indifference: "'As a woman I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world.'"³ Yet *Between the Acts* represents a qualified attempt to commemorate Englishness, particularly in terms of literary history, and to weave landscape and the nonhuman into that history. Hence the repeated interruptions, or rather spontaneous contributions, to the pageant: '*For me Shakespeare sang – / (a cow mooed. A bird twittered)*'.⁴ As Harris notes, it is a novel 'passionately concerned with the English language', which sees its cosmopolitan impurity as a strength: in this 'ramble around words', Woolf 'imagined 'Mother English' as a loose woman, whose words kept eloping and mating together unsuitably, royal words with commoners.'⁵ Reed explains that the novel also 'mingles voices from a broad spectrum of British society', demonstrating another facet of Woolf's exploration of marginalisation within the rural world.⁶ It consequently suggests that, in a broad sense, a cosmopolitan outlook is not necessarily incompatible with a (carefully qualified) celebration of English culture.

¹ Zwerdling, Alex, *Virginia Woolf and the Real World* (London: University of California Press, 1986), p. 312; *Between the Acts*, p. 88.

² *A Shrinking Island*, p. 90.

³ *Three Guineas*, p. 234.

⁴ *Between the Acts*, p. 77.

⁵ *Romantic Moderns*, p. 110.

⁶ 'Merging Voices: *Mrs Dalloway* and *No Place on Earth*', p. 128.

This ‘rambling’ element of *Between the Acts* also applies to the novel’s explorations of nomadism and otherness. Miss La Trobe, like Uryen Quirm in *Maiden Castle* and Clarence in *Armed with Madness*, is figured as an ethnically other presence within the English landscape: her ‘deep-set eyes’ and ‘very square jaw’ remind Mrs Bingham of the Tartars.¹ As Southworth argues, Woolf uses such figures to ‘highlight the strangeness that exists at the heart of the British Isles’, reclaiming the English landscape for marginalised, border-crossing figures:

The presence of a nomadic, ‘foreign’ figure at the center of the work heightens the strange and savage quality of the English countryside and of English village life in *Between the Acts*. [...] Miss La Trobe’s figurative homelessness is indicated by her uncertain origins and identity. Her departure at the close of the novel – a heavy suitcase perched on her shoulder, as she takes ‘her voyage away from the shore,’ ‘str[iding] off across the lawn’ – also highlights her homelessness.²

In some ways the antithesis of the ‘rooted’ local, Miss La Trobe reimagines English culture in her pageant-play in a symbolic attempt to claim epistemological value for the nomadic other within the English landscape. Urmila Seshagiri notes the recurring presence of such figures in Woolf’s work, arguing that she seeks to destabilise and subvert hegemonic ideologies of place and belonging: in *Orlando*, for example, ‘the Gypsies lay claim to a premodern genealogy that not only renders Orlando’s own racial continuity insignificant but, by extension, casts aspersions on the very idea of a racially continuous England.’³ The link between nomadism and liminality or transgression in such figures also connects to points made in Section III, regarding the liberating power of urban walking in *Mrs Dalloway* and ‘Street Haunting’.

¹ *Between the Acts*, p. 53.

² ‘George Borrow, Autoethnography, and *Between the Acts*’, pp. 204, 206.

³ *Race and the Modernist Imagination*, p. 183. Jane Garrity cautions against reading Woolf’s work as providing a clear, unproblematic challenge to ethnic prejudice, arguing that Woolf has a ‘racial blindspot, [a] difficulty in thinking outside polarised notions of the primitive and the civilised’ (*Step-Daughters of England*, p. 59).

Woolf's early experiences of the English landscape as a shifting, liminal zone – particularly coastal regions – may underpin, to some degree, this desire to focus upon transgressive or nomadic figures. She can be connected in this respect with Powys characters like *Weymouth Sands*' Gipsy May, living in the marginal zone of Lodmoor. Links to the phantasmal atmosphere of Powys' work are evident in a 1907 diary entry, describing twilight in the Sussex countryside:

There is a certain evening hour [...] when walking is the finest treat [...]. The road is but a blurred grey vapour – & people & things come towards you all distorted & unfamiliar; walking too at a strange quick pace, upon you & past you before you expect it. [...] Happy ecstasies float the mind out into the vague; spur it & seek not to recall it.¹

