ATMOSPHERIC MODERNISM:
RARE MATTER AND DYNAMIC SELF-WORLD THRESHOLDS

by

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Abstract

Defining rarity as a relative quality in matter roughly opposite to density, this dissertation focusses on the way material qualities of molecular gases, such as semi-opacity, permeation, and blending, inform modernist representations of embodied spatial experience. In modernist writing, rare matter—including air, fog, smoke, and haze—functions as an active component of the sensory environment, filling up the negative space that sets off subjects from objects, and characters from settings. Representing matter across the full range of the rarity-density spectrum allows modernist writers to challenge the ontological status of such boundaries, and to develop dynamic spatial models of the self-world threshold.

The Introduction defines rare matter and examines its function as a sensory medium that can alternately define and blur subject/object boundaries. Interpreting dynamic thresholds as products of authorial activism, I argue that modernist narratives disrupt the normative constructions of the self-world boundary that prevailed in biomedical discourse around the turn of the century. Chapter 1, seeking to expand the scope of modernist object studies to include rare matter, analyzes illustrated books about London to demonstrate the increased cultural visibility of the atmosphere in the modernist period. Visual and verbal gestalt effects, modelled on the hermeneutic oscillation between looking at and looking through the fog, foreground the materiality of
the atmosphere that fills up three-dimensional space, pressing up against the thresholds of the body and disrupting fixed distinctions between subjects and their surroundings.

Chapter 2 shows how D. H. Lawrence harnesses the properties of rare matter to construct dynamic representations of the self-world boundary. In his early novels and his criticism, the oscillation between self-diffusion and self-differentiation expresses characters’ psychological responsiveness to changing interpersonal and ontological pressures.

Chapter 3 demonstrates how Virginia Woolf takes advantage of rare attributes like permeation, fluid motion, and variable particle spacing to model process-oriented communities that incorporate dynamic shifts between social autonomy and collective identity. The Conclusion examines rare imagery in modernist scenes of narration, arguing that dynamic self-world thresholds help to articulate a responsive form of reader-text interaction that allows for the alternation of independent and collaborative reading practices.
I am grateful for the opportunity to have spent several years reading broadly in the field of literary studies, and learning gradually to find my way as a writer and researcher. Encountering the voices of courageous authors, both contemporary and historical, has enriched my relationship with the world around me, often in ways I cannot describe.

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Introduction

“Rarity” in matter is a relative quality roughly opposite to its density: vapour is more rare than water, and wood more rare than stone. In modernist writing, rare matter—particularly in the forms of air, fog, smoke, and haze—functions not simply as an invisible background medium, but as an active component of the lived sensory environment. Gases and other forms of rare matter are made up of the same basic particles that form solids and liquids. However, because of their relative rarity, gaseous substances are often treated as insubstantial, and used to symbolize the various concepts designated as matter’s ontological opposites: concepts such as mind, spirit, and even absence or nothingness. In contrast, my analysis draws attention to the concrete presence of gases in modernist literary landscapes, and the way they fill the negative space that sets off subjects from objects, and characters from settings. Representing matter across the full range of the rarity-density spectrum allows modernist writers to challenge the ontological status of such boundaries, and to develop distinct ways of situating the human body in space. My dissertation shows how the material qualities of molecular gases, such as semi-opacity, permeation, and blending, inform modernist representations of embodied spatial experience.

In “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock,” T. S. Eliot dramatizes the palpable contact between rare matter and dense solid objects in what has become one of the most well-known images in modernist poetry: “the yellow fog” that slinks through the streets, “rubbing its back upon the window-panes” (12). Eliot endows the yellow fog with the

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1 The three most commonly known states of matter are solid, liquid, and gas. Other states include plasmas and various condensates, but these less widely known categories have had little influence on vernacular representations of matter in modernist literature.
body parts of an animal: a back, a muzzle, and a tongue. By employing the device of animation, Eliot makes a point of integrating the physical presence of the fog into the built environment of the city. While mist-like bodies are often associated with ghosts and immateriality, the “yellow fog” slinking through the streets embodies not an otherworldly spirit, but the ubiquitous banality of air pollution in Prufrock’s painfully mundane city.

William Carlos Williams, in a less renowned but equally characteristic poem, integrates a similar sense of the mundane materiality of air into a consideration of the human body’s thresholds. The short poem “Thursday” (1921) begins with the lyric voice declaring, “I have had my dream […] and it has come to nothing” but then, leaving behind the immaterial realm, the speaker shifts his awareness to his bodily position standing “with feet planted on the ground,” looking up at the sky (157). Instead of concentrating on the horizon, with its implication of elusive aspirations, he turns his attention to the borders of his own body, dwelling on the physical properties that connect him to his immediate environment: “feeling my clothes about me, / the weight of my body in my shoes, / the rim of my hat, air passing in and out / at my nose” (157). Extending his bodily space outward through the metonymic intimacy of his clothing, he simultaneously recognizes the physical incorporation of air as it passes into his body through his nostrils. The tactile quality of these sensual observations explains the significance of the final line, in which the speaker decides to “dream no more” (157). Far from being a pessimistic rejection of his former aspirations, this line signifies an affirmative embrace of the immanent physical life that already surrounds him. By literalizing the connection between breath and inspiration, Williams integrates the air into the physical world that he embraces, so that
the sky that holds his gaze becomes not a symbol of transcendence, but a physical
presence as concrete as the ground upon which his feet are planted.

Both of these poems support Steven Connor’s contention that modernist
experiments with materiality help to “retard our own amnesia of air” (“Modernism in
Midair” n.p.; “Haze” 3). Connor, who is currently at work on “an historical poetics of the
air,” has published on-line a series of lectures and conference papers on what he calls
(following Gaston Bachelard) “the material imagination of the air” (“Dim Capacity”
n.p.). Analyzing an eclectic range of cultural products, from popular scientific texts to
lyric poems to inflatable sculptures, Connor seeks to describe and account for a
longstanding cultural tendency to downplay the materiality of rare matter through the
“appropriation of air to serve as the materialisation of the immaterial” (“Next to Nothing”
5). He argues that, because we tend to describe thoughts using the attributes of rare
matter (“Dim Capacity” n.p.), air gets wrapped up in the assumption that mental concepts
have no material substance: “it does not in fact function as a substance, but rather a quasi-
substance, a substance that, like thought itself, is next to nothing, not quite there”
(“Inebriate of Air” 4). Connor suggests that, in part because of the radical reformulations
of matter introduced by the new physics, many modernists depart from this trend, and
attempt “to stay in touch with a palpable air” (“Midair” n.p.). Both “Prufrock” and
“Thursday” support this hypothesis. The “rubbing” of the yellow smoke against the
windows, and the sensation of air moving “in and out” of the nostrils reinforce the
materiality of the air through tactile imagery. In doing so, they refocus atmospheric
imagery away from the “vertical dimension of aspiration and eminence” associated with
the sky and horizon, and toward the role of rare matter “as medium, and as substance”
I use the term “rare matter” in preference to Connor’s term “object air” partly because of complications posed by the terminology currently used in modernist object studies. As a relative quality, rarity also draws attention to the particulate structure underlying all matter; it foregrounds not only the immanent material qualities of gaseous substances, but also the ways in which they interact with denser forms of matter.

1. What is Rare Matter?

In *Dreaming by the Book*, Elaine Scarry revives the archaic usage of the word *rare* to denote a positive quality opposite to *dense* (60). While Scarry’s study of literary setting and the phenomenology of reading has met with some controversy, I follow her in adopting the term *rarity* because it names a semantic category for which English has no alternative, i.e. the quality of being loosely packed in space. The term’s history of usage attests to the conceptual evolution of rarity from a general antonym for density to a specialized descriptor for gaseous substances. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, an obsolete meaning of rarity is “the fact of being set at wide intervals” (“Rarity, n.” def. 1a). This sense of wide spacing connects rarity to porosity, since pores introduce spaces (often filled with air) into otherwise uniform solids, reducing the mass to volume ratio that defines density in physics; it is mainly due to porosity that wood is more rare than stone. A second definition of rarity, current between 1644 and 1887,

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2 See below for a discussion of Daniel Punday’s distinction between objects and materiality, a distinction further contextualized in relation to modernist object studies in Chapter 1.

3 Designed to be accessible to a general audience, the book has proven controversial among academic readers. While Ellen Spolsky commends its contribution to theories of embodiment (127), she joins other reviewers who criticize its overgeneralizations regarding readers’ mental imaging processes (Spolsky 134; Curran 908; Wood).

4 Scarry uses the term “rarity” to describe in relative terms any fictional object that is less dense, solid, heavy or immovable than its surroundings—“rare” items include light, wind, shadows, flower petals, veils, textiles, and other assorted objects (60).
specifies density as its antonym: “Of substances (now chiefly of air): Thinness of composition or texture. (Opposed to density)” (“Rarity, n.” def. 2a). The adjectival form rare, which was current at least until Herbert Spencer’s First Principles of 1862, links these two elements (spacing and density) by describing substances at the molecular scale: “Having the constituent particles not closely packed together (Opposed to dense.) In later use chiefly of the air or gases” (“Rare, a1.” def. 1a).5 As the older usage suggests, the degree to which particles are “closely packed” may characterize solids and liquids as well as gases: it is, in other words, a relative quality. Even the most solid objects, being made of atoms, have a degree of rarity, given their underlying particulate structure. In a porous solid, densely packed particles (the solid substance) are interspersed with pockets of more widely spaced particles (in the pores). In general, I use the term rarity to refer to the relative degree of spacing between particles. When I mention rare matter on its own (in a non-comparative sense), I am referring to gas-like substances in the atmosphere. These include gases, vapours, and gaseous suspensions (like smoke or fog).

From a certain point of view, it may seem nonsensical to attribute material qualities to subjects, objects, or settings represented in a written text. On a literal level, there is no physical matter in a fictional world.6 Nevertheless, most readers respond differently to concrete words like “chair” or “mist” than to abstract words like “representationalism.” If the distinction between concrete and abstract works in practice, then words must be able to transmit some material information. Structuralist narratology

5 In the current scientific usage of rare as a synonym for inert in the phrase “rare gas,” the association with density has disappeared. The current vernacular meaning, the sense of infrequent occurrence, is related to the “wide intervals” in time or space between rare events or objects.

6 Even in a non-fictional representation, differences in readers’ experiences undermine the presumable link between “real” and “imagined” matter; a resident familiar with London could draw on sensory memories unavailable to a reader who has never been there.
appears to offer a plausible explanation: that some clusters of information presented to us in writing take on consistent properties that are at least analogous to the physical properties of matter. The properties of these “existents,” including the “coherence” of their identities, are systematically described in Seymour Chatman’s classic articulation of the principles of structuralist narratology *Story and Discourse: Narrative Structure in Fiction and Film* (30). Existents are built up through the accretion of detail over the course of a narrative, and remain coherent enough that they can be characterized according to their associated traits and their functional relationships with other narrative elements. These functional relationships normally include some habitual assumptions about materiality: in non-fiction and realist fiction at least, “textual objects” rarely violate the basic laws of physics. Scarry suggests that fictional texts construct images of material objects by imitating “the deep structure of perception”—the conditions and processes that allow perception in the real world (5-9). In other words, readers depend on the assumption that “textual objects” will behave somewhat predictably. Rather than being understood as inherent properties of the world mimetically transferred into the text, expectations about the consistency of physical attributes in a text may be viewed as assumptions shared by a discourse community of authors and readers. To name this observable consistency in the physical properties of textually-represented objects, I adopt the structuralist term “existent” to organize some of what I wish to say about the concrete

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7 Scarry’s stated belief in the mental image aligns her with one side of a scientific debate over the prevalence of visual imaging among readers (252). While Ellen J. Esrock’s survey of scientific findings suggests that readers differ drastically in their reliance on visual imaging (94, 118-28), the common assumption that concrete language “appeals to the senses,” finds indirect support in applications of cognitive science to the reading process, which suggest that reading about certain situations can stimulate the same cognitive resources we use to respond to such situations in real life. See, for instance, Lisa Zunshine’s work on theory of mind (272-73), Melba Cuddy-Keane’s work on mental navigation (“Movements of Hand and Mind” 10), and Sarah Copland’s application of “conceptual blending” to figurative language (141).
attributes of rare matter. In particular, I examine the ways that rare matter, because of the properties of physical substance assigned to it, differs as an existent from solid matter.\footnote{I am particularly concerned to distinguish between mimetic representations of rare matter (gases and vapours as components of the setting) and figurative usages that extend words like “atmosphere” to apply to complex narrative devices involving tone, emotional context, and intersubjective mood effects.}

Rare matter occupies space but has an indefinite shape. In the case of gaseous suspensions like fog, smoke and haze, this shape is visible due to the scattering of light by clusters of small solid particles or liquid droplets suspended in the otherwise transparent air. Unlike solid objects, rare matter consists of particles that are not firmly bonded to one another, complicating boundary conditions that usually serve to differentiate individual objects as discrete entities. When a group of gas particles is viewed collectively as an individual (composite) object, its edges may be defined by the surfaces of other objects (when it takes the shape of its container) or by some difference in physical properties, like the condensation point at the edge of a cloud. Otherwise, it blends gradually into the surrounding open space, so that its spatial extent remains somewhat ambiguous. Because of its amorphous shape and underlying particulate structure, rare matter functions as an ideal figurative vehicle for investigating issues of discrete or blended boundary areas between material objects, and by figurative extension, between binary oppositions or logical categories more generally.

