

Anaesthetic Modernism

by

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B.A., University of British Columbia, 2012

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I acknowledge and respect the Lək'wəḡən (Songhees and Esquimalt) Peoples on whose territory the university stands, and the Lək'wəḡən and W̱SÁNEĆ Peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

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Abstract

Anglophone literary modernism has often been discussed in terms of its various attempts to shock its readership back to their senses, to reinvigorate a culture too used to convention. The notorious and persistent sentiments forwarded by Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis—to blast such a stagnant culture into a frenzy of radical creativity by embracing progress and cutting away stale traditions—are both familiar and useful touchstones. However, against the view of modernism as a strong, bombastic attempt to shock people back to their senses, my dissertation draws attention to a contrary understanding of anglophone literary modernism and defines it in terms of its pervasive *anaesthetics*: a mode of formal experimentation that takes anaesthesia and insensitivity as its key aesthetic elements. Anaesthetic modernism pertains to the multitude of experiences of insensitivity, numbness, and disembodiment that also made up a significant strain of modernist creation. Anaesthetic modernism connects the formal, stylistic, and thematic with the sensory, affective, and bodily, thus embracing aesthetics on broad terms and emphasizing the connections among content, form, and feeling in art. In this dissertation, I examine major works by Virginia Woolf, Malcolm Lowry, and Mulk Raj Anand that all represent anaesthetization, but do so in very different ways, ranging from how age, social expectations, and even language cut us off from direct sensory experiences, to self-medicating with alcohol and coping with the existential fallout of being suspended between cultures, to the defining limitations one's social status can enact on one's sensorium and identity. I weave literary criticism and close reading together with biological definitions of insensitivity and the embodied cognition model of consciousness in hopes of expanding the terrain of anglophone literary modernist studies.

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Introduction

Even in the wake of the New Modernist Studies and the uptake of “weak” theory,¹ literary modernism is still often framed according to its aesthetics of shock and upheaval, revolution and excitement. The notorious and persistent sentiments forwarded by Pound and Lewis—to blast a stagnant culture into a frenzy of radical creativity by embracing progress and cutting away stale traditions—are both familiar and useful touchstones; anthologies abound with analogues to what Michael Levenson calls “the spectacle of modernism,” which describes the foundations of modernism as a series of “shock effect[s]” meant to “revive the power of artistic vision” in a “wide terrain of...provocation” (3-5). Even if the “definitional proliferation” of modernism has been effectively embraced (Vadde 2018), modernist aesthetics continue to be seen as the realm of shock (Parkes 2011), speed (Duffy 2009), and muscularity (Lusty and Murphet 2014), which then tend to eclipse—or even contradict—an equally pervasive trend in modernist aesthetics that is the topic of my dissertation. As against the view of modernism as a strong, bombastic attempt to shock people back to their senses, I argue for a contrary understanding of anglophone literary modernism in terms of its pervasive *anaesthetics*: a mode of formal experimentation that takes anaesthesia and insensitivity as its key aesthetic elements.

¹ In “Weak Theory, Weak Modernism,” Paul St. Amour gives an overview of the emergence of weak theory up to the date of publication. He starts by predicting the assumptions about modernism and strength: “Surely weakness is modernism’s obverse—injured, low-energy, and acquiescent—all the cloying orthodoxy that modernism would shock its way out of. Modernism is the production of aesthetic strength through iconoclasm and strenuous innovation. It is strong people exhibiting strength” (n.p.). He then goes on to explain that weak theory is meant to “advance debates about post-critique by moving past some of the brittle binarisms—paranoid versus reparative, depth versus surface, close versus distant, critique versus description—on which those debates run aground. We do so by shifting the focus of the debate to *weak theory*, a loose parcel of concepts and heuristics that mostly antedate post-critique, and only some of which have since become associated with it” and, further, he suggests that weak theory “takes the view that a post-Nietzschean weakening in the philosophies of history and aesthetics was a condition of modernism’s emergence, at least in the European context, as a cultural phenomenon. Modernism, by these lights, is made both necessary and possible in the west by theory’s weakening” (n.p.).

Anaesthetic narratives proliferate everywhere we look: Eliot’s “patient etherized upon a table;” Woolf’s use of free indirect discourse to represent her characters who struggle simply to feel, let alone express, the immediacy of their lives; Remarque’s shell-shocked front-line soldiers; Bowen’s insulated characters who strive not to notice the changes accompanying modernity all around them; Faulkner’s obfuscating perspectives and unannounced chronological leaps; Richardson’s use of stream of consciousness that entangles the narrative in Miriam’s idiosyncratic—and often limited—perspective; and Lowry’s befuddling representation of the perpetually inebriated Consul exemplify the pervasive manifestations of numbness and insensitivity. For these authors, forms of anaesthesia fundamentally shape and infuse their art; the sheer variety of examples shows just how prevalent numbness and insensitivity are in modernist literature. As these examples show, anaesthetic traits can come in many shapes and sizes and are not necessarily tied to substances causing numbness; rather, anaesthetic modernism embraces this diversity by attending to the full range of anaesthetic experiences and the ways that anglophone literary modernists explored, captured, and represented these.

Modernity is, perhaps, a convenient label for a very complex amalgamation of geographic coordinates and time scales. Without attempting to define these here, it is safe to say that modernity, in its many forms, opened the doors to a wide range of experiences and corresponding affects, which Julie Taylor addresses in *Modernism and Affect*:

It is well documented that modern life produced new shocks, stresses and excitements; new forms of tedium, distress and disappointment – an affective gamut exemplified by figures such as the innervated factory worker, the shell-shocked war veteran and the fervent revolutionary. We are also accustomed to thinking about the contested relationship between the historical phenomenon of modernity and the politics and aesthetics of modernism in broadly affective terms: the modernist art work might be understood as a space for processing or registering new traumas and new delights as a vehicle to jolt its reader out of quotidian modes of perception; as a mournful or melancholic response to loss or a hopeful indexing of progress. As readers of modernism, we routinely find ourselves affected by its challenging forms; its capacities to bore, to frustrate, and to please. (1)

I think it important to stress that anaesthetic modernism does not, and cannot, claim to have an unbounded scope; however, I also want to acknowledge the diversity of influences that could potentially lead to states of insensitivity or numbness, and in turn, the twinned diversity of aesthetic responses that anglophone literary modernists represented in their art. Even in accounts of modernism that have this capacious and flexible scope, though, the idea that readers be jolted “out of quotidian modes of perception” is still entrenched. Taylor expands this jolting to account for experiences as different as “traumas and new delights,” but I hope to examine the flip side of this coin and believe that anaesthetic narratives—that process or register numbed, lulled, disembodied, or buffered modes of perception—deserve attention in their own right.

Anglophone literary modernism also happens to coincide with the rise in use of anaesthetics in the medical realm, and thus the moral and ethical conundrums surrounding anaesthesia were being worked out alongside the aesthetics of modernism. In *Anaesthesia and the Practice of Medicine: Historical Perspectives*, Keith Sykes and John Bunker trace the history of anaesthetics, identifying several interesting pressure points in the medical uses of anaesthetics. Before anaesthetics were widely culturally accepted, there was a certain stigma about numbing pain—as if pain was somehow a crucial aspect of functioning bodies: “It was also believed, apparently by many doctors, that pain was ‘a central part of the process of life, that “the annihilation of sensation itself impairs the health of the organs of the body,” and “that anesthesia, whatever its form, is an assault upon vital functions”’ (Sykes and Bunker 93-4). Anaesthesia was only just beginning to mature in the late 1800s and early 1900s, and the biological/medical mechanisms were only partially understood during this period. It is no wonder that there was a healthy sense of skepticism towards something that affected one’s senses—one’s most stable touchstones for navigating through life. Beyond the medical discourse, too, there was a prevailing sense that pain was part of the Christian model of suffering—one that was necessary to atone for one’s sins (Sykes and Bunker 94). To remove one’s pain was to

remove one's ability to suffer properly. While some contemporary thinkers, such as the American Pragmatists, were exploring the importance of the senses in our conception of mind, there was also a prevailing dualist sense that mind and body were fundamentally distinct—and for this reason, the mind and its faculties were often considered of a higher order than those of the body. To suggest that the body cannot be separated from the mind, then, brought up fundamental existential questions. Seen in this light, there is a profundity to the act of numbing one's pain—whether through medical means or otherwise, especially considering tropes of whole populations having to numb themselves to the overwhelm of modernity. In due time, of course, anaesthesia became an accepted and important component of medical treatment, something we often take for granted today, but its ethical and existential ramifications remained a fascination throughout the modernist period.

Anaesthetic modernism connects the formal, stylistic, and thematic with the sensory, affective, and bodily, thus embracing aesthetics on broad terms and emphasizing the connection between content, form, and feeling in art. Anaesthesia implies a lack, as inputs that are usually present—the stimuli registered by one's senses—are missing. This leads to one stream of my study, which deals with narratives representing this lack. However, as a second concern, I will consider the possibility that a loss or lack of sensitivity may, in turn, produce new experiences, including sensory ones. To do this, I will try to reformulate the binarism of feeling/insensitivity into a more complex, constellated set of experiential possibilities: like silence in music or empty space in a painting, even a lack of feeling can produce an array of aesthetic responses—including instances when insensitivity gives an opportunity to attend to otherwise unfelt or unnoticed experiences, thoughts, or feelings. But insensitivity can also lead to forms of disconnection and disembodiment, which can then lead to solipsistic echo chambers and a loosened grip on reality or limited experiences wherein one must live with buffers in place.

My dissertation employs three general methods: Firstly, I research the current scholarship on feeling and the senses in modernist criticism, tracing these roots back to sources that were either concurrent with or even inspired anaesthetic modernism. Historicizing anaesthetics will be part of a greater project to better understand the experience of the various “sensescapes” that influenced the publics of the era. This is a term borrowed from Constance Classen, the editor of *A Cultural History of the Senses in the Age of Empire*, who analyzes some of the key changes in industrial societies that directly influenced the ways these societies were experienced: “Such ‘sensescapes’ demarcated social and spatial zones and gave the era its particular feel. Changes in the sensescape, in turn, publicly signaled the passing of old ways of life and the beginning of new” (6). The concept of the sensescape helps conceptualize the connection between people and their environment—and how there is a reciprocal relationship in which each influence each other. For example, “The technological and industrial developments of the century brought a mechanical dimension to life at the same time as they created new sensory worlds. For the working classes the most dramatic way in which this transition was experienced was within the machine-driven factory” (Classen 12). Kate Flint identifies the senses as a crucial part of our histories, blurring the boundaries between cumulative individual experiences and those shared by larger groups. She explains that “the senses connect us not just to our present, but to our pasts...they are not merely used as organs through which to respond to the present moment, but that they are a potent source of material memories” (Flint 26). Considering how popular discourses characterized—and were possibly preconditioned to understand—anaesthetics will provide a background from which I will consider how modernists complied with, complicated, or confounded these beliefs. This provides crucial context for exploring modernist responses, and especially for understanding how existing conceptions of agency, and even language, play into the cultures, ethics, and biopolitics of feeling.

Secondly, I reconsider the inner workings and implications of the notorious formal and stylistic experimentation of literary modernism in an attempt to open new critical space that reads against the grain of “strong” or “high” modernism and its legacy. Rather than assuming that these works produce or are motivated by exclusively “shocking” effects, my approach aims to reckon with representations of delayed, prolonged, or obstructed sensory experience. The formal qualities of a novel reflect certain sensibilities or sensitivities, as language is always connected to the ways the somatosensory system processes information. Mark Johnson, a pioneer of the embodied mind model of consciousness, suggests that “The ways we notice patterns and discriminate objects will be the result of the habits of perception, thought, and action that we have acquired through our previous experience, given our bodily and neural makeup” (45). This attention to form is essential to any argument anchored in claims about aesthetics, and constitutes the primary terrain on which I will challenge the current critical orthodoxy regarding modernism’s aesthetics. However, I will try to avoid the prescriptive and totalizing tendencies that formalist methodologies (i.e., the New Critics and some neo-formalists, like Caroline Levine) have historically developed by anchoring my work in close reading, which will ensure that my larger framework is tempered with a localized and sensitive practice. Unlike the close reading promoted by the New Critics, I hope to avoid a teleological model of analysis by focussing on aesthesis as a process that demands active attention. My dissertation aims to open up this new terrain in modernist studies by concentrating on narratives that are formally shaped by anaesthesia and works that thematize anaesthesia as a consequence of – perhaps the only rational response to – the shocks of modernity. Anaesthetic narratives may present formal difficulties, as they strive to find ways to represent non-normative sensory functioning. Difficulty, a modernist hallmark, is, according to Leonard Diepeveen,

an odd aesthetic experience; using their whole bodies, people react viscerally to difficulty, often with anxiety, anger, and ridicule. The public debate about difficulty and its scandalousness, then, was much more than the story of elitism and middle-class anti-intellectualism. It was also a story of anger, of pleasure, and of the body. Moreover, those

affective responses are enmeshed in the standard ways of conceptualizing difficulty and profoundly influence how difficulty shaped modern culture. (xv)

Diepeveen's work is particularly useful in providing nuance to the intellectual elitism that is often part and parcel of discussions of difficulty—which often center on Eliot's assertion that “We can only say that it appears likely that poets...must be difficult. Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results. The poet must become more and more comprehensive, more allusive, more indirect, in order to force, to dislocate if necessary, language into his meaning” (289). Difficulty is not a product of erudition for erudition's sake, but rather one possible trait of works that attempt to comprehend such “variety and complexity.” Difficulty is related to the reader's expectations, which in turn relate to norms: thus, narratives dealing with what are perceived to be non-normative states are almost by definition likely to be deemed difficult—if not in form, then possibly in content. It is, therefore, fitting that anaesthetic narratives be part of this conversation. This is not a defining quality of anaesthetic narratives, though, as it is possible that they can be designed to capture a narrative of the everyday that does not challenge the reader outright on formal or content-related fronts.

Finally, my dissertation builds on recent work in “The New Modernist Studies,” “weak theory,” and Nicholas Mirzoeff and Susan Best's claims about how anaesthetics fits, if not defines, our understanding of modernity. While anaesthetic modernism offers a contrary understanding of modernist aesthetics, it does not aim to foreclose or diminish other possible critical logics; indeed, it aims to remain an “open” system: “‘Strong’ readings become closed readings when the hermeneutics of suspicion operate as if they are hermetically sealed,” argues Madelyn Detloff,

That is, if, after the ‘aha’ moment (per Sedgwick) of unveiling the unseemly ideological underpinnings of a particular narrative, the wax ring of right thinking is applied and the interpretation is sealed. Reparative reading, in contrast, is subject to spoilage and rot because it is imperfectly sealed, but has the advantage of being available to those who need

sustenance because it is open (and out on the streets?) rather than carefully preserved on a shelf somewhere (n.p.).

Anaesthetic modernism is aligned with reparative reading in that it engages with anaesthesia, or sensory alterity, not as a symptom with definite causal diagnoses, but as a mode of existence and aesthetics in its own right—and aims to attend to this wherever it arises: on the streets, in the home, or in the trenches. There is no privileged state from which to judge all others; indeed, insensitivity—like empty space or silence—may be an absence, but it is also a source of aesthetic value that may provoke the whole gamut of feelings—even intense ones.

Aesthetics is a term with a complicated history and a number of possible definitions. Following Paul Macneill, when I invoke “anaesthesia,” I am starting with the sense that derives from *an-* (without) and *aesthetikos* (sense perception), which I take as a means to explore the modernist sensorium, focusing on the varying causes, manifestations, and degrees of anaesthesia represented therein. This sense of *aesthetikos* is the more ancient definition, originating in Greek philosophy and discussed at length by Aristotle, and concerns sensory perception and the experience thereof; however, *aesthetikos* also sits at the root of the philosophical study of art (or “the beautiful”)—as originating in Enlightenment Philosophy (coined by Baumgarten in 1735)—and which has evolved to denote either the appreciation of art (a topic too large to discuss here) or a way of talking about the formal qualities of a work of art (e.g., “an aesthetics of...”). As far as the sensory implications of an-aesthesia are concerned, it is important to note that anaesthesia is also the core term for what can include variations of any of the following: analgesia (alleviation or prevention of pain), paralysis (various forms of muscle relaxation), amnesia (a partial or total loss of memory), and unconsciousness. While I start with the medical definitions of these, I also recognize that each state has aesthetic potential and can circulate in artistic spheres (as devices within a text and between text and reader) as well as socio-political spheres (as historicizing/reifying). Anaesthetic modernism is

located at the intersection of these definitions, thus studying the “an-aesthetic” also entails attending to the “difficult” (Diepeveen), disorienting, and unconventional aspects of art as ways of reimagining its definitions and the foundations upon which it is judged and experienced—and, correspondingly, of recalibrating one’s own sensibilities and, in Rancière’s terms, “the distribution of the sensible.”

One of the concepts that underpins much of anaesthetic modernism is “defamiliarization,” and especially the theorizing that accompanies it. Russian Formalist, and modernist contemporary, Viktor Shklovsky has famously framed modern art as invigorating—a break from the necessarily dulling effects of everyday life: “If we start to examine the general laws of perception, we see that as perception becomes habitual, it becomes automatic. Thus, for example, all of our habits retreat into the area of the unconsciously automatic” (8). So-called defamiliarization is rooted in sensory perception, wrapped up in the body, and explicitly counteracts the “automatic” habits that slowly disconnect or buffer people from perceiving much in routine actions; the automatization of life forms a glaze over conscious experience, which disconnects one from one’s senses—the unconscious enacting of anaesthesia. With the accretion of rote activity and habitualization, this glaze hardens, so to speak, particularly in service to one’s ability to perform life’s tasks more efficiently, without having to deal with the constant influx of sensations (and also possibly as a defence mechanism against overwhelming stimuli). In fact, it could be said that a reliance on some form of sensory depression is a condition of modernity, as we have to learn to attend to fewer sensations or risk being overwhelmed.

Shklovsky’s “automatization of life” actually predicts the embodied cognition notion in that he recognizes how the “over-automatization of an object...permits the greatest economy of perceptive effort” (778), which aligns with the idea, in embodied cognition, that habits, routines, and norms tend to form grooves in our experiences that shape who we are, and that we cannot experience things but with our whole bodies. If our worlds are often operating as efficiently as

possible, or even just to cope with daily life—due to our material, socio-cultural, political, or other circumstances—then our bodies are trained to tune out the senses in exchange for these other benefits. This understanding of perceptual sensitivity is one of the foundational components to anaesthetic modernism, especially in illuminating the close tie between the aesthetic and aesthesis in relation to the ongoing functions of the modern sensorium. In this sense, art has always provided a way to cut through, or bypass, this buffer by structuring narrative and giving it an alien perspective—in short, “defamiliarization is found almost everywhere form is found” (11). On one hand, deviations from these “habits” can stand out and provide a new perspective—thus encouraging aesthetic innovation. On the other, though, we can extrapolate that it is not only the utterly normal that desensitizes: I argue that non-normative “habits” can also become so entrenched that they supplant the old norms: alcoholism, distorted conceptions of reality caused by trauma or repressive cultural norms, disgusting sensations caused by pollution, or even the inhumane conditions of factory work are possibly better conceived of as external forces that stretch the definition of the quotidian and may cause a similar automatization forcing us to question how clear-eyed and sensitive we really are to the world around us. Discussing how aestheticism (a modernist precursor that is best known for its dictum “art for art’s sake”) often focused on non-normative states of being, Paul Sheehan explains that, for example, “Illness is an aestheticist state of mind because of its ties to *aesthesis*. Infirmity affects how the world is perceived, and what follows from perception, which is sensation. When we are ill, our sensory receptors become hyperacute, particularly those sensitive to aesthetic impressions” (69). Alternatively, a healthy body tends not to assert itself, functioning nearly free from the altered sensitivity accompanying illness. Anaesthetic modernism does not necessarily share the same affinities that aestheticism does, but it is attentive to both how states of being affect one’s experiences and how art deals with such states.

Broadly speaking, anaesthesia can be induced in three ways: by the unconscious automatization of perception, which Shklovsky speaks of; by some kind of narcotic substance; or by an overwhelming or traumatizing event. Thus, Shklovsky's definition of defamiliarization does not fit cleanly with all forms of anaesthesia, as it relates specifically to the process of coming to one's senses from a state of insensitivity caused by quotidian habituation. In fact, Shklovsky's assertion that through art "one may recover the sensation of life" is, in fact, problematic—both generally and for anaesthetic modernism (9). It seems as though Shklovsky is an initiate in the cult of "the new," where only continuous novelty has any aesthetic value. I argue that it is possible to have aesthetic experiences that arise from narratives that are monotonous, lulling, repetitive, or otherwise perceptually limiting; while these can often fit within the framework that Shklovsky provides, they also broaden the definition of "the sensation of life" to include anaesthetic states. If the goal of art is to "make one feel things, to make the stone *stony*...to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known," then it seems to me that defamiliarization is less about shock and reinvigoration than it is about renewed attention to one's perceptual reality—and, barring complete unconsciousness, anaesthetic modernism maintains this focus on one's sensorium and apperception through the gamut of sensorial states and levels of sensitivity (9). In other words, anaesthetic modernism is inspired by Shklovsky's conceptual framework, while also defamiliarizing this very framework to open it up to a new range of experiences and states.

Anaesthetics allows us to question what happens when one *must make sense of* truncated, fallible sensory input. Conscious experience is ongoing, and it is a process that involves constant feedback from the whole body; thus, even when some part of the somatosensory network is inhibited, conscious experience marches on. And as neuroscientist Antonio Damasio (2005) has famously shown, the reasoning centres of our brains are intimately connected with our somatosensory and emotional centres, meaning that our consciousness is truly shaped, and

experienced, by our bodies. Thus, just as a stimulus incites a reaction, absent or partial bodily information similarly influences experience: there is a gap in our experience that we are forced to reckon with, and which can produce new perspectives and forms of experience. From within this gap arises affect: “visceral forces beneath, alongside, or generally *other than* conscious knowing...that can...suspend us...or that can even leave us overwhelmed by the world’s apparent intractability” (Seigworth and Gregg, 1). Similar to our senses, affect is always happening, but we often don’t notice it unless it bursts forth. To put it plainly, we are intimately familiar with affect, but often take it for granted unless it upsets us. Sometimes a state of insensitivity can alert us to, or even originate, affect that we would not otherwise experience.

While the exact nature of affect, and the ways that it relates to or manifests for, the characters or the reader, is a topic of much debate (most significantly, affect is difficult to talk about in literature because everyone is liable to experience or interpret affect differently; it is reasonable to suggest that there will common tendencies regarding affect, though, and it is also such a fundamental human experience that it needs to be discussed), it is clear that affect studies have made substantial inroads with modernist scholarship and that this is a field that is here to stay—not least because of the developments of the New Modernist Studies and increasing gravity of “weak theory.” In particular, affect offers a site at which the text becomes embodied, and thus gives us ground on which to consider how human experience shaped, and still infuses, these texts. As David James has suggested:

[It] now seems both timely and necessary to broaden the compass for registering unpredictably coalescing affects in modernist writing – negative and reparative, disconsolate and ameliorative – so as to facilitate more accommodating accounts of modernist representations of felt experience. One segment of this inquiry will show how stylistic innovations belonging to the modernist era and to fiction closer to our own illuminate the ethical and epistemic valences of affective representation. (132)

Perhaps the most important reason for studying affect is that, in it, there are always traces of former times and places—and even lives—inhabiting the pages.

Rather than shocking us to our senses, narratives that induce/mimic anaesthesia “suspend” readers in the aesthetic moment, where “visceral,” extra-conscious forms of knowing mingle with forms of artistic production, ultimately bringing about a new “defamiliarization” that forces one to undo the automatization of perception by disconnecting one from one’s senses (Shklovsky, 8-9). In other words, anaesthetic modernism may be the other side of the same coin of Shklovsky’s defamiliarization. Interestingly, there is a conundrum in certain forms of literary criticism that has historically been seen as counterproductive to reader-response criticism, but which anaesthetic modernism recontextualizes. As Wolfgang Iser explains, “The effectiveness of the work depends on the participation of the reader, but explanations arise from (and also lead to) detachment; they will therefore dull the effect, for they relate the given text to a given frame of reference, thus flattening out the new reality brought into being by the fictional text” (10). What if modernism, arising at a time when English literature was institutionalized and criticism was flourishing amongst high-brow readerships, has always built in a metacritical examination, even embodiment, of this very problem? Language always marks a distance from sensation and experience, and elaborate and long-winded explanations only emphasize this fact, so I attempt to show how this same structure of detachment is exploited by modernist authors to critique cultural norms—and even the novel itself.

An often-overlooked aspect of affective studies is that the affects within a narrative do not always align perfectly with the form from which they emerge. Thus, there is always the possibility of a tension here; as James explains of *To the Lighthouse*:

[S]tyle isn’t simply emotionally mimetic of plot; rather, style has an affective plot of its own to convey, one that wrestles with the pain of events without ever suggesting that aesthetic renditions of loss offer adequate or even acceptable consolation. As readers, we too have to navigate this discrepancy, whereby our admiration of the lyrical force of a novel like *To the Lighthouse* may yield a kind of intellectual uplift that’s held in tension with our sorrowful absorption in shattering events. (135)

This affective dissonance can have profound implications, opening up multiple layers that can work together, against each other, or even as different “versions” of a story—so to speak. Anaesthetic

modernism is particularly interested in form-affect manifestations that force the reader to confront any of the ways the text embodies or enacts anaesthesia. To put a finer point on this process, I again follow James:

And in pursuing that kind of thinking-through-form, what do we make of modernist works that require us to become peculiarly aware of the distance between the emplotment of emotion and our feelings about its expression – the distance between those affecting experiences being relayed and the reader’s alternating degrees of absorption and alienation, attachment and recoil? (137)

This often-hidden valence of affect studies seems to be an interesting parallel of the way that conscious experience does not always align with sensory information (or the lack thereof). In other words, the disjunctive or distancing potential between a text and its affective forces is an understudied terrain that anaesthetic modernism is sensitive to.

Moreover, in foregrounding experience defined by insensitivity, anaesthetic modernism also offers an opportunity to examine how the sensorium changes or adapts to anaesthetizing circumstances, bringing into relief—sometimes in forcefully affective ways—a whole spectrum of sense-abilities which help to decenter notions of somatic/perceptual normativity. As Macneill explains, “By definition, *norms* have their basis in *consensus*. The difficulty that arises is that consensus is attained by ignoring or placating dissenting voices” (emphasis in original; 336). Thus, Rancière’s notion of *dissensus* provides insight as it positions the bodymind in a political sphere where there is a constant tension between individuality and the pressures of society. In Rancière’s words, “Politics revolves around what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak, around the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time” (*The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, 13). Thus, it is important to think about conditions that might influence or precondition certain sensory possibilities. On one hand, this entails paying attention to the sensescapes that are (re)created within the text. On the other hand, we need to take into account the cultural standards and the normalizing/conformist pressures that might actually shape one’s

experience or even prevent one from having certain perceptions or feelings in the first place. Art, here, is in an interesting position, as it has the ability to represent, and play with, the aforementioned cultural and political structures, but is simultaneously distinct—asserting its own agenda and logic. Allan Parsons explains, “Artworks can produce effects of dissensus precisely because they neither give explicit lessons, they are not explicitly pedagogical, nor have any destination, no single final outcome or product” thus “...pitting one regime of sense against another in a way that causes the participant to pause and think” (2010, 14).

Chapter 1: “The Body Intervenes”: Embodiment, the Senses, and Prehistory in Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*

Each chapter of my dissertation will examine a different way in which anglophone modernist fiction represents anaesthesia and is made to be anaesthetic. In this chapter, I focus primarily on Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*. I argue that language supplants the perception of the characters, disconnecting them from their senses. Furthermore, in coming to understand the fate of these characters, I suggest that the reader will come to realize that the process of reading each text, itself, falls victim to the same process of disconnection and anaesthesia.

Whether language is in crisis or has sedimented into an almost impenetrable buffer between one’s mind and body, Woolf creates a narrative that forces the reader to acknowledge that language itself always involves a disconnection where communication, and even thought, constantly leaves the body behind. This can be approached in a number of ways, including, of course, the notion of *différance*, where language is always at least one step behind the experience or idea from which it is spawned. However, we can also consider this in neurological terms: “As the cognitive literary theorist Ellen Spolsky notes, however, ‘our brains . . . are what biologists call open systems, meaning that they feed on stuff from outside themselves,’ and ‘that outside stuff doesn’t stay still for long,’ so that ‘the maps our brains make are never finally or completely calibrated. . . . There are, thus, always

discrepancies or gaps, and the brain is always working to catch up with itself” (Quoted in Paul Armstrong, 64). However we choose to look at it, language is never concomitant with experience, and this is the main point upon which this chapter hinges. One possible misconception that must be noted is that this buffering is not necessarily enervating in nature; while anaesthesia does disconnect mind from body, often with a numbing or dulling effect, it also produces a new aesthetic source: the aesthetic of anaesthesia. This can then be the source for both a series of new sensations and an artistic vision that resists the canonical version of modernist aesthetics of shock.

In part, Woolf is resisting Enlightenment thinking that would have rationality as the prime means of accessing aesthetic experience. Any form of evaluating aesthetic experience that relies on a distanced, dispassionate, or conceptual system adds a buffer between consciousness and experience. As Horkheimer and Adorno explain, “Human beings purchase the increase in their power [of reason] with estrangement from that over which it is exerted” (6, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*). Thus, the symbolic representation that is examined is, at best, a simulacrum of the sensible. Once a hermeneutic is implemented and relied upon, one becomes both biased towards certain interpretations and, again, puts a buffer in place that distorts or impedes the actual experience. As Agamben suggests in *The Man Without Content*, from Kant onwards, reason has come to have the affect of detachment: “When the work of art is...offered for aesthetic enjoyment and its formal aspect is appreciated and analyzed...” it “detaches itself both from the activity of the artist and from the sensibility of the spectator” (102, 93).

In *The Waves*, Woolf deploys a unique narrative structure, wherein she creates an inverse relationship between sensory centrality and childhood on one side, and intellectual centrality and age/maturity on the other. As the novel progresses, we see a shift from highly affective impressions towards intellectual maneuverings. Each phase of life has its own form of richness and its own challenges: the children struggle to understand what they feel, feeling betrayed by their own bodies

because of undeveloped language and a lack of experience; while the aging adults feel disconnected from the world, their friends, and their bodies as language, reason, and social expectations take precedence and begin to act as prosthetics. Because Woolf writes in an almost undifferentiated interior monologue/stream of consciousness, the very form of the text itself is shaped by this shift; and, even further, while the reader may find the form alienating and strange at first, it slips towards unconscious understanding by the narrative's terminus.

The narrative of *The Waves* is propelled by frequently shifting perspectives that are mostly undifferentiated, creating a flattening or levelling effect that is dampening in its repetitiveness and psychological focus. Thus, *The Waves* represents a more direct treatment of issues of (in)sensitivity and (dis)connection that are developed in many of Woolf's other novels. The experiences of Septimus Smith are, perhaps, the most explicit and devastating results of anaesthesia, but we can also trace these through *Jacob's Room* and *To the Lighthouse*. What makes *The Waves* unique is that it builds such a sustained examination of anaesthetic effects that is clearly delineated in the narrative structure and the representation of each character.

Chapter 2: Suspended Above the Abyss: *Under the Volcano* and the Biopolitics of Disconnection

Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano* is a novel commonly acknowledged as one of the great modernist tales of alcoholism—and rightly so. Geoffrey Firmin is an ex-British consul whiling away his days transitioning from bar to bar, cantina to cantina, through states of intoxication—always in search of his next drink. In fact, there is never a point in the novel when the Consul is definitely sober, so much of the narrative—the chapters focalized through him, at least—is profoundly shaped by his unstable condition. The place of drink in the novel has been well-studied since its publication, becoming a rather infamous, but somewhat reductive label under which all subsequent criticism tends to acquiesce. Perhaps this focus is inevitable, and it is certainly one that I take up in this

chapter, but I hope to add several new layers that not only broaden the horizon of Lowry studies, but also that of anaesthetic modernism. In short, I will argue that *Under the Volcano* is defined by suspension, which provides the linchpin for three different layers within the novel: the personal, the syncretic worldview of the Consul, and the local or place-based—which is predominantly the Mexican context of the narrative. While each of these layers is connected in the way they lead to the overall sense of suspension, they also open up distinct ways of understanding Lowry's aesthetics and show just how complex and multifaceted the narrative really is.

The personal level deals most directly with the Consul's alcoholism and inebriation, which are closely associated with the biological reactions to alcohol. The most important of which is, for my purposes, the anaesthetizing effects of alcohol consumption. The Consul's senses are numbed or wooled for most of the narrative—and likely have been for most of the preceding year, when Yvonne left him and his sense of suspension implicitly initiated. With unreliable senses, the Consul experiences the world differently and, ultimately, tends to turn inwards, creating a solipsistic worldview in which he projects his inner turmoil onto the world around him. In addition to the literally numbing effects of alcohol, this section also deals with issues of memory and trauma, communication, and other forms of personal disconnection. After all, the Consul is disconnected from his home country and culture, his former occupations and sense of authority, and now even his wife. To capture this state of suspense and disconnection, Lowry shows how writing itself is a form of communication suspended via the letters that the Consul and Yvonne write to each other. While Yvonne's letters reach the Consul, he never sends his: this creates a profoundly tragic layer of dramatic irony in that, hypothetically, if the letter had reached Yvonne in time, it might just have given her enough confidence to whisk the Consul away to Canada and make a fresh start. Unfortunately, the Consul plays a part in his own demise by sealing his fate in a letter he never sends.