Woolf relishes the capacity for twilight to soften the borders of reality, particularly when moving through it: people are no longer easily classifiable, slipping out of their fixed roles, and the mind is encouraged to consider the world in new ways. The language and ideas recall Woolf's writings on Cornwall discussed in Section I, and the sense in *Jacob's Room* that '[n]othing settled or stayed unbroken': as in 'A Walk by Night', the transition from dusk to night seems to allow a kind of diffusion, both between people and between the human and nonhuman. Another nomadic element of these writers' texts is their resistance to linear plotting; this is expressed with reference to the pageant in *Between the Acts*: 'Don't bother about the plot: the plot's nothing'; an instruction which might be applied to the novel itself, which focuses on language and other forms of interaction rather than the revelation of a story.² Style, too, is relevant here: Rebecca Walkowitz notes Woolf's 'evasions of syntax, plot and tone that qualify, unsettle, and redirect enduring habits of attentiveness'; these allow

¹ *Travels with Virginia Woolf*, p. 66.

² *Between the Acts*, p. 82. See Southworth, Helen, 'Women and Interruption in *Between the Acts*', in Snaith, A., and Whitworth, M. (eds.), *Locating Woolf: The Politics of Space and Place* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 46-61, for further discussion of this point.

her texts to emphasise ‘transient communities and experiences’.¹ *Between the Acts*’ jumble of voices draws attention to difference and disorder at a formal level.

As with Butts’ use of parataxis, then, Woolf uses form – Walkowitz’s cosmopolitan style – to explore themes of liminality, marginality and nomadism.² As Sizemore argues, Woolf’s ethic of cosmopolitanism is ‘not an uncritical universalism’, but a specific approach that incorporates a strong sense of community.³ In *Between the Acts*, this ‘cosmopolitanism from below’ is located in the countryside, as in Butts’ marginalised regional communities. Harris notes that Woolf is part of a wider movement in the late 1930s which sites the modernist avant-garde within rural England: something which can seem counter-intuitive, since we ‘are used to the idea of progressive thinking emerging from the crucible of the great modern cities’.⁴ As in Lawrence, such communities can be seen as a retreat for marginalised groups from the increasingly militaristic nationalism of hegemonic English culture in the interwar period; it is significant that Woolf’s most explicitly war-centred novel has a rural setting. Helen Wussow links war in both writers’ work with ‘the perspective of the marginalised other’.⁵ Sam See suggests that (as in Butts) there are links with queer sexualities here: Woolf presents ‘a queer social world’ that ‘might fight fascism pacifically by rejecting nationalist motivations.’⁶ William and Isa are part of this world, and both feel threatened by hegemonic power: William is ‘afraid to stick up for his own beliefs – just as she was afraid, of her husband. Didn’t she write her poetry in a book bound like an account book lest Giles might

¹ *Cosmopolitan Style*, p. 82.

² See Drewery, Claire, *Modernist Short Fiction by Women: The Liminal in Katherine Mansfield, Dorothy Richardson, May Sinclair and Virginia Woolf* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), for further discussion of liminality and form in Woolf.

³ ‘Cosmopolitanism from Below in *Mrs Dalloway* and “Street Haunting”’, p. 104.

⁴ *Romantic Moderns*, p. 169.

⁵ *The Nightmare of History*, p. 15. Wussow focuses on connections between Woolf and Lawrence with regard to the First World War, which Woolf ‘observed from her position as a woman, pacifist, and reluctant participant in the events of a patriarchal society’; while Lawrence ‘regarded the war as the death throes of a society in which he was caught as well as the apocalyptic beginnings of a new, promising world order’ (p. 15).

⁶ See, Sam, ‘The Comedy of Nature: Darwinian Feminism in Virginia Woolf’s *Between the Acts*’, *Modernism / Modernity* 17, no. 3 (2010), pp. 639-667 (p. 644).

suspect?’¹ Hill-Miller notes that both William and Miss La Trobe are gay, and thus outsiders.²

For Sizemore, Woolf’s work expresses an ‘affiliation between various splintered identities in various kinds of bodies’, which produces ‘a cosmopolitanism from below and allow[s] for a plurality of identities combined with attentiveness to otherness.’³ These identities incorporate marginalised classes, genders and sexualities; yet *Between the Acts*’ most thorough exploration of marginality comes in its exploration of connections between human and nonhuman animals. Giles, the symbol of patriarchal power opposed to William and Isa, is ‘relieved’ by stamping on a snake, ‘choked with a toad in its mouth.’⁴ However, the novel’s more sympathetic characters are linked with the nonhuman world: Isa, looking at Lucy Swithin, thinks ‘[e]xtinct she must be, since she had lived in the reign of Queen Victoria’; while Mrs Manresa, similarly, is ‘an uncouth, nocturnal animal, now nearly extinct’.⁵ This evokes Macfarlane’s application of an evolutionary concept, ‘ghost species’, to humans who appear to have been ‘out-evolved by their environments’, as animals sometimes are.⁶ Woolf links the extinct prehistoric animals of her novel with these figures, themselves threatened by militarisation and patriarchal hegemony. Woolf’s interest in the epistemological value of imaginatively occupying nonhuman perspectives is evident throughout her work: ‘The Death of the Moth’ (1942) and *Flush*, to give two examples, both take nonhuman animals as the foundation of their narrative explorations. Sultzbach argues that the thrush in *Mrs Dalloway*

¹ *Between the Acts*, p. 46.