Although it is possible to focus our attention on rare matter’s sensible properties, we more commonly elide its presence due to its role as a sensory medium. Bridging the space between distant objects and our sensory organs, the air transmits visual, auditory and olfactory stimuli by propagating ambient light and sound waves, and by physically transporting solid and liquid particles. By filling up this negative space and touching (or
even crossing) the thresholds of our bodies, rare matter problematizes the spatial
separation of subjects and objects. Combined with its very real physical presence, rare
matter’s function as a sensory medium poses an interesting challenge to the assumption
that subjects and objects may be identified a priori as discrete entities. Daniel Punday
draws a distinction between “objects” and “materiality” to call attention to the problem of
drawing discrete boundaries between subjects and objects in a continuously material
world. Drawing on Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s notion of “the flesh,” Punday defines
“materiality” as that which is left unassimilated in the process of separating the world
into subjects and objects (17-19). This process is described by Samuel Weber, who
suggests that objects are defined dynamically when a subject, attempting to stabilize its
own identity, imposes a distinct definition of the object “achieved only at the cost of
excluding, fending off, or fencing out others” (qtd. in Punday 18). Punday explains the
connection as follows: “This distinction between the messy network of potentials that
surround a material object, and the neat but constructed stability of ‘objectivity’ echoes
the distinction in Merleau-Ponty’s theory between subject, object, and the materiality
(flesh) that overarches them” (18). My argument does not seek to resolve the tension
between “objectivity” and “materiality” that Punday identifies. Instead, I further explore
this tension by examining existents whose concrete attributes pose similar challenges:
because rare matter changes shape and permeates the spaces that often appear to delineate
objective boundaries, it straddles the categories of subject and object in an unusual way.

In “The Art of Fiction” (1888), Henry James employs rare matter’s in-between
status as both a substance and sensory medium to explore the fine balance between the
artist’s physical and mental powers of perception. He writes: “Experience is never
limited, and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility, a kind of huge spider-web, of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness, and catching every air-borne particle in its tissue” (388). In James’s metaphor, the rare substance of the “spider-web” catching the even rarer “air-borne particle” figures the perceptual roles of the senses and the consciousness simultaneously. The metaphor is complicated by the unusual proximity of vehicle and tenor: airborne particles (of air, light, or odorous material) are in fact responsible for most sensory stimuli, but they double figuratively here to blur the physical and mental aspects of perception. The spider-web image harnesses both the material and symbolic complexity of rare matter’s role in perception. At the concrete level, the air transmits light, odour and sound; by filling up negative space and permeating boundaries, it also problematizes the spatial separation of subjects and objects. At the abstract level, rare matter’s metaphorical association with thought supplies useful vagueness at the ontological border between physical and mental experience. Both its material presence and its association with mental images help rare matter to blur the distinction between the “internal” mental realm and the “external” physical environment. This mixture of concrete and abstract valences makes James’s spider-web consciousness an ideal figure for destabilizing the familiar subject-object dichotomy that, as many modernists were at pains to point out, becomes more complicated the more one attends to the actual processes through which we make sense of the world around us. The useful ambiguity of the spider-web image depends on a recognition of rare matter’s concrete participation in perceptual processes.

9 Connor contrasts the assumed solidity of objecthood with the rarity commonly associated with the less tangible aspects of perception: “Objects are, we dream, solid, stony, densely insensate, resistant, extended, but also determined in space and time. Thoughts, signs, representations, by contrast, are ghostly, feathery, insubstantial, at best a soft, sifting sort of mist that settles on things” (“Dim Capacity” n.p.).
2. Rare Matter and Dynamic Threshold Imagery

To fully appreciate rare matter’s role in literary representations of embodied spatial perception, it is necessary not only to recognize its key physical properties, but also to consider their figurative functions. In particular, uses of rare materiality in images of the human body add significantly to the interpretative value of the rarity-density spectrum and provide new ways to approach modernists’ far-reaching concern with the nature of subject-object relations. At the thresholds of the body, where the subject meets the world and encounters the presence of others, rare matter lends its attributes to modernist characters that melt, flow, mingle and dissolve at their edges.

Building thus on Connor’s approach to the materiality of air, and Scarry’s terminology of rare matter, my approach also draws upon Inge Boer’s problematization of linear boundaries in *Uncertain Territories: Boundaries in Cultural Analysis* (2006) for its relevance to self-world thresholds. Although her primary focus is political geography, Boer’s conceptualization of boundaries as sites of negotiation applies equally well to the boundary between the human subject and the rest of the world. Arguing that political and cultural boundaries should neither be taken for granted nor elided through overly optimistic theories of free circulation, Boer proposes instead that “boundaries can be approached as a space in which events can happen, shedding the guise of boundaries as demarcating lines” (12). She goes on to insist that “boundaries cannot be wished away but will serve their ordering purposes better [...] if we accept their existence but take them as uncertain; not lines, but spaces, not rigid but open to negotiation” (13). Whereas an ideal line has no width, Boer’s boundary spaces leave room for negotiation in three dimensions, since they must be created, marked and maintained through concrete actions...
that take up (or traverse distances in) both time and space. The concept of a dynamic middle ground between the rigid demarcation of boundaries and their total dissolution helps to visualize rare matter’s unique function in mediating between two extreme views of the relationship between self and world. These extremes, which I will call “differentiation” and “dissolution,” figure in modernist representations of the self-world relationship, and in the ensuing critical debates.

Differentiation posits a necessary distance or detachment between subjects and objects. At the extreme of differentiation, the skin’s surface marks an absolute boundary between the human body and the outside world. The air that surrounds the body is either ignored (as if the body is surrounded by empty negative space) or treated as entirely external, unrelated to the animate matter of the body. This view is reinforced by the conventional construction of the body as a “container” for the self, with a clearly demarcated inside and outside.¹⁰

Conversely, extreme dissolution involves a complete breakdown of the inside-outside dichotomy, marked by the fusion or indistinguishability of subjects and objects. Animate and inanimate matter, both composed of the same atomic elements, are treated as continuous and ontologically indistinguishable. This monistic scenario often provokes anxieties about the embodied subject’s loss of ontological integrity. To compensate, rare matter’s status as an existent may be subordinated to its symbolic function as the insubstantial substance, standing in for a non-material animating principle (like mind or spirit) that mitigates the threat of self-loss associated with material homogeneity.

¹⁰For an influential articulation of the body-as-container metaphor, see Lakoff and Johnson (29-30). For detailed discussions of the psychological and socio-historical contexts relating to the skin as a bounding surface for the embodied subject, see Elizabeth Grosz’s Volatile Bodies: Towards a Corporeal Feminism (1994) and Didier Anzieu’s The Skin Ego (1989).
Wyndham Lewis, a modernist writer well-known for his polemical rhetoric, comes close to articulating the two extremes in the 1934 essay “In Praise of Outsiders,” when he contrasts writers and artists who emphasize the “hard shell of things” with those who dwell on “all that is fluid and yielding, misty and mysterious” (200-01). The former “externalist” group (typified in Lewis’s view by Stendhal, Balzac or Breughel) illustrates extreme differentiation, an approach that emphasizes demarcating boundaries, “shaping things [...] after a sharply defined, a starkly articulated fashion” (200). However, the “internalist” group (which includes Pater, Proust, Corot and Rembrandt), illustrates only a partial step on the path to extreme dissolution, representing things in “a little blurred and broken, a feebly silhouetted, much less concentrated and compact [...] fashion” (200). This partial dissolution of contours, associated with mist and fluidity in Lewis’s mind, points to a tendency among certain modernists to position their representations between the extremes of differentiation and dissolution.

Such intermediate representations dissolve the absolute distinction between the body’s “inside” and “outside,” but replace it with some kind of transitional zone that recognizes spatial ambiguity and/or dynamic fluctuation at the interface between self and world. In this view, the body is recognized as semi-permeable to both rare and dense matter through biological processes such as respiration, perspiration, digestion and excretion. Rare matter is thus acknowledged as a material constituent of the body, but may also be used as a figurative vehicle to describe the spatial ambiguity and dynamism of the body’s boundary zone. Because matter can move back and forth among the solid, liquid and gaseous states, the rarity-density spectrum lends itself to representations that preserve some sense of differentiation without precluding interaction within the boundary
zone. Extreme differentiation dichotomizes rare and dense matter in order to mark the static bounding surfaces where solid objects meet the atmosphere, often eliding rare matter completely by treating it as negative space. In contrast, a recognition of matter’s mobility across the rarity-density spectrum permits a range of spatial configurations between the extremes of self-containment and self-loss. Because rare matter expands and contracts more freely than solids and liquids, it is especially suited for modelling vectors of motion toward and away from a centre, providing further options for mobile images of self-world thresholds. As a metaphorical vehicle for the body’s ambiguous threshold spaces, rare matter can dissipate without disappearing, and mix at the edges while remaining concentrated in a particular area. Its capacity to represent blurry thresholds is perhaps most succinctly illustrated in Bernard’s claim, near the beginning of Virginia Woolf’s *The Waves*, that “we are edged with mist” (9).

3. Freedom of Perception: Dynamic Self-World Thresholds as Modernist Social Activism

I have already mentioned, in my discussion of Henry James’s spider-web image, the spatial ambiguity generated by rare matter’s dual roles as both a material substance and a sensory medium. I want now to suggest why James might include such a spatially ambiguous image in an essay on “The Art of Fiction,” and how this context helps to explain what is at stake in modernist representations that deliberately destabilize the self-world threshold. The essay, originally published in Longman’s magazine in 1884,

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11 According to Connor, modernism characteristically alternates between these two vectors of motion: “On the one hand, there are the modes of condensation—concentrations, compression, intorsion. On the other there are the modes of diffusion: extension, expansion, radiation. […] Modernism oscillates, we might say, between these two prospects” (“Midair” n.p.). My analysis identifies evidence of this oscillation in both Woolf and Lawrence’s representations of self-diffusion and self-differentiation. As I will explain, both authors use the oscillation to undermine binary oppositions related to the self-world boundary.
explicitly positions itself in opposition to an earlier article in which Walter Besant defines a series of guidelines for judging the quality of fiction; James objects that one cannot define “beforehand what sort of an affair the good novel will be” (384). “Art,” he insists, “lives upon discussion, upon experiment, upon curiosity, upon variety of attempt, upon the exchange of views and the comparison of standpoints” (376). To accurately represent “a personal, a direct impression of life,” the artist must actively work out appropriate forms for whatever life presents: there is “no limit to his possible experiments, efforts, discoveries, successes” (384-85). Besant urges novelists to “write from experience,” but “experience,” for James, is “never limited […] never complete” (388), and a writer’s methodology must be equally open-ended. To leave room for perceptual, as well as aesthetic, innovation, James deliberately renders “experience” in a spatially incoherent series of images, in which “experience” is both “the atmosphere of the mind” and the “huge spider-web” suspended within it, which “converts the very pulses of the air into revelations” (388). Rare matter functions in two roles here, figuring the amorphous, unlimited spatial extent of the perceptual apparatus imagined as an “atmosphere,” but also transmitting the “pulses” of airborne stimuli to the perceptual apparatus imagined as a “spider-web” immersed within the atmosphere. How can the air represent simultaneously both the perceptual organ and the sensory medium of transmission? The image is impossible to resolve into a simple model of perceptual processing; instead, it can only be approached through a flexible, shifting response that does not settle into a single pattern. In this way, James avoids falling into the prescriptive rhetoric that he criticizes in Besant’s work. Although his image of the writer’s perceptual process is both concrete and highly suggestive, it relies on the spatial ambiguity of rare imagery to avoid
any stable definition of the interface between the authorial self as perceiver and the perceptual object to be “captured” in realist fiction. In sum, “The Art of Fiction” contends that pre-established forms do not allow the novelist enough perceptual flexibility to convert new, unfamiliar “impressions” into art; unless our perceptual apparatus (including our understanding of subject-object dynamics) remains open to innovation and reconfiguration, fiction will be unequal to the challenges of representing the modern world, and will reproduce habitual, pre-established ideas rather than recording the spontaneous apprehension of an individual author’s particular “impression” of reality.

Given the marked interest in perceptual process among formally innovative modernists, this defence of expressive freedom would arguably be embraced by a broad range of writers. Artists seeking to create radically new forms need to be open not only to new experiences, but to new ways of perceiving, and therefore new configurations of the self-world interface. In addition, modernists who view their work as a means to effect social change by modelling alternative forms of community share a more specific motive for defending the indeterminacy and dynamism of self-world thresholds. To explain this motive, I draw on two recent studies that describe the imbrication of literary, bioscientific and communal rhetoric in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Both Laura Otis (1999) and Craig Gordon (2007) demonstrate that bioscientific models were discursively intertwined with models of social control that many modernists would have seen as violations of individual autonomy and attacks on the citizen’s capacity for social critique. To understand the insistence on dynamic configurations of the self-world threshold in the modernist works I will discuss, it is helpful to consider how permeable
membranes and boundary regulation figure in the biomedical discourses of the early twentieth century.