The Consul's world is shaped by more than just his alcohol consumption, though: he has a complex set of beliefs based in a diverse array of religious, mythical, literary, and symbolic fragments that he welds into a syncretic whole. These operate to suspend the present moment and force the Consul to reconcile disparate realities—an impossible task, but nonetheless one that shapes the narrative. While there are many possible threads to follow, I focus on several that contribute especially to the Consul's sense of suspension. These include Purgatory, especially as relating to Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the myth of Prometheus, and the parable of the (Good) Samaritan—each of which maps onto the Consul's worldview repeatedly throughout the narrative. Consequently, these syncretic fragments serve to represent cultural examples of cycles of human nature bent on destroying itself. As a novel eventually published after WWII, there is a strong sense in the narrative that humanity is always precariously suspended above the abyss of destruction.

The third layer is that of place within the narrative: this is predominantly represented by the Mexican context, but also deals with some of the global connections inherent in the modern world. Even though the Consul has been living in Mexico for some time, and thus knows much about the history, culture, and people, this knowledge does not translate into connection with the place or its people; rather, many facets of Mexican life actually pose resistance to the Consul, preventing him from integrating and feeling at home. Perhaps this is partly a result of his former position as a British dignitary, a literal representation of Britannia and a figure of authority from a foreign place and culture. But at the same time, Lowry weaves in the history of Mexico in a way that constantly reminds the Consul of its Indigenous people and culture and the bloody and oppressive conquest of the Spanish. In other words, the Consul is aware, on some level, that modernity is rife with alternative histories and competing worldviews; this knowledge acts as a blessing and a curse, at times allowing the Consul to tap into cultural nodes that he seems to have an affinity with, and at

others excluding him or showing how the worst of history repeats in cycles—reinforcing his sense of suspension.

Chapter 3: Stigma, the Social Construction of (in)Sensitivity, and the Modernist Epiphany in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*

This chapter will focus on what might be the most forceful form of defamiliarization in modernism: the epiphany. The epiphany hinges on a moment of illumination, revelation, or insight; by definition, an epiphany is a temporary, rarified experience. From the Greek *epi* “on, to” and *phanein* “to show,” *epiphanein* originally denoted something made manifest, especially in a striking way. While often regarded in relation to the manifestation of deities in classic literature and religious teachings, the epiphany has also taken on a more general meaning in literature and in the mainstream; I will focus on these latter forms of usage. Modernism has some famous epiphanies, and none more so than in James Joyce's *Stephen Hero*, which would later become *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*—a work Anand was inspired by. Epiphanies have the power to incite real breakthroughs by altering perceptions or providing new perspectives; however, they need not provide such grandiose results: one interesting conundrum surrounding (non-religious) epiphanies is that they often get swallowed up by the continuation of “the ordinary,” habit, or external forces—ultimately bringing about no significant change (see Leisl Olson, 2014). I will consider both possible outcomes, as described below.

While there are many ways to approach the study of epiphany in literature, I want to consider how the body is tied into the experience through sensory-emotional channels. While the event itself is often understood as part of some intellectual realization, a chain reaction is set off throughout the whole body, potentially igniting all of our sensory systems—and this is an often-overlooked component in the study of epiphanies. If an epiphany invigorates the whole bodymind, then this also forces us to question what role the sensory experience plays in an epiphany and, even

further, what state the individual is emerging from (even if momentarily). There has been some recent research that suggests that the body sends a burst of signals to the brain right before the epiphany actually happens (Kounios and Beeman 212); this could have profound ramifications, as this would suggest that the body is not only wrapped up with the mind, but may actually play a role in governing how we process information (not just sensory data) and spark an epiphany. This may be one way of approaching the “ineffable” quality of epiphanies.

While an epiphany is often accompanied by a distinct invigoration of the senses, it is important to note that an anaesthetic state can lead to, or play a part in, epiphanies in at least two ways: an epiphany can be 1) a momentary, often intense, return to one’s senses from a state of insensitivity (and then a subsequent shift out of the epiphanic state), or 2) a moment of clarity, inspiration, or understanding that comes about as a result of being buffered from other distracting sensations. Furthermore, if an epiphany is intertwined with some idea or realization, then this must also be a site where Rancière’s “distribution of the sensible” comes into play—a socio-political nexus wherever the bodymind is situated that influences, allows, or limits what may be experienced. Epiphanies are often considered in terms of their influence on the individual, as seen from an interior perspective; thus, my work will open up new terrain on which to consider the ongoing, if backgrounded, relationship between an individual and the world they live in.

The history of the epiphany in modernism is usually traced back to Joyce’s famous explanation in the unpublished *Stephen Hero*: an epiphany is “a sudden spiritual manifestation, whether from some object, scene, event, or memorable phase of the mind — the manifestation being out of proportion to the significance or strictly logical relevance of whatever produces it” (211). However, Joycean scholars have famously disagreed on the nature of epiphany in his work (see Robert Scholes and Florence L. Walzl, 1967, for a notable example). The debate revolves around whether Joyce continues to use the same definition outlined in *Stephen Hero* in his later

works, especially focusing on the same scene after it has been reworked in *The Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. I do not wish to get too deeply embroiled in this debate, but I will try to pose a new way of understanding epiphanies through the lens of anaesthetic modernism.

While Joyce will not be the focus of this chapter, I believe that thinking through some of the problems this debate unearths will be useful as I transition into Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*. Both Stephen Daedalus and Bakha have epiphanies that result as reactions against their respective socio-political situations. The societal expectations and pressures to conform limit their abilities to fully experience the world and even to fully realize their own thoughts and desires (Daedalus against the Catholic Church and Irish cultural norms and Bakha against the constraints of being an "outcast" in the caste-based Indian society). Each of their epiphanies allows them to see through their respective limits and are marked by an almost overwhelming burst of sensorium-spanning sensations that send each into a transcendent state. Thus, their bodies are very much bound up in the stifled, anaesthetized states that precede the epiphanies, the all-important moment of insight or breakthrough, and then the shift to a new normal. Significantly, the epiphanic moment can only ever be temporary, so this state of heightened sensory stimulation ends up emphasizing the relatively insensitive states that precede and succeed it—therefore also reinforcing the anaesthetizing effects of socio-political pressures. For Joyce, there is a sense of irony tied into this return, both because Daedalus's status as an artist is somewhat dubious and because he fully admits the foundational nature of Catholicism and Irish culture in his personality—influences that he may never really transcend.

In *Untouchable*, Anand inverts notions of normativity by showing us that physical appearance and ability are not stable touchstones by which we can judge one's place in the social hierarchy; indeed, Bakha's social standing determines his psychological and sensual world—his bodymind—rather than the other way around. In a time defined by multiple invisible pandemics, from AIDS in

the 1980s through to COVID-19 in the 2020s, where our lives are governed by an automatic distrust of touch and contamination, this chapter critiques the social construction of stigma through the lens of the modernist epiphany. My argument is tripartite: A) Anand constructs the perceived limitations of the outcast's world under the oppressive power of stigma, which has a physically and mentally numbing effect; B) Bakha's epiphany unveils new linguistic, and then social, possibility as he literally comes to his senses; C) the overlapping worldviews of British and Muslim denizens, while problematically racialized, lead Bakha to realize the mutability of identity and his own sensory-emotional potential beyond the limits placed on him as an outcast.

On the face of it, Bakha is the prototypical young man—perhaps even the model from which the normative is derived: “a young man of eighteen, strong and able-bodied” (9). Bakha, though, is the son of a sweeper, powerfully stigmatized as a social outcast. As he puts it: “For them [Hindus] I am a sweeper, sweeper – untouchable! Untouchable! Untouchable! That’s the word! Untouchable! I am an Untouchable!” (52). Lerita Coleman Brown explains that “Part of the power of stigmatization lies in the realization that people who are stigmatized or acquire a stigma lose their place in the social hierarchy” (149). Stigma deprives an individual of agency. An individual stigmatized as disabled is “less able to adapt to the demands of his environment: he has reduced power to insulate himself from the assaults of an essentially hostile milieu” (Wood and Bradley, quoted in Quayson, 149). One may even lose the ability to speak, feel, or think outside of one’s stigma. This tension is drawn out in Bakha, as an ineffable impulse pushes him beyond his epistemic limits. Reflecting on his “untouchable” status, Bakha suddenly realizes “It was all explicable now. A shock of which this was the name had passed through his perceptions, previously numb and torpid, and had sent a quiver into his being, stirred his nerves of sight, hearing, smell, touch, and taste, all into a quickening” (52). Anticipating the embodied mind model of consciousness, Anand connects the linguistic with the sensual in this reworking of the modernist epiphany; Bakha’s initial state of

anaesthetic numbness mirrors the limits of his sensibilities: his blunted sensory-emotional abilities derive from his experiences as an outcast. Furthermore, by exploiting the dissonance of dramatic irony and perspectival shifts between the narrator and Bakha, Anand critiques the ideological normativity – and stability – of both socially constructed identities and narrative conventions of the novel.

Chapter 1: “The Body Intervenes”: Embodiment, the Senses, and Prehistory in Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*

Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves* is about coming to terms with life, it is about social structures, living in a time of war, urbanization, and empire, but it is also about friendship, dancing, and procreation. Perhaps most of all, though, it is about how we experience and make sense of the world. In a novel that spans nearly the entire lives of its characters, Woolf encourages her reader to question what is primary: sensation and impression, or thought and language? Is the child’s perspective more immediate, direct, and authentic than the adult’s? Or is the accumulation of experience, the development of reason, or the level-head of maturity more accurate, more meaningful, more universal? By developing habits, fitting into social norms and expectations, and accumulating countless layers of experience as we grow up, mature, and age, we undoubtedly gain much, but Woolf also asks us at what cost: what do we lose?

Implicitly acknowledging that the loss of these youthful intensities is inevitable, Woolf also recognizes that the question then becomes how to deal with such loss and find an authentic and direct connection to the phenomenal world always immanent around us, guided by one’s senses. How does one avoid becoming insensitive to everyday occurrences, to all the sensations one experiences as a child that are slowly dulled and faded by rote experience? This question is obliquely answered within the fabric of the text itself: while the early chapters are dominated by sense perceptions and impressions, the narrative is written in a language far too sophisticated to be that of the children. It is only when the reader co-witnesses, with Susan and Bernard, the lady writing in “Elvedon” that Woolf reminds that art (here in the form of the written word) has the power to penetrate the buffer of age, habit, and social pressures. If aging, habituation, social conventions, and even language all inevitably disconnect one from the immediacy and intensity of the present moment felt in childhood, one will have to face the prospects of losing the distinguishing qualities, the very

newness, that initiated the shift away from the sensory intensity of youth in the first place. But Woolf tries to get at the heart of how literature can take advantage of these limits to provide new aesthetic experiences that may make up for language's inherent buffering effects.

Paying attention to the ways Woolf's narrative fits within, and works against, the bounds of modernism, this chapter engages with the question of modernism's relation to the past in three ways. First, I will show how Woolf tapped into new philosophical, psychological, and biological conversations, informing her understanding of the limits and capacities of the human mind and body by looking into humanity's evolutionary past. Second, I argue that Woolf contested the prevailing Enlightenment conception of aesthetics that held rationality as the prime means of accessing aesthetic experience. As Horkheimer and Adorno explain, "Human beings purchase the increase in their power [of reason] with estrangement from that over which it is exerted" (6). Woolf shows how any form of evaluating aesthetic experience that relies on a distanced, dispassionate, or conceptual system adds a buffer between consciousness and experience of the work of art; however, because the intensities of youth that allow for more direct and undiluted access to the senses cannot remain fixed in time, Woolf develops a narrative style that mobilizes non-representational, non-symbolic, and even anti-rational aesthetics at times to test the power of art to make one feel. This leads to my third point: I aim to show how Woolf challenged one of the canonical accounts of modernism as based on an aesthetics of shock and invigoration by providing a new aesthetic realm that I call anaesthetics—which attends to the ways modernity, language, and even art, cut off, block, or otherwise impede the senses while simultaneously opening up a new terrain of aesthetic experiences.

In building my analysis of the anaesthetic effects in *The Waves*, I follow in the footsteps of Woolf scholars that have focused on the ways age, habit, and convention function to distance or alter one's experience of the world. Andrea L. Harris, in "Bare Things': Returning to the Senses in

Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*," frames the novel as an attempt to move away from "the symbolic," a realm that feminist theorists have determined is typically gendered masculine (339). Harris argues that Woolf works to find what lies outside of the symbolic; namely, what is primarily experienced through the senses and that can only be accessed by direct, non-representational, or "little" language. She suggests that language "which lies outside of or prior to symbolization" is part of "a terrain that is marked feminine" (Harris 339). She traces how several of the characters find their own ways to access "the thing itself," or to "see beyond the accretions of language that surround objects in the world" (Harris 340; 341)." My work builds on Harris' by examining how Woolf teases apart the ways language acts to buffer one's senses, but also the ways it can grant access to the thing itself. One of the fundamental assumptions here is that language can too easily slip into purely denotative or symbolic language, in which the language becomes "now the signifiers of [its] objects, which designate, in fact, the absence of the object, not its presence" (Harris 343).

In "Between Sensation and Sign: The Secret Language of *The Waves*," Maureen Chun examines the possibility that consciousness, in the novel, exceeds the individual and exists, at some level, in the physical world, passing through individuals like waves. Having this physical component, consciousness is much more than subjective thought, and is experienced as much through the body as through the mind. Chun explains, "consciousness consists of the entire spectrum of experience between insensibility and conscious thought, in which a revelation may be at once conception and shock, thought and sensation" (54). However, this does not mean that this way of connecting to the world is easily carried out; indeed, the narrative itself sometimes acts to block access, leading the reader back to habitual ways of thinking and reading that privilege subjectivity and the various layers of our beings that often buffer us from direct experience of the physical world.

Writing, conversely, about the intensely subjective aspects of Woolf's writing, Dora Zhang, in "Naming the Indescribable: Woolf, Russell, James, and the Limits of Description," starts with the

premise that “however good the description, there is ultimately something about the what-it-is-like qualities of first-person experience that language fails to capture, the feelings of rapture and ecstasy that [Woolf] cannot quite describe” (52). Zhang shows how descriptive language is embedded in the social, and therefore always tends towards the general rather than the personal. While descriptive language holds intimate knowledge hostage, to borrow Bertrand Russell’s term, there are ways that Woolf uses language that allows its referent to remain unchanged—especially via demonstratives, which, themselves, do not lock their referents into denotative cages, but rather encourage the reader to extend their perceptual and cognitive attention towards the referent. This allows a meeting between self and other that precedes processes which categorize, generalize, or otherwise embed the referent into a system. This close attention to Woolf’s language is important because it shows how Woolf conceives of written language, in the form of the novel or narrative, as desensitizing *and* sensitizing depending on how it is used.

Embodied Cognition, Defamiliarization, and the Everyday

Taking up the theme of the sound of the past: modernist echoes and incantations—I want to start by thinking about how Woolf recontextualized modernism’s obsession with the past. As Gillian Beer has argued:

[T]he need to discover origins, the vehement backward plumbing of history, the insistence on causality and judgement, was allayed for Virginia Woolf by her awareness of the survival of prehistory. The continued presence of sea, clouds, leaves, stones, the animal form of man, the unchanged perceptual intensity of the senses, all sustain her awareness of the simultaneity of the prehistoric in our present moment. This absolves her from the causal forms she associates with nineteenth-century narratives. (17)

Woolf, it appears, took solace in the fact that, despite all the trappings of modern life, humans as a species carry with them vestiges of their own evolution and prehistory—in their bodies. While modernity, urbanity, and infinite varieties of socio-cultural practices may shape us, too, Woolf finds

some comfort in knowing that paying careful attention to one's senses, one's mind, one's instinctual knowledge, can tap into something more deeply human. This way of invoking humanity's prehistory brings up two main points: the first is that Woolf seemingly predicts some of the foundational elements of embodied cognition, which notably maintains that action, perception, and affect shape our experience of the world. This means, then, that Woolf was resisting Enlightenment thinking that generally held reason on a pedestal. The second point is that an embodied or even evolutionary lens foregrounds similarity between people: it connects and makes common. Writing on embodied cognition, Crippen and Schulkin explain, "Emotion is central to almost any study of aesthetics, and it is also part of what unifies human action in group settings, giving additional reason to suppose that affect knits together with action, cognition, and perception (7). In this way, Woolf plays with the false dichotomy of private and common, showing how aesthetic experiences—in both senses: perceptual and artistic—can be simultaneously deeply personal and shared.

Woolf scholars have already identified her affinity with embodied cognition; the most notable example is Melba Cuddy-Keane's essay, "Movement, Space, and Embodied Cognition in *To the Lighthouse*," which traces the ways some of Woolf's characters in *To the Lighthouse* experience personal changes directly through their bodies. Cuddy-Keane explains of embodied cognition, "Embodiment theory posits that bodies do not merely express, communicate, or influence thought; bodily experience is the shape of thought itself (58). At its most basic, embodied cognition is a model of mind that is monistic, rather than dualistic, meaning that there is no meaningful separation of mind and body, even going so far as to say that they are so intricately intertwined that they cannot be reasonably understood without each other.

Of course, Woolf was acquainted with her Bloomsbury compatriot Bertrand Russell, whose philosophical writings, along with American Pragmatists like William James and John Dewey, can be seen as almost direct precursors to theories of embodied cognition. These philosophers believed

that the mind cannot be truly separate from the body, and that mind and body work together holistically to create consciousness. Because consciousness extends through the body, then, it extends out into the world, too, through the senses. For this very reason, a conscious mind is both shaped by and shapes the world that surrounds it: “the only environment to which the organism can react is one that its sensitivity reveals” (George Herbert Mead, quoted in Crippen and Schulkin, 37). This is a vast topic, though, so I will focus on two particular ramifications of embodied cognition.² Firstly, part of the mind’s role in daily life is to filter or buffer us from all of the stimuli that we are constantly experiencing. As William James held, “consciousness is at all times primarily a *selecting agency*” that selects “one out of several of the materials so presented to its notice, emphasizing and accentuating that and suppressing as far as possible all the rest” (emphasis in original, quoted in Crippen and Schulkin, 22). This is largely a practical feature of one’s mind, as it would quickly become overwhelming if one had to consciously deal with this constant stream of stimuli—something Rhoda particularly struggles with. While this “selecting agency” works more or less automatically, and is a product of our evolutionary traits, it also ties into our conscious activity, too. Not only do our senses help build the world around us into something we can comprehend, we can also train ourselves to attend more or less closely to certain facets of life. As John Dewey explains, “The medium of habit filters all the material that reaches our perception and thought. The filter is not, however, chemically pure. It is a reagent which adds new qualities and rearranges what is received” (quoted in Crippen and Schulkin 92). Habit plays a significant, if largely implicit, role in *The Waves*: when the characters are children, their minds are relatively untethered to the habits that will come to dominate adulthood.

² For a good introduction to embodied cognition, especially tying current theories to a lineage that includes American Pragmatists, see *Mind Ecologies: Body, Brain, and World*, by Crippen and Schulkin.

But cultural forces play an equally significant role in the development of the characters. The children, for example, attend a traditional boarding school that teaches classical literature, requires a particular dress code, and has a formal schedule—all of which are standards decided upon by previous generations and hardened into convention by repetition over time. The children are being shaped by their surroundings from this very early stage. Louis, for example, ponders the names of all the famous men that have come before him during his own graduation ceremony. This moment marks the transition from childhood to manhood, but instead of looking forward, Louis looks to the past: “Above all, we have inherited traditions” (45). While Woolf’s narrative style does not change at this point, the thoughts and impressions of the characters have started to shift away from sensory impressions as matters of social or cultural importance begin to take center stage for them. Louis, here, is looking backwards as a way of moving forwards: as a colonial outsider (with an Australian accent), tapping into tradition is his way into the British culture he so badly wants to be a part of—he seeks history, rather than prehistory. Instead of revolting against his predecessors, he hopes to imitate them, and by that virtue become what they stand for.

Louis is not the only character that looks to the past for inspiration. Neville looks deeper into history, back to classical literature in particular, which he holds to be the pinnacle of Western art. As he enters his new school, Neville’s sensory attention turns towards the highly formalized classical poetry of a so-called dead language:

...and that library, where I shall explore the exactitude of the Latin language, and step firmly upon the well-laid sentences, and pronounce the explicit, the sonorous hexameters of Virgil, of Lucretius; and chant with a passion that is never obscure or formless the loves of Catallus, reading from a big book, a quarto with margins. (23)

This passage clearly shows how Woolf starts weaving the intricacies of sensory impressions with both art and the past—and starts to focus on the conventions or content of art. Woolf indicates that Neville will revel in the “sonorous” qualities of the Latin poetry, an embodied aesthetic experience to be sure, but much of what Neville loves about it has to do with its formal qualities of

“exactitude,” “explicit[ness],” and clarity—in short, it’s “perfection.” But the source of pleasure that Neville finds in his revered poets will one day be the very thing that he resents. Neville will later express, “But one cannot go on for ever cutting these ancient inscriptions clearer with a knife. Shall I always draw the red surge curtain close and see my book, laid like a block of marble, pale under the lamp?” (70). The language Neville invokes here is very physical, tactile even, but while his senses are alight, the objects of his attention are decidedly cold, hard, and inert. These poets have been the gold standard, the compass rose, of Neville’s value system, but a love poem can never take the place of a lover. Their poems, no matter how beautifully or perfectly expressed, continue to drift into the sands of time: “I would rather be loved, I would rather be famous than follow perfection through the sand” (71).

Interestingly, Neville foreshadows his own turn away from the perfection of Latin poetry when contemplating Percival—whom he loves, but cannot pursue. Neville’s unrequited love is certainly key to the dynamic Woolf creates at the center of the group of friends (Percival is a narrative and thematic lacuna in many respects), part of a dichotomy Woolf sets up from this early stage. Namely, Woolf pits the proprioceptive, improvisatory, and embodied against the intellectual, conventional, and historical; for example, Neville ruminates,

Yet when I read Shakespeare or Catullus, lying in the long grass, he [Percival] understands more than Louis. Not the words—but what are words? Do I not know already how to rhyme, how to imitate Pope, Dryden, even Shakespeare? But I cannot stand all day in the sun with my eyes on the ball; I cannot feel the flight of the ball through my body and think only of the ball. I shall be a clinger to the outsides of words all my life. (37)

Neville can quietly trace the perfection of Latin poetry, but he will never have the spontaneous and intuitive ability to be in touch with the moment the way Percival does. Further still, Percival represents a lack for Neville, so his rumination on being loved has an extra valence here when compared with the poetry that remains perpetually, but lifelessly, by his side. In this way, Woolf emphasizes the need for a living, human connection. Literature, studied dispassionately with the

intellectual aim of mastering conventions, however intricate or sophisticated, can only take one so far. This brings me to Woolf's aesthetic vision, which she famously developed in the decade leading up to the publication of *The Waves*. Railing against the materialists, Woolf gets at the heart of the matter, which turns out to be intimacy:

The writer must get into touch with his reader by putting before him something which he recognises, which therefore stimulates his imagination, and makes him willing to co-operate in the far more difficult business of intimacy. And it is of the highest importance that this common meeting-place should be reached easily, almost instinctively, in the dark, with one's eyes shut. ("Mr. Bennett and Ms. Brown," 17)

Woolf's hope for an intimate connection with her reader mirrors both the kind of connection her characters seek and the logic of embodied cognition that underlies so much of the narrative. This is an integral part of Woolf's aesthetic vision for the novel: if her characters feel intensely, it should follow that her readers share in the experience; but if her characters struggle to feel, or are buffered, so, too, might the reader be. Woolf's technique in *The Waves* explores this embodied intimacy that she thinks the materialists ignore in favour of explanatory details. Historically, sight is closely tied to reason and intellect, so Woolf's call for an aesthetics that operates "instinctively" and "with one's eyes shut" actively resists this trend and opens up space for other senses, affects, or feelings. In other words, Woolf focuses on sensorially evocative writing rather than description, as description adds a layer of interpretation that risks distancing the very thing being described. Evocation, in this sense, is open-ended, connotative, and intuitive, and changes the relationship between text and reader to be more interactive and alive.

The prime means by which Woolf shows how one's senses are inevitably blunted is aging: as they age, the characters in *The Waves* slowly accrue layers of habits, obligations, and socio-cultural norms or expectations, all of which help them to integrate into their respective lives in society

(perhaps with the exception of Rhoda, who I will discuss in greater detail, below). In effect, as the characters age, they function in a state of reduced “friction.” As Bernard recounts,

'It was different once,' said Bernard. 'Once we could break the current as we chose. How many telephone calls, how many postcards, are now needed to cut this hole through which we come together, united, at Hampton Court? How swift life runs from January to December! We are all swept on by the torrent of things grown so familiar that they cast no shade; we make no comparisons; think scarcely ever of I or of you; and in this unconsciousness attain the utmost freedom from friction and part the weeds that grow over the mouths of sunken channels. (180)

This moment comes at a time in the characters’ lives when they are middle-aged, have settled into their routines, and no longer worry about the vicissitudes of life that plagued, but animated, their childhood. The metaphor of the current of life aptly captures the sense that life is often swept away by the momentum of time and one’s eventual, incremental, acquiescing to “freedom from friction.” But this particular reflection comes after news of the passing of Percival, the figurehead of the characters’ social circle. Percival’s death has punched a “hole” in time, breaching the normal flow of life in a way that allows the characters to gain a momentary awareness, or boost in attention caused by the disruption of the status quo. Because of this, Bernard realizes that the passing of time itself has become unnoticed, and that one day is essentially indistinguishable from another. Woolf shows how the everydayness of life can buffer one’s experience, but also that there will inevitably be exceptional circumstances that break through and have the potential to temporarily re-sensitize.

Woolf wrote extensively about everyday life, but she also wrote specifically about states of exception, or non-normative states—most explicitly in her essay “On Being Ill.” Woolf’s essay sheds some light on the way she conceptualized how, when in good health, or in a normative state, one automatically tunes out a great array of stimuli as a way to avoid taxing one’s powers of attention; however, this also tends to include blocking out the attention potential of the body. As Woolf writes,

Literature does its best to maintain that its concern is with the mind; that the body is a sheet of plain glass through which the soul looks straight and clear, and, save for one or two passions such as desire and greed, is null, negligible and non-existent. On the contrary, the very opposite is true. All day, all night the body intervenes; blunts or sharpens, colours or discolours, turns to wax in the warmth of June, hardens to tallow in the murk of February. (32-3)

It is clear from this passage that Woolf understands that the body always mediates or influences one's experience of life; that this needs to be stated so explicitly speaks to the general tendency to downplay the role of the body—a trend which has many sources, but notably comes from social, religious, and enlightenment ideologies that privilege humanity's capacities of reason and willpower. Addressing the limits of everyday language, Woolf writes, "There is, let us confess it...a childish outspokenness in illness; things are said, truths are blurted out, which the cautious respectability of health conceals" (36). As Woolf sees it, illness removes one's filter, so that one might speak the truth as a child might. This sentiment is particularly important when discussing *The Waves* because this novel focuses so closely on the experience of childhood in its opening sections. In contradistinction to the passage quoted above, of Bernard's experience at middle age, the early sections of the novel are full of impressions, deeply felt emotions, and overwhelming affect, and in this way, represent a side of human experience that is glazed over with age, habit, or conventions. Therefore, Woolf explicitly ties both illness and childhood to the body, inasmuch as the powers of intelligence, reason, or convention exert less influence on our lived experiences in these states.

Woolf also shows some concern over how one's state of mind affects one's appreciation of art. Typically, Woolf suggests, art is approached via one's reason as one looks for recognizable conventions and denotative meaning. While she acknowledges that these ways of appreciating art are, at times, valid, necessary, and even richly rewarding, she worries that much is lost with too cerebral an approach; the sensibility of the body is often ignored, and with it, the full resonance of the artwork:

In health meaning has encroached upon sound. Our intelligence domineers over our senses. But in illness, with the police off duty, we creep beneath some obscure poem by Mallarmé or Donne, some phrase in Latin or Greek, and the words give out their scent, and ripple like leaves, and chequer us with light and shadow, and then, if at last we grasp the meaning, it is all the richer for having travelled slowly up with all the bloom upon its wings. (“On Being Ill,” 41)

In acknowledging the perceptual changes brought about by illness, Woolf is praising a slower, more organic, and certainly more sensitive way of reading that allows one to feel the attendant sensations or impressions of the work that cannot be coerced into existence. Being ill can put a reader into a different state of mind because everything is experienced through the unfamiliar mediation of the malady; as for the sensory sensitivity, many illnesses bring their bearer greater awareness of the body, as it is the body’s way of announcing that something is wrong and needs attention—a mechanism supported by evolution. Woolf thus recognizes that, while non-normative, illnesses have some predictable qualities that illustrate how, when healthy, everyday life can, over time, make one insensitive. Illness is not the only way one can become more aware of—more sensitive to—what one’s body is communicating, though.

The Waves shows the reader the very process of habituation or automatization that gives the novel this very theme. While perhaps not as technically difficult as the most experimental novels of modernism, Woolf does employ an unusual narrative form in *The Waves* that requires the reader to adjust to it. Further still, the novel begins with its characters as children who are experiencing the world with fresh perspectives that have not been blunted by the hardness of everyday life or age. Thus, as the reader acclimatizes to the narrative form, they are simultaneously witnessing impressions of the world that betray the characters’ youth, inexperience, and naivety, but also their bodily sensations and strongly affective responses to life. As the reader becomes used to the narrative form, the characters age, become embedded into society, develop habits and routines, and so on. In short, this aspect of the narrative form echoes, to some extent, the experience of reading the novel itself.

In attempting to give life to her characters, Woolf's work comes to align with the concept of defamiliarization developed by Russian Formalist Viktor Shklovsky.³ Shklovsky emphasizes the difference between sensory perception and bodily awareness, on the one hand, and intellectual knowledge and rote meaning, on the other. Shklovsky also emphasizes that art should bring its subject to life, rather than merely create an accumulation of material details, however insightful such details might be about the context of the scene. In a similar vein, Woolf focuses on the importance of the experience of impressions that are always already being processed, ordered, or undergoing apperception by the body: "The mind receives a myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms; and as they fall, as they shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday, the accent falls differently from of old" ("Modern Fiction" 160). In "Modern Fiction," Woolf describes this myriad of impressions as a way of exposing how the novel all too often ignores or downplays the actual experience of life in favour of the material details and even the literary conventions that can, ultimately, desensitize the novel itself.

It would seem, then, that Woolf is sympathetic to Shklovsky's assertion that "art exists that one may recover the sensation of life"; however, Woolf also seemingly plays with Shklovsky's formulation, as the early chapters of *The Waves* focus more on the perceptions and impressions of the characters, and also introduce a narrative style that challenges convention—qualities that put sensation at the forefront. As mentioned above, though, the trajectory of the novel is away from sensory or affective primacy and towards habitual or intellectual primacy. Simultaneously, the narrative form that was so unusual to begin with becomes more comfortable, even benign, as the

³ Shklovsky famously writes, "Art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known. The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar,' to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception because the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object; the object is not important" (778).

reader gets used to it. Thus, Woolf shows the reader exactly what Shklovsky is hoping art can counteract, and she shows that there is a possible internal contradiction with defamiliarization in that it is unlikely that a work of art can continue to have the defamiliarizing effect for a prolonged time or when repeated viewings or readings come into play—and Woolf exploits this as a subtle challenge to modernist aesthetics that champion the new, stylistic innovation, or other forms that may initially challenge the reader and defamiliarize aspects of the text. Just as the newness and intensity of childhood are slowly worn smooth with age, habit, and social pressures, so do modernism’s numerous innovations eventually lose their edge and become familiar.

The Waves is as much about the everyday as it is about momentous or exceptional events, and Bryony Randall has already situated *The Waves* in “everyday” studies in her work “Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves* and the Everyday.” Therein, Randall explains that “Everyday life studies attempts to enable us, if not exactly to arrest the torrent, then at least to find a way of resisting being swept along, insensible, by the things, objects, people, practices, that form our everyday life” (175). The so-called “torrent” of life is, indeed, inevitable, but it does not need to unilaterally dictate the experience of life. As Randall suggests, though, there is a risk—sometimes unavoidable—that one will become “insensible” to various elements that make up the everyday. Everyday studies does not take for granted the basic building blocks of one’s life; Randall echoes Siegfried Kracauer, a critic of mass and pop culture writing in 1920s Germany, who argues that “We must...rid ourselves of the delusion that it is major events which most determine a person. He is more deeply and lastingly influenced by the tiny catastrophes of which everyday existence is made up” (quoting Kracauer 178).⁴ This term, “tiny catastrophes,” is particularly revealing when considering the events of the

⁴ This reminds me of Woolf’s famous description of experience in her essay “Modern Fiction”: “Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and

first chapters of the *The Waves*—in which Jinny kisses Louis and Bernard is bathed, for example—wherein events occur that truly shape the experience of the young characters. However dramatic these moments may seem at first glance, most of them are rather ordinary, everyday occurrences—but the key is that the characters have not become insensible to them yet. “Major events” are processed differently than everyday events; while they may be convenient signposts in one’s life, the fact that they are exceptional, or unordinary, should remind that relatively little of one’s life is made up of them. In *The Waves*, Woolf most often gives everyday occurrences at least the same level of attention as she does for the major events, and because such moments are given more weight, she works to undo some of the hierarchization of narrative moments relative to traditional or conventional plots. This flattening of narrative hierarchy plays with narrative conventions, and reader expectations, by destabilizing traditional plot sequences and challenging some of the Victorian—and by extension, the imperialist—background elements of the novel.