² *A Guide to Virginia Woolf’s Literary Landscapes*, pp. 258, 263. Garrity, again, provides a cautioning voice here: arguing that Miss La Trobe’s sexuality is linked to ideologically problematic ends: her play ‘is predicated on ideas of an ancestral English unity and community. Woolf thus aligns the provisionally English lesbian not with racial decline, but with the recuperation of civilization’ (*Step-Daughters of England*, p. 65).

³ ‘Cosmopolitanism from Below in *Mrs Dalloway* and “Street Haunting”’, p. 105.

⁴ *Between the Acts*, p. 89.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 156, 84.

⁶ Macfarlane, Robert, ‘Ghost Species’, *Granta* 102 (<http://www.granta.com/Archive/102/Ghost-Species/Page-1>; accessed 01/05/2013), p. 5.

discussed in Section II is endowed ‘with sentience and an ability to critique the human species.’¹

However, it is in *Between the Acts* that Woolf attempts her most sustained and ambitious exploration of these connections. She does so through a focus on bodily experience, considering the extent to which this reveals aspects of the world and our relation to it that tend to be occluded by cultural assumptions. Woolf hints at the possibility of non-verbal communication in the tentative, fluctuating understandings that exist between her characters when not speaking, as when the audience are waiting for the pageant to begin, collectively feeling that ‘[t]heir minds and bodies were too close, yet not close enough.’² Communication in the novel is a complex entanglement of the physiological and the verbal, with connections between characters continually emerging and dissipating, as in this passage in which Bartholomew, Isabella, Giles and Mrs Manresa are in the garden together, the latter two glancing at each other:

A thread united them – visible, invisible, like those threads, now seen, now not, that unite trembling grass blades in autumn before the sun rises. [...] She looked before she drank. Looking was part of drinking. Why waste sensation, she seemed to ask, why waste a single drop that can be pressed out of this ripe, this melting, this adorable world? Then she drank. And the air round her became threaded with sensation. Bartholomew felt it; Giles felt it. Had he been a horse, the thin brown skin would have twitched, as if a fly had settled. Isabella twitched too. Jealousy, anger pierced her skin.³

Borders between supposedly distinct categories of sensory experience are dissolved. As Mrs Manresa drinks, her physiological sensations appear to take on a life beyond that of her body alone. Communication, Woolf suggests, arises from empathic understandings of others’ emotional and sensual experiences; their recognition itself has a physiological quality, as

¹ ‘The Fertile Potential of Virginia Woolf’s Environmental Ethic’, p. 72.

² *Between the Acts*, p. 60.

³ *Ibid.*, pp. 51-2.

when jealousy ‘pierce[s]’ Isabella’s skin. Significantly, Woolf also suggests that these realms of contact are more accessible to nonhuman animals: if Giles was a horse, we are told, his reception of and response to this sensation would be clearer. As Sultzbach explains, in such passages ‘a more complete understanding of one’s own being is intertwined with an ongoing process of sensory interaction – the larger realm of worldly flesh touching and transforming our boundaries of selfhood.’¹ This interpenetration of sensory categories also reflects the influence of urban experience, as discussed above.

Woolf therefore emphasises continuities between human and nonhuman experience by focusing on the sensory commonalities we share: the ‘vital light’, ‘little or nothing but life’ that she sees in the subject of ‘The Death of the Moth’.² This reflects the persistence of Woolf’s childhood sense of interconnection with the nonhuman world, discussed in Section I. That belief in interconnection is voiced in terms of art in ‘A Sketch of the Past’: Woolf explains it is a ‘constant idea’ of hers that ‘behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we – I mean all human beings – are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art.’ Ultimately, life alone maintains this unity: ‘we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself.’³ It is through engagement with art that we maintain our connections with each other and the world; and while Woolf here limits her pronouncement to ‘all human beings’, her works – as Jocelyn Bartkevicius argues – often ‘challenge the assumption that human life occurs apart from the natural world.’⁴ *Between the Acts* suggests that art can also connect us with the nonhuman. As Emilie Crapoulet notes, her pronouncement can be linked with Lucy Swithin’s musings in particular: ‘Sheep, cows, grass,

¹ ‘The Fertile Potential of Virginia Woolf’s Environmental Ethic’, p. 71.