Otis argues that many of the scientists whose microscopic research made visible the underlying particulate structure of the body were driven in part by political motives. As cellular anatomy and germ theory developed over the course of the nineteenth century, a far-reaching analogy between cells and citizens, as autonomous units interrelated into larger wholes, led to mutually reinforcing arguments about the need to control the boundaries of the biological and social bodies, respectively (5). Metaphors of invasion and resistance crossed freely between political and medical discourses, so that germs were figured as savages invading or infiltrating the body’s carefully defended frontiers, while native inhabitants of European colonies were feared and regulated as vectors of disease (6-7, 90). These discursive patterns added up to a powerful cultural formation that Otis calls the “membrane model,” which idealized self-containment as the basis for a form of identity based on exclusion (3); thus, the healthy body is characterized by closed or carefully regulated boundaries, impermeable to disease (6, 27), while the healthy nation is characterized by an exclusionary imperialist discourse wherein European powers were “happy to expand outward” but “horrified when the cultures, peoples, and diseases they had engulfed began diffusing, through their now permeable membranes, back toward their imperial cell bodies” (5). In practice, neither national nor biological boundaries could effectively exclude such “foreign” contaminants, since neither cells nor nation-states can function entirely in isolation. However, even models

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12 She claims, for instance, that Santiago Ramón y Cajal, who won the Nobel Prize in 1906 for demonstrating the cellular structure of the nervous system, persisted in his efforts to “resolve boundaries between cells” because of a belief that “the fundamental characteristic of every cell and every human being was its individuality” (71).
that recognized the value of permeability sought to control and regulate boundary traffic in similarly politicized terms. S. Weir Mitchell, who introduced the “rest cure” for neurological diseases, believed that health depended on “the limited capacity of the living unit to exclude” harmful influences, not through the “erection of an impenetrable barrier against one’s surroundings” but through “a constant process of interaction, scrutiny, and when necessary, rejection” (Otis 61). Thus, permeable threshold spaces were carefully monitored, an activity that was frequently articulated through gendered and racialized discourses of penetrability.

Gordon elaborates on this pattern by showing how both social medicine and microbiological approaches to disease encouraged individuals to internalize disciplinary discourses designed to restore both biological and social order and thereby reduce contagion. He investigates in particular the construction of tuberculosis and neurological disorders, showing how sanatorium treatments and rest cures sought to impose habit-forming behavioural regimens that were believed to literally reshape the biological structure of the body. His study of modernist literary engagement with these discursive regimes focusses on D. H. Lawrence and Virginia Woolf, two authors who will also feature prominently in my argument. Noting that criticism has tended to view Lawrence and Woolf as quintessentially “divergent representatives of British literary modernism,” Gordon finds common ground in their contestation of particular trends in biomedical discourse (9). In his view, both Woolf and Lawrence—who, due to their own illnesses had direct experience with the cultural institutions surrounding neurasthenia and tuberculosis, respectively—challenged the coercive and deterministic strains of biomedical discourse through alternative constructions of physiological structures that
enabled them to model new, more ethically defensible forms of community (8). In particular, both authors resisted the logic of social control and habitual conformity that characterized much of the biomedical discourse surrounding body thresholds.

The narrative methods that my study describes can thus be framed as a form of social activism. I do not seek to revisit the ground covered by Otis and Gordon’s excellent studies of literary engagement with the specific discursive complexes of bioscience. Instead, I invoke their arguments to clarify a key cultural context for modernist authors’ emphasis on the dynamic, unfixed qualities of self-world thresholds. Resisting the conformist impulse of much medical discourse surrounding bodily containment, writers who work to free up the modelling of body thresholds preserve the vital power to imagine embodiment in alternative ways, and to model different forms of communal relationships that do not depend so strictly on individual conformity to social patterns of order. Having here considered some of the motives for their emphasis on dynamic thresholds, I turn in the rest of my study to a more detailed analysis of the means by which modernist writers destabilize the spatial ordering of subject-object relationships. I argue that rare imagery, and the particulate model of matter underlying the rarity-density spectrum more generally, provided modernists with unique tools for provoking readers to look at subject-object relationships in new ways and to question the stable, habitual construction of boundaries that biomedical discourse threatened to normalize.

4. Dissertation Chapter Structure

Chapter 1 introduces rare matter’s contribution to embodied spatial perception through the presence of smoke and fog in modernist literary settings. Expanding on
Steven Connor’s insight that modernist texts can help to counteract our contemporary “amnesia of the air” (“Midair” n.p.), I first examine some of the distinct cultural associations that rare matter acquired around the turn of the nineteenth century. I argue that the emphasis on solidity in modernist object studies compounds the effects of this historical distance, and complicates our ability to fully appreciate the material valences of rare imagery in modernist texts. After investigating the reasons for the current emphasis on solidity, I make a case for extending the focus of modernist object studies to include rare matter. Through close readings of four illustrated books about London, I demonstrate how primary texts not only reward, but also invite and support a hermeneutic approach that highlights the material attributes of rare matter that current methodologies tend to ignore.

To demonstrate the analytical power of the rarity-density spectrum, I analyze the visual and verbal construction of the atmosphere in four illustrated non-fiction books that describe the London fog. My methodology adapts concepts from materialist criticism, reader-response theory and recent discussions of “surface reading” to balance the focus on materiality with a recognition of the mediated character of both textual and visual mimesis. Accordingly, my close readings dwell on the concrete qualities attributed to London’s air, lingering over them to provide a thick, cumulative account of representational patterns. I use the illustrations in the London books to demonstrate gestalt effects that foreground the semi-transparent atmosphere occupying the negative space between buildings. Triggered by a shift in the viewer’s attention, this viewing strategy creates an oscillation between the hermeneutic acts of looking at and looking through the fog, alternately recognizing and eliding the materiality of the urban
atmosphere. Analogous reader-text interactions emphasize the materiality of air and fog in verbal descriptions from the accompanying text, articulating the characters’ sense of immersion in a palpably material atmosphere that presses right up against the thresholds of their bodies. This increased awareness of rare materiality facilitates usefully vague spatial models of the boundaries between subjects and objects in perceptual processes. In the final section of the chapter, I demonstrate how an attention to rare matter’s physical properties can help to refine critical discussions of dynamic threshold spaces where subjects and objects meet and interact.

D. H. Lawrence and Virginia Woolf, the subjects of extended treatment in Chapters 2 and 3 respectively, are the modernists who most consistently employ rare matter to explore the intricacies of self-differentiation and self-diffusion. Although they have often been characterized as radically opposed in their approaches to questions of embodiment and identity, I find striking similarities in their treatment of the spatial dynamics of self-world boundaries. Chapter 2 examines Lawrence’s philosophical motives and narratological methods for constructing varied, often mutually contradictory representations of the self-world boundary. I argue that Lawrence’s essays and early novels harness the properties of rare matter to construct models of dynamic individualism that accommodate characters’ psychological responsiveness to changing interpersonal and ontological pressures. Emphasizing the particulate exchange between the body and its immediate environment, Lawrence adds material detail to the flux model articulated in Walter Pater’s “Conclusion” to *The Renaissance*. Close readings of Lawrence’s essays and early novels illustrate adaptive oscillations between self-differentiation and self-dissolution, as well as dynamic hybrid images that incorporate the two principles
simultaneously. By disrupting generic expectations, Lawrence encourages similarly responsive oscillations in the reader-text relationship. The radically open-ended conclusions to the protagonists’ narratives of self-development in *Sons and Lovers* and *The Rainbow* exercise a reader’s ability to oscillate between active involvement in the story (imagining what will happen next) and interpretive restraint (imagining the protagonists’ development as spontaneous and unpredictable). At the very end of each novel, blurry-edged images suggest an analogy between dynamic self-world thresholds and reading strategies, in which diffusion at the reader-text boundary models active involvement, while differentiation implies interpretive restraint.

Chapter 3 builds on the discussion of self-differentiation and self-dissolution in the context of Woolf’s interest in social interactions and communal identity. Sharing Lawrence’s interest in interpersonal boundary spaces, Woolf examines in greater detail the interactions between individual and collective identities. Looking at permeable self-world boundaries, fluid images of interpersonal space and particulate clusters representing crowd interactions, this chapter examines Woolf’s modelling of community in the context of early-twentieth-century debates about the nature of group behaviour. Through narrative strategies that enable fluent shifts between self-differentiation and social fusion, Woolf advocates de-centred forms of community that allow individuals room to opt in and out of collective activities as they see fit. The concept of *ethical spacing*—the preservation of democratic agency through self-differentiation—links the rarity-density spectrum to existing research on Woolf’s non-coercive narrative strategies; in both fiction and non-fiction, Woolf employs a fluid form of rhetoric that invites critical participation from her readers through shifts in focalization and various forms of
narrative discontinuity. My analysis of the gestalt effects provoked by her deployment of fluid and particulate imagery adds to existing research on her use of narrative gaps, and strengthens the case for interpreting her narrative strategies as active interventions in the political sphere. Like Lawrence, Woolf employs dynamic threshold imagery to advocate a process-oriented ethical approach to both self-world and reader-text relationships.

In the conclusion, I analyze embedded scenes of narration in Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1902) and F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925) to explain in more detail how dynamic threshold imagery conveyed through rare matter can reshape our understanding of reader-text interactions. My close readings connect the interpersonal dynamics of storytelling to the physical breath of the storyteller, demonstrating the value of combining methodologies from narratology and modernist object studies. An understanding of the rarity-density spectrum helps to clarify a variety of modernist narrative strategies (including frame stories and unreliable narration) and to reveal the ethical complexities of the relationships between narrators and auditors and, by extension, texts and readers. When applied to the reader-text relationship, modernist models of dynamic self-world thresholds can encourage ethical reading practices that respond respectfully, yet actively, to the alterity of the text, the author, and the characters. Just as the rarity-density spectrum can helpfully destabilize the self-world boundary, permitting characters to move fluidly between self-diffusion and self-differentiation, rare images of narration can helpfully disrupt established reading habits, creating room for productive oscillations between independent and collaborative reader-text interactions.
Chapter 1. Something in the Air:

Incorporating Rare Materiality into Modernist Studies

1. “The New Element”: Rare Imagery in Transition

   Early in the modernist period, a confluence of technological, environmental and aesthetic developments fostered a pervasive awareness, in the general public, of the materiality of the atmosphere. As I will argue, space that today might be commonly regarded as empty was, at the turn of the twentieth century, more likely to be sensed as palpably full of air, fog, smoke or haze. If the visibility of rare matter has altered over the years, how might we need to adjust our contemporary perceptions to understand the associations accruing around rare matter in modernist texts?

   Nearly a century later, today’s readers may be missing some of the cultural context that would have shaped cultural representations of the atmosphere in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For one thing, most of us take for granted a number of technological developments in the modernist period that would have dramatically shifted public perceptions of the atmosphere: the first flights of modern airplanes, or the first transmission of wireless signals through the air, for example.\(^\text{13}\)

\(^{13}\) Virginia Woolf pairs these two developments in *Orlando*, when the protagonist reaches the present day (specified as October 11, 1928) and marvels at modern technology as she rides an elevator: “In the eighteenth century, we knew how everything was done; but here I rise through the air; I listen to voices in America; I see men flying—but how it’s done, I can’t even begin to wonder. So my belief in magic returns” (220). The precise date of the first public demonstration of wireless telegraphy is a matter of considerable dispute (see Hong 25-51), but the rival claims of Oliver Lodge (1894) and Guglielmo Marconi (1896) only enhanced the public profile of the new technology. Michele Pridmore-Brown neatly captures how wireless technology drew attention to previously ungrasped properties of the air as a transmissive medium: “The wireless represented the technical realization of the science of waves; it rendered audible waves travelling through the air and thus made manifest to the senses an unseen world” (411). For further discussion of interrelationships between radio technology and modernist literature, see: Beer “Wireless”; Connor “Midair”; Lamberti; Connolly.
While no representation allows unmediated access to the attitudes and beliefs of an earlier generation, eyewitness accounts and literary narratives can give us some idea of the kinds of perceptual shifts that were publicly associated with such developments at the time. For instance, Byron R. Newton, one of five newspaper correspondents to witness the Wright Brothers’ dramatic flights at Kitty Hawk in 1908, described in *Aeronautics* magazine how the experience altered his spatial perception of the atmosphere:

> I suppose most of us have dreamed of flying or of seeing others soaring comfortably about above familiar places and have awakened with feelings of regret that it was only a dream. When one first looks up at an aeroplane sailing in mid air, it is like waking from such a dream to find that the vision is a thrilling reality. [...] It awakens new emotions. It brings to one the imperfectly defined consciousness that another world has opened up to us. The thought comes: “Is not this great ocean of air above us to become as useful for our pleasure and our activities as the sea or the land?” We get our first real conception of the new element in which we are to perform our human functions. (226)

As a journalist, Newton has a clear incentive to emphasize the dramatic novelty of the experience, and the first powered airplanes fit conveniently into the narrative construction of modernity as a radical break from the past. Significantly, Newton chooses to describe the functional appropriation of airspace as a shift from fantasy toward a distinctly embodied material reality: the airplane refigures the “ocean of air above us” as a place to “perform our human functions,” a place that has “opened up to us” due to a new potential for moving through it in three dimensions. Seeing the air physically hold up an airplane
seems bound to fortify the sense of the atmosphere’s materiality. By “sailing in mid air,” the plane brings the sky within reach, so that “soaring comfortably about” is no longer an impossible, intangible dream. Despite his emphasis on the airplane’s functional utility, Newton also describes this new consciousness of the air as “imperfectly defined,” still unfamiliar enough to awaken “new emotions,” to inspire the contemplation of unknown possibilities. Formerly the stuff of dreams, the air is recast as a “new element” that has been waiting invisibly above our heads, ripe for literal and imaginative re-exploration.