The everyday that is captured in terms of the plot of the novel also influences the form of the narrative itself. Randall highlights that, while the experimental form of the novel is, in a sense, defined by not being ordinary, it nonetheless works to represent everydayness in ways that traditional narrative structures usually do not: “precisely, the inarticulable everyday” (178-9). While the narrative is ostensibly propelled by what each of the characters “said,” it is apparent that much of what is expressed is not actually *said*, but thought, felt, or simply done—and the reader is presented with deeply personal and intimate experiences. Randall explains that, “In particular, the novel’s focus on interiority reminds us that intimate, repeated, transient feelings and thoughts, ultimately form as much a part of who we are as what we look like, whom we marry, exactly when and where we lived: the conventional markers of novels and of life” (179). Woolf reminds the reader

incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness. Let us not take it for granted that life exists more fully in what is commonly thought big than in what is commonly thought small” (161).

that everyday experience is largely made up of waves of “transient feelings and thoughts,” as Randall puts it. While one way of representing such waves of experience could be stream of consciousness writing, Woolf’s novel takes a different form that allows these waves to both express the momentary thoughts, feelings, and actions of her characters individually, but at the same time shows how these waves can pass through a collective or community—or, indeed, a narrative. This constellation of experiences tends to emphasize the experiences that are either shared amongst the group or that at least originate from the same source. In effect, then, Woolf presents a narrative vision that shows (and at times, tells) the reader that human experience is a series of waves, and is defined by this repetitive structure—at varying scales: from the individual, to the group or community, to whole societies. And, as Randall reiterates, because it embraces repetition, “The novel resists resolution, closure, causality” (182).

Kaleidoscope of Sensation, Constellation of Characters

While each of the six characters deserves close examination, at this point I want to zoom in on three: Susan, Jinny, and Rhoda. This is because each of these characters has a relatively clear relationship with their own body and the way they experience the world through it. Most notably, perhaps, these three characters do not rely as heavily on language or socio-cultural factors as their male counterparts, at least as far as their daily activities and senses of identity are concerned. More specifically, Susan and Jinny do not suffer from the anaesthetic effects of life to the same degree that Bernard, Louis, and Neville do. That these two characters maintain embodied ways of living is worth remarking upon as each puts into relief the numbing or buffering effects described above. Through Susan, Woolf shows how directness and authenticity allow for a healthy balance between the intensities exemplified by youth and the control that comes with maturity. Jinny is even more in touch with the language of her body than Susan is, but sacrifices the ability to see the structure of

life, as she lives perpetually in the moment. Rhoda is the most extreme character in terms of her sensitivity; while she has an uncompromising drive to seek out a true relationship with the world, she does so at the peril of her own mental wellbeing.

The simplicity and undiluted nature of youth is most directly captured by Susan, whose feelings are the most extreme (at least at first glance): “I am a child, I love and I hate” (11). There is no middle ground, no shades of grey, and love and hate are equal categories. As a child, she witnesses Jinny kiss Louis, which causes “the yellow warmth in my side” to “[turn] to stone” and forces her to “wrap [her] agony inside [her] pocket-handkerchief” and later “examine it and take it between [her] fingers” (9). At this stage, Susan’s feelings are very physical and even synaesthetic: her initial feeling is sensed, located, and felt immediately within her own body. And instead of rationalizing or processing the feeling using language or reason, it remains somehow physical—and therefore inaccessible by language or thought. At first blush, this moment seems simply childish: such a strong feeling is beyond Susan’s ability to make sense of and she goes on feeling the intensity of her emotion; but it is also a deeply human response: her whole body is absorbed in the feeling.

Only when Bernard arrives to comfort Susan is she faced with a social scenario calling for communication. While the words themselves are not expressed in dialogue within the novel, the reader can see how the sharing of the moment starts to have an effect: Bernard relays, “Our bodies are close now...and then the words, moving quickly, in the depths of your mind will break up this knot of hardness, screwed up in your pocket-handkerchief” and then “when we sit together close...we melt into each other with phrases. We are edged with mist. We make an unsubstantial territory” (10; 11). Susan’s hate, and accompanying affect, is undoubtedly her own, and is distinctly personal. But by being with and speaking to Bernard, the pain subsides. This brings up two important ramifications: the first is that the words shared between the two children do, in fact, disconnect Susan from her bodily, physical experience of hate or anguish—in effect dulling the pain,

which can then be processed or released. The second is that this moment, which started out hyper-individual, becomes shared. That the two are made “unsubstantial” hints at the possibility that their essences or experiences are intermingling, even if only temporarily. Interestingly, this shared or social experience creates a new set of feelings; while language functions to disconnect Susan from her acute feelings, Bernard obviously feels empathetically—sparking new sensations and feelings in him. In this way, Susan’s anaesthetization is paired with Bernard’s empathy, which is represented as a misty intermingling; it is unclear where Susan’s feelings end and where Bernard’s begin. Even further though, Woolf suggests that, while their communication decenters and ultimately diminishes Susan’s more intense set of feelings, Bernard does glean or glimpse some of these feelings.

That Susan’s feelings are bundled up inside of her alludes to the influence of Bertrand Russell; Russell emphasizes that it is not a centralized or detached mind that thinks thoughts, but that thoughts are “rather constituted by relations of the thoughts to each other and to the body” (18). In discussing the way Susan’s childhood agony comes to exist wrapped up in her handkerchief, it seems fitting to use the metaphor of a bundle to describe the way thoughts gather and relate: the confluence of thoughts and sensations work together to constitute her experience, and this experience seems to have an existence of its own. Russell suggests the best way to conceptualize having a thought is that “there is a thought in me.” This formulation allows for an embodied conception of consciousness wherein a thought always exists in relation to the individual and their surroundings—including other people. In other words, thought is not only embodied, but extended. As Maureen Chun describes, “Like wave-particles and the waves of the sea, the rhythms and motions of human consciousness cannot be restricted to a single substance, and follow the rhythm and motions of nonhuman nature” (58). In this way, Susan’s agony is tangible to Bernard, so it can be shared, and in the process diffused.

As the characters age, Susan moves to the countryside and has a family; she lives a rural life working with her hands, and apparently sees life with “clear eyes” (180). Notably, she continues to “love and hate.” In short, Susan differs from the others in that she does not have to navigate London society; she does not have to play by a set of cultural rules forced on her because she avoids the social pressures of urban life almost altogether. Instead, she is defined by the pragmatic considerations of motherhood and rural-agricultural life, which allow her to keep some of her childlike perspective—which is to say that she is shaped by a different set of pressures. Her hands are rough and mark her as an outsider when she does go to a reunion with her childhood friends. “My body has been used daily, rightly, like a tool by a good workman, all over,” Susan explains, “The blade is clean, sharp, worn in the centre” (179). Like a “good workman,” Susan’s life requires that she keeps her senses sharp and listens to her body. Woolf relies on metaphors of well-used tools, sharpness, and hardness to communicate Susan’s identity (and, importantly, this is how Susan also sees herself). Indeed, it is only through linguistic tools, like metaphors and similes, that one can glimpse Susan’s true identity. In this case, connotative language, a tool more closely tied to artistic language rather than social or everyday language, allows an indirect, but mostly unobstructed view of Susan.

The moment that most explicitly shows Susan’s clear sight momentarily invokes language even more artistically driven than metaphor. Reflecting on her life up until the passing of Percival, Susan relays:

But I have seen life in bocks, substantial, huge; its battlements and towers, factories and gasometers; a dwelling-place made from time immemorial after an hereditary pattern. These things remain square, prominent, undissolved in my mind. I am not sinuous or suave; I sit among you abrading your softness with my hardness, quenching the silver-grey flickering moth-wing quiver of words with the green spurt of my clear eyes. (179-80)

Even though Susan is not “sinuous or suave,” the hallmarks of Jinny’s embodied power in her social setting, Susan’s “hardness” is direct and cuts past the “moth-wing quiver of words” that is the stock-

in-trade of her urbanized friends (particularly Bernard). Even though Susan is differentiated from her schoolmates by her rural-agricultural life, the narrative style remains essentially constant; thus, Woolf invokes abstract imagery here as a way of giving shape to something otherwise indescribable. Unlike Rhoda, though, who only glimpses this abstract “dwelling-place” momentarily (a topic returned to below), Susan seems to innately and intimately know this structure. While Susan can see the permutations of this structure—first as battlements and towers, then as factories and gasometers—she also recognizes a “hereditary pattern” that reaches back to “time immemorial.” Susan can see the socio-cultural shifts and their manifestations that have occurred throughout history on one level, while also seeing the much deeper and more constant flow of human life that ultimately adapts to its changing surroundings. And unlike Rhoda, “Susan takes for granted this reassuring image of life as dwelling-place or shelter; it is not something that she has struggled to achieve” (Harris 341).

Jinny is the one other character for whom the bodily and physical never recede through age and maturity. The rest of the characters’ bodies obviously assert themselves at times, especially in childhood, but Jinny’s world is almost solely shaped by the way her body interprets and reacts to the moment. What makes Jinny unusual is that there seems to be an explicit disconnection between her body and mind. The consequences of this are several: first, she has an innate confidence, which is especially pertinent in social settings, and is one of the major issues faced by all of her peers. In this sense, she represents a kind of innocence, or even animality, in that she exists on a level that largely avoids the pitfalls caused by the pressures of society and thus can act without feeling the anxieties that the other characters inevitably do about some aspect of their lives. It is difficult to tell exactly how much conscious control she exerts, though. Secondly, in a related vein, she has an intuitive, reactive way of being, wherein her body essentially automatically guides her actions: “My body instantly of its own accord puts forth a frill under his gaze. My body lives a life of its own...we have

exchanged the approval of our bodies. There is then a great society of bodies, and mine is introduced” (49). While the lives of the other characters trace the ways aging and maturing force them more and more into the realms of reflection, habituation, and obligation—mostly via the language needed to contemplate and communicate such concepts—Jinny uses her natural, bodily abilities to integrate into society differently.

Jinny may be limited in some ways, but it is because of one of her greatest strengths: she lives so naturally in the present moment that she has trouble making sense of the past or future. As a child, this makes it hard for her to follow school lessons; for example: “When I read, a purple rim runs round the black edge of the textbook. Yet I cannot follow any word through its changes. I cannot follow any thought from present to past” (32). While Jinny thrives in the present moment, adapting and reacting as the situation dictates, her prowess quickly disappears when she is forced to consider the future or the past, which contrasts some of the others. Despite this intellectual barrier, Jinny is often the envy of the other characters—especially Rhoda and Susan. In their youth, this is most obvious when Rhoda and Susan feel somehow left out or inferior. Even as a child, Jinny commands attention. As she grows into womanhood, Woolf casts Jinny as almost hyper-feminine—a characteristic which gives her both power and purpose. Her power comes in the form of physical attraction and a confidence that her instincts will always guide her interactions; in this way, Jinny is also the most unconscious of the characters. Her purpose seemingly derives from social expectations; so, although her innate physicality is portrayed as instinctive, she is obviously shaped by social norms. That Woolf conflates this background social evolution with an almost animalistic physical evolution shows the immense, if often unrecognized undercurrents that the social sphere exert. For Jinny, the social and the bodily are always intermingling: Jinny excels in navigating social expectations not by mastering the language or systems, but by tapping into the little human gestures that she notices on faces and in body language, and reacts to in the moment.

If the kind of femininity that Jinny represents is part of the upper-middle class social realm, then this allows for a useful comparison with Susan, who becomes a quintessential maternal figure in the countryside. Both are practical in their own ways, and unselfconsciously fall into their roles in time. It is salient that Woolf does not privilege one way of life or socio-cultural role over the other, thus complicating an archetypal reading of either character. Of course, it is also telling that they both fulfill stereotypical expectations—Jinny circulating at social events and pairing off with young men and Susan raising a family. There is undoubtedly a problematic typification at play here, but Woolf undermines this stereotyping by representing Susan and Jinny as uniquely able to exist and work readily in the realm of the body and the senses. Andrea L. Harris has argued that the “immediate or the sensible” are typically “relegated to the feminine” and have therefore been “excluded from metaphysics” (347). When seen this way, Woolf’s emphasis on, or championing of, the body’s role in conscious experience can be seen as a challenge mounted against so-called materialist novelists and patriarchal and Enlightenment ideals.⁵ Woolf had just published *A Room of One’s Own* in 1929, so it is possible to see Susan and Jinny through this lens as more capable of realizing an authentic or in-touch experience than their male counterparts, and are therefore full of potential but restricted by such patriarchal social expectations. Woolf does not spell out a woman-as-body archetype, but she does seem to suggest that certain established socio-cultural expectations shape people in somewhat predictable ways. For a counterpoint, Percival is depicted as having an embodied way of being, too (a point that will be addressed below). Thus, Percival—the figure most admired by the male characters—complicates the gendered reading of embodied knowing that would otherwise seem to

⁵ By Enlightenment ideals I mean, as a general tendency, that “Enlightenment philosophers from across the geographical and temporal spectrum tend to have a great deal of confidence in humanity’s intellectual powers, both to achieve systematic knowledge of nature and to serve as an authoritative guide in practical life” (William Bristow, *The Enlightenment*). Enlightenment thinkers also held notoriously restrictive and paternalistic views on the roles of women in society, which only adds to the problem. Of course, I do not mean to oversimplify the philosophies of a diverse set of thinkers. I admit that some of the philosophies may align more closely with my own work here than I fully communicate; however, I do hold that the enduring popular conception of Enlightenment ideals often falls under the definition quoted.

be the realm of the feminine. Unfortunately, Percival's perspective remains outside of the narrative, so a detailed comparison with Susan and Jinny is impossible.

Rhoda is the most unique, and possibly most opaque and perplexing, of the characters. Always the outsider, she often seeks out silence and solitude, explicitly removing herself from social obligations whenever possible. She is marked by her inability to reconcile language as a symbolic system and finds the flow of time jarring. Perhaps Rhoda is so hard to pin down and categorize because she has a negative quality—like she is the photographic negative of Susan or Jinny. Instead of representing a stable way of being, she is by nature dispersive, she dissolves and fragments, and she is always having to anchor herself to something lest she lose touch with reality. She is so sensitive to the violence of the world—and the social, in particular—that she needs to insulate herself. Language is particularly problematic for Rhoda, as she finds it both inherently abstract (i.e., that it does not correspond to the “bare things” that Bernard speaks of) and also inherently connected to the social. Speaking to this point, Dora Zhang explains, via Russell, “Words are general, Russell argues, because language is essentially social. In order to serve its chief purpose of communication, ‘it must be public, not a private dialect invented by the speaker’” (61). Every time Rhoda is confronted by the social or temporal facets of language without warning, she is rocked to her core; she is unable to find solace in these avenues of connection, which, for example, Susan did organically as a child. It seems that Rhoda is oversensitive, or unable to selectively block out what the other characters do so naturally; instead, she anaesthetizes herself against the onrushing stimuli of life—a different process than that which occurs automatically through age, habit, social obligations, and so on. She seeks out solitude and silence, and tries to mentally obstruct the waves of life crashing against her. There is always a risk that without some way to ground herself, the anxieties of modern life will overwhelm her. That Rhoda eventually commits suicide speaks to this irreconcilability, in that to be alive is to feel; but when one can no longer stand feeling, non-being or

death is the only option. Rhoda's death does punctuate the narrative, but like the violence that she fears, the moment and affective reverberation of her death do subside as they are swept away by the current of life. Rhoda's body consistently overrules her conscious, logical mind, showing what happens if one cannot selectively block out or numb some of the myriad sensations that perpetually bombard the sensorium—including sensations associated with thoughts and feelings. Woolf shows how becoming anaesthetized to life risks leaving one a lifeless automaton, but Rhoda resides at the opposite end of the spectrum: vulnerable to the violence of any interaction. If Rhoda represents an extreme aspect of Woolf's aesthetics, then the problem is that this coincides with the extreme end of ontology: that is, they are coterminous.

To put a finer point on Rhoda's inability to merge moments in time, it is clear that she finds the passing of time, and the fear of what might be around the next corner, to be violent. For example, when meeting up with her childhood friends for dinner before Percival ships off to India, Woolf gives a clear account of Rhoda's perspective:

I am afraid of the shock of sensation that leaps upon me, because I cannot deal with it as you do—I cannot make one moment merge in the next. To me they are all violent, all separate...I do not know how to run minute to minute and hour to hour, solving them by some natural force until they make the whole and indivisible mass that you call life. (106-7)

Apparently, Rhoda lacks the “natural force” that can weave time and experience together. Instead, she sees life in terms of its moments, feeling unmoored whenever one moment ends—something that is constantly happening to her. The problem is that she is highly sensitive, unlike some of her friends who have, via various means, become increasingly numb to the regular stimuli of daily life. Her sensitivity explicitly extends into space, and it takes relatively little to overwhelm her.

Interestingly, she uses her own body to ground herself: “What, then, can I touch? What brick, what stone? And so draw myself across the enormous gulf into my body safely?” (103). This is similar to the “extended” and “enacted” aspects of 4E cognition. As Crippen and Schulkin explain, quoting

Mark J. Rowlands, “enactivists hold that perception and cognition ‘are constituted in part by the ways in which an organism acts on the world and the ways in which world, as a result, acts back on that organism’” (5). Rhoda’s anxieties and fears flood her consciousness, and because she has an almost pathological inability to regulate this affective energy, these emotional charges are projected outward and then reflected back at her.

After receiving news of Percival’s death, Rhoda wanders the streets of London in a contemplative and even adventurous mood. Temporarily open to the violence of being in public, she welcomes the onrush of stimuli that would normally shock her; Percival’s death has opened her up to the truth of everyday life on the streets, which she sees as ugly, in an almost Dickensian colouring. She decides to buy a new pair of stockings, and her pain is temporarily assuaged by the simple ritual of shopping: “Pain is suspended as a girl silently slides open a drawer” (132). But as soon as she is forced into the social realm again, she is overwhelmed by the affective forces she perceived in the salesperson. Recounting what happens when the salesperson addresses her, Rhoda describes, “And then, she speaks; her voice wakes me. I shoot to the bottom among the weeds and see envy, jealousy, hatred and spite scuttle like crabs over the sand as she speaks” (132).⁶ This communication rips Rhoda out of her safe, buffered space and back into the rush of social time—she is forced to deal with life at the pace and intensity of the outside world—but for once, she relishes the experience. This is an example of the “shock of sensation” that she was afraid of when meeting her friends, but she is in a state of receptivity for once. Even in this altered state, though, Rhoda cannot accept language as a means of practical communication; however, she dwells in “the

⁶ This passage immediately calls to mind Eliot’s “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” which follows a speaker not unlike Rhoda, in the sense that he feels both overwhelmed by the demands of life—especially in social settings—and is benumbed by quotidian routines. The most explicit connection between Rhoda’s soliloquy and Eliot’s speaker include the line “I should have been a pair of ragged claws / Scuttling across the floors of silent seas” and the final sentence of the poem, “We have lingered in the chambers of the sea / By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown / Till human voices wake us, and we drown.” Eliot, T. S. “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” 7.

wild semblance of life” that these harrying experiences plunge her into. For someone so attached to her own idiosyncratic idea of truth, which normally means experiencing something by literally touching it, it is uncharacteristic for Rhoda to become receptive to these kinds of experiences.

Rhoda does, for a brief moment, experience the kind of meaning that she has been craving since childhood. The crucial moment comes when witnessing a musical performance in her altered mood:

“Like” and “like” and “like”—but what is the thing that lies beneath the semblance of the thing? Now that lightning has gashed the tree and the flowering branch has fallen and Percival, by his death, has made me this gift. Let me see the thing. There is a square; there is an oblong. The players take the square and place it upon the oblong. They place it very accurately; they make a perfect dwelling-place. Very little is left outside. The structure is now visible; what is inchoate is here stated; we are not so various or so mean; we have made oblongs and stood them upon squares. This is our triumph; this is our consolation. (134)

In contradistinction to the math problem Rhoda struggled with as a child, which made her feel like she was forced “outside” any understanding (15), “very little is left outside” of this structure. It is not clear what exactly brings this experience together in such a way as to create the structure Rhoda envisions, but there are some interesting clues. Most importantly, Rhoda recognizes that there is something “inchoate” that is expressed through the music. This suggests that non-representational art, in the form of music, is tapping into either some deep form from prehistory, something pre-linguistic (possibly the semiotic), or some nascent form that will develop into the future. While this timeline is ambiguous, it is still significant because Rhoda seemingly integrates into the flow of time—something she has not been able to do until this point. As Harris explains, “after welcoming the overt violence around her that Percival's death has allowed her to see, Rhoda expresses her desire for a direct language while listening to a singer at a concert. Like the music, the language Rhoda desires would be overt, direct, and non-representational...” and that, through this experience, “Rhoda soon realizes that language sometimes provides direct access to concrete objects, precisely

the thing she has been seeking” (340). This experience, this kind of knowing, is extra-linguistic, and so bypasses Rhoda’s normal defences. Once she has opened this door, through non-representational communication, she seems to realize that language can do a similar thing. Harris continues, “Rhoda wants to perceive the thing, in this case, music, as it exists in the world immediately, without language mediating between herself and the thing...” but this is where the switch kicks in: “it is the need to use simile in order to convey the qualities of things that she critiques, and yet she uses simile and metaphor to describe the music” (340). In other words, Rhoda has to switch from denotative to connotative language—metaphor and simile—to glimpse the “truth” she seeks. In the end, then, Rhoda, too, finds a way to experience the sublime flow of time in a way that gives her a sense of safety, even “triumph” and “consolation,” in a world that is otherwise inhospitable.

Gender and Psychoanalysis in *The Waves*

While a full discussion of the gendered psychoanalytical underpinnings of *The Waves* is beyond the scope of this chapter, the prominence of works dealing with the gendered structure of the Freudian psyche, and the amount that these overlap with anaesthetic modernism, compel an acknowledgement and possibly even a note for further research. Working in the lineage of Freud and Lacan, Julia Kristeva establishes that everyday language works as part of a “thetic,” or positing structure, and therefore fits into the Symbolic realm: “the *symbolic*—and therefore syntax and all linguistic categories—is a social effect of the relation to the other, established through the objective constraints of biological (including sexual) differences and concrete, historical family structures” (emphasis in original, 1947). The symbolic has traditionally been associated with the male gender, and this maps onto the male characters in *The Waves* surprisingly well: they all hope to master the symbolic in some way as a means to an end—to capture the essence of life in phrases (Bernard), to master the perfection of Latin (Neville), or to establish a successful career and climb the social

ladder despite one's colonial and middle-class background (Louis). Thus, this becomes significant as part of the discussion of gender and feeling in *The Waves*: the male characters seem to be particularly prone to the anaesthetizing effects of the symbolic, slowly becoming insensitive as they age and become increasingly embedded in, and shaped by, the symbolic structures that they conform to. It is important to note that one male character stands as an exception: Percival. Unlike the rest of the characters, he is purely surface—the only main character whose perspective is not explicitly part of the narrative. In this way, Percival is defined by the symbolic as a prototypical/archetypal masculine figure: he is the uncontested leader of the pack during his school years, moving through life without hindrance. However, Woolf complicates Percival's masculine symbolic shell by foregrounding his bodily awareness and his intuitive way of being; this interiority is not explicitly aligned with the semiotic, but Woolf nonetheless creates this subtle tension. In a sense, Percival is unthinking and either does not want to, or does not need to, invest his energies in mastering the symbolic the way the other male characters do—perhaps because he embodies the perfected imperialist man in whom the culmination of a whole culture acts through deep-seated intuition. This Percival is similarly naïve to his namesake in the Fisher King legend, but is ironized by Woolf via his ignominious death in imperial India.

The female characters, on the other hand, are each connected explicitly with their bodies and have greater sensitivity—a trait that even defines them. This would suggest that, to Woolf, females are aligned with the semiotic. Contrary to the symbolic, the semiotic is theorized as pre-linguistic and therefore prior to one's entrance into the symbolic:

According to a number of psycholinguists, “concrete operations” precede the acquisition of language, and organize preverbal semiotic space according to logical categories, which are thereby shown to precede or transcend language. From their research we shall retain not the principle of an operational state but that of a preverbal functional state that governs the con-

nections between the body (in the process of constituting itself as a body proper), objects, and the protagonists of family structure. (Kristeva, 1945)

The semiotic, being tied in with the body and the feminine, is of particular interest here, and helps give shape to the male/female and anaesthetized/sensitive dichotomies operating throughout the narrative. Kristeva theorizes that the semiotic is always active beneath the surface of the symbolic, and can occasionally break through—and that poetic language is one avenue that can potentially be harnessed as a means to this end. The semiotic is not as easily identified in the female characters as the symbolic is with the male characters, and this is partly because the semiotic becomes part of the symbolic as soon as it breaks free from the *chora*. However, the female characters seem to ground their femininity in their bodies, which ties them to pre-linguistic, semiotic ways of being: Susan with her maternal sureness and the deep knowledge that grounds her, Jinny via her ability to shift into an almost solely embodied way of being that allows her to navigate social settings spontaneously and with feminine-coded power (which is something of a photo-negative intertwining with masculine-coded power), and Rhoda—more problematically—in her inability to enter into the symbolic and subsequent search for “little language” as an alternative.

The relevant question, though, is how Woolf conceives of the feminine in *The Waves*. Does Woolf restrict the female characters to their bodies?⁷ Is this a limit—one that the male characters are not subject to? Or is Woolf trying to recuperate a feminine way of being that is more aligned with the body and senses? Percival offers a possible exception, in that his way of being is explicitly embodied; however, his lack of interiority creates an impasse in interpreting how, or if, the semiotic comes into play. There does not seem to be a clear or consistent answer to this question, especially

⁷ For a brief, but useful overview on gender in *The Waves*, see Gillian Beer’s “Introduction” to the novel. In “‘Bare things’: Returning to the senses in Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*,” Andrea L. Harris tracks the psychological underpinnings of the novel, tying this directly to issues of gender and the body—which inspires my work here. See also Jane Marcus, in “‘Britannia Rules *The Waves*,’ from *Hearts of Darkness: White Women Write Race*.”

considering the spectre of Woolf that looms in the shadows of the narrative (especially the lady writing in Elvedon): i.e., even if her characters face certain limits, the fact that she is authoring the narrative itself suggests that she has a mastery of language that transcends these very limits that her characters face.

Hélène Cixous takes on this question in her conception of *écriture féminine*, in which she hopes that women will be able to claim an unrepressed position that does not disconnect a woman from her own body: “Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies— for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text...” as a way of creating “a universal woman subject who must bring women to their senses and to their meaning in history” (1869). It is clear that Woolf writes the senses into her female characters in *The Waves*, and in doing so, does some work toward validating the experience of the body—especially the female body. Even though the female characters have stereotypically feminine characteristics and roles, problematizing a strong emancipatory reading of *The Waves*, the narrative does bear some of the marks of *écriture féminine*. That there is a stylistic continuity used throughout the narrative (between characters) also disrupts a strictly binary reading of gender; however, this narrative continuity prevents Woolf from giving her female characters explicit outlets in the narrative for actually expressing themselves publicly—and thus starting the work needed to break down the repressive patriarchal/phallogocentric history of writing. “To write,” is, for Cixous, “an act which will not only ‘realize’ the decensored relation of woman to her sexuality, to her womanly being, giving her access to her native strength; it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal” (1873). Jinny and Susan certainly “realize” connections with their bodies, sexuality, and “womanly being” that have traditionally been

“censored,” but *The Waves* obviously also stages some of the anaesthetizing effects of the symbolic and of the limits that society puts specifically on women.

That the narrative perspective blends the inner and outer lives of the characters allows Woolf to show how the surface of the characters becomes increasingly defined by the symbolic as they age and are more deeply embedded in societal norms and habits. Further still, by de-emphasizing the difference between the narration of male and female characters, Woolf is showing how the characters come to perform their gendered differences in a way that has affinities with Judith Butler’s conception of gender performance. As Butler describes, “If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true nor false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity” (2384). There are at least two important ramifications here: first, that the gendered differences between the characters become more pronounced the more they are implicated in the symbolic, and second, that the symbolic creates a boundary around the body itself, ultimately applying a set of expectations and norms from a socio-cultural context—and this becomes *the* outward-facing identity of the character, marking an explicit disconnection between their inner and outer lives. Even though Jinny and Susan remain in touch with their bodies and senses, they do inevitably seem to display their gender on this boundary. One of the strengths of the novel is that the narrative style makes it more difficult to tell what is happening in each character’s mind and what is happening around them. Add on top of this the almost indistinguishable voices of the characters and it seems like Woolf is only drawing attention to the bodily/symbolic boundary in order to undermine it. This does not mean that gender does not adhere to societal norms in *The Waves*, but rather that Woolf plays with the thetic-aesthetic-anaesthetic in terms of the body, the symbolic, and, therefore, gender.

To put a finer point on this, if the symbolic is thetic, then it can be related to its etymological relative: aesthetic. Significantly, the aesthetic has a double personality that pits sensory perception—both the processes and organs involved and the information gathered (in its pre-conscious state)—against the philosophy of the Beautiful—and all the baggage that comes with notions of taste, methods of study, or artistic movements. This opposition is, in a way, what underpins anaesthetic modernism: the referential, and thus thetic, nature of language is always distancing one from one’s body and senses. Yet language can also be the medium of art, and language used artistically (perhaps “poetically” in Woolf’s or Kristeva’s understandings) is capable of bursting through the symbolic boundary, if only momentarily, to show a glimpse of the semiotic—and thus may have a trace back to the body. Even if these moments are quickly subsumed by the normalized rhythm and pressure of life, and even prose for that matter, Woolf works to rupture the surface of the symbolic via narrative technique and representations of bodily sensitivity.

Conclusion

To bring this chapter to a close, I want to forward one last thought about *The Waves*. As I have shown, Woolf draws the reader’s attention to the aesthetics of embodied experience. While the intensities of youth are slowly dulled and replaced by intellectual, linguistic, and habitual priorities, Woolf also suggests that there are ways in which we can get back to our roots. As Harris reminds, “Woolf wants to arrive at what is irreducible in subjectivity, that without which there is no self, and this proves to be sense-perceptions and the language in which they are stated” (342). And because embodied experience and aesthetics rely on prehistoric human traits, Woolf connects both human beings and art to our deep past—our evolutionary roots. In this sense, Woolf is recentering the body—both the historical body of the interwar period and the prehistorical body—in an attempt to find solid footing, artistically and existentially. The interesting point, here, is that Woolf, in showing

how embodied consciousness and sensory primacy can blur the boundaries between characters, also extends this through her narrative to the reader. The “communion of sensation allowed by reading,” Joanne A. Wood explains, “merges the reader's body with those in the text” (501). Just as waves of experience traverse Woolf's characters and narrative, they also swell and crash onto the shore of the reader's mind and body. This idea theorizes a common feeling about art, and especially literature—that there is a special connection between the art and its viewer, reader, or listener. Woolf allows for her reader to share in this connection by anchoring it in the sensory and bodily, and in so doing, expands the scope of the novel to include the reader. The reader connects on both the level of shared embodied experience and in the aesthetic engagement with the narrative. So, despite the various traumas of modernity—from the interwar period and beyond—and the many ways we tend to have our senses dulled or diminished, Woolf gives credence to aesthetic experience of any intensity, or even lack thereof, as a way of getting back to being human.

Chapter 2: Suspended Above the Abyss: *Under the Volcano* and the Biopolitics of Disconnection

“So dependent is the self on sensations, that where there are not sensations there can be no ‘I.’”
(Jack Miles, Preface to *The Monk and the Philosopher*, xvii)

Set in 1938 in the Mexican city of Quauhnahuac, the Nahuatl name for the city of Cuernavaca, Malcolm Lowry’s *Under the Volcano* brings together local history, or what Stephen Spender calls the “despair of Mexico” in its post-revolutionary era with “the hopelessness of Europe torn by the Spanish Civil War” lurking in the background (“Introduction,” ix). The novel’s protagonist, Geoffrey Firmin, is a dipsomaniacal ex-British consul who is cut off from his home country, profession, wife, and, as I will explore, his senses. The Consul has lost his diplomatic position because Mexico has begun to assert its independence in the global market, and has lost the power and privilege that accompanied his former role. However, the most salient feature of the Consul’s lifestyle is his reliance on alcohol. Whiling away his days in various bars and cantinas, or rediscovering hidden bottles, the Consul’s return to sobriety, to life beyond the bottle, is almost endlessly deferred by the promise of his next drink. His unbreakable habit of self-medicating with alcohol is a way to avoid dealing with both personal and societal trauma: the Consul is haunted predominantly by his divorce and his (potential) involvement in war crimes during WWI, while the narrative is haunted by the history of conquest in Mexico, the ongoing—if distant—Spanish Civil War, and the impending descent into WWII. As a result of the Consul’s state, Lowry’s narrative is unreliable and disorienting from the start; as a reader, one is never quite sure what state the Consul is in, how clear his thoughts, or how trustworthy his grasp on reality.