² Woolf, Virginia, ‘The Death of the Moth’, in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1947), pp. 9-11 (p. 9).

³ ‘A Sketch of the Past’, p. 84.

⁴ Bartkevicius, Jocelyn, ‘Thinking Back Through Our (Naturalist) Mother: Woolf, Dillard, and the Nature Essay’, *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment* 6, no. 1 (1999), pp. 41-50 (p. 41).

trees, ourselves – all are one. [...] And thus [...] all is harmony, could we hear it. And we shall.’¹ The creation of art in the novel becomes a collective activity extending into the nonhuman world: when Miss La Trobe’s pageant seems to be going awry, disrupted by a rising wind which makes the words inaudible, the cows intervene:

Then suddenly, as the illusion petered out, the cows took up the burden. One had lost her calf. In the very nick of time she lifted her great moon-eyed head and bellowed. All the great moon-eyed heads laid themselves back. From cow after cow came the same yearning bellow. The whole world was filled with dumb yearning. It was the primeval voice sounding loud in the ear of the present moment. [...] The cows annihilated the gap; bridged the distance; filled the emptiness and continued the emotion.²

Actual drama within the nonhuman world – the loss of the calf – ‘bridge[s] the distance’, both between the human and nonhuman world, and between ‘nature’ and ‘culture’. Far from being spoiled by this interference, the play gains energy and communicative power from it; the ‘primeval voice’ connects, in some ineffable way, with art and culture. As Cantrell puts it, such events illustrate the ‘ongoing collective activity of making meaning’, an activity that includes the human and nonhuman, given their entanglement; while Westling explains that Woolf ‘posits nonhuman forces and beings as crucial players in the human drama’.³

This collective communicative power is of particular interest regarding birdsong, a form of sound that can be interpreted as music, literal communication, or pure sound. Woolf’s use of birdsong in *Between the Acts* anticipates David Rothenberg’s point that it should not be analysed as the mere communication of information, but as creative expression: ‘if the voice of an animal is not heard as message but as art, interesting things start to happen: Nature is no longer an alien enigma, but instead something immediately beautiful, an exuberant opus with

¹ *Between the Acts*, p. 157. See Crapoulet, Emilie, ‘Voicing the Music in Literature’, *European Journal of English Studies* 13, no. 1 (2009), pp. 79-91 (p. 89).

² *Between the Acts*, p. 126.

³ ‘Virginia Woolf, Modernism, and Place’, p. 44; ‘Virginia Woolf and the Flesh of the World’, pp. 865-66.

space for us to join in.’¹ Woolf’s novel displays an intuitive understanding of this position: birds interact with the gramophone for, example, in ways that simultaneously disrupt the play, and provide an energy that maintains its dramatic power: ‘A waltz, was it? [...] The swallows danced it. Round and round, in and out they skimmed. Real swallows. Retreating and advancing.’² Diane Gillespie argues that Woolf presents a world in which ‘the *bird* and *we* are one with each other and also with an authentic mode of expression,’ while Harriet Blodgett suggests that ‘the rhapsodic birds express the natural vitality of life which art too expresses in its own way’.³ In this way Woolf challenges the nature/culture dichotomy. The nonhuman world is also connected with music in more general ways:

Music wakes us. Music makes us see the hidden, join the broken. Look and listen. See the flowers, how they ray their redness, whiteness, silverness and blue. And the trees with their many-tongued much syllabing, their green and yellow leaves hustle us and shuffle us, and bid us, like the starlings, and the rooks, come together, crowd together, to chatter and make merry while the red cow moves forward and the black cow stands still.⁴

It is not what we normally understand as ‘music’ that creates this sense of unity, but rather a synaesthetic harmony, between colours, birdsong, and the physical movements of the cows. At another point, as the gramophone plays, the ‘view repeated what the tune was saying’, and the cows ‘were saying the same thing to perfection.’⁵ The world that emerges is presented as ‘a work of art’, in which all living things become the words, the music, the ‘thing itself’. As Harris explains, the ‘interruptions’ from nonhuman animals are precisely those moments when the play ‘has its fullest impact and when the audience feels united.’⁶ Hinnov argues that ‘[n]ature’s influence possible reveals some cosmic wholeness that is broader than the human

¹ *Why Birds Sing*, pp. 2-3.

² *Between the Acts*, pp. 163-64.