A little-known short story by Virginia Woolf entitled “Flying over London” (to which I will return later in the chapter) dramatizes the sensory intensity of imaginative aerial exploration. The story describes in vivid detail the sensations experienced by a first-time airplane passenger, though the last lines reveal the flight as a fabrication by the narrator. The descriptions are nevertheless compelling, especially for the spatial dimensions of their atmospheric effects: “It is true that the earth fell, but what was stranger was the downfall of the sky. One was not prepared within a moment of taking off to be immersed in it, alone with it, to be in the thick of it” (167). Even in this imagined reconstruction, the embodied experience of flying entails a sense of immersion that reinforces the perception of air as a tangible material substance—something that noticeably fills up volumetric space, rather than being ignored due to its ubiquity and transparency.

The sense of being physically enveloped in a material atmosphere was likely enhanced by the actual atmospheric conditions in urban centres like London around the

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14 The frame may reflect the fact that Woolf’s aerial exploration was only ever imaginative: she never flew in an airplane herself (Beer “The Island and the Aeroplane” 267).
turn of the century, when both industry and residential heating released unprecedented levels of coal smoke that have since been regulated and controlled. Whereas inventions like powered airplanes would have drawn attention to the air due to their conceptual novelty, air pollution had been a matter of public concern for centuries, and was tied up in complex debates about public health, urbanization, industrialization and natural resource management. Although meteorological records are incomplete, Peter Brimblecombe presents strong evidence for a correlation between the increased prevalence and severity of London’s notoriously thick fogs (which peaked in the 1890s), and the estimated density of atmospheric pollution from residential and industrial smoke (172). Smoke abatement efforts by local and national authorities, along with a series of clean air exhibitions organized by smoke abatement societies and social reformers, raised the public profile of atmospheric pollution in the late nineteenth century, but actual reductions in atmospheric pollutants came slowly. Killer fogs (acute pollution incidents

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15 A number of recent histories of air pollution in Britain (several going back as far as the medieval period) document evidence for shifts in the discursive construction of air quality alongside measurable data about atmospheric conditions (Brimblecombe, Thorsheim, Whitehead, Mosley).

16 For instance, as germ theory gradually discredited the idea that infectious disease was transmitted by miasma (a kind of organically-polluted air), coal smoke went from being perceived as a kind of antiseptic agent which cleaned the air, to being perceived as a “dirty” pollutant, and a health hazard in its own right (Thorsheim 10-18). Henry James’s “Daisy Miller” notably incorporates the miasmatic theory of disease when the protagonist dies from “Roman fever” (a.k.a. malaria) after breathing the “villainous miasma” of the night air in the Colosseum (110-116). Malaria, named after the bad air that was believed to be its cause, was endemic to certain areas of Rome due (as we now know) to the prevalence of mosquitoes that bred in the Pontine marshes, which were not completely drained until the 1930s (Crick 123).

17 London historian Jerry White confirms the peak in the 1890s, observing that “the great fogs so common in Victorian London had become much less frequent from the early 1900s” (London in the Twentieth Century 60).

18 For detailed discussion of smoke abatement efforts in Britain during this period, see Brimblecombe (90-116) and Thorsheim (6-8, 19-40). For discussions of the educational role of clean air exhibitions, see Thorsheim (93-99) and Whitehead (67-93).
that dramatically increased the mortality rate) occurred in 1873, 1880, and 1892, adding urgency to public discourse about London’s atmosphere (Brimblecombe 124). 19

It is with good reason, therefore, that writers like Charles Dickens and John Ruskin included bleak, acrid atmospheres in their descriptions of Victorian urban landscapes. At the beginning of Dickens’s *Bleak House*, a thick fog permeates every part of the landscape, from the “green aits and meadows” to the railyards, wharfs, and “waterside pollutions of a great (and dirty) city” (13). Acrid, damp, and cold, the smoky atmosphere envelops and penetrates the body as well:

Fog in the eyes and throats of ancient Greenwich pensioners, wheezing by the firesides of their wards; fog in the stem and bowl of the afternoon pipe of the wrathful skipper, down in his close cabin; fog cruelly pinching the toes and fingers of shivering little ‘prentice boy on deck. Chance people on the bridges peeping over the parapets into a nether sky of fog, with fog all round them, as if they were up in a balloon, and hanging in the misty clouds. (13)

In this passage, Londoners’ physiological susceptibility to penetration by the unhealthy atmosphere is matched by a sense of spatial immersion and suspension similar to Woolf’s portrayal of airplane flight. Experienced at ground level, the immersive, opaque

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19 Such acute pollution incidents result from a confluence of natural and manmade conditions, and do not correlate directly with average pollution levels, as attested by recurrences of “killer fog” in 1948 and 1952, long after the peak of smoke and fog levels in London. The “Great Smog” of 1952 was by far the most deadly, causing an estimated 4000 excess deaths, compared to estimates ranging from 270 to 1000 for other acute pollution incidents (Brimblecombe 124). A thick, choking fog darkened the streets between December 4-8, 1952, disrupting the transportation system and dramatically increasing the mortality rate from respiratory illness (ibid. 165-68). The crisis finally spurred public demand for comprehensive regulation—the 1956 Clean Air Act was the first to successfully regulate domestic fuel burning as well as industrial sources of air pollution. By 1987, smoke levels in London had been reduced by 80 percent from 1952 levels (ibid. 165-172).
atmosphere seems “close” and somewhat claustrophobic, though the balloon reference implies that the “nether sky of fog” is still potentially a place of mystery and adventure.

Apart from providing dramatic settings for Victorian fiction, the urban atmosphere was also incorporated into the apocalyptic discourse surrounding the turn of the century. The more nightmarish qualities of the fog are closely associated with the last decades of the Victorian era in Ruskin’s “The Storm Cloud of the Nineteenth Century,” a public lecture delivered at the London Institution in 1884. The lecture, which begins in a measured scientific tone by defining attributes of clouds and mists, shifts into an apocalyptic register to describe the “plague-cloud” that Ruskin claims is “peculiar to our own times,” having first appeared in his meticulous weather observations around 1871.\footnote{Thorsheim points out that Ruskin’s lectures were delivered only one year after the eruption of the volcano Krakatoa in 1883 (56); volcanic ash was thrown high into the atmosphere, and produced dramatically coloured sunsets around the globe for several months following the eruption. While Ruskin recorded the “plague-cloud” phenomenon more than a decade earlier, the recent global experience of the eruption probably enhanced the dramatic appeal of his lecture.} This “thin, scraggy, filthy, mangy, miserable cloud” (41-42) is associated in his mind with both physical and moral pollution: while it may be caused by the “poisonous smoke” coming out of “at least two hundred furnace chimneys” nearby, it “looks more [...] as if were made of dead men’s souls” (33). Ruskin’s doom-filled rhetoric suggests that the polluted condition of the atmosphere is a fit punishment for humanity’s defilement of nature: “By the plague-wind every breath of air you draw is polluted, half round the world; in a London fog the air itself is pure, though you choose to mix up dirt with it, and choke yourself with your own nastiness” (42). The lecture concludes ominously with the observation that “the Empire of England, on which formerly the sun never set, has
become one on which he never rises” (44). The hyperbolic, almost hysterical gloom of the lecture, combined with its earnest moral message, leaves it ripe for parody.

It is thus with a healthy dose of irony that Virginia Woolf structures her satire of literary periodization in Orlando (1928) around meteorological imagery. The registers of change, in Orlando's fantastic journey through more than three and a half centuries, are not only personal, literary, and cultural, but also ecological. As midnight strikes at the dawn of the nineteenth century, a “turbulent welter of cloud” rolls into London (165). The damp atmosphere hyperbolically infiltrates every aspect of Victorian culture: it provokes facial hair and muffled furniture, leads to purple prose, and prompts Orlando to marry, as the sexes pair off into “indissolubly linked” couples in a “desperate effort to snuggle their feelings into some sort of warmth” (167, 170-76, 196). A century later, Orlando observes that ending of the Victorian era brings yet another sudden climactic shift: “The sky itself, she could not help thinking, had changed. It was no longer so thick, so watery, so prismatic now that King Edward [...] had succeeded Queen Victoria. The clouds had shrunk to a thin gauze; the sky seemed made of metal [...] There was something definite and distinct about the age” (217-18). Expressed through a change in atmospheric humidity, the onset of the modernist period is accompanied by an emphasis on metallic imagery and clean, definite contours typical of avant-garde movements like Futurism and Imagist poetry. The parody depends on familiar stereotypes that have long shaped modernist studies: the radical break with Victorian traditions, the incorporation of technological imagery, and the dichotomization of “hard” and “soft” modes of aesthetic expression. Of course, Woolf is simplifying for the sake of parody. As I will demonstrate, rare images in modernist texts do not function simply as caricatures of Victorian
traditions, nor do they always mark a historical rupture with the culture of the previous century. In the texts I will consider in this chapter, the sense of three-dimensional immersion in palpably material atmospheres remains, but rare matter no longer carries the heavy moral symbolism often attributed to it in Victorian writing. As modernist writers grapple with their own questions about subjectivity, objectivity, embodied experience, and social relations, they draw attention to the atmosphere for their own purposes, though their perceptions are no doubt influenced by both the literal atmospheric conditions and the public discourses that shaped the broader cultural meaning of the air in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

2. Extending Modernist Object Studies Across the Rarity-Density Spectrum

Recent scholarship about materiality in modernist literature provides an obvious starting point for developing appropriate methodologies to analyze rare imagery. However, this emerging sub-field has so far focussed largely on matter in its solid state. The prominence of Virginia Woolf’s short story “Solid Objects” as a touchstone illustration in two groundbreaking studies—Bill Brown’s “The Secret Life of Things: Virginia Woolf and the Matter of Modernism” (1999) and Douglas Mao’s *Solid Objects: Modernism and the Test of Production* (1998)—attests to the importance of solidity as a key trope in modernist object studies. Materialist scholarship influenced by a neo-Marxist focus on socio-economic systems seems to address solid objects more readily than rare ones. I would like to suggest that this marked emphasis on dense matter stems primarily from two related habits: the tendency to conflate rare matter with immateriality or abstraction by ignoring its physical properties, and the tendency to discuss commodification using discrete, solid chunks of matter. To enable an expansion of the
field of study to encompass a greater variety of material forms, I adapt strategies from existing materialist criticism to better confront the complications introduced by rare matter.

In “The Secret Life of Things,” Brown describes an emerging critical movement toward “a new materialism” that breaks from its roots in dialectical materialism, and investigates instead “how literature itself works to imagine materiality; how it renders a life of things that is tangential to our narratives of modern production, distribution, and consumption” (5). Despite his interest in glimpsing the “sensuous, aesthetic, [and] semiotic” properties undervalued by our habitual constructions of objects as commodities, Brown’s analysis retains a neo-Marxist vocabulary that shapes his analytical perspective. Like Daniel Punday, Brown uses materiality (and later introduces the term thingness) to name that which exceeds the reification of culturally-defined objects. One might think that this focus on revealing material properties “tangential” to established cultural narratives would work against the relegation of rare matter to the symbolic role of insubstantial substance. However, Brown paradoxically reinforces the discursive erasure of rare materiality by limiting his discussion to matter in its solid state.

Elaborating on the practice of new materialism, Brown ascribes solidity to “the matter of modernism” when he draws on Woolf’s “Solid Objects” to illustrate the distinction between “thingness” and “objecthood.” 21 The story describes a collector who picks up fragments of glass, metal and ceramic, and arranges them on his mantel based on physical properties that have little to do with their original functions. Attributing the fetishistic

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21 Although he describes Woolf’s “Solid Objects” as “a story not about solidity, but about the fluidity of objects,” Brown is really concerned only with the fluidity of meaning that characterizes solid objects: “how they decompose and recompose themselves as the object of a new fascination” (3).
appeal of the fragments to the wartime scarcity of commonplace materials like iron and glass, Brown uses the protagonist’s behaviour as a model for a kind of defamiliarization that foregrounds materiality by disrupting the established cultural significance of familiar objects.