This chapter most obviously ties into Anaesthetic Modernism via the Consul’s alcoholism: his prodigious alcohol consumption directly causes his numbness and disconnection, as alcohol has a literal anaesthetizing effect—especially when consumed in large quantities. That he drinks to suppress painful memories or to avoid the precarious reality of daily life also fits the Consul into a

lineage of modernism's great drinkers. Admittedly, this is why I was drawn to include this novel in my project in the first place. But while the Consul's dipsomania is still a crucial factor in relation to my larger conception of Anaesthetic Modernism, *Under the Volcano* offers numerous additional valences that, together, make it an even more important inclusion in this dissertation. However, *Under the Volcano* is notoriously difficult to distill or summarize, and this is because of the complicated and idiosyncratic interweaving of elements from different scales and sources that make up the narrative world. Thus, in an attempt to find a framework for discussing the multifarious nature of the novel, I will break the chapter into three thematic nodes for consideration. The first is the individual level, which deals directly with the characters. This, of course, brings in the Consul's drinking, but also issues of memory and trauma, communication, and forms of (dis)connection. The second level is that of the syncretic worldview of the Consul. Classical and local myths, religious texts, literary allusions, and a huge web of symbols all strongly influence the narrative, and weave together to form the syncretic worldview the Consul has created. This layer of the narrative highlights the Consul's inward, solipsistic state, and thus adds an important node of disconnection and suspension. The third node is place-based, and thus deals with both the local Mexican context and the global context within the narrative. These scales are also the sites of resistance to certain larger concepts, like that of modernism itself, and where issues relating to the state of humanity come to the fore—especially the possibility of history repeating itself yet again through another world war. Using these three nodes as a framework for approaching this narrative helps to tease apart the complex web of associations and influences that are continuously, but not always obviously, at play. These layers do not function in isolation either, intermingling with each other, they are also all filtered through the unreliable, obfuscating, and even hallucinatory perspective of the Consul, the other main characters, and the narrator.

Because the anaesthetic valences of this narrative are so complex and varied, I have considered finding a term that more fully captures this diversity. Anaesthetic Modernism is a conceptual framework that considers the various ways modernist authors examined how people can experience, or be put in a state of, insensitivity, numbness, or disembodiment. I recognize that my use of the term stretches the medical definition and purposefully conflates it with its cognate, borrowed from the study of art, the aesthetic. At its core, *Under the Volcano* is a novel about suspension, so I have chosen this word as a key to my chapter. Suspension has several layers of meaning: on one level, it suggests a state of suspense, which denotes some action that is stalled or deferred. On another level, it connotes the anticipation of something happening, a state of anxiety or at least the wish for resolution while waiting. On yet another level, to suspend something is to hang it from above so that it remains in place. Suspense often includes the arresting of time, preventing the regular flow of temporality until some crucial moment that may be out of one's control. In extreme cases, it describes being on the edge of a precipice—whether literal or figurative. It is also a disconnection that shifts one's attention or alters normal experiential processes: just as time can stretch and warp when one experiences suspense, one's senses can be heightened or dulled, and even one's cognitive functions can alter their experience of reality. All of these facets of meaning converge for the Consul: he perpetually puts off making decisions about his life—other than those relating to his next drink. And when he drinks, he disconnects himself from responsibility and retreats into a fundamentally altered existence where reality has no fixed meaning or immediate consequences. Drinking wools his senses and buffers his fragile ego, but ultimately, his life hangs precariously above the abyss.

When I set out to write this chapter, I was sure that it would revolve around masculinity and feeling—considering how the Consul's self-medication related to what I was calling the pharmacology of masculinity. The modernist period marked shifting ideals of masculine feeling and

put outdated models of masculinity, like the “pervasive Victorian masculine ideal of courage, self-control and above all a manly ethos of not complaining” under scrutiny (Lusty and Murphet, 5). This old masculine ideal of dispassion, suppressed emotions, and distance or objectivity prevents men from making emotional and physical connection, which is, in turn, a potentially traumatic situation that creates a negative feedback loop of isolation and, seemingly inevitably, anaesthesia as a coping mechanism. Many male figures in modernist novels turn to drink, or other narcotics, so that they don’t have to face this personal crisis. Drink, as a substitute for wounded masculinity, is also transformed into a site for mastery, connoisseurship, and tolerance (a possible substitute for the manly tolerance of pain). Of course, this comes at the price of dulled senses, distorted thoughts, and compromised relationships. Interestingly, alcohol or drugs cannot be mastered: while one can walk the tightrope of one’s tolerance, pushing on further only ensures a loss of control of both body and mind.

One complexity that I want to address from the beginning is that anaesthetic modernism sometimes involves bursts of intense feeling—sensorial or otherwise. This might seem like a deficiency in my conceptual framework at times, but it may actually be part and parcel of it: when one or more faculties are buffered, other sensitivities can emerge. Importantly, once-suppressed or hidden feelings may become more perceptible or may even dominate one’s experiences. Thus, in experiencing a loss of sensitivity, a possible side effect is that a whole new set of feelings, sensations, and thoughts may be produced. In other words, there is a paradoxical possibility of finding profound feeling through anaesthesia as new layers of affect open up. This can also shape the form of the novel, in a sense related to that of the notorious “difficulty” of modernism (see Diepeveen), by manifesting as disorienting, frustrating, or lulling stylistic features; however, there is also the possibility that these moments are also beautiful, insightful, or provide access to aspects of our sensorium that would otherwise be inaccessible or go unnoticed. The Consul is obviously insensitive

to many things, numbed and buffered by alcohol, but he also experiences a number of events very intensely—and these experiences are then paired with, perhaps even shape, his idiosyncratic syncretic worldview.

Finally, I want to clarify how I approach interpreting the effects of alcohol consumption, starting with a physiological understanding of alcohol's effects as one progresses through stages of intoxication, from the initial buzz through to the loss of control and even the subsequent hangover. For example, alcohol affects the brain in a series of stages, starting with excitation of the nervous system, which is followed by the depression thereof; extreme cases of long-term abuse may even lead to neurological changes, such as a reduction of white and grey matter in the brain. The experience of drunkenness may involve increased confidence, euphoria, numbness, slowed motor capabilities, dulled awareness, disorientation, impaired vision, and even blackouts. This physiological understanding is foundational to my chapter, but ultimately remains secondary to the more directly represented issues surrounding anaesthetic modernism that make up the narrative. To put a finer point on the matter, the physiological effects of alcohol fundamentally shape the narrative in several ways—from subtle stumbles to downright disorientation—and so I also closely consider these ways intoxication is represented narratively, thematically, and even symbolically. Of course, symptoms are never merely symptoms, and deserve dwelling on: by paying attention to the ways that intoxication functions and the shapes it takes, we can better understand the ways bodies mediate our interactions with the world. Rather than just reverse-engineer the normative functioning of the body, though, anaesthetic modernism urges us to see what these altered states allow us to see for their own sakes. In short, though, I want to reiterate that the effects of alcohol are considered broadly, perhaps even holistically, in this chapter, and I consider them all to be interrelated. These are not the only sources of anaesthesia in the narrative, either, but the presence of alcohol always lingers wherever the Consul roams.

Literature Review

Scholarly work on *Under the Volcano* often focuses on the Consul's alcohol consumption, and for good reason. However, there are many studies that tend to treat the Consul too autobiographically, matching his behaviour to Lowry's own personal struggles with alcohol. While there is obviously some merit to such pursuits—namely, in making sense of some very idiosyncratic situations—there is a risk that this kind of critical lens prevents one from seeing the literary transformations that alcohol allows in the novel. Alcohol is a material good that can be traced to certain geographical or technological origins, patterns of global influence, cultural norms, and even literary (or other artistic) lineages. Alcohol is a powerful and complex symbol that can resonate on different wavelengths and, especially in *Under the Volcano*, can be an external influence or a gravitational center. As I will argue below, alcohol can also shape the form of the narrative itself. Therefore, it is critical to push beyond heavily autobiographical scholarship, or work that tries to fit the Consul into too narrow a conception of an alcoholic, for example.

Steven Earnshaw, in *The Existential Drinker*, examines a number of narratives from the past century that are strongly shaped by alcohol consumption. However, instead of considering the habits of these fictional characters as indicative of alcoholism—i.e., as a disease that reduces the characters to a list of symptoms—Earnshaw tries to understand these characters specifically through the lens of Existentialism. One of the main threads that underpins his argument is that drinking, for these characters, is a choice—one that allows them to pursue authenticity—rather than merely a symptom of a medical condition or escapism (4-5). While it is difficult to see the Consul's drinking primarily as a "passion" (5), Earnshaw's perspective is useful because it opens up possibilities that allow for seeing the value of drinking as a generative literary tool, even mode. Speaking of the rich web of symbols present in the novel, Earnshaw explains:

the piling on of symbols is not just a literary device, it is the means with which the world itself is to be understood, a way of discerning patterns and meaning; things are 'like' other things, and can thus be connected and made sense of by extensive and extended similarities, so analogy and metaphor are not 'optional' ways of being in the world which could otherwise be understood more straightforwardly, but are the prime, elemental paths to knowledge. There is also a sense that such an attempt to pull everything together into some overarching symbol, or symbolic system, is too much, that the collation of symbols overwhelms the individual rather than enlightens. Drink, for Firmin, here serves a number of functions. It opens up the connection-making, symbol-apprehending facility through the altered state that alcohol brings him, enhanced, when he drinks it, by the hallucinatory qualities of mescal (mescaline). By being in a frequently altered state he is always able to 'see' clearly the horror of the world, to focus in a way which modernity's speed denies. (120)

This passage aligns quite closely with my own understanding of the novel, especially in the way that what disconnects and numbs the Consul is also what brings into focus the otherwise impossibly unwieldy excess of symbolic meaning that surrounds him. In this way, too, Lowry is able to show how much humanity is already (perhaps always already) ignoring or numb to just as a feature of normal daily life. In a sense, Lowry shows how the Consul trades one kind of insensitivity for another: modernity is only manageable if myriad sensations are continuously blocked out—but we take this for granted—and the Consul's altered state allows him to see some of these more clearly than the average person. That this kind of disconnection is "normal" is disturbing, especially in the historical context of the novel, with the ongoing Spanish Civil War and the looming catastrophe of the Second World War. But even without having to contend with such inconceivable scales of suffering, what Lowry also achieves is the illumination of quotidian experiences that "modernity's speed denies." His state of suspension gives him time and space to let his mind wander, and this seems to be the source of the rich and complex symbolic level of the narrative—though it is also tied to his deterioration and, ultimately, his demise.

Several scholars trace various mythological or religious threads throughout *Under the Volcano*, and Paula Di Gennaro works in this vein via the "Cain archetype," which hinges on the Consul's guilt and the way he seems to wander through life, deferring both sobriety and responsibility. Di

Gennaro's argument covers a lot of ground, and nicely integrates the Consul's drive to drink with some of the more prominent religious or mythical valences of the novel. One particularly intriguing point is that Di Gennaro recognizes not only the Consul's clear-sightedness when drunk, a point a number of scholars make, but also his heightened sensitivity: "He is aware that alcohol and existential suffering have made him more sensitive and have opened the door to a deeper understanding, just like a magician using the cabbala, or a Dante wandering through the three states of the human soul. Isolation is the punishment for this deeper comprehension and, obviously, for his guilt" (127-8). Guilt is obviously one of the most salient forces preying upon the Consul's mind, to the point that it has affected the very fiber of his being. This guilt goes hand-in-hand with his self-punishment through alcohol: by drinking as much as he does, and by developing such a strong dependency on it (whether biological or otherwise), he guarantees his own perpetual suffering. But, as Di Gennaro suggests, the anaesthetizing effects of alcohol are paired with a sensitivity that is often focused through magic, mysticism, or religion: as aforementioned, desensitization in one faculty often goes hand-in-hand with a sensitization of another, but for the Consul, this sensitivity is most often directed inwards and felt existentially.

Coming at *Under the Volcano* from the angle of cognitive grammar, Eric Rundquist shows how Lowry uses Free Indirect Speech (FIS) to tap into the experience of drunkenness that shapes the narrative from the Consul's perspective. Rundquist explains that "The style [FIS] is commonly understood as a means of either speech or thought presentation...but it can also be applied to perceptions and other facets of character consciousness beneath the level of thought, like feelings and states of mind" (40). Rundquist is able to trace narrative techniques that actually mimic a drunken state, proving to some extent how the use of alcohol actually shapes the narrative form itself. For example, "the use of passive voice, and participial verbs in general, helps to represent the drunken Consul's reduced scope of perceptual awareness: the beginnings of events and the

participants in them are often backgrounded or ellipted from his consciousness” (50). This kind of scholarship is crucial in providing a precedent for showing how Lowry goes beyond using intoxication merely thematically, and is actually exploring the ways it fundamentally destabilizes the narrative—and does so via an explicit focus on the disconnection between the Consul and his “perceptual awareness,” putting a finer point on the way anaesthesia blocks some experiences while highlighting or even generating new ones.

Alcohol consumption has a particularly complex and problematic history in Mexico, which Deborah Turner explores in *Alcohol and Nationhood in Nineteenth-Century Mexico*. Turner explains that, even in pre-conquest times, the Aztecs had strict social restrictions on who could consume alcohol—and, more specifically, get drunk—in public: only the social elites, including military, religious, and political leaders, were afforded such permissions. “These rules were in place,” Turner suggests, “because drunkenness was a form of intoxication that established connections and facilitated communications between humans and various gods, which only the elite in Aztec society were normally deemed important enough to experience” (xxiii). Seen in this light, the Consul’s familiars and mystical experiences take on a new colouring: his intoxication becomes a noble pursuit of higher truths, and he is sacrificing his own health and relations in this aim. Of course, he finds limited success in actually reaching any profound knowledge, and this may be a reflection of his fallen status (he is the former Consul, after all), or perhaps the dubious justification permitting only those of higher status the right to drink freely. Turner also delves into the cultural and political complexities of regulating drinking establishments in Mexico City throughout the 19th century, showing how government officials waffled between requiring highly visible and open drinking venues, that could easily be monitored by authorities, and requiring liquor-selling establishments to be as discreet as possible, hiding all patrons away from public sight (21). This additional layer of local history helps contextualize the Consul’s drive to find the deepest, darkest corners of bars and

cantinas as indicative of the loss of his social status and, simultaneously, his inability to find community and connect with the locals—ensuring his isolation and disconnection.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, a number of scholars have considered the roles drink and drunkenness play in *Under the Volcano*. Greg Bond, in “Boundlessness beyond Boundlessness: The Sea, Drink, and Form in Malcolm Lowry's Fiction,” traces the way alcohol functions throughout Lowry's oeuvre. He shows how, in *Ultramarine*, alcohol “is only a prop, an accessory to growing up and becoming a man, and it lacks all the obsessive and perception-enhancing qualities with which it is imbued in the works of Lowry's middle period. Drinking may be important to young Dana Hilliot, but drink as a door to perception is not” (627). Bond suggests that the Consul, on the other hand, is aided by drink in illuminating a different view of the world; while this vision is ultimately wrapped up in doom, the great tragedy of the novel is generated by the lingering sense of hope: “This hope derives from the mystical experience that accompanies intoxication, and the intimations of paradise that are thus gained” (629). In “The Place of Hallucinations in *Under the Volcano*,” Thomas B. Gilmore focuses on the hallucinatory experiences that vie for the Consul's attention. Part of his argument hinges on the fact that there is something noble in the Consul and, therefore, his pursuit of drunkenness of such mammoth proportions sets him apart from other drunken literary figures. However, the crux of Gilmore's paper is captured when he explains: “with the aid of an immense quantity of alcohol he hallucinates the various means to [his demise]: the threats, the police persecution, the confused violence, even his own murder. Simultaneously and mysteriously, as in a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy, the hallucinations become actuality” (300). This focus on the Consul's hallucinations helps highlight the ways this unreal, and untethered, facet of the Consul's experience blends into his sense of reality, thus allowing the symbolically- and psychologically-charged visions to take on more literal meanings for the Consul than might otherwise be possible.

The Consul's drunken hallucinations and subsequent syncretic mythological projections, in turn, tie back to the idea that reading and writing can be legitimate ways of experiencing or understanding the world, which Jonathan Butler describes as “the sanctuary not only of alcohol but of writing itself” (“Malcolm Lowry’s *Under the Volcano* and the Drunken Discourse of Literary Solipsism,” 42). While Bond and Gilmore focus sometimes too narrowly on drink and hallucinations, respectively, Butler weaves a much more thorough and nuanced account of the Consul's intoxicated consciousness, tying it into the very style of the narrative itself. Butler describes alcohol “as a facilitating factor of the metarhetorical discourse he constructs as a means of maintaining an effective disconnection from the world and as a form of validation, through a discursive logic entirely unique to it, of a rhetorical mode of relating to the world that consistently generates a gap between sign and referent, word and thing” (39). The “gap” that Butler envisions here is closely related to my own understanding of the Consul's disconnection from the world, especially in the way that the literary representation of drunkenness in the novel mimics the sensorial disconnection that results from alcohol consumption. In this way, the quantity of drink correlates with the level of disconnection on both literal and literary levels: the more anaesthetized the Consul becomes, the more he weaves his own narrative—and the further this narrative becomes a projection of the Consul's innermost obsessions. The consequences of this trajectory are suspension, disconnection, and, ultimately, his fall into the abyss.

Suspension, Disconnection, and the Abyss

Under the Volcano is a novel about suspension, and the Consul is suspended in many ways—he has been pushed away by his country with no connections at home, has been left by his wife whom he relied on far more than he knew, and he feels that the world is in a state of turmoil that he is powerless to face. His connection to each of these facets of his life has been whittled down over

time, leaving him in a precarious position with few ways of grounding himself. This section will focus on the aspects of the narrative that deal most directly with the Consul's state of suspension, including the effects of alcohol consumption and withdrawal, the nature of written communication via two important letters, and the way memory functions to displace and suspend the present.

Before proceeding to the aforementioned valences of suspension, I briefly want to discuss an important framing device that operates in the background of the entire narrative, occasionally coming into focus: Dia de los Muertos, or Day of the Dead, which happens to be the day the novel and the day the frame narrative takes place (which I will also discuss in the section on the Mexican context of the narrative). The actual history, religious underpinnings, and related rituals involved in the celebration are far too numerous to mention here, but As Hugo G. Nutini explains, "During this time, country and city come together; the little community becomes the cosmological center of existence, and individuals and families are renewed by remembering their roots and paying homage to those who are no longer present. For a moment, living and dead exist in the same world" (n.p.). It is not merely a coincidence that Yvonne returns to Quauhnahuac on the Day of the Dead: while she is ostensibly coming back to revive her marriage and start a new chapter, what she finds is, in a way, a ghost of her husband. Emphasizing the symbolic possibility of this, the opening chapter is set exactly one year later—and the reader learns of the Consul's death in this framing chapter. The rest of the narrative happens in a single day and functions like a retelling of his death—something that might be remembered at a Day of the Dead celebration. Because of this framing chapter, *Under the Volcano* is a narrative profoundly suspended—thematically and formally. To borrow Nutini's words, the Consul is most certainly his own cosmological center; while he may exist in the real world, his is a spectral presence—like a living memory that is disintegrating every moment. Thus, this liminal or spectral presence permeates throughout the narrative and acts as a constant reminder that the

narrative itself is suspended temporally and thematically through this local religious event: indeed, for a few hundred pages, the “living and dead exist in the same world.”

While drinking in *Under the Volcano* is a well-worn topic, I want to return to it for a moment—and hopefully in a new way: this section starts by focussing on how drink provides Lowry with the symbolic vehicle to intertwine abstract existential suspension with bodily suspension. One of the effects of being drunk is that one’s faculties become slowed and numbed. As the Consul’s friend Dr. Vigil explains to him, the nervous system is like an electric system: when one drinks, the system starts to break down and becomes unpredictable (151). With prolonged and copious use, alcohol damages many parts of the body, and the most obvious symptom is often a horrible hangover. As the alcohol is processed, and leaves the body, one’s senses start to function normally again, but now there is a new series of feelings as what was blunted gradually becomes sensitive again and one’s perspective changes and expands. In other words, the numbing and buffering effects of alcohol wear off and one is vulnerable again to the phenomenal world, which includes one’s own body. That the Consul’s friend, Dr. Vigil, uses the analogy of an electric system to describe alcohol’s effects on the Consul also suggests what Tim Armstrong calls the “neurasthenic paradigm” that came about as a result of studying experiences of soldiers during WWI. Prominent physicians, like George M. Beard, had already forwarded theories, decades earlier, that the nervous system behaved in such terms. Armstrong explains, “Neurasthenia, with its huge variety of symptoms, was based on the conception of the body as a nerveo-electric system with a limited level of internal energy with which to cope with signals from the external world” (2). The Consul responds to Dr. Vigil’s comment by thinking of his own battery dying (152), unable to keep a constant charge. Lowry represents the Consul’s capability to handle the pressures of reality in this way, meaning that the shocks of life are likely to overwhelm him—and that drink is then the best defense against such shocks. Challenging the entrenched notions that either rationality or manly stoicism can master the

stimuli of life, the Consul recognizes his own vulnerability—which is perhaps best exemplified by the shock generated by Yvonne’s return: “Yvonne’s long-dreamed-of coming...has in itself created the most important situation of your life save one namely the far more important situation it in turn creates of your having to have five hundred drinks in order to deal with it” (72). The Consul’s nerves are frayed, and thus so is his attention: this is how the numbing effects of alcohol become a form of self-medication that allow him to narrow his field of experience enough to cope with the signals he is processing.

The fear of an impending hangover—or even delirium tremens—and the desire to get back to the insulating drunken state, also push the Consul back to the bottle in a never-ending cycle. That Yvonne arrives in the morning might suggest that the Consul has a chance to break free of his diurnal alcoholic cycle; he could become sensible to the lifeline Yvonne offers him as the effects of alcohol wear off. At one point, early in the day still, the Consul awakens from some kind of dream to find the house quiet, Yvonne is still asleep, and he realizes he has a bit of time to himself. Of course, instead of the Consul coming to his senses, his mind turns to the task of finding his next drink; the problem now is that he has an intense hangover, so Lowry displaces the Consul’s sensorium with a different protective layer: the Consul wakes with “...an inconceivable anguish of horripilating hangover thunderclapping about his skull,” which is “accompanied by a protective screen of demons gnattering in his ears...” (132). The Consul then seems to act without conscious effort, breaking into a run through his garden and homing in on a hidden bottle of tequila he had placed there some indeterminate time ago. It is his demons, or “familiar,” that have guided him there on auto-pilot to save him from suffering his hangover too long. In typical Lowry fashion, reality is displaced by hallucination for the Consul, but because the Consul’s familiars are brought into being by symptoms related to alcohol withdrawal, it is strange that he labels them “protective.” In short, he needs not to feel. This drives home the reality that, for the Consul, being sober is the abnormal state. What is also

interesting about this scene is the way the Consul (via his familiars) essentially pauses his life when the need for a drink has gotten too great; in a twisted fight-or-flight response, instinct or some other sub-conscious drive provides a buffer that allows the Consul to remain suspended. Jonathan Butler frames this scene in terms of a “discursive relationship to figments of his imagination” (49-50), which cuts him off from any external discourse (and, therefore, salvation). Butler’s model of solipsistic disconnection explains a great deal of how the Consul expands or maintains the gap between himself and his compatriots, but glosses over the physiological aspects that twin this phenomenon.

The physiological effects of alcohol withdrawal syndrome can be severe and cause people with alcohol use disorder side effects that include intense physical, mental, and emotional distress. For those, like the Consul, who also face a return to an unpleasant reality, the incentives to return to the bottle are strong. Twentieth-century literature has a not insubstantial subset of characters dealing with alcohol withdrawal, so the Consul fits within this legacy⁸; while the Consul may be unique in the way personal, mythological, and religious hallucinations are woven into his experience, the logic at play here fits into a larger literary trend. This can, perhaps, be most succinctly summarized by invoking the term *pharmakon*.⁹ In Greek, *pharmakon* can mean remedy, poison, or scapegoat, and its logic applies in multiple ways to alcohol use disorder. The trope of alcohol as both medicine and poison is well established; at the most basic level of this schema, alcohol is a poison in that it is literally toxic to the human body and damaging to the mind. However, as heavy alcohol use becomes

⁸ Perhaps the most notable example is that found in Conrad’s *Lord Jim*, a novel that is referred to in *Under the Volcano* and which Lowry likely found inspiration in. In *Lord Jim*, one of the deserters of the *Patna* is hospitalized for severe alcohol withdrawal symptoms—and ultimately dies because of them. Amongst the many parallels between these two novels, one of the most salient is the profound guilt complexes suffered by some of the characters—and which relate to seafaring crimes that are eventually acquitted, but which leave permanent marks on those who were culpable.

⁹ The most famous works on the concept of the *pharmakon* are by Plato and Jacques Derrida. While these texts are both inspirations for this chapter, I don’t invoke either directly—doing so is beyond the current scope. Both thinkers consider the flexibility, or multi-faceted nature, of the term *pharmakon*, showing how something—like the written word—can be both a boon and a detriment. I think there is potential to undertake a comparison between these works and *Under the Volcano*, and may consider doing so in the future.

sustained, withdrawal symptoms become the most immediate threat and can even be fatal if not treated. Thus, when faced with severe withdrawal symptoms, the most straightforward solution is to return to the bottle—a move which temporarily defers the onset of such symptoms. Of course, there is also the sense that alcohol can numb the pain of reality—especially grief or trauma—and thus can be seen more as a choice than an addiction (although this is typically considered false logic, an excuse rather than justification). Pharmakon also connotes pharmaceuticals, an increasingly dominant force in modern societies. While Lowry does not directly describe alcohol as a drug in *Under the Volcano*, and does not use terminology related to prescriptions, it is the way he depicts alcohol use as a biologically-enforced form of protection and insulation that suggests the notion of alcohol as a form of self-medication. Lowry, then, uses a mix of repression and alcohol to assuage the Consul's suffering (his symptom, so to speak). These are fairly recognizable tactics, especially amongst men who, for whatever reason, cannot process or discuss what troubles them—whether the addiction itself or what is causing them some form of pain or suffering. Thus, this form of toxic masculinity could be termed the pharmacology of masculinity, wherein the medicine is both poison and scapegoat. For the Consul, alcohol enables him to face each new day by dulling his pain and giving him occupation, but he knows it also poisons his body and mind—and his relationship with Yvonne; however, he comes to see his alcohol-infused suffering as necessary, as the means by which he can pay for his sins.

Thematically, the problem with oscillating between states of inebriation and withdrawal is that the Consul never actually grasps the repercussions his choices have on those around him. As Laruelle summarizes, “You’ve even been insulated from the responsibility of genuine suffering” (229). Jacques Laruelle is, of course, whom the narrative is focalized through in the opening frame chapter, which lends his later appearance a more objective, distanced perspective. That the Consul cannot even suffer properly is a crucial thematic keystone to the novel, and is one of the main

reasons his suspended state is so poignant: as soon as he comes out of his suspended state, he is doomed; however, he cannot stay in his suspended state forever, as the cost of remaining intoxicated cannot be afforded indefinitely. Suffering takes on a contradictory meaning for the Consul, as he simultaneously wants to stop his and Yvonne's suffering while also suffering more completely, and more alone, so that he may get to the deepest sources of his troubles. Because the Consul has turned inwards, he puts himself at the center of all that he sees around him. As Patrick McCarthy explains, "Lowry himself recognized that he needed to present Geoffrey both as the victim of forces outside himself and as the author of his own doom" (59). Perhaps this is reflective of his purgatorial state in that he neither finds the courage to redeem himself, nor commits fully to the path of doom—that is, until he sleeps with Mariá in the final chapter. Because he does not have a guide to take him through Hell, which in itself may be a self-inflicted punishment, such a descent would bring with it the risk of remaining there—whether this means facing the consequences of dealing with personal trauma, accepting a religious judgement, or a more general allegorical state from which there is no return. Thus, the Consul remains in a purgatorial state of suspension, disconnected from what can help him, what can harm him, and from having to commit to a decision.

The Consul has lost touch with the most stable touchstones in his life, and in this way has become profoundly disconnected from the world outside his consciousness. Of the ways the Consul is disconnected, being detached from the regular flow of time may be the most obvious, but also the most consequential. Speaking about the consequences of being disconnected from the flow of time, Stephen Kern suggests that "Individuals behave in distinctive ways when they feel cut off from the flow of time, excessively attached to the past, isolated in the present, without a future, or rushing toward one" (3). It would seem that the Consul is prototypical of this formulation, as he fits each of Kern's descriptions. Regarding the past, he obsesses over the time before Yvonne left him and he apparently holds a strong sense of guilt about his command aboard the *S.S. Samaritan* (more on this

topic later). As for the present moment, his isolation or disconnection is central to his character, but is also complicated: his bouts of drinking help him put off having to face responsibilities or even decisions about daily life. Thus, while his health and relationships continue to worsen day by day, he continually turns inwards and backwards. This is one of the most tragic aspects of the novel, as there are several moments when he could make a decision that would not only save his life, but reconnect and possibly even make him happy. Finally, he does not seem able to envision a future: the only future he can see is one that he wrote in a letter almost a year before the narrative takes place. In the end, of course, he also effectively spurs on the actions that lead to his death and send him tumbling down a ravine. Further still, Tim Armstrong reminds that time is experienced subjectively and is therefore influenced by anything altering the consciousness of the subject. He explains, “As in Bergson the sense of time is not inbuilt, not a Kantian *a priori*, rather it is an effect of the mind’s functioning, affected by such factors as drugs, situation, and fatigue. Indeed, this description arguably makes time nothing but a kind of fatigue, the drag or noise which is built into the perceptual apparatus” (5). Armstrong is writing in the context of shock and trauma, but his point is useful in a general sense, too. The experience of time is deeply tied into “the perceptual apparatus,” so if something influences or affects one’s senses, that thing also influences one’s sense of time. Most commonly, this can be excitement, speeding up time, or depression, slowing time. Seen in this light, the Consul has essentially paused time by anaesthetizing himself with alcohol. Not only does it numb his senses, but it alters his bodily functions and mental processes.

Alcohol is not the only factor that affects the Consul’s experience of the world, contributing to his state of suspension: another powerful influence comes in the form of written communication, or more specifically, letters. In the final moments of the narrative, while the Consul is back at the fateful Farolito, he is given a bundle of letters from Yvonne:

“Do you remember to-morrow?” he read. No, he thought; the words sank like stones in his mind.—It was a fact that he was losing touch with his situation...He was dissociated from

himself, and at the same time he saw this plainly, the shock of receiving the letters having in a sense waked him, if only, so to say, from one somnambulism into another; he was drunk, he was sober, he had a hangover; all at once... (358)

The shock of receiving the letters has rocked the Consul substantially enough to cause a momentary shift in his state. He seems to gain perspective in this instant, bringing to a head his various realities: “he was drunk, he was sober, he had a hangover; all at once.” These states do not cancel each other out; indeed, they are irreconcilable. Thus, the Consul “dissociates,” or possibly comes to recognize that he had already become dissociated, and so has trouble determining what is real and what is fantasy. The impossibility of his situation freezes the Consul, causing even his brain to come to a “standstill” and, once again, finding himself suspended (360). The shock of discovering the letters is enough to knock down the walls of his current echo-chamber, which yet again opens all possibilities to him, but this awakening essentially precipitates his downfall—he is treading water in an inhospitable setting, and has no time or capacity to get a foothold in the situation. This moment complicates the defamiliarization effect in that the shock of the letters does not innervate the Consul—and if he does gain perspective about his situation, it is that there is no stable state that he can rely on. If the alcohol-induced, habitualized existence he emerges from woos his senses and prevented him from recognizing the full immanence of the world around him, his momentary awakening fails to provide objectivity or control; instead, the only insight he gains is that he is cycling through competing states, each with its own distracting nature and instability—each inevitably preventing the Consul from reconnecting with Yvonne, those in the Farolito, or even himself. Letters have an outsize influence in the novel, especially considering one of them is never even sent. These letters deserve some attention, as they represent some of the key conflicts of the novel—both for the Consul and for Lowry as an author of the written word.

It is particularly Lowry-esque that the wakening force comes in written form: these letters represent language, communication, and salvation suspended—suspended because, once written, the

message is unchanging and becomes both a personal artifact and an aesthetic object. Verbal communication is immediate and has the potential to connect people via an open dialogue. Written communication may use many of the same building blocks that its verbal counterpart does, but there are some crucial differences. Possibly the most significant difference is that it lacks immediacy and has a very different way of connecting people. Speech comes to life in the moment it is uttered, while writing suffers a kind of death: it is put into stasis or suspended animation, waiting for a reader to reinvigorate it—but there is no guarantee of its efficacy as intended at the time of writing.¹⁰ The Consul may have been putting pieces of himself into his letters—pieces that he will never get back. If this is the case, it helps explain why the Consul's fate seems so inevitable: perhaps it is. Written language comes into play most forcefully in *Under the Volcano* via letters that the Consul and Yvonne have written each other: each character expresses the wish to connect with the other—something that, consequentially, never happens in person during the narrative.