³ ‘Virginia Woolf and W.H. Hudson, Visionary Ornithologist’, p. 133; Blodgett, Harriet, ‘The Nature of *Between the Acts*’, *Modern Language Studies* 13, no. 3 (Summer 1983), pp. 27-37 (p. 28).

⁴ *Between the Acts*, p. 108.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 120-21.

⁶ *Romantic Moderns*, p. 112.

universe, as well as a yearning for lost unity'.¹ The shuttling between unity and fragmentation (or what Marshall Berman calls 'a unity of disunity') is one of the central themes underpinning *Between the Acts*, illustrating Woolf's continuing concern with the tension or dialectic between belonging and movement.² In its polyphonic cacophony of voices, both human and nonhuman, the novel also demonstrates the influence of cosmopolitan modernity upon Woolf's final evocation of the English landscape.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that Woolf's childhood experiences are central to an understanding of her work: its themes, imagery, form and settings. Like Lawrence, Powys and Butts, Woolf developed her literary approach against a backdrop of distinctive tensions and ambiguities, caught between cosmopolitan modernity and nostalgia for a sense of tradition and belonging. Having the opportunity to develop an intimate sense of connection with two radically different environments – the dreamlike, shifting coastal landscape of St. Ives, and the bustling, vibrant world of London – Woolf developed a sensibility distinctively attentive to the character of places. This is often evident, of course, in the drawing of simple contrasts; but more significantly, this shuttling between environments allows Woolf to draw experiential parallels between them, and to challenge prevalent assumptions about the character of urban and rural experience. Consequently, in Woolf's hands, London acquires qualities usually associated with 'wild' or pastoral landscapes: characters experience the world as animistic, and as the source of a rich weave of intermingled sensory experiences. Moreover, the city is

¹ 'The Nature of Time and Cosmic (Comm)unity in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*', p. 216. Carrie Rohman sees similar ideas underpinning *The Waves*, in which, she argues, 'force, intensity, art and movement connect the human, the animal, the earth, and the cosmos'. Rohman, Carrie, "'We Make Life": Vibration, Aesthetics, and the Inhuman in *The Waves*', in Czarnecki, K, and Rohman, C. (eds.), *Virginia Woolf and the Natural World: Selected Papers from the Twentieth Annual Conference on Virginia Woolf* (Clemson: Clemson University Press, 2011), pp. 12-23 (p. 22).

reimagined as a site that actually reveals our interconnection with others – human and nonhuman – and our environment. Fragmentation, Woolf suggests, is central to the experience of being alive, and the sensory dynamics of the city emphasise this; but they also suggest unexpected connections, since to be fragmented is not necessarily to be isolated. On the other hand, certain developments of Woolf’s era – particularly in transportation – facilitate new ways of perceiving and thinking about rural landscapes. They defamiliarise us to the character of places, through both the experience of movement, and the contrasts and juxtapositions they facilitate. Moreover, Woolf’s fascination with the ways in which the past is embedded and layered in the English countryside reveals this influence; and she also projects this kind of sedimentary understanding of place onto her descriptions of the urban environment.

Early works such as *Jacob’s Room* already illustrate Woolf’s interest in the decentring of human perspectives, and the attempt to see ‘the world without a self’. She explores the fragmentary, shifting character of human identity and suggests that a richer, more epistemologically valuable understanding of place can stem from attempts to occupy new perspectives. Woolf seeks to reimagine the English landscape as a site of nomadic, liminal identities, attempting to defamiliarise accepted understandings of names, categories and borders within the places of her fiction. Her perspectival explorations are also linked with animality: firstly through playful anthropomorphism, connecting her with Powys and Lawrence in particular, and secondly in *Between the Acts*’ sustained attempt to connect human and nonhuman sensory experience. Yet even this, the most rural of Woolf’s novels, reveals the influence of urban cosmopolitan experience in its location of marginalised communities within the English landscape; and works like ‘Street Haunting’ also suggest that Woolf’s emphasis on multi-sensory modes of experience and engagement is profoundly

influenced by urban life. In their different ways, these evocations of place all reach towards a sense of unity, with others and our environment, that reflects Woolf's deep sense of belonging to place; yet at the same time, that unity is inevitably ephemeral, in tension with the entropic pull of fragmentation and liminality. Woolf's understanding of the value of peripatetic movement, juxtaposition and defamiliarisation is a key element in her ability to balance such tensions in her work.