Since cultural preconditioning inevitably shapes our perceptions of the objects around us, Brown proposes that “thingness” can only be revealed momentarily as a form of “misuse value” consisting of the properties that “become legible, audible, palpable” as a result of a shift in functional context (3). Paraphrasing Adorno, he explains that “the passage into materialism […] requires acknowledging ‘things’ outside the subject/object trajectory” (2). Accordingly, Brown associates “things” with materiality, and “objects” with phenomenal identities and cultural significance as well as materiality. His initial description of the method required to get at “thingness” could apply to any form of matter:

The sort of objectification that takes place during those operations that produce use value, sign values, cultural capital will never produce a thing. Producing a thing—effecting thingness—depends, instead, on a fetishistic overvaluation or misappropriation, on an irregular if not unreasonable reobjectification of the object that dislodges it from the circuits through which it is what it typically is. (2-3)

Maintaining his focus on solid objects, Brown proceeds to illustrate this method by describing the renewed attention to the properties of a knife when it is repurposed to serve as a screwdriver. Using a kitchen implement to turn a screw ruptures its habitual associations and foregrounds its unique material qualities, “its thinness . . . its sharpness
and flatness . . . the peculiarity of its scalloped handle, slightly loose” (3). Such moments of defamiliarization cannot permanently separate a “thing” from its culturally-constructed identity; instead, they temporarily highlight properties that are usually taken for granted, providing an opportunity to reflect upon the norms surrounding a culturally-embedded object. My project seeks to do something similar with rare matter: to draw attention to the material properties that tend to get overlooked when a rare existent is automatically associated with immateriality.

To draw attention to material properties of rare existents, I propose a variation on Brown’s method for “effecting thingness” (2). While Brown’s examples all involve solid objects, his line of inquiry could just as easily foster a sensuous apprehension of the atmosphere: “What happens when we deauraticize the object […] and begin again […] with some sense of the curious thingness of those objects we incessantly if unconsciously touch, the objects we see without ever looking? What if we looked?” (2). The atmosphere’s capacity to disperse and permeate space poses a distinct challenge to “the object” with its Benjaminian aura of particularity. Furthermore, air is perhaps the most ubiquitous example of something “we incessantly if unconsciously touch” and “see without ever looking.” For instance, in the descriptions of London’s fog that I discuss later in this chapter, the liminal moment when material attributes previously taken for granted “become legible, audible, palpable” (Brown 2) is the narrative transition of rare matter from negative space to sensuous foreground. It is to pursue this “misuse value” that my interpretations insist upon the material attributes of rare existents, in a “reobjectification” that acknowledges their embeddedness within circuits of textual
meaning-making, but temporarily brackets off the familiar symbolic roles that habitually define them.

In this sense, my methodology aligns with recent reactions against the dominance of symptomatic reading practices in contemporary criticism. In her groundbreaking study of Victorian female friendships, Sharon Marcus proposes the term “just reading” to describe her resistance to the idea that “the true meaning of the text must lie in what it does not say” (74). Instead of aiming to “plumb hidden depths,” Marcus seeks to “account more fully for what texts present on their surface but critics have failed to notice” (75). In a special issue of Representations dedicated to exploring “alternatives to symptomatic reading,” Marcus and Stephen Best describe these emerging methodologies as variations on what they call “surface reading” (3). They explain: “A surface is what insists on being looked at rather than what we must train ourselves to see through” (9).

A heavy focus on symbolic meaning, for instance, may devalue and actually conceal the more literal meanings of an image or description.

As Marcus admits, “just reading” still depends to some extent on the surface/depth model; instead of focussing on what has been excluded from primary texts, it calls attention to details that are “given” in a primary text but have been bypassed by critical analysis (76).

Since the term “surface” applies more readily to solids and liquids, I avoid the surface/depth analogy and concentrate on the more flexible visual metaphor of looking at versus looking through. Marcus and Best point out that this metaphor has been previously applied by de Grazia and Stallybrass to express how the manifestations of a text on the page (such as the “old typefaces and spellings, irregular line and scene divisions, title pages and other paratextual matter” in Shakespeare’s First Folio and early quartos) tend to be ignored or even perceived as a barrier in the pursuit of more abstract forms of symbolic interpretation (de Grazia and Stallybrass 257; see also Battershill). The symbolic appropriation of rare matter to represent immateriality works in a similar way, but the semi-transparency of rare suspensions makes the process of looking at or looking through even more intuitive in the case of rare existents.

Suggesting that “surface reading,” in seeking to reveal what has been missed by symptomatic reading, cannot finally escape the surface/depth paradigm, Cannon Schmitt uses the term “literal reading” to describe “a kind of reading that, without setting itself resolutely against the metaphorical, nonetheless attempts a more sustained consideration of the literal and the obvious than is usually undertaken” (n.p.).
Because of their ubiquity and conventional symbolic functions, they can easily remain “hidden in plain sight” unless we consciously adopt hermeneutic practices that pay attention to their material properties. To do so, we must first identify how and why existing criticism in the field of object studies either defines its scope in ways that exclude rare matter or treats rare images primarily as symbols of immateriality.

An excellent test case is Douglas Mao’s *Solid Objects: Modernism and the Test of Production* (1998), an influential materialist study of modernism that strongly associates materiality with solidity. Mao combines a neo-Marxist focus on matter’s ideological functions in the socio-economic system with a historicist interest in the specific terms of modernists’ engagement with the object world. His title, alluding to the same Woolf story that Brown discusses in “The Secret Life of Things,” clearly identifies solidity with modernist writing about objects. Mao draws on an allusion to Walter Pater’s *Renaissance* in Woolf’s story to illustrate a “metaphorical turn to production” among modernist writers who seek to “reverse aestheticism’s tropes so as to emphasize making instead of absorbing, recording instead of experiencing, the enduring instead of the ephemeral, and the solid instead of the fluid” (19). Pater’s earlier exhortation “to burn always with this hard, gemlike flame” (60) is transformed in Woolf’s story into a criterion for the protagonist’s collection of any object “more or less round, perhaps with a dying flame deep sunk in its mass” (“Solid Objects” 98). The fact that Pater’s flame re-appears in Woolf’s story “imprisoned […] in this gemlike thing” reflects, for Mao, a broader shift from an aestheticist focus on the ephemeral and fluid to a modernist emphasis on the enduring and solid (36). Mao continues to conflate the symbolic and material attributes of rare matter when he contextualizes his emphasis on solidity with a discussion of T. E.
Hulme’s “rejection of the turn toward intuition and fluidity in art inspired by Henri Bergson” (15). Thus, fluidity (one of the most obvious attributes of rare matter) becomes symbolic of a much broader cultural discourse, and is excluded from the scope of Mao’s argument based on the historicist claim that its cultural salience is reduced with the move from aestheticism to modernism.

By employing fluidity primarily for its symbolism, Mao fails to extend to rare materials the capacity for autonomy he is so careful to recognize in solid objects.25 Arguing that “imaginative writing in English has always included representations of solid objects” but that “the high modernists introduced into their writings a self-conscious contemplation of the object qua object” (13), Mao defines the resistance to symbolic appropriation as a signal feature of modernist approaches to matter. He suggests that writers like Woolf, Joyce, Stevens, Williams, Freud, and H. D. all participate in “one of modernism’s defining passages, from an older tradition in which the object appears principally as a signifier of something else or a component of scenic plenitude to a newer order in which its value depends neither on metaphoricity nor on marginality” (13).

Linking this autonomy to modernist concerns about the alterity of the object world, Mao argues that twentieth-century writers show a particular “feeling of regard for the physical object as object—as not-self, as not-subject […] as solidity, as otherness in its most resilient capacity” (4). While I agree that modernists often pointedly emphasize the radical alterity of material objects, modernists’ awareness of such physical “otherness” is

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25 Rare matter’s fluidity similarly defines its abstract role as a signifier of social relations in the Communist Manifesto’s quotable formula “all that is solid melts into air”: here the chemical process of sublimation stands in for the erosion of “fixed, fast-frozen” feudal relationships under the bourgeoisie’s “constant revolutionising of production” (Marx and Engels 6). See also Marshall Berman’s many references to modernity’s “atmosphere” or “climate” of social change in All That is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity (15-21, 87-98).
not limited to matter in its solid state. If modernist discourse no longer confines the object world to a principally symbolic role, why should the materiality of rare matter be so consistently subordinated to its symbolism? Is it possible for a thick mist or a column of smoke to play the role of “not-subject” just as well as a solid object? Mao bases his argument on solid objects with discrete, identifiable shapes and identities, and addresses the more amorphous physicality of rare matter only to associate it with an earlier literary period.

As I will argue, rare matter’s amorphous shape and capacity for permeation add complexities to subject-object relations that are obscured by an exclusive focus on solid objects. For example, rare matter’s formless mobility makes it harder to commodify. As Connor points out, Marcel Duchamp’s *Air de Paris*, a 1919 readymade consisting of an emptied chemist’s bottle, plays on the assumption that an air-filled container is empty of marketable matter: “the gesture of emptying out the original contents of the flask substitutes nothingness for the original commodity on sale in the pharmacist’s shop” (“Next to Nothing” n.p.). The new content of the bottle, the eponymous Paris Air, ironizes the process of commodification precisely because air is rarely bought and sold. The atmospheric system is complex and unpredictable enough that the global economic system has so far made few formal attempts to regulate its distribution.\(^{26}\) This tendency to elude commodification, to drift outside the cycles of production and consumption, makes

\(^{26}\) For instance, once rain falls to the ground it is fair game, but when Andean farmers put up nets to capture irrigation water from clouds, they do not pay for the weather they “mine” (Organization of American States sec. 1.3). The commodification of natural gas is an exception that proves the rule. Unlike most gases, natural gas is imprisoned in pockets underground. It is therefore easier to locate with respect to terrestrial boundaries, and more amenable to existing systems for regulating mining rights. In contrast, air pollution has proven difficult to regulate precisely because it circulates across borders and jurisdictions, and permeates unpredictably through an atmospheric system that is treated as common resource rather than a privately-owned commodity.
rare matter less useful than solid objects as a rhetorical contrast to the mass-produced commodity. Thus, the exclusion of fluidity from the realm of (solid) objects may at times be a matter of rhetorical convenience. For instance, Mao’s focus on solid objects facilitates his argument that modernist cultural theorists like Adorno, Benjamin and Baudrillard insist on the particularity of individual objects as a counter-pressure to mass-production (6-7, 21-22). Mao draws parallels between this concern with the “imperiled particular” and modernist writers’ anxiety about artistic production (6-7, 21-22). For instance, he suggests that Benjamin speaks to “the (or a) modernist vision of the predicament of the object, a vision of the modern age as one in which the particular, the concrete, and the auratic were threatened as never before by habits of generalization and abstraction serving a newly triumphant science” (6-7). In this vision, it is the discreteness of the object, its individuality, that must be defended from the effects of symbolic systemization. Because this discourse of the “imperiled particular” depends heavily on the discreteness of individual objects, it is difficult to extend this defence of the object world’s autonomy and alterity to forms of matter that do not have a definite name and shape.

This is precisely where the differences between solid and rare existents come into play. Take a cloud, for instance. Its outline is variable; it may seep away gradually as the sun burns it off, or change shape so that it becomes indistinguishable from the surrounding cloud bank. As John Ruskin points out in an exhaustive chapter on “The Truth of Clouds” in *Modern Painters* (1843), the visible outlines of a cloud are defined by local temperature differences, so that vapour particles may be blown from one cloud, disappear from view, and reappear as part of another cloud when they again cross the
condensation threshold (302). As temperature zones change, a cloud may be separated into smaller parts without retaining the fragmentary shape that links a piece of solid matter to its origin. This shiftiness makes rare matter difficult to separate into “particular” objects. As a result, the neo-Marxist strain of materialist criticism, locating political saliency in the operations of the capitalist commodity system, tends to use solid objects to address materiality.

Brown and Mao’s pioneering work on solid objects has played a crucial role in debunking the stereotype that modernist writing (especially in prose) dwells on subjective interiority to the point of excluding any consideration of the physical world. However, as the trend toward “new materialism” progresses, scholars are showing an increasing interest in expanding the scope of modernist object studies. The varied approaches to modernist materiality presented at the 2009 Modernist Studies Association seminar “What the Roast Beef Said: Object Lessons of Modernism” attest to both the vitality of this thriving subfield, and the need to diversify its material focus. While several of these short discussion papers employ the vocabulary of neo-Marxist discourse or Brown’s “thing theory,” many aim to reclaim and historicize forms of materiality that seem to have been excluded by existing materialist methodologies.

I join these scholars in seeking to broaden the focus of modernist object studies, so that it may encompass other

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27 “The Truth of Clouds” resembles in tone the initial descriptive portions of “The Storm Cloud of the Nineteenth Century,” but employs none of the apocalyptic rhetoric that characterizes the later work.

28 For instance, Matthew Strohack considers how muck and scum disrupt the clean contours of river stones to produce “bio-horror” in William Carlos Williams’s *Patterson* (4). Elizabeth Anderson looks at how domestic scraps (beeswax and shredded paper used in a children’s art project) occupy “an interstice of cultural production” and accumulate private meanings in the course of domestic sacred rituals (1, 3). Margaret Konkol examines modernist poets’ engagement with the “curious textures and solidities” of newly invented synthetic plastics. Tim Newcomb examines conglomerate (or “particulate”) forms of matter such as asphalt in American “cityscape” poems of the early twentieth century (4-10).
forms of matter that were equally central to modernist writers’ representations of embodied experience, perceptual processes, and subject-object relations.