Significantly, the narrative effectively starts and ends with letters: in the opening frame chapter, Laruelle finds the letter that the Consul had meant to send to Yvonne—the very letter that could have saved their marriage and their lives. The letters in the final chapter are from Yvonne and reveal what spurred the Consul to write his unsent letter. Perhaps written language, here, represents a sublimated form of communication that can replace the apparently impossible real-life conversation. This suspended form of communication is the perfect way to express what Yvonne calls the “memory” of their love (360). Written language may not allow for immediate connection, but it does have other unique qualities. The letter the Consul wrote Yvonne, which Laruelle comes across in the first chapter, seems to be invested with an understanding and energy that the Consul never shows during the narrative—in this way, his letter to Yvonne is his clearest and most powerful

¹⁰ In the *Phaedrus*, Plato explains, “I think that writing has a strange feature that makes it quite like painting. For the offspring of the painter's skill stand before us like living creatures, but if you ask them a question, they are very solemnly silent. And the same goes for written words” (275E). Both Plato and Derrida connect writing with death/Thanatos.

attempt to connect with her. However, as mentioned above, it seems as though he loses a piece of himself in writing the letter, as if he permanently transfers his hopes and intentions to the letter. In the process, loses his future chance at finding a way to connect in person. The letter, then, bears more than just the mark of the Consul: the written word inscribed there carries potential—but in a permanently suspended form—and perhaps this is the point. As Jonathan Butler theorizes: “The letter thus fits squarely into the domain of the Consul’s *modus operandi*: to generate discourse that even when initially directed toward others, ultimately remains self-enclosed, serving aims that remain solely within the Consul’s own private world, as the Consul himself is tortuously aware” (48). In other words, even though the Consul ostensibly writes the letter to Yvonne—in a gesture that could have righted the foundering ship that was their marriage—the Consul writes the letter for himself. Thus, the letter was never really intended for Yvonne, but nonetheless “a letter always arrives at its destination” (Lacan, 30); in this case, the “destination” is, perhaps temporarily, suspended.

There is a dialectic of presence and absence encoded in the language of suspension and resumption: in a letter, the sender is physically absent, but they are summoned to mind while the recipient reads the words on the page. However, rather than summoning the actual person who wrote the letter, the reader summons their own memories in order to give life to the words. The letter bears a trace, not of the sender themselves, but of the absence of the sender: the signifier displaces the signified, and the sign displaces the referent. In effect, the Consul becomes stuck in the realm of letters that can never be sent or arrive—and so keep his world in suspension. The memory of the Consul and Yvonne’s love is all that keeps them connected, and it has lost most of its magnetism by the time the novel takes place. Their love is now a thing of the past, and as such has become an aesthetic object; it is something that can be appreciated from a distanced perspective, but it also stimulates aesthesis, or sensory affect. From this perspective, the letter can be read and reread, allowing greater understanding and opportunity for reflection and interpretation. But when their

former love is invoked, it stirs their emotions and sparks a glimmer of hope, clouding the more reasoned or analytical approach to the letter that written language allows. This nostalgia is a powerful emotional response, one that is easily reinterpreted into a new future-oriented narrative that fosters the positivity associated with this nostalgic affect. However, despite the desire to follow this new narrative, the hard reality for the Consul is that the words and feelings in the letters remain marooned in the past.

The sequence of the Consul's experience with the prostitute, Mariá, in the dark, destiny-setting bowels of the Farolito, marks the divergence of his memories from the present moment—and any possibility of a future with Yvonne. The Consul's actions are accompanied by the words of Yvonne's heart-rending letters, and the whole scene is structured in an almost cinematic way. It is worth pausing here for a moment to explain what Lowry achieves linguistically, which then augments the thematic richness and plot sequencing by representing the drunken experience of the Consul—who is rapidly breaking away from reality in a way that is slightly different than previously. In the final phase of the narrative, the Consul has an out of body experience and can almost see himself from a detached perspective. This shows just how intoxicated he has become, actually mimicking the effects of alcohol on the mind, a process that Eric Rundquist has analyzed using cognitive grammar. Rundquist's analysis focuses on the events following the Consul's experience with Mariá, and thus represent a similar state of mind and, therefore, a similar linguistic structure and representation:

These clauses portray the drunken protagonist as prone to a sort of distracted inward gaze: he focuses on the processes of his own mind in a way that dilutes or interferes with his attention to events in the outside world. Furthermore...he is cast as a patient rather than an agent of his own cognition: he construes his mental activity as something that is done to him, rather than something that he does to himself. The mental processes in this passage thereby reflect two things that literary critics have pointed out about the Consul's psychological tendencies: his solipsism (in the sense that he is keenly focused on his own

mind but unable to really verify anything outside of it) (Butler, 2017) and his sense of being out of control of his life, including his own discourse and behaviour (Falk, 1985). (47)

What is most important, here, is that Rundquist shows how Lowry's narrative technique mimics the actual experience of intoxication, making the connection between the physiological and thematic aspects of drink within the narrative even more concrete. While this level of connection is not necessary for *Under the Volcano* to be an interesting example of how intoxication (and, subsequently, anaesthesia) can function and be represented in literature, it nonetheless provides a new level of engagement that opens some doors to new interpretations. In this light, the text is almost alive with the experience of intoxication, which is influencing the very building blocks of the text.

Returning to the letters from Yvonne, it is even more apparent how the experience of reading them is both a lifeline (in the sense of providing a stable linguistic/grammatical sequence that he can hold on to despite his increasingly detached, solipsistic, and uncontrolled state) and a source of intense affect that combines with his intoxicated state to produce an unstable connection with both past and present. He reads, in Yvonne's words, "What is a lost soul? It is one that has turned from its true path and is groping in the darkness of remembered ways" and then "You are walking on the edge of an abyss where I may not follow" (360; 361). This echoes the trope of the Consul as a guideless voyager facing an unfamiliar and hostile environment—and one in which his very soul is at stake. Both an aesthetic of memory and a Catholic dialectic of guilt/suffering as feeling are at play. As for the Consul's experience of memories, the "remembered ways" are themselves "dark;" it is as though the light of life has moved on with time, and the past is left in the shadows. This further suggests that memories, projected spatially, are things one can get lost in. Perhaps the crucial implication is that one may look back at memories from the present safely, but one cannot live in their memories without risking losing oneself in the obfuscating darkness—especially considering that one's memories are inherently, unavoidably individual and thus cut off

from even one's closest relation's memories. It is in this state of disorientation that the Consul first becomes aware of the beautiful young Mariá:

Lightning silhouetted against the window a face, for a moment curiously like Yvonne's. 'Quiere Mariá,' she volunteered again, and flinging her arms round his neck, drew him down to the bed. Her body was Yvonne's too, her legs, her breasts, her pounding passionate heart, electricity crackled under his fingers running over her, though the sentimental illusion was going, it was sinking into a sea, as though it had not been there, it had become the sea...or her body was nothing, an abstraction merely, a calamity, a fiendish apparatus for calamitous sickening sensation... (363)

The moment Mariá takes hold of the Consul, he is so deeply lost in his memories that he is unable to fully comprehend what is happening. His biological urges have been ignited by his memories, and these memories now displace reality sufficiently for the Consul's slowed and altered consciousness to translate or map Yvonne's body onto Mariá's. The Consul's senses momentarily come alive and his body seems to act of its own accord—presumably on muscle memory. In this moment, the Consul's faculties other than his haptic system are “in the dark,” and the stimuli they receive—like the “electricity crackl[ing] under his fingers”—must be close enough to that of memory to help further maintain the illusion that Mariá is actually Yvonne. That Lowry uses an electrical metaphor here also recalls Dr. Vigil's explanation of how the body breaks down like a failing electrical system when one drinks too much. In short, the Consul's body and mind are disintegrating and he is left “groping in the dark.”

The illusion soon fades and the memory descends into abstraction—and the Consul descends with it. His mind starts to jump through a series of memories that coincide with his darkest days—the days after Yvonne left him. The narrator implies that the Consul acknowledges, at least to some degree, what has just happened and the Consul begins to suffer again in realizing his unfaithfulness. That the Consul suffers on account of his infidelity is problematic in that he fulfilled his lustful urge, even if he was not fully aware of his indiscretion until afterwards. He did have a chance at intimacy with Yvonne shortly after they arrived back at his house, but it is implied that he

was not up for the task. Apparently, the memory of Yvonne has a more powerful physiological effect on the Consul than her actual presence, which only underscores the power of memory for the Consul. It is likely, too, that the Consul chooses to break his moral code so that he can suffer more—this would align with his desire to sink or descend further into the abyss/hell. Suffering is a complex and almost paradoxical inevitability for the Consul, and it is represented as twinned with the Consul’s descent into hell. While not always explicitly Christian or Catholic in nature, it is through a religious lens that his suffering takes on its greatest meaning. Yvonne has been portrayed as Beatrice-like, and offers salvation in a way that resembles both a fresh start and a spiritual rebirth. That the prostitute’s name is Mariá, of course, should remind the reader of the Mary Magdalene. Lowry contrasts Mariá with Yvonne—who represents salvation and the future—as she is a prostitute, which makes the Consul’s infidelity damning—but also simultaneously innervating. In this way, then, there is a dialectic wherein suffering is tied to feeling, both affective and sensory. If one’s senses are the most direct route to reality, then in another reversal typical of Lowry, the Consul can be most aware of his situation when suffering the most.

The Consul knows that there will be consequences to his actions; as the narrator explains, “Out of this suffering something must be born, and what would be born was his own death” (364). Lowry conflates the Consul’s long history of hurting Yvonne with this one, highly symbolic, act of infidelity so that it becomes pregnant with the inevitable consequence, “his own death,” which is the opposite of the dream Yvonne has of raising a family with the Consul. However, the Consul has no noble way of dying for this crime, and so his desire to fulfill his own penalty of suffering becomes a literal thirst that stands in its place. The narrator describes, “The thirst was not thirst, but itself heartbreak, and lust, was death, death, and death again and death...” (364).¹¹ The repeated use of

¹¹ This moment seems to parody Jesus’ crucifixion in that, moments before his death on the cross, Jesus remarks “I thirst” (John 19:28). This is a moment of bodily distress, which Lowry ironizes by invoking the Consul’s thirst for alcohol—which would not quench his thirst and only intoxicate him more, disconnecting him even further.

“was” in this scene implies both certainty and impossibility, and it functions as a metaphor masquerading as a literal fact. Further still, the repeating word “death” snowballs out of control as it gains momentum, but ultimately always manifests as the next drink. While the need for alcohol is utterly urgent, the death it causes is a slow one.

The way the Consul falls into bed with Mariá seems almost too easy, considering he is usually paralyzed with indecision and is generally buffered from external stimuli. But his slow personal disintegration can be explained, in part, if he is suffering from melancholia, as described by Freud. The symptoms of melancholia are defined as follows:

The distinguishing mental features of melancholia are a profoundly painful dejection, cessation of interest in the outside world, loss of the capacity to love, inhibition of all activity, and a lowering of the self-regarding feelings to a degree that finds utterance in self-reproaches and self-revilings, and culminates in a delusional expectation of punishment. (244)

This would help explain the Consul’s sense that he must inevitably face punishment as a result of losing Yvonne a year before the novel takes place. If Yvonne is the Consul’s love object, then a hole opens up in her place when she leaves. Being sufficiently traumatic, this event fundamentally shifts the Consul’s existential foundation and leaves him utterly “inhibited,” or suspended in a cycle of “self-reproach.” This state forces him to focus inwards, leading to negative narcissism, which in the Consul’s case, turns into obsession. That Yvonne returns to Quahnahuac is deeply disturbing to the Consul because he has essentially accepted that she is gone—lost to him forever—and it is likely that his disintegration has progressed beyond the point of no return. Alcohol plays no small part in this process, as it effectively reduces one’s ability to repress traumatic memories in a healthy, normal way (Freud 254). Thus, drunk and facing an upwelling of affective energy attached to the letters he has just read—the memories therein having functionally replaced the real Yvonne, the sign replacing the referent—the Consul fulfills his “delusional expectation of punishment.” The profound irony is that this series of events makes the Consul feel more than at any other point in the narrative. This

act of copulation is uncharacteristic in that the Consul has been unable to (re)consummate his relationship with Yvonne since her return; instead, he performs only when he projects the memory of Yvonne onto Mariá. In this moment, the moment of “the little death,” the Consul opens the way for his real death. Thus, while he may not intend, literally, to die, he has enacted his own symbolic death. Freud continues, “The analysis of melancholia now shows that the ego can kill itself only if, owing to the return of the object-cathexis, it can treat itself as an object—if it is able to direct against itself the hostility which relates to an object and which represents the ego’s original reaction to objects in the external world” (252). Moments after his infidelity, the Consul experiences his “crisis,” which comes as a result of the juxtaposition of his current, fallen state and an idyllic vision of life in Canada—the very life that Yvonne has proposed—and which occurs in the bathroom of the Farolito. This scene is full of reminders of venereal diseases, a near constant obsession of Lowry’s, and, in a puddle on the bathroom floor, a dead scorpion. Lowry works in the image of the scorpion that stings itself to death throughout the narrative, and this is its final instance. With the context of copulation, the scorpion’s stinger can be seen as a phallic symbol, and its death a side-effect of this sexual act. In short, the affective energy that is associated with the lost object, Yvonne, comes bursting forth in the Consul as his suspended/inhibited love is released (cathected?). This shock brings the Consul very close to finally redirecting his love back to Yvonne, but because of the influence of alcohol and the events he has set in motion, he never has the chance to do so.

Syncretic Personal Mythology

As discussed in the previous paragraphs, the Consul is directly and significantly affected by alcoholism: his physiological processes are altered, his ability to live in the present moment is severely compromised, and he inevitably seeks out suffering as a means of keeping his demons at bay. While these facets of the narrative are foundational to the narrative and very relevant to

anaesthetic modernism, Lowry also wove a complex web of symbols into the worldview of the Consul—and these have salient reverberations with the thematic valences of suspension. To make up for his increasing inability to make sense of the world, or simply to sense anything reliably, the Consul has retreated further inwards, creating his own complex syncretic set of beliefs; his own past and his esoteric knowledge of mythology, literature, and history actively decenter the present moment and hinge on states of suspension, indecision, and indelible guilt. This leaves the Consul out of sync with the world and puts him into a purgatorial state. In this section, I want to consider some of the most germane threads woven into the Consul’s syncretic worldview, showing how they layer the narrative in ways simultaneously convoluting and illuminating and extend the thematic reaches of the Consul’s dipsomaniacal suspension. This section shows how the Consul’s experience and worldview ultimately map onto his psyche, creating a solipsistic and purgatorial buffer insulating him from reality.

Dante’s *Divine Comedy* is alluded to several times throughout the narrative and, while references to it are somewhat oblique, there are some key thematic considerations that are well-aligned with these references. Purgatorio is, significantly, a place (and accompanying state) of suspension in which someone must essentially wait before progressing upwards to Paradiso. Of course, there are two very important mountains looming over Quauhnahuac, and Purgatorio is represented as a mountain that one must climb as one progresses towards the earthly paradise. The Consul can almost always see the peaks of Popocatepetl and Ixtaccihuatl, the titular volcanoes, which thus serve to remind him of the possibility of finding paradise. In the *Divine Comedy*, Purgatorio is associated with sins originating in love—whether those of excessive, disproportionate, or wrongly placed love—which could be translated to the Consul’s “love” of, or desire for, alcohol or his unhealthy relationship with Yvonne (and even his visit with Mariá). Perhaps even more salient is that the lowest level of Purgatorio is that of the excommunicate: a concept that has multiple

affinities with the (ex) Consul and all of the ways he has become disconnected from the people, culture, places, and identity that used to give him meaning. Unfortunately, the Consul's drinking prevents any progress up the mountain, so to speak, as it seems impossible for the Consul to repent, or more specifically, reconnect, while drinking. One of the repeating motifs in the narrative is the idea that one must ceaselessly strive upwards in order to be saved. But, knowing this, the Consul seems stuck: if there is a way out, it is to go downwards—the Consul is mired in existential quicksand. Purgatory is a place defined by suspension, and the Consul seems to ensure that he stays in such a state rather than change his ways and ascend the mountain to his own salvation.

Even if an ascent of the mountain was possible, Popocatepetl is also an active volcano—so even its zenith reminds of hellfire. In the final moments of the Consul's life, he dreams he is sped up the volcano in an ambulance; however, when he reaches the top, the tranquil perspective he expects is replaced with this hellish vision:

It was crumbling too, whatever it was, collapsing, while he was falling, falling into the volcano, he must have climbed it after all, though now there was this noise of foisting lava in his ears, horribly, it was in eruption, yet no, it wasn't the volcano, the world itself was bursting, bursting into black spouts of villages catapulted into space, with himself falling through it all, through the inconceivable pandemonium of a million tanks, through the blazing of ten million burning bodies, falling, into a forest, falling— (391)

Even summiting the volcano only leads back to hell: Lowry has created a false dichotomy, at least for the Consul, undermining the schema of Dante's *Purgatorio* and the novel's Faustian epigraph. In a somewhat unusual pan-human vision, the Consul sees the world falling into the chaos of war. Of course, this reminds of the events on the *S.S. Samaritan*, wherein German officers were burned in the furnaces, and presages WWII, much of which coincided with Lowry writing the novel. Thus, as the Consul plummets down the ravine to his death, the reader finally glimpses his repressed fears of a world tipping into hell.

One notable difference between *Under the Volcano* and the *Divine Comedy* is that the Consul lacks a guide. While Dante was led on his journey by Virgil, the Consul is on his own; however, Lowry does provide a possible candidate: Dr. Vigil. Not only does the name Vigil come awfully close to his Latinate predecessor's, but it also connotes both watchfulness and the observance of religious ritual. That Dr. Vigil checks in on the Consul suggests that he is trying to help, or guide, his intoxicated acquaintance. While his name might connote a religious watchfulness, and Dr. Vigil does seem interested in the wellbeing of the Consul's soul, Lowry explicitly places his expertise and services in the medical world. Thus, through this lens, the Consul's existential and spiritual travails are directly linked to his physiological and psychological disorders. The main problem, of course, is that Dr. Vigil also happens to drink rather a lot and so is a guide with potential for good and bad. So, on one hand this can be read as symptomatic of the state of the world, in that even those in positions to help nurture humanity back to health are suffering the same consequences of our species' apparent desire to destroy itself. On the other hand, Lowry subtly encourages the reader to consider the medical analogues to existential and spiritual sickness—especially considering that the latter have been considered to be more and more enmeshed with human biology via the embodied mind model of consciousness. In this view, real bodily ailments can be traced back to emotional responses to one's experiences. Thus, in a world teetering on the edge of catastrophe, on the edge of world war for the second time in two decades, let alone all of the ramifications felt more locally by the Consul, it is no surprise to see people easing their anxieties with alcohol to the point of developing physical or psychological dependencies. It seems that the only way the Consul can make sense of this reality is to look to timeless figures and narratives like those found in the *Divine Comedy*.

The *Divine Comedy* provides a useful part of the mythical framework that Lowry invokes, but there is another key mythological figure that Lowry blends in to *Under the Volcano*: Prometheus. Prometheus is named four times in the novel, mostly in reference to some idiosyncratic vision the

Consul has of Prometheus suffering away eternally in the barrancas of the town. But his reference is also implied a number of times, including an instance wherein the Consul is directly compared to him: “The Consul, like that poor fool who was bringing light to the world, was hung upside down over it, with only a scrap of woven wire between himself and death” (232). The myth of Prometheus has a surprising number of valences with *Under the Volcano*, and these may help to explain some of the assumptions that lie deep within the fabric of the text—and more specifically, within the psyche of the Consul. The myth of Prometheus primarily revolves around suffering: both the specific suffering that Prometheus faces as a punishment—for defying Zeus and stealing fire to give to humanity—and also the suffering that he, an immortal being, shares with all mortal humans doomed to various ailments. On the surface, there is an obvious connection between Prometheus having his liver eaten by an eagle every day and the Consul poisoning his liver daily through drink. The Consul wakes up hungover or sober, having recovered (often only partially) from the night before, only to emerge back into a world of endless suffering. Prometheus is stuck in this cycle, literally suspended on the side of a mountain, so he also echoes the Consul’s suspension by showing how cycles end where they begin and the consequences of the cycle perpetually loom. Lowry does seem to invert the punishment/relief cycle of Prometheus, as alcohol, though poisonous, numbs the Consul from the physical pain or psychological suffering he would otherwise have to contend with. The alcohol also influences his thoughts, though, providing distraction and loosened inhibitions. If the Consul avoids the pain of loneliness or wartime trauma, he pays for it with the sickness of alcoholism and the deterioration of his personal life.¹² All of these perpetuate the Consul’s daily cycle and, therefore, his state of suspension.

¹² This trade, of course, can be seen as the Consul’s Faustian deal with the devil; while the Consul gets what he most desires, he is also never satisfied and must continue his endeavour for a satisfaction that will never come.

While Prometheus' punishment is most superficially understood in terms of the physical pain caused by the eagle, he also suffers the humiliation and isolation of being cut off from the rest of the gods. Of course, the Consul is really an ex-consul, having been let go when English economic interests were curtailed when Mexico nationalized most of its resource extraction industry. The Consul was given the consulship in the first place as a way to distance him from the English center after the wartime ordeal aboard the *S.S. Samaritan*. Thus, the once great man has been pushed further and further away; he shows little in terms of outright humiliation, but it is not difficult to see his current state as a result of, or even symptom of, repressed thoughts—and even less surprising that his inherited values would lead him to bottle up rather than open up. That Prometheus can take a certain pride in his sacrifice, too, gives Lowry a model for noble suffering—suffering on behalf of the wider world, and suffering that causes suspension and disconnection. Over and over, though, the Consul envisions his loneliness as the primary cause of his fall, and subsequent suffering. As Goethe's Prometheus laments,

But silence is intolerable here.

So too is speech.

I am fast bound, I must endure,

I gave to mortals gifts... (quoted in Kerényi 89)

There is no obvious sacrifice, or gift, which the Consul has given to save or benefit humanity, and so Lowry complicates the comparison: is the Consul's mysterious and unwritten book¹³ the masterwork that is supposed to stand in for fire, or the arts, in the Prometheus myth? Certainly, if the Consul is seen as an analog to Lowry, then *Under the Volcano* itself might represent his great sacrifice. Lowry

¹³ "Meantime do you see me as still working on the book, still trying to answer such questions as: Is there any ultimate reality, external, conscious and ever-present etc. etc. that can be realized by any such means that may be acceptable to all creeds and religions and suitable to all climes and countries?" (41)

may also be conflating the Prometheus myth with its literary legacy. Goethe was a notorious recluse when writing, accepting that the role of the author was, in a way, to remove himself from society so that he could focus on (re)creating the work at hand. As Carl Kerényi explains,

The modern trait that stands out clearly in Goethe's experience at that time is the isolation of every man, a lot which the poet resolutely accepted[:] "in each new piece of work...I had to grope forward and make new experiments. Since in this I had to reject, to exclude the help of men, I cut myself off, like *Prometheus, from the gods as well*, and this was all the more natural because, in view of my character and manner of thinking, one attitude always engulfed and repelled all others." (Emphasis in original, 15-6)

The legacy of Goethe, in particular, emphasises the separation of the man of intellect from his kin: there is a burden that must be carried by such a person, and it is that they feel their isolation more acutely. Thus, while the Prometheus myth is based on the fact of suffering as fundamental to humanity, and is therefore a common trait, it is twinned with the problem that each human must bear their suffering alone.

To return to the ordeal of the *S.S. Samaritan*, Lowry embeds the symbolic importance of the biblical parable of the Samaritan in the first chapter—which is focalized through Laruelle. What is only briefly mentioned, and shrouded in mysterious circumstances, becomes one of the central themes and motifs in the narrative. In short, the Consul was apparently in command of a Q-ship gunboat, the *S.S. Samaritan*, during the First World War. On one mission, the Consul's crew managed to best a German U-boat, taking its crew as prisoners. However, the German officers were reportedly burned alive in the furnaces of the *Samaritan*, which is a serious war crime. It is unclear how the Consul is implicated in the matter, but Laruelle recalls that the Consul has, in moments of drunken inhibition, admitted his sense of guilt and possibly even his culpability. While the veracity of these remarks is dubious—importantly, Laruelle takes a skeptical stance—the name of the ship and the possibility that the Consul allowed the incident to take place strongly invoke the parable of

the (Good) Samaritan from Luke 10:25-37. This parable is notorious for being misinterpreted, and ultimately leaves some key takeaways to the reader.

At the core of the parable is the question of what guarantees someone eternal life in heaven: to put it simply, one must love God and love one's neighbour as one's self. To summarize the parable, a man is grievously wounded and left for dead on the road from Jerusalem to Jericho. A priest and then a Levite pass the man by without aiding him. A Samaritan then comes by and helps the man, taking him to an inn and paying the innkeeper to nurse the man back to health. The parable is used as a way of demonstrating who one's neighbour is, and shows how two individuals that would be expected to be good "neighbours" ignore the wounded man on the side of the road. It is often assumed that the original audience of the parable would have been surprised that the Samaritan is the one to stop, as historical cultural tensions would set the expectation thus. Richard Bauckham "distils the dilemma traditionally accepted to be at the heart of the parable: the contest between Jewish Law and human compassion: 'when it confronts a priest with a dead or dying man, it sets up an unusual, halakhically debatable situation, since the commandment that a priest avoid contracting corpse-impurity conflicts with the commandment to love the neighbor. One commandment must take precedence'" (Quoted in Ryan, 4). Because the *Samaritan* incident is part of the frame tale focalized through Laruelle, it helps give the narrative a background theme and symbology that remains throughout: namely, that the Consul, and possibly much of humanity, face unanswerable moral dilemmas. The upshot is that this situation paralyzes the Consul with indecision, yet another form of suspension.

Because the *S.S. Samaritan* incident haunts the Consul, the discovery of the dying Indian that the characters see on the road to Tomalín takes on extra significance. The Consul knows that he is not allowed to touch the doomed man, as he could face legal ramifications; he presumably knows this because of his former status as the British Consul, and thus his knowledge is tied to his (former)

privilege. Now that he is in a more precarious position, his self-preservation instinct kicks in and cancels out his desire to help the dying man. The major difference here from the biblical parable is that the Consul *knows* that the man is still alive—and yet he does nothing. This is just as much a reflection on the general disfunction of the Mexican legal apparatus, though, which may be “sensible” at times, and dehumanizing at others (253). The Consul is not alone in indecision, either, as the other passengers on the bus quickly decide that “it wasn’t one’s own business, but someone else’s” (256). In this moment of profound indecision, time itself comes into question: “Yet it was not that time stood still. Rather was it time was moving at different speeds, the speed at which the man seemed dying contrasting oddly with the speed at which everybody was finding it impossible to make up their minds” (256). Thus, this convoluted scenario creates a thematic bridge between indecision, or suspense, and responsibility or morality—and also between the microcosm of the Consul’s life and the macrocosm of the state of humanity. This theme is echoed throughout the narrative, perhaps most explicitly regarding the Spanish Civil War. As Di Gennaro suggests, Hugh and the Consul both “recognize the futility of involvement [in the Spanish Civil War] and admit, as a consequence, the uselessness of interference: as if to say, whatever we do, or think, or believe, we are guilty” (134). There is a moral double bind underpinning the whole narrative, and the scene of the man dying by the side of the road is one of the most explicit examples and ties together the religious, moral, and historical threads running throughout.

Returning to the biblical story, the Consul has something in common with the priest and Levite that is almost paradoxical: “the priest and Levite are not blind. They see—and they do not see. In our culture of looking the other way, we have precisely this paradoxical correlation. We see and we do not see. Seeing is more than just an objective sensory process” (Ryan quoting Robert Zimmerman, 13). Distilling the problem of “looking the other way,” the Consul has retreated into himself, and thus sees only from an egocentric perspective. Instead of prioritizing the wellbeing of

the dying man, the Consul—and the others—act to save themselves from being legally implicated, and thus liable to face punishment. In the words of Martin Luther King Junior, who spoke of the parable, “I can imagine that the first question which the Priest and the Levite asked was: ‘If I stop to help this man, what will happen to me?’ Then the good Samaritan came by, and by the very nature of his concern reversed the question: ‘If I do not stop to help this man, what will happen to him?’” (quoted in Ryan, 12). Through these scenes, Lowry could be commenting on the often-dehumanizing nature of the Law, which seems quite plausible considering the legal troubles he endured in his various trips to and in Mexico, but his actions also reflect specifically on him. In a sense, he is witnessing his own slow-motion destruction and does nothing to save himself, knowing all along that nobody else is likely to intervene. Thus, while many characters in the narrative fail to act neighbourly, the focus is on the Consul; he may have once been a “great” man, but his trauma and guilt have caused him to turn inwards. In other words, Lowry shows how the Consul’s physiological anaesthesia is paired with what might be best described as spiritual anaesthesia. His mind has become an echo chamber of memories, a conflicting sense of duty or responsibility, and a web of religious or mythological fragments. As Patrick McCarthy explains, “Reading the symbols of the outside world, the Consul inevitably discovers some relationship to his own situation; but since he cannot control the multitude of meanings engendered, in part, by his readings, the correspondences that he finds between himself and the world ultimately undermine his sense of his own identity” (45). The above examples are more or less idiosyncratically tied to the Consul, and in a sense, these are quite recognizably modernist narrative traits, but the next section will explore how the local context influences the Consul and the narrative in some new ways that are not so easily assimilated under a modernist aegis. The Mexican setting heavily influences the Consul by reinforcing his sense of existential disconnection and suspension, even providing instances of

resistance or hostility, all while representing the complexity and damning cyclicity of human nature through specifically Mexican contexts.

The Influence of Place and the Mexican Context

The previous section outlines some of the key ways Lowry uses religious and mythical themes and symbols to underscore and add nuance to the Consul's anaesthetized and suspended state; however, the setting of *Under the Volcano* also plays a significant role in shaping the narrative and directly influences both the worldview and the fate of the Consul—even if in sometimes indirect and obfuscated ways. Some of the content of this section could have accompanied the previous section, as there are also substantial historical, mythical, and religious facets of Mexican life that come to influence the Consul's experience and worldview. But at the same time, the Mexican context also resists or eludes the Consul at times, and so challenges assimilatory assumptions about the portability of Lowry's modernist aesthetics. An exhaustive examination of the intersections between the Mexican context and *Under the Volcano* is far beyond the scope of this chapter, so I will focus on the elements that contribute to the sense of suspension that the Consul finds himself in. These range from the history of colonization to the Mexican Revolution, from the modernization of the country to the tensions that are woven into the very fabric of Mexican society.

Even before the chapter focalized through M. Laruelle frames the story of the Consul's last day, Lowry inserts yet another framing situation: the opening pages situate Mexico along a line of latitude that girdles the Earth. This has at least three effects: first, it connects all the places mentioned (the Revillagigedo Islands, Hawaii, British Honduras, and Juggernaut, India) along a seemingly arbitrary geographical measure; however, it turns out that each of these places is significant for the main characters, either as places of their birth or major events. Second, though, it places Mexico at the center of all this, giving credence to the geological and cultural linchpin of the

narrative. This adds a thematic or symbolic valence in the sense that it mirrors the Consul's inward focus or solipsism. Finally, it gives the reader reason, right from the start, to keep the geo-political background of the novel in mind: everything is subtly inflected with this telescoping local-global lens, so the narrative simultaneously delves deeply into the ego-centric mind of the Consul and reminds of the ways local and global politics seep into every facet of life. As Helmbrecht Breinig explains:

Thus, Mexico is at the center of the world. Its physical topography is the result of the geological forces bringing about the Americas and provides the material for making it a natural paradise but also a natural inferno. Its political geography is to a large degree the result of outside forces: American and British economic interests, and German fascism and its local offshoots trying to gain influence and to subvert both the Cárdenas government and the role of the Anglo-Saxon powers on the eve of World War II. This political situation forms a backdrop for the private story and is symbolized by the Indian on horseback who appears several times and who is obviously one of Cárdenas's messengers carrying money to the agrarian cooperatives under the *ejido* system. (294)

Breinig usefully shows how, for the Consul, Mexico really is at the center of the world, which implicitly decenters Eurocentric or American perspectives and modernist centers, even though Lowry was ostensibly writing back to these English-speaking readerships. He also sums up a number of the influences simultaneously shaping Mexico, and by extension, those living there. This has many facets, but perhaps the most important is that the Consul face the consequences of these political forces that are outside of his control—and much bigger than any one person. That Lowry manages to hold all of the scales and conflicting forces in one narrative gives it an eerie sense of precarity: like it is the world itself that is suspended above the abyss.

Quauhnahuac, or Cuernavaca, is the capital city of the south-central state of Morelos, which is less than 100 kilometres south of the national capital, Mexico City. It has a long and complex history, ranging back thousands of years to the Indigenous peoples that inhabited the region pre-colonization. It was also home to Hernán Cortés, one of the earliest and most influential Spanish

conquistadors, and thus bears the legacy of bloodshed and the destruction of the Aztec Empire and culture. However, Morelos is also a place of resistance, a place where the rights and privileges of the commoner incited rebellion and reform. It was a place of industrialization and the concentration of power into *haciendas*—or large landholdings and plantations—but also of utopian and socialist ideals, of *ejidos*—land held in trust and worked by the common people of the area. In short, Lowry draws on the history of a place that has as much modern complexity as historical and mythical richness—a place that is both deeply unique and simultaneously representative of the human condition everywhere.