Conclusion: Expanding Modernist Communities

All of the writers covered by this study illustrate what Marshall Berman calls the ‘dual character’ of modernist art and thought: ‘they are at once expressions of and protests against the process of modernisation.’¹ These expressions take various forms, including cosmopolitan style and imagery, a technology-inspired expansion of perspectives, and a defamiliarised understanding of place, facilitated in part by the increasing transience of the period under consideration. Yet while Lawrence, Powys, Butts and Woolf all draw upon modernity in these ways, their work also protests against modernisation, insofar as it threatens their sense of place. Lawrence is the figure in whom the need for resistance or protest feels most acute. As Peter Fjågesund explains, his work expresses a sense of besiegement by developments of his time:

Invading the countryside, the rapidly growing cities devoured its human and natural resources. Human beings were turned into mechanical ants, tending the conveyor belts of dirty, smoky factories and producing standardised goods. A quickly expanding state bureaucracy brought a Kafkaesque sense of public authority, leaving the individual at a loss confronted with the labyrinths of power.²

The growth of heavy industry, mass urbanisation, and the increasing incursions of the state into private life are among the processes which come into direct conflict with the strong sense of place and tradition that marks all of my subjects. As J.R. Watson notes, Lawrence’s early work (particularly *The White Peacock*) demonstrates a ‘lovely openness’ to his home region; he is ‘undoubtedly struggling to express something about the world around him’, and he tells Jessie Chambers of the novel: ‘Everything that I am now, all of me, so far, is in that.’³ At the beginning of the period on which this study has focused, it is still possible for this sense of intimate connection with a specific region to underpin Lawrence’s fiction. From this point

¹ *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*, p. 235.

² *The Apocalyptic World of D.H. Lawrence*, p. 90.

³ ‘D.H. Lawrence and the East Midlands Landscape’, p. 20.

onwards, however, his work does not merely resist ‘the process of modernisation’, but expresses it (albeit in complex, ambivalent ways): his literary consciousness, and the landscapes through which he realises it, expand accordingly. Nonetheless, this close grounding in place remains as a foundation for all of the writers in this study, and their expressions of modernism and modernity are therefore always qualified by an awareness of the potential threats posed by social fragmentation, urbanisation, technology and industrialisation. Lawrence and Butts in particular reveal a deep-seated ambivalence in their responses to these phenomena, while Powys and Woolf’s abilities to reflect self-consciously upon such tensions mean their work is not troubled by contradiction in the same way.

I have argued that the ways in which my subjects use the developments of their time to reimagine relationships with place, even when they are positively disposed towards such developments, are often fraught and problematic. This is evident, for example, in their attitudes to and uses of transportation. Thus, for Woolf car travel facilitates new understandings of the fragmentation of the self, new ways of engaging with place, and a richer understanding of the histories embedded in the landscape; while for Butts it can perform a similar role, but only for certain groups. These initiates, as Scylla puts it in *Armed with Madness*, “live fast and are always having adventures, adventures which are like patterns of another adventure going on somewhere else all the time”¹; they embrace the transience and fragmentation of modernity as a means of accessing the histories and energies of place.¹ This understanding of temporality and place also recalls the timeless and cyclical narratives which Powys’ characters are absorbed into. Yet Butts’ 1924 poem ‘Song to Keep People out of Dorset’ (later called ‘Corfe’) is, she explains in a diary entry, ‘to be sung in a

¹ *Armed with Madness*, p. 31.

car when crossing that county'.¹ Butts sees no contradiction in embracing the new experiences facilitated by technology, while simultaneously railing against the consequences of its democratic power: cars do have the potential to promote new epistemological/perspectival engagements with landscape, but such experiences should be limited to an elite. The contrast between Woolf and Butts on this point brings out some of the ways in which an embrace of modernity, coupled with a strong sense of attachment to place, can be alternately valuable and problematic. In this thesis I have sought to emphasise the presence of these ethical ambiguities and complexities in the writers under consideration.

These authors can be both connected and distinguished by their particular deployments of imagery. Lawrence and Powys, for example, are fascinated by the idea of excavation, whether in Gerald Crich and Philip Crow's mines, or the archaeological work at Maiden Castle. Lawrence uses such imagery to explore the engineering of human nature; while Powys' emphasis tends to be on the sense that such sites contain energies and presences beyond the human. Bodies of water are key images in all four writers, but in a variety of ways: ponds form symbolic narrative centres in *Between the Acts* and *Wolf Solent*, for example; while in Butts and Lawrence, the ocean can function as a realm of nihilistic oblivion beyond human life and culture. At other points in their work – and often in Powys and Woolf – the sea is instead a site of cosmopolitan comingling, whether of species, smells, sounds, temporalities, or metaphysical realms. Trees are another central source of imagery: in Lawrence, Butts and Woolf, these are connected to childhood, often in traumatic ways; they are imaginatively endowed with sentience and/or language, functioning as symbolic guardians of the landscape; and forests can function as metaphysical or temporal portals. For Lawrence and Butts, such portals tend to carry with them a sense of a clear divide between

¹ *The Journals of Mary Butts*, p. 206.

worlds; Powys and Woolf, on the other hand, often prefer to convey this sense through images of twilight murkiness, which suggest a permeable, diffuse boundary. I have argued that such differences in the deployment of superficially similar imagery reflect these authors' particular ideological sensibilities, particularly with regards to the social, cultural, industrial and technological changes of the era.