3. “Let the Science be as Vague as its Subject”: Rare Matter in Studies of Modernist Vagueness

Two studies of vagueness in writing from the modernist period begin to suggest the potential theoretical contributions that an increased focus on rare materiality might generate. Jesse Matz and Megan Quigley have recently drawn attention to the importance of vagueness in impressionist and modernist writing respectively. Both scholars highlight rare matter’s symbolic potential in literary treatments of epistemological questions about the nature of perception. In general, they both tend to emphasize rare matter’s discursive function rather than its materiality, but at certain moments the two levels come together and demonstrate the fruitfulness of an approach that calls attention to rare matter’s physical properties. In such scenes, amorphous, cloud-like imagery embodies vagueness in a *concrete* form that cannot be mistaken for immateriality; such images partake of the object world’s autonomy, and therefore cannot be reduced to an exclusively symbolic role.

In “Modern Novels and Vagueness” (2008), Quigley identifies a “simultaneous turn toward vagueness in philosophy and fiction” during the modernist period. She draws attention to a public debate in which the vagueness of language is, on the one hand, lamented as an imperfection, and on the other, regarded as a strength. Bertrand Russell represents the former view in “The Philosophy of Logical Atomism” (1918) when he

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29 Many of the writers that Matz labels as literary impressionists have traditionally been included in the modernist canon: Marcel Proust, Joseph Conrad, Ford Madox Ford, Henry James, and Virginia Woolf.
claims that “the process of sound philosophizing, to my mind, consists mainly in passing from those obvious, vague, ambiguous things, that we feel quite sure of, to something precise, clear, definite” (qtd. in Quigley 107). In contrast, proponents of embracing the value of blurry thinking include William James, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Frank P. Ramsey (ibid. 107). Charles Sanders Peirce, a friend of both James brothers, warns against the “fallacy of over-precision” in scientific methodology (ibid.). Going further, William James’s *The Principles of Psychology* urges, “Let the science be as vague as its subject,” in keeping with Ramsey’s insistence that there is a serious philosophical danger in “treating what is vague as if it were precise and trying to fit it into an exact logical category” (qtd. in Quigley 108-09).

In Quigley’s view, writers like Henry James and Virginia Woolf treat vagueness not as an epistemic defect in knowledge, but as a semantic effect of real indeterminacy, as something to be captured in language through innovative writing (110, 113-18). For instance, in the 1937 BBC broadcast “Craftsmanship,” Woolf compares writing to moth collecting, and suggests that when words are pinned down to one meaning, they die like pinned moths (Quigley 117). She thereby stands up for the useful vagueness of literary language. But whereas Woolf deliberately embodies this vagueness in the concrete rare image of a moth fluttering in the air, Quigley seems more interested in the image’s abstract significance.

In seeking to correct a bias in the longstanding hard-soft dichotomy in modernist studies, Quigley indirectly reinforces its terms. She claims that the “turn towards vagueness […] has been crucially overlooked” due to modernist criticism’s overemphasis on “classicism and objectivity” (123). Seeking to redress the balance, she presents her
evidence as a challenge to the “portrayal of modern writing as hard and direct” (123). However, Quigley’s contextual introduction couples “hard” images with “concrete” and “firmly delineated” language, implicitly aligning non-solid matter with linguistic abstraction as well as vagueness (101). In her close reading of Night and Day, she mistakes concrete images of rare matter for signs of immateriality. She contrasts the “vagulous phosphorescence” of old Mrs. Hilbery with “Sir Harry’s physicality” to emphasize the older woman’s “indefiniteness” (118). But the physicality of Woolf’s phosphorescence is underlined in a passage that Quigley quotes two pages later, when Ralph Denham draws a blurry symbol to describe his view of perception:

> It represented by its circumference of smudges surrounding a central blot all that encircling glow which for him surrounded, inexplicably, so many objects of life, softening their sharp outlines, so that he could see certain streets, books, and situations wearing a halo almost perceptible to the physical eye. (Woolf, ND 519)

Quigley insightfully connects Ralph’s drawing with the “luminous halo” and “semi-transparent envelope” that figure “life” in Woolf’s well-known essay “Modern Fiction” (160). However, when she suggests that these images seek to convey “ontological vagueness,” Quigley understates their deliberate concreteness—they are “luminous,” “semi-transparent,” and, like many gases physically present in the atmosphere, “almost perceptible to the physical eye.”

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30 For a more detailed discussion of both passages in relation to Woolf’s representation of self-world thresholds, see Chapter 3, pp. 161, 177-78.
The ambiguity of the word “almost” in that last phrase brings up the problem of perceptual modeling. Is the halo “almost perceptible” because of its transparency, or because (on the linguistic level) it does not quite coalesce into a concrete image, retaining a figurative quality that (just barely) separates it from the physical plane that produces sensory stimuli? In Literary Impressionism and Modernist Aesthetics (2001), Jesse Matz suggests that this ambiguous hovering of words between the abstract and the concrete is characteristic of literary impressionists’ attempts to “reproduce the inchoate feelings that Impressionism locates between sensing and thinking” (65). Matz’s analysis fuses a neo-Marxist focus on social and ontological alterity to a model of perceptual processing in which the impression, a literary trope characterized by its vague and shifting meaning, mediates between concrete sensation and abstract intellect. In his view, authors productively employ the vagueness of the word “impression” to explore the ambiguities surrounding the mind’s interaction with the physical and social environment.

Characterized by “oxymoronics” (61) and “indeterminacy” (54), the impression functions like “a third term” that disrupts the binary opposition of “intellect and sense” (61), or “like a bridge [that] both unifies and divides sensations and ideas, thinking and feeling” (22). The emphasis is slightly different for each writer: the impression mediates “sensations and ideas” for Pater, “contingency and [creative] freedom” for James, “sensation and perception” for Conrad, and “experience and essence” for Woolf (30-32). It is, in other words, a sliding label for these authors’ variable characterizations of the relationships between the mind, the body, and the outside world. As such, it has important affinities with rare matter in its role as a sensory medium.
Matz, like Mao, tends to subordinate rare materiality due to his neo-Marxist priorities. His argument aligns the perceptual division of sense and intellect (T. S. Eliot’s “dissociation of sensibility”) with the polarized class distinctions that result from capitalism’s division of labour. He explains, “a key feature of Marxist subversion is the assertion, against the rule of alienated rationality, of a vital and vigorous sensorium, toward the reintegration that would by analogy forever discredit social hierarchy” (133). Crucial to his argument is the dubious premise that impressionist writers nearly always allegorize perception using social types, casting themselves as artists or intellectual characters who rely on relationships with women or lower class characters to supplement their access to sensuous, concrete experience (40-41). In cases of successful “impressionist collaboration,” these marginalized characters provide the artists with a “material supplement” (180) that can be kept at arm’s length so as not to overwhelm the intellectual faculties.

The perceived need to defend modernism’s socio-political use value can lead to a narrow hermeneutic focus on gender and class hierarchies that tends to exacerbate the exclusion of rare matter from materialist arguments. Matz uses the vagueness of the impression to complicate binaries like sense-intellect, body-mind, and sensation-

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31 While it seems plausible that writers want to balance perceptual openness with observational distance, it is hard to see why this balance must necessarily be figured through “the relationship between people […] whose different social backgrounds put them into agonistic combination” (33). In pursuing what he calls the “social analogy,” Matz is concerned to frame modernist representations of perceptual processes as the kind of socially-relevant political intervention valued by feminist and neo-Marxist criticism. In keeping with dialectical models of social change, Matz’s impression can mediate the various dualisms involved in perception, but it invariably fails to overcome them entirely. Playing into the myth of modernism’s elitist apolitical aesthetic, Matz suggests that modernists’ models of the impression’s perceptual functions are “inhibited by their associations with threatening social changes” (35), leading writers to seek “both the impression’s inspiring mediation and some safer division of perceptual categories” (9). The social analogy, then, provides only a limited critique of the stereotype that associates modernist writing with social elitism and hyper-intellectual abstraction.
cognition, but he still depends heavily on power differentials between such cultural categories as male-female and highbrow-lowbrow. The explanatory power of his usefully vague impression rests on an oscillation between binary oppositions and more ambiguous mediations. As a result, he adopts two contrasting approaches to rare existents. Where the binary framework of the social analogy is dominant, rare matter tends to be employed as a symbol for immateriality, and associated with the marginalized “frailness” of the subordinate, sensuous collaborator. On the other hand, when Matz recognizes a successful mediation (i.e. when the dualisms of the social analogy begin to break down) the analysis accords to rare existents a more robust sense of materiality.

Matz’s description of the exquisitely faint impression in Henry James’s novels associates rare matter with a specifically feminine sensibility. Young women like Maisie Farange or Isabel Archer, whose “apophatic” sensitivity to impressions results from an imaginative ability to compensate for their limited worldly experience, occupy the role of the sensuous collaborator in Matz’s social analogy (81, 86). Matz alludes to the spider-web image from “The Art of Fiction,” which I discuss in the Introduction, to characterize the Jamesian “woman of genius” as particularly gifted with the power of the active imagination that “takes to itself the faintest hints of life” and “converts the very pulses of the air into revelations” (“The Art of Fiction” 388, qtd. in Matz 92). The exemplary faintness of these impressions depends on Matz’s association of rare matter with immateriality. As I have argued, James’s spider-web image harnesses the dual role of rare matter as immersive substance and transmissive sensory medium to complicate his modelling of perceptual processes. Matz’s argument, rather than using the material properties of James’s rare imagery to interrogate the role of mind-body dualism in
perception, instead adopts the common tendency to equate rare matter with immateriality, in pursuit of a broader point about faintness:

But here, in these splendid images, a problem emerges: when “web” meets “particle,” art traps life; or, to alter the metaphor, impressions fade to too exquisite faintness. [...] Impressions, as “hints” and “pulses,” are important now for their slightness, which better proves the power of genius to convert them into revelations. The exaltation of the imagination of genius demands that impressions diminish. (91-92)

Just as Quigley uses Woolf’s image of phosphorescence to emphasize old Mrs. Hilbery’s immateriality, Matz ultimately employs rare images to signify the diminished, “exquisite faintness” of the impression in James’s fiction. Again, rare matter signifies that which hovers on the edge of physicality, like “a halo almost perceptible to the physical eye” (Woolf, ND 519, qtd. in Quigley 121).

In his analysis of Virginia Woolf, Matz again equates rarity with immateriality, despite suggestive similarities between the mediating function of the impression and rare matter’s role as a sensory medium that disrupts subject-object binaries. Interpreting Woolf’s texts through the lens of his “social analogy,” Matz uses the paradoxical logic of “standpoint feminism” to parlay the feminine “genius” for faintness into a perceptual advantage (81-85). While the marginality of a sensuous collaborator like Mrs. Brown is in social terms a liability, a female narrator (the intellectual collaborator) may harness this marginal “standpoint” to deconstruct and undermine gendered power structures (Matz 196-201). To support this view, Matz presents Woolf’s career as a teleological progression in which representations of impressionist collaboration become increasingly
optimistic and successful as they leave behind inanimate forms of material supplement and take on more overtly feminist stakes. The progression begins with “The Mark on the Wall,” and charts a series of confrontations between the self and otherness, leading up to a momentarily successful instance of perceptual collaboration in Woolf’s “Character in Fiction” (1924).

By insisting that the role of the sensuous, concrete collaborator can only be effectively filled by a human character, Matz’s social focus downplays the inanimate form of alterity embodied in rare existents, overlooking their suggestive affinity with the impression’s mediatory role in perception. According to his interpretation, the non-human objects that provide the material supplement in early writings like “The Mark on the Wall” (1917) and “The Death of the Moth” (1917) prove inadequate to the task of underwriting the synthesis of perceptual categories. In Matz’s view, Woolf’s narrator struggles to render “The Mark on the Wall” as simultaneously material and meaningful, but her effort to transcend habitual perceptual divisions “depends upon a kind of trick of otherness: it is only because the ‘mark’ is so alien—so minimal, so meaningless—that investigation of it can enable her to bracket off conventional experiences and conventional ideas” (186). It is the slightness of the foreign object, its near-nothingness, that enables the narrator to safely (if only temporarily) harness it as a material supplement. He identifies the same effect in “The Death of the Moth”:

The moth is such a little bit of life that it is “little or nothing but life,” and “because he was so small, and so simple a form of the energy that was rolling in at the open window,” it condenses that energy to its essence.

[...] If you need to pare life down to the size of a moth in order to see its
“true nature,” then you jeopardize that very life in the process. The moth in this sense is not unlike the femininity James admires for its “frailness”: both get their powers to transmit life into art from a weakness that is in real terms a liability. (188)

In “An Unwritten Novel,” the moth reappears as a symbol of perceptual synthesis (“life itself”), but this time its delicacy is reinforced by its suspension in a rare medium. Of “this moth that hangs in the evening air over the yellow flower” (111), Matz argues, “the same fragility obtains” (191). Thus, Matz repeatedly aligns images of tiny insects fluttering in the air with frailty, faintness, and weakness, as if rare existents were indeed, in Connor’s terms, “next to nothing, not quite there” (“Inebriate of Air” 4).