Under the Volcano contains many artefacts and cultural touchstones that represent this fragmented, yet resilient place, and the Consul is both directly and indirectly intertwined with his setting. As with many other elements of the narrative, the setting is made highly symbolic for the Consul, and thus plays a part in his various struggles. The Consul lives in a solipsistic state, but rather than projecting his thoughts and feelings onto the world, he reads the world into himself—albeit through a highly coloured lens. In other words, the Consul’s ultimate demise certainly feels fated, or pre-determined—especially because of the opening frame-chapter—but there is also a sense that there are many forces at play that are unpredictable. It would be impossible to overlay a clear master pattern or schema onto the narrative, but the aforementioned forces and sources of inspiration are woven together into a syncretic, if chaotic, whole that trends in a recognizable direction. Even the aspects of the setting that the Consul notices play no small part in contributing to the overall symbology. In the paragraphs that follow, I will take a closer look at how the Mexican setting and context influence the Consul’s fragmented sense of self and how these facets contribute to his sense of suspension, paralysis, and even doom. The seemingly contradictory forces within Mexican history and culture, at least as understood by the Consul, make for a setting layered with existential obstacles that cause the Consul to feel suspended. While it is perhaps oversimple to say

that the Mexico of *Under the Volcano* also represents the state of the world or humankind—it is important to acknowledge the universal strings on which the narrative’s meaning reverberate, which include religion, politics, modernization, and more. The Mexican context provides the foundation of a guilt complex that is embedded into the Consul’s psyche and which prevents him from connecting to his home country, his ex-wife, or even his senses. The setting perpetuates the sense of guilt that the Consul carries from his *Samaritan* days by forcing him to see the socio-political problems around him, which he then maps onto the topography of Cuernavaca via complex literary, mythical, and occult allusions.

Some of the most obfuscated Mexican references are those relating to the pre-colonial history of the region. What is now known as Morelos was mostly occupied by the Aztecs, who have a deep history of this region that dates back centuries, if not millennia. They were not a homogenous culture, but rather an amalgamation of smaller groups and city states that made various agreements to work together—and which often shifted territory and influence. That Lowry includes references to the Aztecs resonates on several levels: first, Lowry acknowledges the existence, and persistence, of indigeneity within Mexican society—however diffused it may be in the novel; second, Aztec culture provides a deep-rooted precedent for mythical and cyclical forces or patterns that bubble up throughout the narrative; and third, to introduce the concept/philosophy of *la vida impersonal*, which is then carried further by more prominent characters.

There is significant room to examine the Indigenous aspects of the narrative, but much of this is beyond the scope of the current chapter. The most immediate aspect of the Indigenous presence to the Consul’s sense of suspension is that it calls into question his sense of belonging and rootedness. On a superficial level, it is apparent that the Consul has only befriended a few locals. But the first time he mentions “Indians” of any kind, he is referring to the story of William Blackstone who left the Puritan colonial-settler society in Massachusetts to “[live] there quietly among the

Indians” (53)¹⁴. Evidently, his self-image is something of a Blackstone-type and therefore he sees himself as living apart from his former people and culture without ever fully integrating with “the Indians.” Even that he is referred to as “the Consul” is telling, as this label marks him explicitly as an outsider—someone who must maintain a slight distance in order to serve a purpose and who embodies another established, and foreign, culture. Of course, he is an ex-consul, and thus has been cut loose by his home country, leaving him suspended between two cultures.

This leads into the second point: referring to the Aztecs creates a temporal loop wherein Lowry invokes both the deep history of the culture and their modern-day presence. This conception of cyclical time brings together stages of human development and shows that, ultimately, we always end up destroying each other and ourselves. Like Yeats’ widening gyre, it seems that each cycle becomes more chaotic and destructive, taking us farther and farther away from our mythical roots. Lowry taps into these Aztec roots in a subtle way by blurring the lines between reality and the supernatural or mythical world vis-à-vis the Consul’s constant intoxication. As Deborah Turner explains,

In the preconquest era, much attention has been given to the apparently stringent rules that the Aztecs imposed regarding the social control of drunkenness. According to Aztec law, only the highest military, religious, and political figures were allowed to become drunk in public, except during particular religious festivals in which communal consumption of pulque was permitted... These rules were in place because drunkenness was a form of intoxication that established connections and facilitated communications between humans and various gods, which only the elite in Aztec society were normally deemed important enough to experience. (xxii-xxiii)

In this light, the Consul’s drunkenness is a privileged means of accessing the gods, granting him supernatural knowledge and even heightened sensitivity to this. The Consul even recognizes the spiritual/religious side of drinking: in a letter to Yvonne, which Laruelle discovers in the opening

¹⁴ It is evident that the Consul willfully confuses two different William Blackstones, but for the purposes of this chapter, the germane point is that the Consul fixates on the Blackstone that wanted to get away from the Puritans and so lived “amongst the Indians.”

chapter, the Consul writes, “You will think I am mad, but this is how I drink too, as if I were taking an eternal sacrament” (42). Of course, Lowry complicates such privilege by showing how alcohol, consumed in excess, destabilizes one’s connection to reality to the point that any knowledge gained through such means is unreliable, potentially incommunicable, or impossible to put into practice. This Aztec lore makes the Consul all the more like Prometheus by implying that the Consul’s perspective can occasionally provide quasi-divine clairvoyance. Even further, this knowledge is tied directly to his sense of suspension: “My equilibrium, and equilibrium is all, precarious—balancing, teetering over the awful unbridgeable void, the all-but-untraceable path of God’s lightning back to God?” (41). Any such divine knowledge also strands the Consul in an isolated state and undermines the privilege of the knowledge by showing how it comes with a price.

As with so many aspects of *Under the Volcano*, the Aztec lens of alcohol consumption cannot be taken at face value: because of Mexico’s complex and layered history, there is, in fact, a contradictory history also at play. In post-conquest, or colonial, Mexico, Spanish and Christian worldviews largely subsumed the Indigenous worldviews, and so alcohol consumption started to be viewed as sinful and was heavily controlled. What was once reserved for the social elite now became associated with socially marginalized: “During the colonial period, drunkenness became a stigma attached to the Indigenous identity, along with sinfulness, barbarism, idolatry, and other failings discursively associated with indigeneity” (Turner, xxv). This tension is not explicitly borne out in the characterization of the Consul, but perhaps it is evident in how he is treated by Mexicans and the numerous characters hidden away in various cantinas that he seems to know. That public watering holes were often meeting places for socially-marginalized people, including Indigenous Mexicans, gives a very subtle sense that the Consul may have actually found some community therein—community that he may not have been willing to keep while sober, with Yvonne, or when an official

consul.¹⁵ In any case, there is evidence that the Consul is existentially stuck between social worlds, unable to truly integrate into, or benefit from, either.

The Consul's distanced perspective allows him to see the patterns of human history at play in the world around him. There are examples of this throughout the narrative, but a particularly interesting instance comes while he is walking with his childhood friend Laruelle. The Consul and Laruelle are walking by the Diego Rivera murals at the Cortez Palace, the *History of Morelos, Conquest and Revolution*, and each remark upon how the mural shows the conquering of Mexico:

“You get an impression from here those tourists can't up there,” M. Laruelle said, “they're too close.” He was pointing with his tennis racquet. “The slow darkening of the murals as you look from right to left. It seems somehow to symbolise the gradual imposition of the Spaniards' conquering will upon the Indians. Do you see what I mean?”

“If you stood at a greater distance still it might seem to symbolise for you the gradual imposition of the Americans' conquering friendship from left to right upon the Mexicans,” the Consul said with a smile, removing his dark glasses, “upon those who have to look at the frescoes and remember who paid for them.” (221-2)

This scene usefully concentrates the history of Mexico in a way that suits Lowry's narrative. At first blush, the mural represents the Spanish conquest of the Indigenous population, as Laruelle describes. If Mexico is sometimes figured as the Garden of Eden, then pre-conquest might represent a pre-lapsarian time, before the original sin that seemingly continues to haunt humanity. While Laruelle's is the obvious interpretation, and most salient, the Consul reminds Laruelle that the mural was commissioned, and paid for, by the American ambassador to Mexico, Dwight Morrow, and thus slightly complicates any understanding of the mural as a pure critique of the Spanish conquest by a homegrown, Mexican artist. This sentiment does two things: it shows how the Consul is comparatively further removed than even Laruelle and also shows how inter-implicated modern

¹⁵ Deborah Turner highlights the significance of “urban drinking houses” for those of lower social standing: “for those of lower social status— men in particular— urban drinking houses represented a crucial social space for congregating; exchanging information; organizing economic transactions; meeting friends; and releasing tensions through games, music, and dancing” (xxvii).

society is, suggesting that it is impossible to disentangle just who is responsible for the current evils of the world. Taking this point even further, Rivera, too, was largely inspired and trained by European modernists, and thus brings a Euro-inflected style to his Mexican subject. The Consul, perhaps playing devil's advocate, reminds that history can easily be reshaped or manipulated depending on how it is represented—or that it changes depending on who is looking or how one looks. And while the mural is meant to be read in a linear manner, from beginning to end, the final scene depicts the spirit of revolution through the figure of Zapata, thus hinting at the beginning of a new cycle of violence (even if it is from a sympathetic point of view). Finally, the pair also recognize that the tourists have another view altogether, and it is one that apparently lacks perspective. In other words, outsiders don't stand a chance at understanding the bigger picture. The narrator goes so far as to call the tourists "vandals in sandals" (221), hinting at the destructive potential of tourism and the inevitable violence that accompanies the intermingling of cultures that comes with globalization. This scene helps highlight the impossibility of fully comprehending either the complexity of the history of Mexico or its current moment. The only truth that can be reliably drawn from this perspective is that "the past is irrevocably past" (113). The problem for the Consul is that, at times, he seemingly tries to take too many steps back to see the whole picture—and loses himself in the process. The various cycles happening simultaneously, with varying scale and influence, seem to paralyze the Consul, which prevents him (on an existential level?) from taking his life into his own hands. Thus, the numerous layers of Indigenous presence in *Under the Volcano* serves to suspend the Consul as he reads the history of the area into his own personal mythology.

Finally, the third and most oblique way that the Indigenous presence influences the Consul's suspended state is through the idea of the sacrificial rituals of the Aztecs. However, this requires some framing, as the Consul's interest in ancient cultures is not limited to the Aztecs, but is rather far-reaching and apparently includes all things "cabbalistic and alchemical," including "work[ing] in

something on Coxcox and Noah” in his mysterious book project (41).¹⁶ In short, he is obviously familiar with some of the history and religion of the Indigenous cultures of the area and, because he has such a strong tendency to read anything he sees/thinks into his own life, it is not a stretch to see that he feels his fate is somehow tied to the sacrificial rituals of the Aztecs—even if such rituals do not explicitly occupy his thoughts—as influenced by being in Quauhnahuac. As Chris Ackerley and David Large explain about the Consul’s final struggles with the local authorities in the Farolito,

The *Jefe de Jardíneros*, or head gardener, who condemns the Consul in Chapter XII, embodies on one level the demands of the old Aztec gods for human sacrifice as retribution for the agonies inflicted upon the native peoples by the conquistadors and those of European blood... The phrase was a late addition, engendered by Lowry's need to correct the reading of the sign... but it accords with the Consul's sense, at some level of his private mythology, of himself as that sacrificial victim. (Note 129.3)

The lurking sense that the Consul must pay a price for either his personal sins or those of his forefathers seems to undermine any possibility of personal redemption. With this in mind, it is no surprise that the eponymous volcanoes provide an inverted image of the inferno bubbling up to the surface, betraying the presence of the hellish abyss that yawns below the Consul. That the volcanoes retain their Nahuatl names, and that Lowry used the Nahuatl name for Cuernavaca—Quauhnahuac—rather than the post-conquest name, contribute to the sense that the Consul is aware of the ancient lore attached to this place and imply, on some level, that the Aztec gods await their repayment. It is hard to say just how much Lowry knew about Aztec beliefs, but it seems possible that he was also aware of the Aztecs’s worry about the permanence of the universe itself. Turner explains how alcohol consumption, which was a means of communing with the gods, also gave insight into matters perhaps too grand for humanity:

For the elite political, religious, and military leaders of the Aztecs, drunkenness was considered a privilege afforded to the most accomplished, brave, and important members of society so that they might assist the gods in their struggle to maintain the universe against

¹⁶ For example, Coxcox refers to a mythological Aztec character that experiences an event resembling the biblical flood, so serves as yet another example of how the Consul sees the world in terms of universals in his syncretic worldview.

impending collapse. It is worth noting that this is the same fight for which the Aztecs offered many human lives in their infamous bloody sacrifices... Additionally, drunkenness was conceived as a state of instability, one that affected the transcendence of the mutable boundaries between divine, human, and natural forces, but one that could easily violate or offend such boundaries and protocols in the wrong hands. (xxiv-xxv)

While the Consul is more directly concerned with his own fate and the fate of a humanity bent on destroying itself, it seems strangely appropriate that Lowry may have felt the simultaneous smallness of life on earth and the enormity of destruction that was (always) potentially around the corner. This kind of knowledge could easily become more a burden than a blessing, especially when feeling so disconnected and suspended. The Consul most clearly pictures his state as being suspended above, and slowly descending into, a Christian hell, and, as mentioned above, represents a complex syncretism. The key here is that the Consul sees manifestations of indigeneity around him that invoke an Indigenous past that is haunting; manifestations which act as lightning rods for his guilt/trauma. Almost without fail, these moments make the Consul look backwards, stalling him so that he never progresses—never gets out of the existential rut he occupies.

Like the complex and often bloody pre-conquest history of Mexico, the contemporary setting of the narrative bears the marks of the Mexican Revolution, which started in 1910 and lasted for a decade in earnest—and had lasting effects that the Consul readily recognizes in 1938. While there is much to unpack about the Mexican Revolution itself, Lowry seems to twin it with the Spanish Civil War (and to some degree the inevitable decline into WWII). On the most basic level, Lowry emphasizes that the worst parts of history have a strong tendency to repeat themselves, and that revolutions and wars fail to bring recognizable progress, but rather return society to where it was previously. These conflicts have a number of qualities in common, including inverted trajectories, where the fall of the authoritarian Mexican dictator (Díaz) is followed by the rise of the authoritarian Spanish dictator (Franco). The Consul gives a surprisingly prescient, if also dispassionate, perspective on the effect of the Spanish Civil War on Spain's culture; as Hugh

recounts, “He [the Consul] has a new line now. He says *when* the fascists win there’ll only be a sort of ‘freezing’ of culture in Spain...Which will presumably thaw at some future date when it will be discovered, if you please, simply to have been in a state of suspended animation” (106). In a way, *Under the Volcano* is itself in a state of suspended animation; the frame narrative that sets the time cycle in motion gives the rest of the narrative a sense of inevitability that haunts the Consul. Of course, the major difference is that the Consul is frozen with his fate, and, unlike the cultures frozen by authoritarian rule, the Consul will not resume from where he left off. Thus, while the world cycles on, the trajectory of the Consul is only ever downwards. It is somewhat problematic to think of the Consul as a sacrifice, though, because his downfall seems to be his own doing; I do not intend to minimize his trauma or addiction, but Lowry explicitly gives the Consul the opportunity to start fresh with Yvonne and her Canadian dream.

Thinking directly about Mexico in a modernist context, the Mexican Revolution can be seen as the result of the growing pains that Porfirio Díaz forced the country through during his dictatorship—and whose final fall from power precipitated the revolution. As Ackerley and Large aptly summarize, once Díaz came into power, he drastically altered Mexico:

For the next thirty-four years he controlled Mexico, bringing it forcibly into the modern world by inviting industrialization and overseas investment. He gave Mexico law and order, political stability, and, for the first time since independence, a solvent economy. Railways and roads were built, drainage and sewerage schemes initiated, and oil fields brought into production. Yet the name of Díaz is widely detested because progress was made at such cost to humanity: corruption and bribery throughout the civil service, exploitation of Mexican resources by foreign powers, no freedom of the press, virtual slavery of the uneducated, and extravagant displays of luxury among the rich. The gap between rich and poor had never been wider, and because the costs of modernisation had been so great and had caused such wide-spread discontent, the seeds of insurrection were sown, culminating in the bloody Revolution of 1910-20. (Note 108.5)

In a way, Díaz made a Faustian deal of his own: he gained thirty-four years of power, in which time he accomplished much. But the soul of Mexico, so to speak, suffered greatly as a result—and their lot was not likely to improve upon his departure as a teary-eyed, nostalgic, old man. The fear of

“consuls” and “espiders” in Mexico comes from the time Díaz was in power, as he built a vast network of spies to help him keep an eye on activities all over the country. Thus, even thirty years after his reign, there was still a deep-seeded suspicion of anyone unfamiliar or who was not immediately forthcoming about their identity. If this means anything to Lowry and his characters, it is that the Revolution never truly succeeded in weeding out the dictator’s legacy. What’s more, the surveillance state that persists prevents the Consul (as it did Lowry) from ever feeling at ease. This is yet another layer buffering him from Mexican society—it is difficult for him to remain anonymous because of his visible differences (skin colour, British clothing and style, etc.), and when asked what he is doing in Mexico, his differences quickly become political.

Perhaps because of his character, or perhaps because he is sober, it is Hugh who reflects directly upon the Porfirian and Revolutionary holdovers. Critics commonly consider Hugh as a foil or alternate version of the Consul, and he is concerned with the state of the world in a way much more urgent and forward-thinking than the Consul is—and he seems able to take action when the Consul cannot. He is obsessed with the Spanish Civil War, and feels a strong sense of guilt because he is so far away from the fray. Hugh, in part, represents idealism—of the anti-fascists in Spain and, by extension, Revolutionists in Mexico—but even if the ideals that people like Hugh and his Mexican friend Juan Cerillo stand for are often admirable, they also often lead to less-than-ideal outcomes (something the Consul and the “Indian women” on the bus to Tomalín seem to understand). In a lengthy rumination on the state of post-Revolution Mexico, Hugh thinks to himself:

All this spelt Porfirio Díaz: rurales everywhere, jefes políticoś, and murder, the extirpation of liberal political institutions, the army an engine of massacre, an instrument of exile. Juan knew this, having suffered it; and more. For later in the revolution, his mother was murdered. And later still Juan himself killed his father, who had fought with Huerta, but turned traitor. Ah, guilt and sorrow had dogged Juan’s footsteps too, for he was not a Catholic who could rise refreshed from the cold bath of confession. Yet the banality stood:

that the past was irrevocably past. And conscience had been given man to regret it only in so far as that might change the future. For man, every man, Juan seemed to be telling him, even as Mexico, must ceaselessly struggle upward. What was life but a warfare and a stranger's sojourn? Revolution rages too in the tierra caliente of each human soul. No peace but that must pay full toll to hell— (113)

This passage contains traces of several key themes, tying them together in the character of Juan Cerillo. The first is that the high-minded ideals that spurred on some of the forces of the Mexican Revolution, metonymical for idealistic struggles everywhere, were, on one hand, often corrupted by power, and on the other, failed to bring about lasting change. That “all this spelt Porfirio Díaz” shows that it is not even the marks of various revolutionary leaders (turned corrupt power-grabbers) that remain, but the dictator that preceded them. In other words, systemic change is not likely to result from revolution or reaction. And as Ackerley and Large explain, “although the incident of [Juan Cerillo] killing his father seems rather ineptly contrived by Lowry, it epitomises the sordid conflicts of honour and idealism that characterised this period” (note 108.5). Second, Lowry approaches the question of guilt and absolution in the context of the bloody revolution. Here, Hugh pits the sacred against the “banal,” and suggests that Catholics have an easy route to reconciliation through the ritual of confession. Of course, the Spanish conquistadors, in particular, committed myriad atrocities in the name of religious conversion. But more to the point, here, Hugh is ruminating on the relationship between decision making and consequences. A movement spurred on by idealism is bound to face impossible decisions at some point, because the real world is incompatible with the ideal. For Juan Cerillo and Hugh, this means that the best one can do is strive to uphold one's values and goals. In order to do so, though, one must make sacrifices—Juan Cerillo commits parricide in the name of his ideals—and these sacrifices may become the source of great guilt. And guilt, which weighs one down, can only be countered by “striving upwards.”

One of the lingering questions hovering around the Consul is whether or not he ever actually strives upwards, and the fact that it is so hard to definitively respond in the affirmative is

telling. Once again, the Consul is suspended, paralyzed, at least until his final descent. But if the Consul truly believes that revolution, or war, will not bring about positive change, but merely circle back to some prior socio-cultural state with some new technology or shifted boundaries, then perhaps the only options are suspension or an idealistic, but Sisyphean, effort to strive upwards. The Consul may seem to be giving up on life, and he may have a severely altered perspective due to his near constant inebriation, but he is not as hardened or jaded as Hugh or Juan Cerillo. The fact that he suffers so much seems to be a result of a certain kind of sensitivity, only it is not a sensitivity to the world immediately around him, but to deeper reverberations that don't seem to register for the others.¹⁷ In this light, the predicament for the reader becomes whether or not the Consul's sensitivity, in its grand scale, justifies his utter insensitivity to those around him—and even to himself. My sense is that the Consul suffers on the grander scale because he has been numbed or anaesthetized to minutiae of everyday life. It is unclear exactly what falls within the scope of the Consul's expansive vision, whether it is more tangible and practical—like what might be expected to fall under the purview of a consul—or more mystical—like the existential questions underpinning his mysterious unwritten book that will be “acceptable to all creeds and religions and suitable to all climes and countries” (41). Lowry leaves this dilemma to the reader, hinting that there may be larger unifying forces at play, even if humanity has no way of gaining such knowledge. But in any case, because he cannot act on a grand scale, he is caught in a state of suspension, and it is within this context that the narrative takes place. Thus, we can be sympathetic to his suffering at one scale while seeing the disintegration of the individual at another scale—and, therefore, can have a more critical perspective of his deceptions and the harm he causes to those around him.

¹⁷ Perhaps the Consul is even a response to Gatsby, Fitzgerald's great, and doomed, dreamer; as famously described by Nick Carraway: Gatsby had a “heightened sensitivity to the promises of life, as if he were related to one of those intricate machines that register earthquakes ten thousand miles away” (49).

While the Consul's drinking habits have a universal quality, and certainly resemble some of the other great drinkers of modernism, they are also definitely influenced by Mexican culture and even fauna; tequila and mezcal play a special part in the escalation of the Consul's drunken state and, arguably, affect him in ways that ensure he cannot recover his grasp on reality. For some very brief context, tequila and mezcal can only be produced in Mexico, as they are protected by various international trade agreements. The agave plants used to make these spirits require very specific climatic conditions and are native to central Mexico. Tequila is especially tightly regulated in that it must be made of the blue agave plant and every step of its production is highly prescribed. Mezcal, on the other hand, can be made from over forty different varieties of agave—which have not been hyper-cultivated by big-agriculture into monocrops with minimal differentiation. Mezcal is also more representative of Mexican distilling history and Indigenous culinary heritage and has not faced the same set of problems that the mass-exportation of tequila has caused in regards to its production (Torres-Garcia et al. 157). It is interesting that one of the Consul's "familiar" implies early in the narrative that the Consul needs to avoid tequila and mezcal lest he lose control; he seems much more able to handle other spirits, like whiskey and beer, that are, as one of the "familiar" highlights for him, more closely associated with his nationality and are known quantities. While not a connoisseur to the same degree that some of Hemingway's characters are, the Consul knows the different effects of various alcohols—and those of the Mexican spirits are particularly disorienting and lead to his most severe hallucinations, loosening his grip on reality. It is only after imbibing mezcal that the Consul unwittingly puts into motion the events that will ultimately kill him. It is the mezcal that "[strikes] a discord," makes him "forget eternity," and then "slow[s] his mind" (297, 298, 351). Mezcal, in addition to numbing his senses, affects the Consul's experience of time, causing it to telescope and jump uncontrollably. As the Consul gets more intoxicated, the narrative seems to mimic his state, becoming more disorienting and difficult. The interior monologues feature more

intrusions and, at one point, the Consul realizes after a lengthy discussion that he has not actually been talking to Yvonne or Hugh at all—only himself. Alcohol buffers and suspends him in his “whirling cerebral chaos.” There is a profound irony with alcohol in that one can never master it the way one can with so many other activities: at some point, one always loses control. While it is obvious that the Consul’s alcohol tolerance is immense (“But my lord, Yvonne, surely you know by this time I can’t get drunk however much I drink” (89)), mezcal somehow resists his attempts to attune to it. Even though one could argue that a day full of drinking any kind of alcohol would have significant effects, the Consul’s final fall is directly related to the traditional Mexican spirit—a final commitment to his ultimate disconnection, transcending the state of suspension he has been in until this point, precipitating his own demise.

While alcohol may be the predominant motif in the narrative, perhaps the most obvious local features in the text come from the landscape: Popocatepetl and Ixtaccihautl, the two volcanoes presiding over everything that happens below them in Quauhnahuac. While only briefly alluded to in the text, the myth of Popo and Ixta seems to be a fateful template weighing on the Consul’s own life. There are several versions of this myth, but in essence the story goes like this: a warrior and princess fall in love, but the warrior is forbidden to marry the princess by her father unless he proves himself in battle. Through miscommunication and deception, the princess learns that the warrior has died, and so she dies from grief. The warrior eventually returns victorious, only to find his princess dead. He takes her out of the town and settles next to her, where they remain until they have been covered in earth and snow, becoming mountains. However, Popo’s anger remains, and so he becomes an active volcano, whereas Ixta now sleeps forever. This myth has many valences in the narrative: the most salient of these are the themes of doomed love and fateful miscommunication. Further still, the Consul characterizes these volcanoes as “the image of the perfect marriage,” which causes him at least two problems (97). First, on some level he always compares his failed marriage to

this tragic, but romantic example. Perhaps it represents for him an image of a pre-lapsarian purity—innocence before the inevitable fall from grace. Second, it also implies that the perfect marriage is actually not much of a marriage at all, but rather a permanently ossified form of love that was only ever shared from a distance. Put another way, it is love put into stasis, love suspended; this is not a living love. Even further, the volcanoes serve as symbolic of the journey the Consul and Yvonne would need to take if they were to reach their version of paradise (a trip to climb the volcanoes is mentioned several times).

If the peaks of Popocatepetl and Ixtaccihuatl represent paradise, then the barrancas of Quauhnahuac lead to the depths of hell. Seemingly bottomless and impossibly steep, these ravines serve as a constant reminder of the abyss over which the Consul hangs. As Jacques Laruelle describes in the opening chapter, “It was too dark to see the bottom, but: here was finality indeed, and cleavage! Quauhnahuac was like the times in this respect, wherever you turned the abyss was waiting for you around the corner!” (16). Of course, Laruelle knows at this point that the Consul was thrown into a barranca after he was killed by the secret police, tying the geological landscape of Quauhnahuac to the political landscape. That Laruelle uses the word “cleavage” upon seeing the barranca is particularly significant because it is one of a small set of English words, called contronyms or auto-antonyms, that can mean both one thing and its opposite: “to cleave” means both to “split or sever” and to “stick fast to” or “become strongly involved with or emotionally attached to (someone)” (*OED*). If *Under the Volcano* is about being suspended above the abyss, then the precipitating force is cleavage—personal, political, and even between mind and body—and this cleaving even seems to echo from the very ground of Quauhnahuac itself. While the Consul is severed on each of these levels, he is simultaneously drawn to what he has been severed from. It is this tension that causes his state of suspense and which ultimately paralyzes him and prevents him from taking action that could save his life, his marriage, and his identity. The Consul seems to know

that he will inevitably descend into hell, as he accepts that he might have to fall all the way in order to end his suffering.

Finally, I would like to return to the importance of the Day of the Dead, which creates the profoundly suspended framework of the whole narrative. More than just a structural linchpin, the Day of the Dead also upends social structures, putting everything into a state of suspension for a day. Patrick A. McCarthy explains,

Through the fiesta Mexicans escape from themselves and their situations: the fiesta dissolves boundaries of time and space, gender and social class, liberating society from ‘its gods, its principles, and its laws.’ ‘The fiesta,’ [Octavio] Paz contends, ‘is a return to a remote and undifferentiated state, prenatal and presocial. It is a return that is also a beginning, in accordance with the dialectic that is inherent in social processes.’ Through the fiesta, then, people ‘exceed’ and renew themselves by participating in its cyclic ritual of death and rebirth. (McCarthy quoting Octavio Paz 64)

That the narrative takes place on the Day of the Dead is significant for several more reasons. The first is that this is a day where the boundary between the living and the dead is most diaphanous. As we find out in the first chapter, the Consul is bound to die, and so he has a spectral presence that makes his existential and spiritual struggles more poignant. It is as if he is already between life and death, like some of the mythical and literary figures he invokes; that he sometimes sees himself in their molds, then, is all the more fitting. The second is that normal systems, hierarchies, and activities are disrupted on this day, temporarily creating a more fluid existence. On one hand, this means that almost anything is possible—and this potentiality is what drives the narrative and creates the sense of tragedy. On the other hand, this also means that the world is a little less stable for a day, and the Consul is already on such precarious footing, that this shift—however temporary—is enough to push him over the edge and into the abyss.

While the Day of the Dead has significant symbolic ramifications, it is almost puzzling how little the Consul engages with the festivities or its history. McCarthy explains, “Since *Under the Volcano* takes place on the Day of the Dead, we might expect to find the Consul eventually

participating in these timeless rituals, emerging from himself into a sense of oneness with others and with the universe itself” (64-5). Considering the Consul’s interest in other ancient religions and rituals, this unwillingness or inability to engage with the local customs seems a rather conspicuous lacuna; however, it can be explained in at least two ways. The first is that the Consul just cannot connect with those around him—especially anyone who is not in the same kind of alcoholic, cantina-bound isolation he is. The second, as McCarthy continues, is that the Day of the Dead only opens its possibilities “for those who can throw away their minds, as Dr. Vigil would put it” (64-5). This refers back to *la vida impersonal*, which “assumes that although we are morally responsible for our actions, we should understand that our lives take place in the context of larger patterns and thereby recognize the greater and more significant reality that lies outside us” (McCarthy 59). The Consul not only fails to connect with his immediate relations, but he also cannot seem to tap into a cosmology that would, perhaps, shift his perspective sufficiently to push him out of his ego-centric rut. *La vida impersonal* is an esoteric reference that Lowry likely picked up from his friend, Juan Fernando Marquez (Juan Cerillo in *Under the Volcano*), in Oaxaca (Ackerly and Large, note 12.1). It represents a foreign religious belief that the Consul cannot assimilate: he cannot seem to “throw away his mind,” so, despite being cut loose from his own cultural roots, he fails to benefit from local wisdom.

Conclusion

Perhaps more than the previous two chapters, this chapter expands the possibilities of Anaesthetic Modernism, showing how many narrative facets can work together to tell a story all about numbness, disconnection, and disembodiment. The layers of anaesthetic valences—the personal, the syncretic worldview, and the place-based—help tease apart the multifarious ways that suspension functions throughout the narrative—from the minutiae of everyday life to the fate of humanity

descending into another world war. Thinking about the narrative on the global level, especially, helps place it in terms of modernism, too. Despite the proliferation of “modernisms” around the world, it is still easy to think about modernism as an idea that transcends borders. In this way, the whole narrative of *Under the Volcano* is suspended somewhere between anglophone/Eurocentric modernisms and global modernisms. Even though Lowry has ostensibly inherited his modernist lineage, his is a novel that hinges on breakdown, incompatibility, and disconnection. However, my sense is that Lowry brings together three issues that are, in typical Lowry fashion, both highly idiosyncratic and somehow universal. The first is that modernist aesthetics, as part of a particular lineage, cannot be dropped into a new context without facing the repercussions of disconnection. This does not mean that great works of literature cannot be made far from home, so to speak, but rather that such works must inevitably bear these marks and may be faced by local resistances. And as Aníbal González reminds, “It is well to remember...that modernity, both as a nascent concept and as a historical experience, has been present in Spanish American life since the Conquest and is present in the very notion of the Americas as a ‘New World’” (4). Not only did South America have a rich history and culture, but it also had its own artistic responses to modernity through *modernismo*. Thus, Lowry’s narrative is always already decentered by local writers’ work that speaks both to local politics, history, and aesthetics and back to European artistic movements. Modernity, for many of the *modernistas*, was inseparable from cosmopolitanism, which had the effect of helping re-evaluate their own historical roots. Octavio Paz suggests that “Paris was for them, more than a nation’s capital, the center of a new esthetic. Cosmopolitanism led them to discover other literatures and to reevalutate their own Indigenous past. Their exaltation of the pre-Hispanic world was above all an aesthetic one, of course, but it was also something more: it was a critique of modernity and particularly of progress in the style of North America” (quoted in González, 6). So, even though Lowry was plumbing the local history and culture of Mexico, *modernism* had already been doing this

for decades. Furthermore, to be as inclusive as the Consul wishes his own book could be inevitably leads to overwhelm, both because of uncontainable scale and because not all subjects that art seeks to assimilate are willing. Secondly, as I have written above, Lowry's is an aesthetic of suspense—which is borne out thematically through layers of miscommunication, memory, and a complex syncretic set of beliefs; physiologically through the numbness and disorientation that accompany intoxication; and even individually through the solipsistic turn inwards. These facets of the Consul's characterization are what make him utterly unique, and yet oddly familiar. For someone so hopelessly paralyzed by competing desires and impulses, and for a narrative with a foregone conclusion, the Consul also seems to elicit great sympathy and tenderness through his strange humour, myriad struggles, charming observations, and, more grandly perhaps, visionary perspective. Finally, the historical context of the narrative, into which Lowry painstakingly weaves multiple temporal cycles and geographical and geological scales, both anchors the narrative and destabilizes a clear sense of futurity—and perhaps this is the feature that ends up resonating most for the reader. As Di Gennaro so aptly puts it, “The sense of an impending end...is perceivable not only in the Consul's personal tragedy, but also in the overall atmosphere of the book, which gives the reader a continuous sensation of precariousness, uncertainty about one's own individual fate, and, in view of the crucial historical moment, also of humanity itself” (133).