For Powys and Butts, the need to retain a sense of connection with English place, while developing a literary approach which expresses their experience of modernity, takes the form of an animistic reinvigoration of the landscape: as Esty puts it, both writers use protagonists 'lately returned from the zone of continental modernism', who become initiated (or reinitiated) into 'the fierce, uncanny power of their own terrain'.¹ If these currents are less pronounced in Woolf, this perhaps reflects her relative lack of anxiety regarding the threats posed by modernity; although in her work too, the English landscape is revitalised by a sense of nonhuman presences. These represent one of the ways in which all four authors expand the possibilities of narrative perspective, through decentring or entirely removing the single human point of view. The modernist novel, as Pericles Lewis notes, experiments with approaches including a 'generalised projection of a collective consciousness' and 'the use of multiple perspectives.'² Jessica Berman, similarly, argues that a 'formal emphasis on partial or incomplete perspectives' may be what separates 'modernist texts from their realist equivalents – at least so far as the construction of community is concerned.' Modernism is thus associated with an approach that 'decentres belonging and challenges commonplace notions of the universal political subject.'³

¹ *A Shrinking Island*, p. 118.

² *Modernism, Nationalism, and the Novel*, pp. 10, 43-44.

³ *Modernist Fiction, Cosmopolitanism and the Politics of Community*, pp. 20, 22.

This development of narrative techniques which emphasise community over individuality is a recurring characteristic of the texts analysed in this study, particularly Woolf's work: *Mrs Dalloway*, as Donna Reed notes, creates a 'community of intersubjectivity', in which 'active, authentic, and sympathetic voices' commingle.¹ Esty links Powys and Woolf in terms of their use of 'mobile shifts of perspective [...] to indicate the presence of a deeper communal viewpoint'; and I have argued that, in all four writers, these communities are expanded to incorporate the nonhuman world.² Their texts move beyond anthropocentrism – the tendency, as Mary Midgley explains, to see humans as placed 'at the absolute, objective centre of everything' – by exploring the perspectives of nonhuman animals and the atmosphere of place.³ Rosemary Sumner argues that these developments have antecedents in Hardy: in *Tess*, for example, he brings into the field at Flintcomb Ash the 'strange birds from behind the North Pole' which have 'witnessed scenes of cataclysmal horror in inaccessible polar regions': Sumner notes that these birds 'have observed sights beyond human capability. Hardy insists that no human has ever seen what those birds have seen.'⁴ Interwar modernism develops these ideas by suggesting that nonhuman perspectives can extend into geographical, temporal and metaphysical realms beyond the commonly accepted parameters of human experience.

As Jessica Berman notes, the legacies of modernism remain the subject of ongoing cultural debates, and recent work upon the cosmopolitan character of the movement suggests that the 'future of modernism, or at least one of modernism's futures, may very well be community'; I want stress the participation of the nonhuman in that community.⁵ Another ongoing

¹ 'Mrs Dalloway and No Place on Earth', p. 133.

² *A Shrinking Island*, p. 68.

³ Midgley, Mary, 'The End of Anthropocentrism?', in *Philosophy and the Natural Environment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 103-112 (p. 104).

⁴ *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, p. 307; *A Route to Modernism*, p. 160.

⁵ *Modernist Fiction, Cosmopolitanism and the Politics of Community*, p. 202.

reassessment emphasises the need for a broader definition of modernism, and in this respect too I have argued that the four writers under consideration are of relevance: in different ways, all are marginalised figures (Woolf and Butts as women; Powys in his focus upon rural life, and his complex national identity; and Lawrence in his working-class roots). These marginalised identities may be linked to their empathic connections with the nonhuman world. Their particular forms of modernist innovation also reflect their distinctive socio-cultural identities: all four writers' work is marked by the desire to challenge temporal boundaries, incorporating a deep engagement with the past into modernism; and their literary experiments – Powys' emphasis on atmosphere, for example – are often subtle rather than audacious. They also collectively challenge the idea of modernism as a primarily metropolitan movement, stressing the role of rural landscape in their literary approaches, and questioning polarised ideas of urban/rural experience, style and imagery.