In contrast to this general trend in Matz’s writing, I argue that rare existents are neither minimal nor meaningless, and their rarity is neither a marker of immateriality nor a sign of weakness. The rare object “supplements” perception not as a failed collaborator, but precisely as that which interrogates the ontological divisions in perception. In these early examples, Matz positions rare matter as the “material supplement” at the marginalized, exploitable pole of the intellect/sensation binary. Later, when Woolf’s rare imagery appears in the context of successful perceptual mediation, its concrete amorphous qualities make it resemble instead the mediating impression—the vaguely defined “third term” that complicates the hierarchical reading by making the two poles of the binary seem less distinct. For instance, in “Character in Fiction,” Woolf’s narrator determines that the key to rendering Mrs. Brown is “to steep oneself in her atmosphere” (425). The ensuing description draws on rare matter for both its concrete and its abstract meanings: “The impression she made was overwhelming. It came pouring out like a
draught, like a smell of burning” (425). In response to these intense images, Matz ceases to conflate rarity with immateriality, and briefly acknowledges air in its complex materiality:

Like a draught of air, the impression is an atmosphere the two women share—Mrs. Brown’s pain felt as Mrs. Woolf’s “pity.” Like a “smell,” it is an effect produced in the perception of it, but yet with a source—the word ‘smell’ imitating the grammatical ambiguity whereby the impression is at once process and object. (198)

Here, Matz pauses to examine the material qualities that give rare matter its symbolic potential. This short passage reveals several of the rare properties that inform my own close readings: the atmosphere is represented as an immersive, intersubjective medium that carries particulate traces of a “source” object across bodily thresholds and into the subject’s olfactory organs. Elsewhere in Matz’s analysis, the socio-political priorities that drive the social analogy take precedence, and the analogies between rare matter and the mediating impression remain unexplored.

While Quigley and Matz’s nuanced interpretations demonstrate the figurative power of rare matter for articulating useful vagueness, both scholars unnecessarily emphasize its association with immateriality. A more robust sense of the air’s physical, material presence in literary settings is needed to balance this connotative sense of immateriality. Rare matter, though it may be light, transparent, and difficult to sense, is nevertheless a substance; as an existent, a component of the object world in a literary setting, it exists, takes up space, and interacts with other objects. When it is not standing in as a metaphorical vehicle for an abstract concept, it is often a thing: substantial, not
“almost there.” To disrupt the pattern of binary oppositions that connects solidity with robust materiality and rarity with frailty and near-nothingness, I adopt the rarity-density spectrum as a useful alternative to the hard-soft dichotomy that has, at various times, served to characterize certain trends in modernist writing. \(^ {32}\) “Hard” and “soft” derive from tactile sensations, and refer primarily to properties of solid objects, whereas “dense” and “rare” draw attention to the physical composition of matter at the molecular level. This shift in emphasis facilitates an analytical perspective that encompasses matter in all three states. My preliminary emphasis in this chapter on rare substances in particular is rhetorically pragmatic: since materialist literary critics have tended to focus on solid objects, I wish to highlight the physical attributes of rare matter that other methods overlook. The analysis of body thresholds in subsequent chapters addresses more explicitly how rare and dense forms of matter interact.

4. “Foggy City”: Foregrounding Rare Matter in Illustrated Texts about London, 1898-1938

In this section, I discuss four lesser known works that, through a combination of illustration and descriptive narration, emphasize the material presence of the atmosphere in the urban spaces of London. These four books span the modernist period: Alice Meynell and William Hyde’s *London Impressions* (1898), Ford Madox Ford’s *The Soul of London* (1905), William Loftie and Yoshio Markino’s *The Colour of London* (1910), and Chiang Yee’s *The Silent Traveller in London* (1938). Part of a genre of illustrated

\(^ {32}\) Eileen Gregory provides a succinct account of this trend in *H.D. and Hellenism: Classic Lines*. 
London books that gained popularity in the late nineteenth century, these collaborations between authors and illustrators demonstrate the cross-pollination of verbal and visual approaches to the London fog, and allow me to develop an interart analogy that helps to demonstrate hermeneutic techniques for “foregrounding” rare matter.

Each of the authors and illustrators of the London books resided in the city for many years, so that their evocations of local weather conditions are rooted in first-hand sensory experience. As I have argued, London’s notorious fogs (along with other historical factors) no doubt enhanced the cultural profile of rare matter in this period, but aesthetic movements also played their part. Enmeshed in both the sensory environments and the intellectual currents of their time, the authors and illustrators of the London books notice rare matter and call attention to it, whereas some of that awareness drops out of subsequent criticism and is lost on readers today. It is the deliberate foregrounding of rare matter in these books, the artistic “making visible” of the London fog, that rewards close reading.

Urban imagery can be particularly susceptible to Connor’s “amnesia of the air” (“Midair” n.p.) because we tend to imagine cities primarily in terms of the built environment. Norman Crowe, an architectural theorist who writes about the relationships between natural and built environments, argues that physical infrastructure tends to dominate our mental images of urban space: “When we choose to visualize the city as a formal entity, we tend to see it in response to the formal order imparted by its

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33 Nick Freeman identifies a mixed genre of books about London that “paired discursive metropolitan essays with illustrations” (28). These included collaborations between Gustave Doré and Blanchard Jerrold in London: A Pilgrimage (1872), William Hyde and Alice Meynell in London Impressions (1898), and a prospective collaboration between Hyde and Ford Madox Ford, which failed to materialize because several publishers considered the market for this type of book to be saturated (Moore 93; Freeman 29).
infrastructure—streets, underground utilities, railroad lines, subways, and freeways” (21).

Eschewing this exclusive emphasis on man-made infrastructure, all four London books pointedly integrate natural features into their accounts of urban systems. Ford is particularly explicit about the tendency to take for granted the natural components of city space: “We who walk about the streets forget the elements; we hardly ever realise by what minute and meticulous patching up the great city is rendered water-tight and air-tight—with tiny slates on the roofs and tiny tiles in the sewers” (168). As neglected as it is ubiquitous, rare matter not only fills in spaces between the city’s solid objects, but also infiltrates their surprisingly permeable boundaries; only the unseen effort of “meticulous patching” prevents its intrusion into both the thoughts and the homes of city dwellers.

Meynell likewise highlights the interpenetration of natural and man-made elements. In her chapter on “The Climate of Smoke,” she initially sets up a tension between a “natural storm” and the “paltry tempest of the smoke” (9), but goes on to undermine the nature/technology dichotomy by introducing several hybrid terms: “Only by acknowledging the climate of London to be more than half an artificial climate, and by treating our own handiwork—the sky of our manufacture—with a relative contempt, are we excused for thinking the effects in any sense beautiful” (9). Here, the phrase “sky of our manufacture” upsets the common association of the sky with untouched nature.

Similarly, acknowledging “half an artificial climate” implies that the other half remains natural in origin, despite the pollution of smoke from residential and industrial

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34 Meynell’s description of the half-artificial climate carries religious overtones, as demonstrated by her objection to calling the London sky “by the names proper to the celestial heights” (10). Her tone, however, is merely dismissive of the mundane, “paltry” spectacle, and stands in marked contrast to Ruskin’s nearly apocalyptic sense of unnatural weather in “The Storm Cloud of the Nineteenth Century.”
chimneys. Reinforcing this sense of mingling, the illustrations by William Hyde make no effort to distinguish between the natural and artificial components of the atmosphere. With their thick fogs and luminous cloudy skies, they also leave no doubt that rare matter occupies its share of city space.

That any Londoner can “forget the elements” as they walk through the streets (Ford, Soul 168) would seem strange to Chiang Yee and Yoshio Markino, both of whom immigrated to London several years before publishing their books on the city. Influenced by Chinese and Japanese traditions respectively, both author-illustrators place special emphasis on fog as a culturally-inflected trope and as a characteristic London phenomenon that strikes newcomers as particularly noteworthy. Markino generally resists being positioned as a cultural mediator, but he does comment on the visual contrast between Japan’s atmosphere, which is “so clear that you can see every small detail in the distance,” and London’s, where “your background is mystified abruptly, which has a great charm to me” (“Essay by the Artist” xxxviiij). As a painter, he sees London’s mist as its defining feature: “I often hear artists complaining because they cannot get models or views resembling their own ideal, but I must say London in mist is far above my own ideal […]. I think London without mists would be like a bride without a trousseau” (ibid. xxxvij-xxxviiij). Chiang is similarly impressed with the fog, and does not hesitate to draw cultural contrasts. He devotes an entire chapter to London’s fog, in which he explains, “as I am a Chinese who has lived in the interior of an Asiatic continent and been used to the

35 Meynell and Hyde’s London Impressions was published in the 1890s, at the peak of the thick fogs caused by industrial and residential coal-burning. Meynell attributes this “climate of smoke” less to factories than to transportation technologies and “the unnumbered houses” (9), recognizing the contribution of residential coal-burning at a time when public policy efforts still focussed primarily on regulating industrial pollution (Brimblecombe 115).
mountain fog and lake mist for many years, I have a special feeling about it” (56). When Chiang writes about London for a Chinese audience, he calls it “Foggy City” (65). All four of the London books place great emphasis on the inseparability of London’s urban space from nature in general, and from its climate in particular. This shared interest in urban nature unites four otherwise diverse books, and explains their common efforts to make London’s physical atmosphere—the air itself—a salient feature of the represented landscape.

As Meynell recognizes in the phrase “the sky of our manufacture,” London’s atmosphere is not exclusively natural in origin, but the fogs in these books are “manufactured” in another sense as well. As representations of the city, the texts and the illustrations in the London books mediate and construct the material information they convey. In fact, fog famously stands for the constructedness of London’s urban landscape in Oscar Wilde’s witty dialogue between Vivian and Cyril in The Decay of Lying, published the year after London Impressions. Highlighting nineteenth-century Impressionist painting as a key influence on subsequent perceptions of the city, Vivian parodies descriptions of “the evening mist” that “clothes the riverside with poetry” (85) in the well-known “Ten O’Clock” lecture by J. M. Whistler, alluded to here as the “master” of the Impressionists:36

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36 Whistler exhibited at the 1863 Salon des refusés in Paris. He was also at the center of a short-lived coterie, known in the press as “Whistlerians” or “Impressionists,” who congregated under his leadership at the Society of British Artists in London between 1884 and 1888; a group exhibition entitled “The London Impressionists” shows evidence of continued activity even after the “Whistler faction” lost control of the society in 1888 (Koval 91-93).
Where, if not from the Impressionists, do we get those wonderful brown fogs that come creeping down our streets, blurring the gas-lamps and changing the houses into monstrous shadows? To whom, if not to them and their master, do we owe the lovely silver mists that brood over our river, and turn to faint forms of fading grace curved bridge and swaying barge? (78-79)

Reversing the usual mimetic relationship, Vivian suggests that, in this case, nature is imitating art. The implication that Impressionists actually create the physical fogs is playfully nonsensical, and seems to function primarily for shock value. The ensuing constructivist explanation for the foggy weather, which posits that Impressionism “invented” the fog in the sense of increasing its cultural visibility and aesthetic appeal, is much more plausible:

The extraordinary change that has taken place in the climate of London during the last ten years is entirely due to a particular school of Art […]. At present, people see fogs, not because there are fogs, but because poets and painters have taught them the mysterious loveliness of such effects. There may have been fogs for centuries in London. I dare say there were. But no one saw them, and so we do not know anything about them. They did not exist till Art had invented them. (78-79)

Vivian’s deliberately audacious endorsement of perceptual preconditioning stops just shy of a purely subjectivist viewpoint when he concedes that fog may have existed unnoticed in London “for centuries” before art made people appreciate its beauty.
As any fan of Dickens knows, fog is hardly absent from representations of London before Impressionism. However, Wilde is not alone in pointing to Whistler as a popularizer of the London fog’s aesthetic appeal. Chiang Yee makes a similar point when he quotes E. V. Lucas’s *A Wanderer in London* (1906), which claims:

It was Whistler who discovered London […] as a city of fugitive, mysterious beauty. For decades the London fog had been a theme for vituperation and sarcasm: it needed this sensitive American-Parisian to show us that what to the commonplace man was a foe and a matter of rage, to the artist was a friend. Everyone knows about it now. (Lucas 25; Chiang 55-56)

Although Chiang draws inspiration for his own atmospheric effects from his Chinese heritage, noting that “we Chinese have been born to the love of fogs for thousands of years” (65), he ascribes a more local influence to Whistler when he suggests that the painting *Old Battersea Bridge* “betrays at once” that Whistler lived for a long time “under the constantly changing foggy weather of London” (63). Not all art historians would concur that Whistler’s atmospheric effects are primarily a function of foggy surroundings, but Wilde and Lucas’s allusions make clear that his name is associated with the foregrounding of London’s atmosphere in public aesthetic discourse. Modernist writers seeking to distinguish their atmospheric imagery from the dark, damp skies of Dickens and Ruskin may have found the Impressionists’ alternative aesthetic construction of the fog particularly appealing.