Chapter 3: Stigma, the Social Construction of (in)Sensitivity, and the Modernist Epiphany in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*

This chapter will focus on the novel *Untouchable* (1935), by Mulk Raj Anand, which follows Bakha, an outcaste or “untouchable,” for a day in a fictional town in northern India. *Untouchable* is a novel that stretches the boundaries of anglophone modernist literary production and also unveils the deeply problematic Hindu caste system to an international audience. The opening pages of *Untouchable* make several details clear: that the outcastes of the largely Hindu town live in “uncongenial” conditions outside of Hindu society, and that Bakha, the protagonist whom the narrative follows, is fated to be a sweeper, even though he is a capable young man. That each of Anand’s opening paragraphs foreground these details sets the stage for some of the major conflicts that run throughout the novel; the first being the problem of stigma within the caste-based society, and the attendant limitations placed on untouchables. This stigma comes from deeply entrenched religious doctrine that permeates society, ultimately turning all caste-Hindus into a distributed surveillance network—a real-world panopticon—that is highly hierarchical, functions automatically, and can act spontaneously and immediately at any given moment. The second major conflict, which stems from the first, is the disconnection between body and mind, instinct and intellect. Because the religious system is woven into the very fabric of society, it acts to shape and even limit the range of Bakha’s experience. Bakha, therefore, is conditioned to enact self-surveillance. Herein lies the overarching argument of this chapter: Bakha’s bodymind—his somatic and cognitive activity—is actually limited and buffered, and thus made insensitive, by the conditions forced upon him as an outcaste sweeper. Critics have been quick to note that Bakha is represented as “all body,” but little attention has been paid to the bio-religious and biopolitical ramifications of Anand’s narrative. Bakha’s relative insensitivity is, in my reading, both a marker of his subjugation within the caste system, but also the site of potential and even resistance to his oppression. I anchor my argument in

the epiphany that Bakha experiences after being accosted by a caste-Hindu he accidentally touches, opening up a new understanding of his socio-cultural status. This moment temporarily breaks open the stigmatic barrier blocking Bakha's bodymind, exposing how religious and socio-cultural pressures condition much of his life. After Bakha's epiphany, he eventually finds himself swept up in a crowd listening to Gandhi speak. Anand prevents the reader from getting a clear sense of what stance he takes on Gandhian reform, so I look closely at how Anand uses modernist techniques to complicate the ideas he introduces.

Before digging into my own reading of *Untouchable*, I will briefly outline some of the critical readings of the novel. Tracing these readings reveals some of the pressure points of the novel and of the criticism surrounding it. Much of the early scholarship on *Untouchable* dealt with Anand's life, putting into perspective his Indianness and shedding light on the ways he navigated the Bloomsbury scene and the acculturation involved therein. In "Cast(e)ing Narrative: Caste, Class, and Religion in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*," K. W. Christopher discusses the representation of Bakha, arguing that Anand uses various narrative techniques to undermine Bakha's revolutionary potential and reinforce Gandhi's reformism. Christopher points out that Bakha mostly accepts his lot and does little to question or resist the oppressive system that holds him down. Ultimately, Christopher charges Anand with blaming Bakha for his social status. However, there are several problems with Christopher's argument, not least of which is that Anand, however subtly or indirectly, criticizes Gandhi for using the very same logic that Christopher uses: Bakha recognizes that Gandhi effectively blames the outcastes for being impure. While I agree that it is inherently problematic for Anand to speak for an outcaste—Anand was not an "untouchable"—I believe both that his portrait of Bakha is, at times, empowered, and that Anand (perhaps slyly) critiques Gandhi. Christopher also seems to ignore the intended audience of *Untouchable*, which was, in many ways, the Bloomsbury group that he circulated in while honing his writing skills and developing his style. Nonetheless,

Christopher does add some useful detail to the narrative techniques and contexts that Anand uses, including the “porous” quality of the narrative, which “enables the osmosis of the factual and the fictional” (68-9).

Veronica Barnsley, in “Anticipatory Anti-Colonial Writing in R. K. Narayan’s *Swami and Friends* and Mulk Raj Anand’s *Untouchable*,” approaches the “anti-colonial” sentiments of Anand’s novel by analyzing how time functions within the narrative. Describing the complicated narrative perspective that Anand creates with the interplay of Bakha and the narrator, Barnsley homes in on Bakha’s epiphany. She speaks to the possibility of positive or constructive change for Bakha, which can then be extended to his community and even his caste, and thus produces a reading of *Untouchable* that is hopeful and that attends closely to the way Anand, like some of his modernist contemporaries, plays with time. Time, according to Barnsley, is represented in a way that allows Bakha to temporarily gain the subjecthood denied by his caste; however, this moment is then negated as it fails to be transcendent and subsequently fades into the past. This reading aligns well with my anaesthetic reading, as I argue that Bakha emerges from a state of numbness and insensitivity, momentarily realizing some of his otherwise subdued somatosensory potential, before returning to an insensitive state.

In “Valorization of the ‘Touchables’ ‘Nation’ in Mulk Raj Anand’s *Untouchable*,” Kamalakar Bhat takes issue with the way that Bhaka is represented as uniquely able, amongst his caste, to mimic the characteristics of the higher castes. The root of the issue is the newfound sense of “superiority” that Bakha has because of his time spent amongst the British Tommies and his acquisition of some of their “fashun.” Admittedly, Bakha is described several times as being above his lot: he is physically strong and yet also has a refinement to his nature. However, I think that a literal reading of these select passages produces an unnecessarily strong reading of what is actually a very complicated, sometimes ironic, narrative voice. Rather than representing Bakha as having the

qualities of the castes that perpetuate his oppression, the narrator undermines the reliability of the narrative, which allows room for conflicting interpretations of Bakha's character and puts into tension the possible ways outcastes like Bakha could resist their oppression or alter their own public perception within the caste system. The author seems to think that Anand missed an opportunity to make a bolder political statement—one that either explicitly condemned the oppressive caste system or that provided suggestions for a wider, galvanizing program for positive change. It may have been possible to do so, but *Untouchable* works within an Anglophone modernist framework that instead foregrounds the embodied consciousness of Bakha. While this narrative fails to provide an explicit political agenda, its aesthetic valences are far-ranging and resist reductive generalizations that risk oversimplifying the realities and desires of outcastes.

Ben Conisbee Baer, in “Shit Writing: Mulk Raj Anand’s *Untouchable*, the Image of Gandhi, and the Progressive Writers’ Association,” pays considerable attention to the complex ways that Anand represents Bakha as a potential model for the nascent consciousness of the subaltern outcastes of Hindu caste society. Baer emphasizes that Anand is writing back to a Bloomsbury audience, which stands in for both the center of the metropole and the heart of modernist literary production. Further still, Anand uses the framework of the metropole/colony to challenge the universalist and equalist claims inherent in both colonial and caste logics; indeed, Anand shows that there are always sentiments of both equality and superiority/hierarchy present in colonial and caste ideologies. Baer delves deeply into the modernist qualities of *Untouchable*, which opens up possibilities for seeing the conundrum of speaking for the subaltern—especially relating to the ways the narrator intervenes in Bakha’s “naïve” mind.

In addition to the critical attention that has been paid to *Untouchable*, Anand has written several texts that reflect on his writing process, time spent with Gandhi, and conversations with various members of the Bloomsbury Group. Thus, there is a temptation to take his word on a

number of issues related to *Untouchable*; however, the reliability of these texts is somewhat dubious, as they tend to be reconstructed accounts written years later or are curated in ways that represent Anand in interesting ways. For example, Anand writes about his stay with Gandhi when he was in the process of writing *Untouchable*, describing how he recited his manuscript to Gandhi, who then gave him advice on how to improve the novel. Anand recounts how, on the one hand, he is apprenticing himself to the works of Joyce and other modernists, and on the other, that he is stripping the more overtly modernist aspects of his novel under the tutelage of Gandhi (which apparently involved getting rid of all the high-brow language of Bloomsbury). So, Anand carefully places himself within a modernist lineage—especially regarding the formal features of the text and the psychoanalytical underpinnings of Bakha—but then also emphasizes his Indian and Hindu positionality so as to guarantee his authenticity. In short, he maintains a complex identity, from which he can be both an insider and an outsider, or apprentice and master, in either Bloomsbury or Indian contexts. This is especially important to remember when considering how the narrator functions within *Untouchable*, adding language and perspective that otherwise seem out of place—and ultimately creating dramatic irony that is crucial to understanding the narrative thrust of the text.

Much Anand scholarship focuses on the representation of Bakha from a more or less postcolonial lens, which generally helps unpack some of the contentious or problematic ways Bakha's life is depicted. These are necessary discussions, but they do sometimes risk underappreciating the complex influences that Anand knits together to create a work that is both inside and outside anglophone literary modernism. This chapter focuses on the way Anand represents the embodied experience of Bakha, and tries to balance the aesthetic vision that Anand has created with the socio-cultural, religious, and political pressures that ultimately shape Bakha's life.

Caste and Insensitivity

Caste is an ancient facet of Indian society that has shifted and evolved over the centuries, and has myriad ramifications that touch many aspects of daily life. Couched in the Hindu religion, caste is highly hierarchical and strongly influences public behaviour—determining anything from available professions and access to certain spaces, to marriage possibilities and education. It is far beyond the scope of this chapter to tease apart the multifarious intricacies of caste, but the question of the outcaste is fundamental to any reading of *Untouchable*, and so deserves some attention here.¹⁸

The label of “untouchable,” which Anand takes up consistently throughout his novel, is roughly synonymous with related terms outcaste, *dalit*, and *harijan*—though each has specific connotations and none have ever been universally accepted. At the most fundamental level, untouchability is a result of inheriting a profession which “pollutes” one: leatherworkers, washers, and of course sweepers/latrine cleaners are a few examples that fit into this category. Because these workers’ professions are inherited, there is little room for change. To make things worse, even amongst the untouchable professions, there are local hierarchies that end up perpetuating oppressive strata within each community and prevent social mobility. Each stratum of the hierarchy hopes to keep those below it down as a way of maintaining some semblance of status or power—thus motivating watchful eyes, ready to identify any breach in the social order.

¹⁸ Anand Teltumbde, in *Dalits: Past, Present, and Future* gives a good summary of the origins of caste, which should consider both the *varnas* and *jatis*: “There is much confusion even in scholarly literature between *jati* and *varna*, which together constitute the basis for the caste system. *Varnas* were brought into India by the conquering tribes of Aryas during the dark period of history. Initially, there were three *varnas* (classes) sans hierarchy, which evolved into four (Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Shudra) *varna* system (*Chaturvarna*) by the end of Rigvedic period with a notion of hierarchy and then went on to designate the excluded ones as the *avarnas* (non-*varna*) or *pancham* (fifth) *varna*. Thus, *varnas* were finite and with a definitive hierarchy. Castes (*jatis*), in contrast, are countless and (because of it) with fluid notions of hierarchy. *Varna* is the *vedic* classification of the four ranked occupational order, whereas caste refers to ranked hereditary, endogamous and occupational groups separated from each other by the ideas of purity and pollution. Classically, *varnas* defined the borders of Hinduism, whereas *jatis* were local and are rarely found beyond the borders of ethnolinguistic regions. The *varnas* may be taken as theoretical, whereas castes (*jatis*) are real and concrete” (17-8).

Through various campaigns to improve the conditions of untouchables, the terms *dalit* and *harijan* came into use. *Harijan* was made famous by Gandhi, meaning essentially “children of god” or “holy one.” This term was used to give a sympathetic and purifying connotation to outcastes. While Gandhi did achieve some success in his attempts to abolish untouchability as a practice, the *harijan* name was largely rejected by its recipients. The term *dalit* was made famous by B. R. Ambedkar, a figure whose reputation and legacy has largely been eclipsed by Gandhi outside of India, and roughly translates to “downtrodden” or “oppressed.” It is telling that this term has been more widely accepted by untouchables, as it puts emphasis on the struggles that shape their experience and thus resonates widely. While Gandhi named the untouchables “Harijans or children of God...the renaming did not please radical Untouchables who later came to prefer the term dalit or oppressed, a word that proclaimed their real state rather than mystify it” (Sarkar 180-1). By shifting the emphasis from either the cause of oppression (untouchability) or an unrealized sense of holiness (*harijan*) to the experience entailed by the term, *dalit* galvanizes an extremely heterogeneous demographic better than any previously conceived label. That the term *dalit* is missing from Anand’s narrative may speak to Ambedkar’s relative national and international obscurity, or perhaps as a way for Anand to highlight the difficulties in communicating agendas for reform to the multitude of outcaste colonies.

Untouchables occupy a subaltern position in Hindu caste society; however, because there are so many strata within local hierarchies, it is very difficult for members of any single stratum to develop a sense of unity with another stratum—let alone the rest of the untouchables or caste-Hindus. Further still, because of this hierarchical complexity and that one is born into their caste, there is little possibility for rebellious action or thought. Thus, untouchables are in quite a different power dynamic than other subaltern populations. Anand Teltumbde explains

The worst feature of the caste system vis-à-vis slavery is the opposite consciousness they produce and also their processes of production. While caste consciousness strengthens the

caste system, slave consciousness resists the system of slavery. Dr Ambedkar once said, 'Tell a slave, he is a slave and he will rise in revolt.' This was not possible with the untouchables, who willingly endured their untouchability for centuries. Untouchability induced a sense of self-deprecation in untouchables, and killed their spirit of revolt. The process of producing this consciousness basically differed because of the differential structures of the two systems. In slavery, the system had two dominant parts in contradiction: slaves and masters. The structure of the caste system depicts a continuum that obviates the neat division between the oppressor and the oppressed. The contradiction is pushed down to the local levels, not for elimination of the oppression but for becoming an oppressor. The castes contend within their locale with the castes which suffer similar oppression as them, for superiority. This eliminates the possibility of any rebellion against the system as a whole. (Teltumbde 28)

While Anand does not address this distinction explicitly, he does show how Bakha instinctually reverts to a servile state whenever social pressure is applied. Perhaps more conspicuous is that Ambedkar is notably missing from the narrative. While some critics have argued that this omission is to the novel's detriment, as mentioned above, it is also possible to suppose that Anand is indirectly suggesting that no Ambedkar equals no social change or that there are other complicating factors.

In *Untouchable*, Anand shows how caste directly delimits Bakha's daily life. Bakha is forced to live in the outcastes' colony, where one's senses are continually affronted and thus automatically tend to block out as much as possible; filth is just a reality, as washing is impossible with so little clean water to go around; one is perpetually exposed to the elements, as outcastes live in poorly constructed and ill-insulated housing; and hunger is nearly constant, as outcastes rely on the charity of caste-Hindus for their food, begging every day for scraps or leftovers. Bakha must continually block out these undesirable sensations just to go about his daily life. Further still, outcastes cannot touch anyone from a higher caste, lest the caste-Hindu be "polluted" and have to undergo ritual purification. Thus, outcastes are barred from entering any caste-Hindu's house, cannot retrieve their own water from communal wells (meaning they must wait for generous caste-Hindus to fill their jugs), are not allowed to attend schools (so are prevented from attaining much of an education that might help improve their circumstances), and are forbidden from visiting temples (and by extension have little or no access to religious teachings or community). These concrete limits also have far-

reaching effects that can manifest in many ways. Outcastes are forced to be dependent on the higher-caste members of their community, preventing a sense of autonomy or self-reliance. Temples and religion remain mysterious and inscrutable, and may inspire awe or fear. Bakha, in particular, has little time for leisure, as the needs of his profession are constant and relatively urgent; he is essentially always on duty. These are just a few examples of how Bakha's caste directly shapes and limits his activities and experiences.¹⁹

Despite his ill-fated profession, Bakha is extremely good at his job—in fact he apparently does the work expected of his whole family, his brother and father being inherently lazy. As mentioned above, Bakha is almost immediately introduced as an able-bodied man coming into the prime of his life. Strong, skilled, and possessing great stamina, Bakha is in some ways the perfect physical specimen—almost superhuman in these respects. But, when doing his job, Bakha begins to act unconsciously, as if an automaton, which allows him to do his job without experiencing the unpleasant realities of the task at hand. The narrator describes Bakha cleaning the latrines:

He worked away earnestly, quickly, without loss of effort. Brisk, yet steady, his capacity for active application to the task he had in hand seemed to flow like constant water from a natural spring. Each muscle of his body, hard as a rock when it came into play, seemed to shine forth like glass. He must have had immense pent-up resources lying deep, deep in his body, for as he rushed along with considerable skill and alacrity from one doorless latrine to another, cleaning, brushing, pouring phenol, he seemed as easy as a wave sailing away on a deep-bedded river... And though his job was dirty he remained comparatively clean. He didn't even soil his sleeves, handling the commodes, sweeping and scrubbing them. 'A bit superior to his job,' they always said, 'not the kind of man who ought to be doing this.' For he looked intelligent, even sensitive, with a sort of dignity that does not belong to the ordinary scavenger, who is as a rule uncouth and unclean. (16)

By filtering this activity through the narrator, Anand paints a picture of Bakha as an almost elemental force. In part, this reflects the countless repetitions of his task that he has performed—

¹⁹ There are several moments in the narrative when Bakha briefly exists outside of these limits—like when he plays hockey or takes in the warmth of the sun—suggesting that some small avenues for reprieve exist. These are also significant moments in that they show places where resistance to the oppressive caste system are possible; Bakha's mind is at its most expansive and joyous at these occasions and he even experiences pleasant sensations usually numbed.

perhaps being perfected through many generations of hard work. That the narrator uses images from nature to describe Bakha has at least two valences. The first is that Bakha is particularly well aligned with forces of nature, suggesting that his capabilities are, indeed, natural—rather than learned artificial human constructs. In this sense, Bakha is imbued with innocence and purity by the narrator. However, the second valence makes things more complicated. If the narrator observes from a removed, unspecified subject position, then there is always the possibility of a political colouring to these remarks. This reading might consider that Bakha, by dint of his birthright, is only doing what is natural for him to do. Thus, the narrator could be exemplifying a very subtly paternalistic perspective that simultaneously accepts the order of things and yet sees a singularly fine specimen of his caste in Bakha.

That the narrator also alludes to some mysterious resources held deep within Bakha's body—and his “intelligent, even sensitive” appearance—only plays further into his complicated characterization. Most surprisingly, though, is the way the narrator comments on how Bakha is somehow “superior to his job.” It seems as though the narrator employs free indirect discourse to suggest that this is how Bakha thinks of himself; on some level, Bakha seems to transcend his social status—or promises to do so at some undefined point in the future. Taking this potentiality as representative of the structural position of outcastes in Hindu society, Baer suggests,

All body and little mind, for most of the novel Bakha is the figure of a sleeping giant. He signifies a massive physical potentiality constrained by the cruel workings of a millennially ancient caste system. The untouchable represents the foundation of strength holding up the delicate temple of the upper castes. Anand transforms this symbolic and deeply sedimented figuration of the untouchable, rendering Bakha as a muscular proletarian body in the terms of Socialist Realism. (586)

Unlike the variously frail, diminutive, or digestively-challenged caste-Hindus in the novel, Bakha is physically superior and healthy. On the one hand, this might prevent a foreign readership from holding prejudicial views of untouchables; on the other, as Baer suggests, Anand could be reworking

the trope of the latent potentiality of the proletariat-cum-outcaste outcaste to undermine or resist the religious logic of the caste-Hindus.

Looking more closely at Bakha's experience when working, it is apparent that he has developed a buffer of insensitivity that enables him to endure the unpleasantness of a sweeper's tasks: "He hardly realised that he had lapsed into activity, so vigorously did he attack his job. And he was completely oblivious during the quarter of an hour he took to finish a fourth round of the latrines, oblivious alike of the time and of the sweat trickling down his forehead, of the warmth in his body and the sense of power that he felt as he ended" and, further, "he worked unconsciously. This forgetfulness or emptiness persisted in him over long periods. It was a sort of insensitivity created in him by the kind of work he had to do, a tough skin which must be a shield against all the most awful sensations" (20). This is not a numbness that is debilitating; this is a buffer that is enabling, that makes survival, if not thriving, possible. When his bodymind flips this switch, however, Bakha is not only shielded from offensive sensations, he is also insensitive to the "sense of power" he might otherwise feel by accomplishing his work with such prowess. The problem here, of course, is that Bakha is ignorant of his own potential, even though he sometimes feels he deserves better treatment or more opportunities to grow and flourish.

One striking feature of the narrative is the way Anand represents changes in sensory-emotional states. While Bakha is quite accepting of the nature and necessity of his work, falling into a familiar rhythm and exertion that is sometimes satisfying, he is often forced into states of extreme emotions—which can take the form of all-consuming gratitude, but also anger, fear, humiliation, and even utter paralysis and insensitivity. Invariably, these states are reactions to the treatment from caste-Hindus and fall into two categories: benevolence and condemnation. There is seemingly no middle ground, no nuance, to the way outcastes are treated, and this polarization serves to drive home their subhuman status and is a necessary extension of class-based surveillance as a means of

keeping hierarchies present. The upshot of these more drastic upwellings of sensory and emotional excitement is that they have to break through a conditioned buffer—a permanent barrier of insensitivity that has been conditioned as a survival mechanism and is otherwise automatically in operation.

A good example of the benevolence dynamic comes when Bakha receives a generous offer of a new hockey stick from Charat Singh. When Bakha hears of this gift, a possession he could never hope to afford himself and which will be the envy of all his friends, his conditioning kicks in: “Charat Singh’s generous promise had called forth that trait of servility in Bakha which he had inherited from his forefathers, the weakness of the down-trodden, the helplessness of the poor and the indigent, suddenly receiving help, the passive contentment of the bottom dog suddenly illuminated by the prospect of fulfilment of a secret and long-cherished desire” (17). The narrator makes obvious the hereditary nature of this response, which includes the inheritance of both the material conditions of poverty and the sense of duty to react to kindness with servility. This response is more than just intellectually based, as Bakha’s whole being caves to the feeling—his body, his emotions, and his mind. His mental awareness is always connected to his bodily awareness. This is seemingly mirrored in Charat Singh, but from the opposite end of the spectrum: “Charat Singh was feeling kind, though he did not relax the grin which symbolized six thousand years of racial and class superiority” (16). Anand positions the narrator in just such a way as to allow an implicit, if obvious, characterization of the paternalism that Gandhi so famously championed (which will be discussed in further detail below). While Bakha seems sincerely touched by the gesture, we can see the superficiality of Charat Singh’s kindness—it has no real consequences for him, fails to improve the conditions for Bakha in any lasting way, and gives Bakha the illusion that he is being looked after. Interestingly, Charat Singh seems equally to embody the bias he carries in his veins, smiling in part to his own mind’s eye that tells him he is fulfilling his duty as a caste-Hindu—and

thus reinforcing his sense, however indirect, of superiority. This scene shows additional examples of how conditioning effects the whole being of each of the characters, which helps to establish just how embedded these reactions are and how bodily responses are inextricable from their experiences.

While the generosity of Charat Singh produced an immediate, whole-body reaction, Bakha is far more affected when faced with condemnation. Even the prediction of such treatment is enough to send a wave of fear through every fiber of his body. When sent to the temple grounds to sweep the square, Bakha's natural curiosity is piqued by the procession happening inside. As an outcaste, he is forbidden from entering the pure space of the temple, as merely his presence would have a polluting effect—but he cannot help but take a look inside. After building up his courage, he nimbly makes for the stairs leading to the temple, though his courage quickly wanes and his conditioning kicks in: “But he soon lost his grace in the low stoop which the dead weight of years of habitual bending cast on him. He became the humble, oppressed under-dog that he was by birth, afraid of everything, creeping slowly up, in a curiously hesitant, cringing movement” (58). Anand subtly echoes the diction used in the above scene with Charat Singh, quietly mirroring the kind of language that Bakha has been abused with throughout his life. But more importantly, we can see how Bakha's resolve quickly dissipates as he cowers physically and mentally to the pressure of merely the idea of being caught. Anand never suggests that Bakha is in danger from the law, and the police are supposedly unreliable at best; however, essentially any caste-Hindu is a potential whistle-blower, thus there is a society-wide panoptical network of policing that can build up a head of steam spontaneously and act without any regulation and with impunity—and do so from the position of the moral and religious high ground. To make matters even worse, there is no support system—official or otherwise—in place to protect outcastes when accosted by caste-Hindus. While outcastes make up a large percentage of the population, they can easily be cornered individually: a crowd of righteous caste-Hindus can descend upon a single outcaste who cannot escape or hope for much

assistance. Outcastes exist in an inherently precarious position, and it is this precarity that forces Bakha to anticipate the backhand of fortune at every turn. Speaking of the nature of panoptic discipline in *Discipline and Punish*, Michel Foucault explains:

And, in order to be exercised, this power had to be given the instrument of permanent, exhaustive, omnipresent surveillance, capable of making all visible, as long as it could itself remain invisible. It had to be like a faceless gaze that transformed the whole social body into a field of perception: thousands of eyes posted everywhere, mobile attentions ever on the alert, a long, hierarchized network. (214)

While the concepts underpinning the panopticon were developed in the context of prisons, and are often based on a specific architectural relationship of “bodies in space” (205), the way that the caste-Hindus automatically act to uphold the religiously-dictated social hierarchy shapes the way those outside the power structure act—and even feel. The distribution of this power is simultaneously invisible and omnipresent, and it is essentially inscrutable because of its religious source and ancient precedent. So, knowing this consciously and instinctively, Bakha soon conforms to the social expectations placed upon him. The key, here, is that Bakha’s sense of guilt, his self-surveillance, is what actually operates in this moment—not the exertion of power that is possible. In this sense, he has been caught by himself, and this shows the extent to which the socio-religious conditioning has been instilled—how deeply it permeates Bakha’s being.

Bakha’s anaesthetized state is a result of his conditioning, which operates on him in two ways; while some portion of this insensitivity is directly related to his profession as a sweeper, vis-à-vis the unpleasant sensations that he automatically blocks out, it is also entangled with the ways the socio-religious power structure functions. Bakha occupies the lowest position in the highly stratified local hierarchy, which creates a layered, but essentially unidirectional, application of power—one in which each stratum is motivated to ensure that social mobility is impossible for the strata below it. This ultimately ties back to a discussion of surveillance, as this becomes the primary mechanism by

which the hierarchy is upheld. It is worth noting that the society represented within *Untouchable* is not, strictly speaking, an example of the disciplinary society Foucault describes; however, there are enough parallels between the two that borrowing some of Foucault's framework and lexicon can help illuminate Bakha's situation in meaningful ways.

While there are many gradations of power within the outcaste community itself, the most important and rigid societal boundary is that between any caste-Hindu and any outcaste. Thus, even though there are strata between Hindu castes, all caste-Hindus work together in the novel to maintain this fundamental order. Returning to Foucault, here, there is an "economy of power" embedded in the social fabric, and it is "distributed in homogenous circuits capable of operating everywhere, in a continuous way, down to the finest grain of the social body" (80). This is one of the essential factors that leads to Bakha's self-surveillance, and ultimately his anaesthetized state, because it represents a state of vigilance that is ubiquitous and thus exerts constant pressure. While the application of punishment for an infraction of the socio-religious code—like when an untouchable touches a caste-Hindu—may not be uniform, at least not within the novel, the possibility of punishment is functionally everywhere. Outcastes have no power to begin with, but if they contravene the social order, they are treated akin to criminals. Further still, those applying the requisite disciplinary action do so with the impunity justified by religion and the juggernaut force of society: like a criminal in a disciplinary society, "the offence opposes an individual to the entire social body; in order to punish him, society has the right to oppose him in its entirety. It is an unequal struggle: on one side are all the forces, all the power, all the rights" (Foucault 90). Thus, the immediacy and force in which the caste-Hindus accost Bakha would seem excessive if he were not an outcaste, especially considering the accidental nature of the contact, but the speed and severity of the reaction is likely meant to instill a sense of perpetual fear in the offender—indeed, in all potential offenders—as a means of reducing the potential for any "future disorder" (Foucault 93). The

punishment Bakha receives is not carefully considered, it is not calculated based on the “crime,” but it represents a united effort to inflict disciplinary action that instills “not the actual sensation of pain, but the idea of pain” (Foucault 94). This representational level of the threat of punishment is ultimately what leads Bakha to self-surveillance, contributing to his insensitive state.

That the disciplinary society functions on the level of representation creates a unique problem for outcastes, and this is one of the most important implicit themes of the novel: there is a register of representation and signification, of language, that runs throughout the novel that Bakha cannot access. Because the caste-based social order is so deeply entrenched, all that is needed is to trigger the conditioning in outcastes to ensure their docility. In Foucault, this signifying power that is built into the disciplinary mechanism is meant to be legible by all, but in *Untouchable*, Anand shows what happens when norms are so deeply conditioned that such representations act automatically—even unconsciously—in the minds of outcastes. Indeed, “a play of representations and signs circulat[es] discreetly... in the minds of all,” but apparently on a deeper, even bodily, level for outcastes (Foucault 101). This is exactly why Bakha’s epiphany is so impactful: for possibly the first time in his life, he recognizes the label of “untouchable” for what it really is—and sees, even if just for a moment, how it circulates throughout society. This realization is doubly meaningful: not only does Bakha gain perspective on the label that has been marking him out wherever he goes, but he also realizes that his limited ability to access this same language also bars him from accessing the very economy of power that acts upon him. In this sense, Bakha is buffered on both sides of his being: he is desensitized to his living conditions and profession and he is insulated from that which could potentially grant him access to the world that holds power over him. Interestingly, it is in being accosted that Bakha’s senses come to life: while his socio-religious conditioning has led to his anaesthetized state, the caste-Hindus break through this buffer in order to maintain disciplinary order and allow for a chain reaction of sensations—some of which produce the desired effects of

fear, obedience, and docility, but these also lead to a host of revelations that light a fire of dissent in the young man. While the disciplinary state functions most efficiently when it need not take action, disturbances always end up requiring display of power enacted on bodies: “a relation that is immediately intelligible to the senses,” an “aesthetic of punishment” (Foucault 106). This sensibility dynamic gives a new meaning to the term “social body,” in that it helps describe the mechanisms by which bodies are sometimes numbed, as a way of increasing docility, and at others are meant to be sensitive, so that disciplinary action is effective and carries out its coercive function. The question, then, is whether Bakha metonymically represents the social body of the untouchables at a moment when there is the potential for a new class consciousness—or perhaps class sensitivity.

Experience through body(mind) and the series of epiphanies

Anand establishes early in the narrative that Bakha’s experience is muffled as a direct result of his socio-cultural context. But Bakha is also becoming a man, and so even though the novel takes place over the course of a single day, Anand depicts Bakha at a crossroads in his life: perhaps there is a possibility of a change of fate, but this is never certain. But by framing the narrative within a single day, Anand is able to create a novel of suspense and suspension. Of particular interest, in this regard, is the epiphany Bakha experiences in response to a particularly sudden and impactful series of altercations with caste-Hindus. Anand shows how the caste-Hindus jump into action, enforcing the disciplinary/punitive function of their religious right of power, aligning closely again with Foucault: “There is a machinery that assures dissymmetry, disequilibrium, difference. Consequently, it does not matter who exercises power. Any individual, taken almost at random, can operate the machine” (Foucault 202).

This epiphany occurs a few pages after Bakha unwittingly touches, and thus pollutes, a caste-Hindu, who goes on to accost Bakha and draw a mob full of vitriol and abuse. The series of events

directly following the initial reprimand follow a significant pattern, where Bakha moves through a state of numbness bordering on paralysis before coming to his senses. Bakha's first reaction is described: "Bakha stood amazed, embarrassed. He was deaf and dumb. His senses were paralysed. Only fear gripped his soul, fear and humility and servility. He was used to being spoken to roughly. But he had seldom been taken unawares" (46-7). The surprise factor exaggerates Bakha's response, causing his instincts to kick in and his body to shut down all sensory perception, going so far as to stall even his mental processes—in effect he shrouds himself in a cocoon that is protective, resulting from his overwhelmed socio-religious conditioning. It is obvious, then, that his somatosensory processing is intertwined with his cognition and apperception: as he comes to realize the consequences of his actions, his body responds in echo, creating a feedback loop wherein he is thoroughly numbed. Consistent with his bodymind's ability to become insensitive to the uncongenial aspects of his work, which is also the result of conditioning, his reaction to the abuse of the caste-Hindu shows that it is difficult to disentangle any possible hierarchy between mind and body—Bakha exhibits a response that is both instinctual and conditioned into him.