Collectively, these characteristics also suggest links between modernist explorations of place and the emergence, in recent decades, of literary approaches that transgress generic, geographical and temporal borders in more sustained ways; the exploration of such links could be the basis of future research. In some respects, these authors can be categorised as psychogeographers: as Owen Hatherley explains, for writers like Iain Sinclair and Peter Ackroyd, this 'has come to refer to an archaeological, vaguely occult approach to the city,' which 'is walked through at random, the rich historical associations leading to recondite, occasionally critical chains of association and reflections on the nebulous spirit of certain areas.'¹ The sense of a sedimentary temporal layering of the metropolitan environment echoes that seen in Lawrence, Butts and Woolf; while the nomadic, associative approach to movement through the city recalls Woolf's 'Street Haunting'. Furthermore, the undermining

¹ Hatherley, Owen, *A Guide to the New Ruins of Great Britain* (London: Verso, 2010), p. 122.

of urban/rural, human/nonhuman and artificial/natural distinctions is common to the writers in this study, and again anticipates more recent literature. W.G. Sebald's *Vertigo* (1990), for example, imagines traffic noise as 'the new ocean [...] the waves roll in over the length and breadth of our cities [...] [and] it is out of this din that the life is being born which will come after us and will spell our gradual destruction'.¹ Compare Bernard's sense in *The Waves* that the "growl of traffic might be any uproar – forest trees or the roar of wild beasts."² The intimations of a posthuman world in Sebald – prompted by metropolitan life – also echo Lawrence and Woolf's occasionally apocalyptic urban imagery.

Following Richard Mabey's *The Unofficial Countryside* (1973), texts including Michael Symmons Roberts and Paul Farley's *Edgelands* (2011), and Robert Macfarlane's *The Wild Places* (2007), emphasise wildness within the built environment: Macfarlane tells us it is 'there in the margins, interzones and rough cusps of the country [...] weaved with the human world'.³ Such approaches to place are foreshadowed by interwar modernism both in terms of themes and form: hence Jerome McGann's point that Powys' use of 'digression, polyphony, improbable events, and [...] studied meandering' anticipates Sebald.⁴ The nomadic explorations of marginality and liminality evident in the subjects of my thesis have an afterlife in such figures: for Sebald in *The Rings of Saturn* (1995), an exploration of the Suffolk coast facilitates the imaginative interconnection of disparate geographical and historical points; while for Sinclair in *London Orbital* (2002), adventure is no longer found in 'scrambling over the Andes or discovering rare plants', but in such things as 'a few shards of

¹ Sebald, W.G., *Vertigo* (trans. Hulse, M.; London: Vintage, 2002), p. 63.

² *The Waves*, p. 73.

³ Mabey, Richard, *The Unofficial Countryside* (London: Pimlico, 1999); Farley, Paul, and Symmons Roberts, Michael, *Edgelands: Journeys Into England's True Wilderness* (London: Vintage, 2012); *The Wild Places*, p. 227.

⁴ 'Impossible Fiction', p. 183.

broken Roman pottery in a display case at the Clacket Lane Service Station'.¹ In these works, an attentiveness to the local is informed by a new awareness of global and temporal interconnection, one which has roots in the broadening of perspectives seen in interwar modernism. The cosmopolitanism of modernity, Rebecca Walkowitz argues, 'trouble[s] the distinction between local and global'; hence her analysis of modernist authors alongside Sebald, who 'enhances and also disables local points of view: enhances, because he shows the global networks in which even the most local experiences participate, and disables, because he suggests that those networks change what local experiences are.'² The writers under consideration therefore initiate threads of literary exploration which continue to be developed across generic boundaries. Perhaps their most significant shared characteristic in doing so is their powerful yet transient engagement with place. As Ella Westland notes of Lawrence, these writers strive to create 'that paradoxical modern entity, a temporary home.' This kind of 'truly felt but intermittent and interrupted engagement' with place, she suggests, may be the utmost that figures caught up in Marshall Berman's 'maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal' can achieve.³ As I have argued, however, it has the potential to enrich our relations with the nonhuman world in complex ways.

¹ Sebald, W.G., *The Rings of Saturn* (trans. Hulse, M.; London: Vintage, 2002); Sinclair, Iain, *London Orbital* (London: Penguin, 2003), p. 387.

² *Cosmopolitan Style*, pp. 6, 2.

³ 'D.H. Lawrence's Cornwall', p. 281; *All That is Solid Melts Into Air*, p. 15.

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