By dint of good fortune, the crowd that had surrounded Bakha is dispersed by a cart driver, enabling Bakha to flee and begin processing what has happened to him. As he moves away from the scene of the incident, and away from the caste-Hindus admonishing him, he starts to regain his faculties and senses, though his thoughts are still clouded. The narrator recounts, "Why was all this?" he asked himself in the soundless speech of cells receiving and transmitting emotions, which was his usual way of communicating with himself" (51). Curiously, the narrator explicitly connects this feeling through Bakha's neurological pathways, into his cells. This highlights the difference in register between the apparently well-educated narrative voice and the "naïve" mind of Bakha; however, this is an even more explicit description of the way Bakha's bodymind functions: intracellular communication predominates and something baked into his DNA seems to direct his

actions and abilities. That this cellular communication “was his usual way of communicating with himself” shows that his body is a more active component of his being than his conscious mind can fully recognize. Something primal operates in Bakha deep below the surface, and this is not buffered or limited by socio-cultural conventions. The socio-religious conditioning is undoubtedly entrenched well below Bakha’s conscious mind, often kicking in before he even realizes what is happening, but perhaps it does not go right to his core. That this primal level of his bodymind functions without hindrance helps drive home the desensitizing nature of the caste hierarchies in operation, as it is his conscious mind that is most directly affected. Echoing the symbolic structure of socialist realism that Baer notes, Bakha could also metonymically represent a cell of the unconscious body politic of a demographic potentially coming to its senses.

After a period of reflection, Bakha finally comes to realize the full meaning of a name he has been called all his life: “untouchable.” Anand structures this realization so that it resembles the way Stephen Daedalus describes the epiphany to Cranly in James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, especially in the way something utterly familiar takes on a new meaning and becomes manifest in a profound new way. This realization is represented as total, unlocking knowledge that was inaccessible before. The epiphanic moment is felt throughout his whole body:

Like a ray of light shooting through the darkness, the recognition of his position, the significance of his lot dawned upon him. It illuminated the inner chambers of his mind. Everything that had happened to him traced its course up to this light and got the answer...it was all explicable now. A shock of which this was the name had passed through his perceptions, previously numb and torpid, and had sent a quiver into his being, stirred his nerves of sight, hearing, smell, touch, and taste, all into a quickening. ‘I am an Untouchable!’ he said to himself, an ‘Untouchable!’ He repeated the words in his mind, for it was still a bit hazy and he felt afraid it might be immersed in the darkness again...The undertone, ‘Untouchable, Untouchable,’ was in his heart; the warning shout, ‘*posh, posh*, sweeper coming!’ was in his mouth. His pace quickened and it formed itself into a regular army step into which his ammunition boots always fell so easily. (52)

A shockwave runs through Bakha’s body in the form of a single word transmuted into a somatosensory stimulus. This shockwave awakens the full gamut of Bakha’s sensorium, further

suggesting that he always ultimately ends up knowing through his body—and more specifically, through his nerves; however, this shockwave also serves to emphasize the state, “numb and torpid,” that he momentarily emerges from. Bakha becomes temporarily sensitized, making him acutely aware of his surroundings in ways that he would previously have blocked out. Taking a moment to settle himself after the abuse that led to his epiphany, the narrator describes,

A bright, busy scene surrounded him where he lingered. The burning inside had emptied his mind of its content and he stood firm, struggling to express each shock as it impinged on his tight-stretched senses. A huge, big-humped, small-horned, spotted old brahminee bull was ruminating with half-closed eyes near him. The stink from its mouth as it belched, strangely unlike any odour which had assaulted Bakha’s nostrils that day, was nauseating. And the liquid dung which the bull excreted and which Bakha knew it was his duty to sweep off, sickened him. (53)

In this state of heightened awareness, Bakha reacts strongly to odours that he would not normally be sensitive to. That it is a bull that makes the offensive scents is, of course, poignant for at least two reasons. First, Bakha “knew it was his duty” to clean up after the bull, and Bakha has so far done his job exceptionally well and with relatively little complaint. This marks a state of exception in the narrative where Anand can plant seeds of hope for change: the first step towards emancipation for untouchables is likely some form of resistance, and here Bakha breaks free from his conditioning and sees this sacred animal in a new light—and enlivening his numbed senses to the bull’s smell. Second, because the bull is a sacred creature in Hindu society, it is treated significantly better than Bakha is by caste-Hindus. The bull is a living symbol of Bakha’s oppression, and marks the first of several experiences that will rankle him while in this temporary state of increased sensitivity.

A striking feature of Bakha’s epiphany is that the linchpin of the experience, the word “untouchable,” is a name he has presumably been called many times in his life. That this familiar word now produces such a powerful effect implies that the word’s meaning had only ever been partially understood by Bakha—the full range of its signification was either inaccessible or unprobed. As Sharon Kim explains, “Like the dark spots left on the retina by a light, epiphany

reveals the state of *not* having seen and intuits that there is something that yet cannot be seen...Epiphany recasts what had previously passed for vision as a false or insufficient perception, a form of *méconnaissance*' (10). Instead of Joycean ecstasy, though, Bakha feels a white-hot shock tinged with anger.²⁰ The feeling of ignorance that twins the epiphanic thrill of his realization plays a vital role for Anand in communicating the plight of subalternity that untouchables face. In this moment of epiphany, Bakha sees himself from an outsider's position—perhaps for the first time in his life. Kim, exploring the nature of the Joycean epiphany, explains that “the Joycean perceiver is a subject in the sense of one who has been subjected to another power. Because the formal structure of beauty requires a corresponding structure of vision, the mind's luminosity has been shaped by what it apprehends” and that “The object perceived in epiphany thus manifests itself in the subject, which becomes the visible realization of itself. So, what is seen in epiphany makes a subject of the one who sees it” (36). While Bakha's epiphany is not shaped by “the formal structure of beauty,” specifically, his “mind's luminosity has been shaped by what it apprehends.” Perhaps paradoxically, in apprehending himself from this distanced perspective his body reacts by firing its entire somatosensory system. Thus, Bakha's body, which is normally buffered, is inhabited wholly as he momentarily experiences subjecthood. The profundity of Bakha's epiphany thus becomes apparent when *he sees himself as a subject* even though he occupies a subaltern, a subhuman, status. In this sense, the surveillance network of caste-Hindus has backfired: in attempting to maintain the disciplinary machine through verbal and physical punishment, a reaction strong enough to break through the anaesthetic conditioning has burst forth in Bakha. The consequence is that he sees himself in a new

²⁰ For more on the influence of Joyce in Anand's work, see: “On the Genesis of *Untouchable*: A Note by Mulk Raj Anand,” by Mulk Raj Anand; “Shit Writing: Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, the Image of Gandhi, and the Progressive Writers' Association,” by Ben Conisbee Baer; and “Joycean Legacies in Indian Modernism,” by Jinan Ashraf. For more on Joycean epiphany more generally, see: “Literary Epiphany in the Novel: 1850-1950,” by Sharon Kim and “The Aesthetics of Phenomena: Joyce's Epiphanies,” by Jurate Levina.

light, one that he should not have seen, and this has the potential to disrupt the self-surveillance Bakha had been unconsciously undertaking all along.

Forms of Hope

After returning home from his trying morning, Bakha cannot help but confess to his father the inner turmoil he is experiencing. While Bakha does feel lucky to receive sympathy from his father, he is disappointed by the way his father accepts his own fate: “‘We must realise that it is religion which prevents them from touching us.’ He had never throughout his narrative renounced his deep-rooted sense of inferiority and the docile acceptance of the laws of fate” (83). Whether because of age and poor health, relative rank (Lakha is the head of the sweepers of his cantonment), or jadedness, Lakha is resigned to his fate and is squeezing the most out of his current position by delegating all responsibility to his sons so that he can laze about. Lakha is the (literal) embodiment of hereditary social structure, and thus a living symbol of continuity with the caste system. To Bakha, he represents the hopelessness of the outcastes, making this manifest through his bitter and demanding exterior. His father may be able to resign himself to his pre-determined fate, but Bakha finds that religion does not provide the answers or justifications he seeks. Anand subtly pits religion against reason throughout the narrative—and religion acts as the perfect motivation for the power underlying caste-based surveillance because, in the narrative at least, it does not require reason. Bakha cannot fully comprehend how religion functions in his society other than recognizing that it is the bedrock upon which rules and rituals are built. Even if he wants to learn about religion, he is barred from entering any temple by virtue of his polluting presence—which of course is a religious rule to begin with. It is this kind of circularity that really solidifies the societal rules, systematically preventing any change in social status.

There are two ways in which Bakha might find alternative worldviews and knowledge that could change his fate: by means of education and by means of foreign/outsider perspectives.

Historically speaking, as Anand Teltumbde explains,

The access to education during the colonial period was the moving force in the revolutionary development in the history of Dalits. Education opened up the world to them, made them understand their status vis-à-vis others, helped develop the consciousness of being wronged and lent them psychological strength to resist it. This is the precise process one finds in various agitations articulated by Dalits before Ambedkar. (39)

Thus, education and foreign perspectives were powerful drivers for positive change for untouchables, even if neither avenue was ever meant to have such an effect. In a way, British colonialism worked against itself by empowering an otherwise subservient portion of the population it needed to hold power over in order to function. As far as education within the novel goes, though, Bakha knows that he will never be welcome at school in the Hindu society: “Later still he realised that there was no school which would admit him because the parents of the other children would not allow their sons to be contaminated by the touch of the low-caste man’s sons,” but then continues, “how absurd, he thought, that was, since most of the Hindu children touched him willingly at hockey and wouldn’t mind having him at school with them...He was a sweeper, he knew, but he could not consciously accept that fact” (39). Bakha may not usually be critical, but he manages to critique the system in this moment, calling it “absurd.” Bakha has pinpointed an inconsistency in the caste system: the children who play with Bakha do not discriminate the way their parents often do, instead valuing Bakha for his hockey prowess and looking up to him as a role model. Anand thus takes a position on the nature/nurture problem as it relates to caste by suggesting that social distinctions are learned and not innate—even if they have been upheld for thousands of years. Holding with this logic, even though Bakha’s material reality has shaped his body and his mind, his fate was never sealed—and still may not be. Bakha does not have much hope

of gaining a formal education, though, and relying on higher-caste boys for lessons seems a precarious solution at best (39-41).

The other possible route to greater intellectual and social freedom comes via foreign/outsider perspectives. *Untouchable* presents three sources of non-Hindu perspectives for Bakha: the Tommies from the army barracks, the Muslim denizens of the city, and the missionary Colonel Hutchinson. It is poignant, of course, that Bakha cannot fully understand the Colonel Hutchinson, who attracts Bakha's attention because of his clothes and the fact that he is a "Sahib"—but his Christian recitations only serve to confuse Bakha and push him away. Christianity mirrors Hinduism in that neither religion is accessible to Bakha. While the Christian message of the missionary Colonel is lost on Bakha, he does recognize that the British Tommies and Muslims do not treat him as a sub-human outcaste—and this opens Bakha's mind to new possibilities, though these remain vague within the narrative. Ruminating on his previous confrontation, Bakha thinks, "They don't mind touching us, the Muhammadans and the sahibs. It is only the Hindus, and the outcastes who are not sweepers. For them I am a sweeper, sweeper—untouchable!" (52). Realizing that each group has its own beliefs, Bakha tries to understand the root of the problem. The behaviour of the Tommies and Muslims has effectively driven a wedge into Bakha's worldview, opening up a crack through which a sliver of light shines into his mind.

The only proof of Bakha's newfound "superiority" is his British clothing and bed linens, which his friends tease him about while apparently also harboring not insignificant jealousy for; they all seem to recognize the cultural capital that clothing, other British sundries, and even hairstyles have. Anand shows that these items are impractical, but that their cultural value far outweighs any drawbacks: "[Bakha] shivered as he turned on his side. But he didn't mind the cold very much, suffering it willingly because he could sacrifice a good many discomforts for the sake of what he called 'fashun'" (10). Bakha already suppresses a range of unpleasant sensations related to his

profession and living conditions, which are imposed upon him as consequences of his socio-cultural position. While the insensitivity related to his profession, for example, has turned into an automatic function—something deeply conditioned—his more recently adopted obsession with “fashun” seems to play more upon his conscious faculties. However, Anand suggests that this new value is actually making inroads to Bakha’s very core: “The clear-cut styles of European dress had impressed his naïve mind. This stark simplicity had furrowed his old Indian consciousness and cut deep new lines where all the considerations which made India evolve a skirty costume as best fitted for the human body, lay dormant” (10). While this constitutes a relatively subtle gesture, Anand hints that the socio-cultural conditioning that plays so significant a part in Bakha’s life is not immutable. The narrator conceptualizes Bakha’s psyche in physical terms, which suggests some connection between mind and body in both conscious activity and memory—and especially as shaped by repetition and routine. That this “fashun” “cut deep new lines” shows just how potent a symbol the Tommies’ clothing is. Perhaps ironically, though, it is merely superficial aspects of “European dress” that challenge his inherited values. The outcomes of these challenges are not necessarily emancipatory, at least not in any clear-cut fashion, as Bakha mistakenly believes their clothing is the reason for the English soldiers’ “superiority.” The narrator relates that “[Bakha] had been told they were sahibs, superior people. He had felt that to put on their clothes made one a sahib too. So he tried to copy them in everything, to copy them as well as he could in the exigencies of his peculiarly Indian circumstances” (11). Even if Bakha’s beliefs are somewhat mistaken, the upshot of his newfound affinity with the Tommies is that he opens himself to new possibilities and, in turn, is exposed to new perspectives.

[Gandhi and Untouchability Writ Large](#)

In a narrative that otherwise exhibits everydayness, the introduction of Gandhi—and the whole scene that surrounds his speech—seems quite anomalous, an intervention in the quotidian rife with possibilities. Bakha chances upon a crowd rushing to see the great man, the Mahatma, and is swept up in the mob with a desire to see what the fuss is all about:

It was as if the crowd had determined to crush everything, however ancient or beautiful, that lay in the way of their achievement of all that Gandhi stood for. It was as if they knew, by an instinct surer than that of conscious knowledge, that the things of the old civilization must be destroyed in order to make room for those of the new. It seemed as if, in trampling on the blades of green grass, they were deliberately, brutally trampling on a part of themselves which they had begun to abhor, and from which they wanted to escape to Gandhi. (137)

This is an unusual narrative moment where the narration shifts temporarily into a register that layers the plot with an interpretation of the events that reaches far beyond what Bakha is likely to comprehend. Rather, it is as if the narrator knows that Gandhi will force a crisis in Indian society, but plants this as a feeling in the crowd's instinctual drive. This "as if" rhetoric is particularly useful as a way to superimpose a belief that has not been fully formed or stated: it remains open-ended and tentative. This highly symbolic language ties "the old civilization" to "the blades of green grass" and, simultaneously, "a part of themselves which they had begun to abhor," which needs to be trampled out with enough force to destroy its roots. Gandhi supposedly offers a new alternative, and thus holds perhaps the most significant symbolic power of all. Interestingly, this passage emphasizes the importance of a fresh start, free from the baggage of the old system, but Gandhi did not necessarily represent such a break, but rather a reinterpretation of the established ways. Thus, there is also a quiet critique of the faith this crowd is putting in Gandhi, hinting to the knowing reader that there may be some barriers to their comprehension—and yet the enthusiasm, if not urgency, is certainly palpable. While Anand mostly depicts an enthusiastic, almost adoring crowd, this was not a uniform response: "Yet others who feared Gandhi were many of the Untouchables, despite his campaign for

their better treatment in India. They saw him as a paternalist Hindu who would never agree to social revolution of the sort that would really transform their position” (Brown 62).

Listening to Gandhi speak thrills Bakha, at least at first. Soon, though, Gandhi’s words start to confuse Bakha: “Bakha didn’t understand these words. He was restless. He hoped the Mahatma wouldn’t go on speaking of things he (Bakha) couldn’t understand” (146). Some passages from Gandhi’s speech pique Bakha’s interest, even going so far as to evoke a sense of love from the young man, but it is obvious that Gandhi either speaks to an audience other than the uneducated outcastes or fails to recognize that he uses language they are unfamiliar with. This of course, reminds of the missionary Colonel, an even more extreme example of misunderstood audiences, whose words obscure his meaning instead of communicating it. There may even be a (dis)connection here between the incommunicable or possibly incompatible aspects of religion and the plight of the outcaste. Discussing how outcastes can improve their social acceptance, Gandhi explains that “[outcastes] have, therefore, to purify their lives. They should cultivate the habits of cleanliness, so that no one shall point his finger at them. Some of them are addicted to habits of drinking and gambling of which they must get rid” (148). Coming from a mostly orthodox Hindu perspective, Gandhi’s teachings seemingly try to shoehorn outcastes into Hindu society not by overturning beliefs, but by finding a new way to play by the rules. Thus, he implies that outcastes are, in fact, “impure” or “unclean,” and that it is their responsibility to purify themselves so that caste-Hindus have no grounds on which to find fault. He does believe this is possible, and that it will have beneficial effects, but even Bakha quickly sees the problematic logic herein: “But now, now the Mahatma is blaming us, Bakha felt” (148). Further still, Gandhi is famous for his asceticism, his purposeful renunciation of material wealth or comfort, which was meant, in part, to bring him closer to the untouchables. But “what Gandhi and his associates did was a matter of personal conviction and choice. The poor, however, are forced to live a life of non-possession. The self-chosen poverty

of the great leader did not question the brutal lacks in their lives. It morally privileged and aestheticized them” (Sarkar 174). So, there are several ways in which Gandhi’s message to the untouchables runs aground morally.

After Gandhi’s speech, the novel ends quite abruptly. So, after thoroughly investing the narrative in Bakha’s story, Anand shifts perspectives in such a way as to leave the reader contemplating the proposed solutions to the plight of the outcastes; however, instead of providing a clear path forward, Anand has only emphasized the complexity of the situation. But Anand avoids putting forth any cohesive political agenda, and this has its strengths, too: “Bakha’s baffled admiration of Gandhi is part of Anand’s determination to get inside the heads of subaltern protagonists without claiming straightforwardly to speak for them” (Barnsley 737). Bakha feels hopeful that positive change may be on the horizon—as he might infer from the presence and enthusiasm of the large crowd gathered to hear Gandhi speak—but he is also profoundly confused. Even if the true way forward was communicated, Bakha would not be able to understand it—which leaves him in a suspended state of inapprehension. The potential range of his sensorium is suppressed by his societal position, and especially due to his profession, but in the final moments of the narrative, his cognitive abilities also prove to be buffered. All of these ideas fail to guide Bakha because the language used to describe them is incomprehensible to him. Ultimately, Anand characterizes Bakha as trapped and unable to find a path out of his oppressed existence. Presumably, Bakha is a metonymic stand-in for his caste. If this is true, then Anand depicts a society-wide negative feedback loop, insofar as there is a great swath of the Hindu population that wants change but cannot envision a way forward, let alone unite and carry out a nuanced and sophisticated agenda:

There was an insuperable barrier between himself and the crowd, the barrier of caste. He was part of a consciousness which he could share and yet not understand. He had been lifted from the gutter, through the barriers of space, to partake of a life which was his, and yet not his. He was in the midst of a humanity which included him in its folds and yet debarred him from entering into a sentient, living, quivering contact with it. (137-8)

This passage clearly shows that Bakha, as an outcast, is in a liminal—almost purgatorial—societal position, and that this prevents him from making physical or intellectual “contact” with his world. His emotions may be alight, indicating a desire to break through the caste barrier, but the momentary illumination provided by his epiphany is now gone. Bakha’s sensitivity and understanding are again blunted, despite his longing to connect with the sympathetic crowd. Anand subverts the logic of the epiphany insofar as the insight Bakha gains is temporary and the moment of transcendence fails to lead to any significant change or growth for Bakha. Unlike his modernist precursor, Stephen Dedalus, Bakha does not gain a philosophical perspective that may serve him in the future. Anand opens the doors to new possibilities, only to show that they lead to more locked doors; Bakha is returned to his sensory and cognitive caste-cocoon. In other words, while there are some glimmers of hope for the outcastes, Anand shows the double bind of Bakha’s situation: his social status forces physical, sensory, and intellectual limitations on him that he wants to transcend, but these same limitations prevent him from understanding what the anti-untouchability activists, like Gandhi, are trying to do to make any progress. By showing this reality, Anand communicates far more about the Hindu caste system than a Gandhian reformist speech ever could; yet, like many of his modernist contemporaries, Anand relies on building uncertainty, instability, and unanswered questions into his narrative to do so.

Conclusion

While the form of *Untouchable* is not as immediately stylistically striking as some of Anand’s contemporaries’ work, it bears several hallmarks of the modernist novel—indeed, seeing it as such helps to illuminate many facets of the text. As Anna Snaith aptly summarizes, “Anand employs features associated with literary modernism to explore subaltern experience: the one-day novel, interior sense perception and the everyday. His choice to write in English points not only to his

intended readership but also to his association of untouchability with the colonial subject more generally” (Snaith 19). Anand creates a parallel structure, where Bakha’s “naïve mind” is twinned with his conditioned insensitivity. This occasionally allows Anand to move beyond caste-based, colonial, or enlightenment conceptions of outcastes as needing direction or instruction to adhere to conventional behaviour or better themselves: the focus on the socio-religious source of Bakha’s conditioning instead shows that Bakha’s whole life has been shaped by these pressures and expectations. His epiphany connects his body, his mind, and his emotions: instead of having a realization that allows him to understand—intellectually—his lot in life differently, his whole body awakens—and it is this sensitizing that becomes the center of his potential and a source of resistance to the way he has been treated. Bakha’s epiphany reworks the classic modernist epiphany, most clearly represented by the experience of Joyce’s Stephen Daedalus, by adapting the formal structure of epiphany in order to show the limits of aesthetic awakening for an outcast. In other words, Anand creates something of an ironic parallel with Joyce: Bakha is temporarily de-anaesthetized in his epiphanic realization by the very cause of his anaesthetizing reality, but this event turns out not to be an aesthetically valuable experience in itself for Bakha—even if it might be for Anand’s own aesthetics. The caste-based surveillance state has prevented Bakha from feeling a range of possible experiences, and this turns out to be an especially effective form of subjugation. That Anand uses recognizably modernist features helps him map an established aesthetic framework onto an Indian context. This has the double function of opening up the narrative possibilities afforded by modernist aesthetics, especially Bakha’s literal aesthesis, and also of reflecting the narrative to a global audience, in effect taking the hyper local and making it global.

There are many instances when the narrator’s distance from Bakha becomes obvious, and each time some small shift in perspective is apparent. The narrator is never named and does not seem to represent a specific perspective, but the cumulative picture that Anand gives the reader of

his narrator is that of a worldly, educated person. One of the lengthier and more telling of these narrative interventions comes when Bakha envisions escaping his fated profession by imagining himself living the life he was briefly introduced to while working at the British army barracks. The narrator quickly shifts from Bakha's admiration of the Tommies to a philosophical rumination on the effect of foreign influence and the inevitable yearning for new experiences and worldviews to shake one out of one's routines:

It was a queer mixture of awe and romance, the alternation of his hatred for his own town and the love for the world to which he looked out. Men get used to a place, become familiar with it, and then comes a stage when the fascination of the unknown, the exotic, dominates them. It is the impulse to create a new harmony, frowning upon the familiar which has grown stale and dreary with too much use. The mind which has once peeped into the wonderland of the new, contemplated various aspects of it with longing and desire, is shocked and disappointed when living reality pulls in the reigns of the wild horse of fancy. But how pleasant men find it to look at the world with the open, hopeful, astonished eyes of the child! The vagaries of Bakha's naïve tastes can be both explained and excused. He didn't like his home, his street, his town, because he had been to work at the Tommies' barracks, and he had grown out of his native shoes into the ammunition boots that he had secured as a gift. And with this and other strange and exotic items of dress he had built up a new world, which was commendable, if for nothing else, because it represented a change from the old ossified order and the stagnating conventions of the life to which he was born. (78)

The whole passage speaks to the narrator's project of contextualizing Bakha's position. In this passage, the narrator explicitly "explains" and "excuses" Bakha's "naïve tastes" for the reader—hinting a slightly paternalistic position. The language is of a different register than that which purely describes Bakha's experience and has a faintly philosophical tenor. The narrator also takes a stance strikingly similar to that described by Viktor Shklovsky as the automatization caused by habit is illustrated, which is strangely prescient here. Not only does this passage separate the narrator from Bakha in sophistication of thought, but it picks up on the theme of insensitivity that runs throughout the novel—but in a new way. While Shklovsky speaks generally about the insensitivity that accompanies habit and routine, Anand applies this framework to the specifics of Bakha's life and locale. The most striking example of "the wonderland of the new" in Bakha's life is the British

army barracks. The Tommies have a cultural status that Bakha is enamored with, but because he does not fully understand the context of their presence or the world which they come from, he transposes all of his fascination with “the new” onto their clothing. Bakha’s obsession with “fashun” is duly made fun of, but Anand also uses Bakha’s obsession with the Tommies as a way to introduce a glimpse of their worldview. While Bakha puts outsize emphasis on obtaining any garment of the Tommies, he also recognizes that they treat him as a human being—which is more than he can say for the majority of the caste-Hindu’s that are supposed to tolerate, if not support, him. Thus, the way Anand structures this socio-cultural framework creates a parallel between Bakha’s obsession and what the narrator here describes as a “change from the old ossified order.” Rather than translating Bakha’s thoughts into a higher register of sophistication, as the narrator does earlier in the narrative, the narrator actually interprets and explains Bakha’s position for the reader. In this moment, the narrator explicitly writes for an outsider audience, such as Bloomsbury, filling in gaps and context that is not, strictly speaking, essential to Bakha’s story. Thus, there is a layer of metanarrative that forces the reader to recognize their position outside the text, probably identifying with the language and perspective of a narrator that is otherwise mysterious and slippery. In other words, this passage temporarily disconnects the reader from Bakha in such a way as to shift away from his sensory-emotional experiences that have predominated.

On top of the sensorial focus of the novel, Anand also taps into modernist conceptions of time to destabilize both history and the present moment in the novel. As Veronica Barnsley explains, “Anand combines his future-driven political programme with an involvement in modernist representations of time and the self, using ‘unreal’ modes of time (non-linear or non-standard) to connect the ‘now’ of immediate experience with the ‘forever’ of liberation via a representation of the subaltern mind” (731). Significantly, Anand’s strategy to unmoor the sense of history that weighs Bakha down allows Bakha to feel, and thus think, rebelliously against the surveillance state of the

caste system—even if the novel ends before he has a chance to make real this potential resistance. Bakha's life is suspended, for the reader, in a single day: there is little room for significant development, personal or societal, in such a brief span of time. So, even though Bakha is at a transitional phase of his life, quickly becoming an adult, and temporarily sensitized by his epiphany, the narrative remains essentially synchronic. Most of the relationships and activities recounted throughout the day serve to hammer home just how difficult it would be for Bakha to improve his lot in life; so much of his world is governed by hierarchies and power systems that function to keep everyone in their relative position. Thus, there is also a sense that Bakha's life seems cyclical—in this version, he is doomed to live a similar version of this one day every day of his life; however, the suspension inherent in the one-day novel is stretched both long into the past and into the indefinite future. If, as Barnsley suggests, real change is enacted, it will have a potentially permanent effect; but the suspension of the narrative only ever leaves this utopian possibility hypothetical.

By blending modernist traits and techniques into his work, Anand cannily provides a dual insider/outsider perspective on untouchability. His work is deeply influenced by his Indian upbringing, and he anchors the narrative in a distinctly local context. Perhaps the most striking feature of this local focus is the way he represents the socio-religious fabric of society, emphasizing the self-protecting hierarchical Hindu caste system and sub-hierarchies that run throughout society. Anand shifts the focus of this societal power distribution to the bodymind of a single character, showing how the constant threat of disciplinary action, exerted over centuries, functions to condition a set of experiential limitations. However, while this socio-religious conditioning infiltrates the very core of Bakha's being, his bodymind also proves resilient, with an instinctual drive that motivates rebellious thought and ultimately represents the necessary site of resistance and change. The narrative remains open-ended, though, forcing the reader to feel the visceral conflict within

Bakha, as he contemplates all the conflicting perspectives and thoughts he has come across on this fateful day.

Coda

To conclude my dissertation, I will consider how anaesthetic modernism fits into current trends in modernist scholarship, paying additional attention to future directions and further considerations.

Because my dissertation brings together theories from a number of disciplines and approaches, it is important to think through the ways these interact. The most significant, and historically persistent, issue is the supposed “gap” between the arts and sciences—which is, thankfully, slowly being eroded as fields like the medical humanities, neuroaesthetics, and bioaesthetics gain stronger footholds the more they are pursued. As neuroaesthetic pioneers Samir Zeki et al. have noted:

For reasons that are hard to comprehend intellectually, though relatively easy to understand emotionally, there are some who dislike and resent what they see as the intrusion of science into the private world of subjective experiences. This attitude carries with it a widely shared belief among scientists and the public alike, namely, that aesthetic experiences are necessarily subjective and therefore impervious to scientific enquiry—a belief that is not necessarily shared by philosophers like Immanuel Kant and Arthur Schopenhauer, nor by those pursuing neuroaesthetics as a discipline; it is in any case an assumption that requires rigorous reappraisal and reexamination. (427)

While I am certainly invested in bridging this gap, I also recognize the importance of maintaining a critical perspective; instead of skepticism, though, I suggest that humanist scholars keep an open mind and welcome dialogue from other disciplines. The perceived incompatibility of the arts and sciences seems to be more wrapped up in institutional structures than in substance or methodology; but perhaps instead of merely blurring boundaries, we should be careful to acknowledge such intersections. Indeed, it is the fundamental differences in these disciplines that makes them potentially useful to each other, and expanding the grounds on which we can understand literary phenomena can only be a good thing—even if purely reinforcing the possibility that what we already do allows the greatest potential for answering the questions at hand. This being said, it seems clear to me that there are a number of fronts on which an understanding of neurobiology, for instance, can shed light on the ways, and underlying causes, we behave and react the ways we do—and that

modernist authors have tapped into these experiences in ways that deserve close attention. Whether we consider the texts we study as snapshots of a specific moment in history or as objects that transcend any boundaries put on them (Mao 10-11), we can always take into account the human, and thus biological, elements of the character—author—reader nexus.

Furthermore, there is not as much to be gained by any reductive goals, however appealing the quantified results may be, as there is in understanding the complexities, nuances, and even impasses that literature presents us with (the most common criticism that humanists convey against scientists is that science wants only to produce laws or generalizable facts). As Carsten Strathausen summarizes:

The current rise of biologism across the humanities is primarily a reaction against this long-standing speculative tradition of art and aesthetics in Western culture. What distinguishes this reaction from its historical predecessors in the nineteenth century, however, are its broad universalist claims buttressed by recent sociobiology and neo-Darwinian theory. The prevailing sense among today's scholars interested in biology and culture is that evolutionary theory will not merely supplement, but help revolutionize the traditional modes of inquiry in the humanities. (3)

For this reason, my methodology will always be grounded in close reading. The temptation of latching onto systems of thought that promise universalist explanatory power is sometimes great, but any approach or lens that tries to exchange total certainty for interpretive process will have limitations—especially in dealing with the uniqueness of diverse texts. One implication that anaesthetic modernism brings up that has not been lost on me is the possibility of becoming insensitive in my own practice as a scholar. It is inevitable that studying literature will, at times, push me away from a direct encounter with the text—how could I be immune to the very distancing and desensitizing effects of the critical process that I argue always come into play? But this inevitability, it seems to me, only reinforces the need to be critical about the relationship between text and reader, and with the critical apparatus itself.

Of course, part of my concern here also relates to current developments—and insecurities—in modernist scholarship. The purview of the so-called New Modernist Studies seems to be constantly expanding, and we must be careful to avoid encouraging an appropriative impulse. Some of this disciplinary anxiety comes, I think, from the difficulty in defining the scope and reach of the term “modernism,” as Douglas Mao explains:

For still others, the new modernist studies has been all too flexible. Noting, for example, how imperatives from other studies areas have contributed to the tendency to expand the reach of the term “modernism,” the exponent of this perspective might urge that the new modernist studies has never been as intellectually coherent as it ought to be, or that it has been diminishingly so, and that it courts losing whatever specificity of aim it once had because its objects of analysis are essentially unlimited. (Mao, 6)

Even reckoning with such definitional questions as these, I am confident that understanding anaesthetic modernism is relevant today—especially in a time of ennui, angst, division, alienation, and seemingly infinite media creep: I think it’s fair to say that our senses don’t know what to make of the world right now. In other words, anaesthetic modernism can help us to better understand the sensescapes we are in and the multifarious pressures we face as embodied beings. To zoom in on one example, a field like critical medical humanities may prove to be fruitful ground for collaboration. Whitehead and Woods, in their ambitious introduction to the field readily suggest that “A historical perspective can enable us to attend to different forms of qualitative critical thinking – and different ways of sensing our world – that were important in the past and that may remain with us today, even if we have lost the vocabulary to describe them” (7), and “that the experimental and non-realist modes of modernist texts might offer a useful model for representing illness” (4-5). With this in mind, I will cap off my dissertation by acknowledging ways in which my study can intersect with, and inform, these burgeoning fields that recognize the potential benefits of such a collaboration.

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