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37 For instance, Eric Shanes observes that Whistler’s views of Venice, a much less polluted city, are “every bit as dingy and monochromatic as his views of London” (92). Shanes points to other possible motives for the “indistinctness” in these pictures, including epistemological uncertainty, formal contrasts, and a rejection of “fastidious hyper-realism” (92).
From Turner’s skyscapes to Whistler’s atmospheric effects to the Impressionist experiments of Monet, Manet and Degas, nineteenth-century innovations in European painting take rare matter as a central motif. Asian-born painters like Chiang and Markino also import into the London art scene the fog iconography so central to their respective landscape painting traditions. I argue that these developments in the visual arts can help to provoke critical awareness of the atmosphere’s material attributes in literary studies as well. Collaborations between authors and illustrators are an obvious point of departure for making connections between verbal and visual discourses, but they are often passed over by cultural critics because they fall between disciplinary boundaries. Recent trends in modernist studies—the loosening up of the modernist canon and of a strictly formalist definition of the field—allow critical access to non-canonical texts, like the London books, that can help conceptualize more clearly the discursive functions of rare matter in the modernist period.

Scholars’ efforts to champion what they see as underrated artists (Meynell, Hyde) or genres (impressionist non-fiction by Ford) tend to skew analyses of collaboration toward either the pictures or the text, exacerbating disciplinary divisions and avoiding the semiotic challenges of image-text relationships.\footnote{This imbalance is less marked in the cases of Chiang and Markino, probably because they both contribute text that comments self-reflexively on their own illustrations.} While the collaborative nature of the London books demands an interdisciplinary approach, it is notoriously difficult to ascertain the precise relationship between visual and verbal representations. The issue of interart comparisons has been the subject of considerable debate, especially in field of literary impressionism, which borders on my study due to Ford’s canonical status in that
genre.\textsuperscript{39} Maria Kronneger’s \textit{Literary Impressionism} (1973) freely compares mid-nineteenth-century continental movements in painting and literature. Recent studies of literary impressionism by H. Peter Stowell (1980) and Todd Bender (1997) take a more cautious approach to interart comparisons. Jesse Matz (2001) takes a particularly negative view of interart analogies, insisting that “despite certain similarities, the impressions of painting and literature are \textit{antonyms}” (49). To support his objection, Matz alludes to one side of an extended debate about the advisability of interart comparisons. Suggesting that “analogies between the arts are always suspect,” Matz footnotes Alastair Fowler’s “Periodization and Interart Analogies” as one of several “standard warnings against interart analogies” (n. 81, 256). In fact, Fowler’s article is part of a 1972 special issue of \textit{New Literary History} devoted to the question of interdisciplinary methods in literary and art history. While Fowler and other contributors do warn against overextended analogies between verbal and visual media, the overall effect of the volume is to suggest that interart comparisons can be made, provided that the grounds for comparison are carefully established.\textsuperscript{40}

Focussing on collaborative, illustrated texts facilitates historically-grounded interart comparisons, since there is no need to speculate about whether the authors and illustrators encountered each others’ work. Markino and Chiang comment explicitly

\textsuperscript{39} For a discussion of Ford’s role in establishing “literary impressionism” as an object of critical analysis, see Bender (3-14).

\textsuperscript{40} While Fowler warns that any “notion of a universally valid systematic correspondence between the arts must be regarded as a chimera” (506), he concedes that valid interart comparisons may be made on the basis of “a metaphor (‘translation’) […] so long as the metaphor is sound” (499). Alpers and Alpers, in their article in the same volume, concur that overly systematic comparisons are undesirable: “Attempts to compare the arts characteristically come to grief in forced equations between specific features” (457). In his contribution, John Passmore sensibly insists: “Cross-art predicates are not inevitable; they have to justify themselves by being illuminating” (586).
about their own painting techniques in the text of their respective London books. Ford’s review of Meynell and Hyde’s *London Impressions*, entitled “William Hyde: An Illustrator of London,” provides evidence of their conscious collaboration, and confirms that Ford himself viewed the London book genre from a mixed-media perspective. Given the review’s appearance in *The Artist*, a periodical devoted to visual art, Ford understandably gives precedence to the illustrator, with whom he later collaborated on several occasions.\(^4^1\) Despite the review’s necessary focus on Hyde’s paintings, Ford nevertheless takes care to highlight Meynell’s role as a suitable creative partner, “a collaborator who is absolutely unrivalled at reaching, with her pen, just such effects of exquisite delicacy of shade and tone as set Mr. Hyde apart from other designers” (6). Ford’s sense of a mixed verbal and visual medium is also reflected in his use of the word “poetic” to describe Hyde’s art. It is, in fact, Hyde’s skilful use of rare matter that earns him this compliment. Ford writes: “A landscape, like all art we may say, is poetic by force of suggestion. Hence we are often moved by what remains unrecorded, or looms indefinitely through a mist, as much as, or far more than by that which is sedulously introduced” (1). It is possible to detect, in this emphasis on suggestion and indefiniteness, echoes of Ford’s own impressionist style. While Ford’s prose is often compared in passing to paintings by Turner, Whistler, and Monet,\(^4^2\) my own interest in describing how

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\(^4^1\) Ford went on to collaborate with Hyde on *The Cinque Ports* in 1900. Then, around 1902, he discussed the possibility of including illustrations by Hyde in the book that eventually became *The Soul of London* (Moore 93; Freeman 28). They were unable to find a publisher, and the first edition of *The Soul of London* came out without any illustrations. However, the 1907 American omnibus edition entitled *England and the English* (which included *The Soul of London* along with Ford’s *The Heart of the Country* and *The Spirit of the People*) featured 16 black-and-white reproductions of selected illustrations from Hyde and Meynell’s *London Impressions*.

\(^4^2\) See, for instance: Saunders, “Ford, the City, Impressionism and Modernism” (67, 72); Wrenn (44); and Britzolakis (3).
rare matter functions to represent immersive spatial experience requires a more detailed methodology for comparing the deployment of atmospheric imagery in verbal and visual media.

Beyond a basic historical grounding, the value and the functional validity of interart comparisons must also be established. Mindful of the need to select “functionally equivalent elements for comparison” (Fowler 501), I use the following parameters to guide my interart comparisons: beginning with juxtapositions on the printed page, I ground the comparisons in specific functional similarities related to the emphasis on rare matter, and limit my conclusions to issues connected to this common ground. Despite the potential pitfalls, I insist that a targeted comparison is worth making because an analysis of illustrators’ techniques for “foregrounding” rare matter can help to conceptualize a method of close reading that reveals analogous dynamics in literary texts. Figure and ground are originally visual concepts, and are applicable to literary existents only by analogy. Since rare matter complicates the figure-ground question by filling in the space between solid objects, it makes sense to work out some of the mechanisms on pictures before tackling the more elusive visual realm within the written texts.

The figure in a field of vision is generally the object of visual attention, while the ground is the less distinctly focussed area against which the figure stands out (I. Gordon 65). Figure/ground relationships were an important focus of investigation for Gestalt psychology, a theory of perception that gained some currency during the modernist period. While competing perceptual theories sought to analyze complex sensations as composites of simpler components, Gestalt theorists believed that complex sensations were more than the sum of their parts; to support their theories, they tended to rely on
visual demonstrations that forced a viewer to actively notice aspects of visual perception that are usually unconscious. For instance, the human visual system uses a number of properties to distinguish figure from ground, and generally we make the distinction without thinking much about it (Enns 183). However, it is possible to design images in which the properties that normally help us to distinguish figure from ground have been adjusted to create ambiguity. Gestalt psychologist Edgar Rubin published one of the most famous illustrations of figure/ground ambiguity in 1915: a black and white image which can be alternately interpreted as either a vase or a pair of facing human profiles, depending on whether the black or the white portions of the image are viewed as the foreground (Bruce and Green 106). Figure/ground ambiguity is a subset of what W. J. T. Mitchell calls “multistability,” the property of pictures that “employ a single gestalt to shift from one reference to another” (48). The possibility of a gestalt shift between two mutually exclusive interpretations of the same image (the vase or the faces, for example) illustrates the role of a viewer’s conscious attention in interpreting the visual “data” encoded in a picture; it thereby supports the Gestalt psychologists’ contention that visual perception is a dynamic process rather than a passive accumulation of visual stimuli. For the purposes of this study, multistability is especially important because it permits a shift in the focus of visual attention, and thereby calls attention to the parts of an image that previously functioned as negative space. Three-dimensionality considerably complicates the figure-ground relationship, and tends to reduce figure-ground ambiguity (Bruce and Green 109, 115-16; I. Gordon 78). However, semi-transparent gases in a painting possess

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43 See Ian Gordon (56-64) for a brief history that contrasts Gestalt theory with structuralism and behaviourism in psychology, and outlines its rhetorical emphasis on illustrative examples rather than experimental data. See Enns (105) for a comparison of Gestalt theory and associationism.
a kind of multistability, since they can function as either figure or ground depending on the focus of the viewer’s attention.

This type of figure-ground ambiguity opens the way for a hermeneutic alternation between looking at and looking through the fog, which I will extend, by analogy, to describe an interactive reading process that deliberately foregrounds the often neglected atmospheric components of literary settings. Atmospheric effects in visual art can provoke reflection about the interpretative challenge of multistability as it applies to rare suspensions like cloud, smoke, haze and fog. Suspensions comprise clusters of small solid particles or liquid droplets suspended in the air. Unless these particles condense into raindrops, however, we generally notice them only in the form of the larger wholes of which they are a part—we interpret them as either discrete, compound objects (e.g. “the only cloud in the sky” or “a puff of smoke”) or as continuous substances (e.g. “fog filling the streets” or “haze blotting out the horizon”). While firmly grounded in the particulate nature of rare suspensions, the object/substance distinction nevertheless depends on the mental inclination of the viewer.

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44 The definition for mist in the Oxford English Dictionary recognizes these two alternative senses: it may refer to “a diffuse cloud of fine water droplets suspended in the atmosphere” or to “such droplets viewed collectively as a substance or medium” (“Mist, n1.” def. 1a).
In the illustrations of the London books, semi-transparent atmospheric effects take advantage of this interpretative ambiguity, permitting a gestalt shift “from one reference to another” (Mitchell 48) as viewers decide whether to look at or look through the fog and smoke that permeate London’s streets. As a result, these images can help to conceptualize the process of foregrounding rare materiality. In William Hyde’s *The Clock Tower, Westminster* (Fig. 1), rain and clouds extend from a dramatically lit skyscape all the way down to ground level (Meynell and Hyde 16; Ford, *England* 224). By emerging from the background into the middleground to surround the tower from all sides, the damp weather asserts its presence in the city streets, limiting visibility and provoking pedestrians and omnibus riders to huddle under umbrellas. Similarly, in Yoshio Markino’s frontispiece to *The Colour of London*, entitled *Night: Lights in Piccadilly Circus* (Fig. 2), washes of colour blur bodies in the crowd, surround the flaring

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45 For full-page illustrations from *London Impressions*, I follow the “List of Pictures” in assigning the numbers of the facing page (see the “List of Pictures”). Where these illustrations are reprinted in the 1907 edition of Ford’s *England and the English*, I include the page numbers from that edition as well. Unless otherwise indicated, references to Ford’s text are from the 1911 Duckworth edition of *The Soul of London*. 
lamps in halos of foggy light, and completely erase any sense of a horizon separating sky-
space from the street level scene in the foreground.

Fig. 2. Yoshio Markino, *Night: Lights in Piccadilly Circus*, 1907, watercolour (Plate: Loftie and Markino, ii).
These images show the continuing influence of J. M. W. Turner, whose mid-nineteenth-century paintings often overlap in pictorial space the cloudy forms of sublime atmospheric effects and the mundane, solid objects of urban life. For example, in Turner’s *Rain, Steam, and Speed—The Great Western Railway* (1844), a deeply textured atmosphere blurs the contours of train, trestle, and distant shore (Fig. 3). Markino recalls in his memoir being “strongly impressed” by a Turner exhibit at the Tate Gallery around the same time that he “began to struggle to paint [his] favourite London fogs” (143).

Hyde’s and Markino’s illustrations demonstrate that, although rare matter may sometimes occupy the literal foreground (the shallow part of virtual space closest to the viewer), it can also be used to blur distinctions among the foreground, middleground and background positions by filling up the space that ostensibly separates them. By painting *in* the semi-opacity of the atmosphere, the artists render visible the negative space that is normally elided as transparent distance, a space that perspectival painting normally assumes or implies, but does not usually fill except with scattered solid or liquid objects. Because it adds rare matter as a visible object, I will call this an additive effect.

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Fig. 4. Chiang Yee, *Fog in Trafalgar Square*, 1938, watercolour (Plate: Chiang, 61, © Country Life).
Another visual effect, which I will call contour blurring, implies fog or haze by partially obscuring the solid objects behind it. Ford alludes to this technique when he describes an urban panorama in terms of the blurriness in a watercolour painting:

The rows of four-footed, gaunt, inactive cranes, painted a dull rust colour, and the few enormous steamers at the inner ends of the quays—all these things were wetted, fused and confused in their outlines, beneath a weeping sky in which a drapery of clouds had the look of a badly blotted water-colour painting, still wet and inefficient. (Soul 68-69)

Ford draws on the familiarity of colour wash effects from painting to express in words the blurring of contours produced by the fog’s semi-transparency. What begins as a painting technique (the bleeding of colour on the “badly blotted” paper) applies by analogy to the perceived solidity of objects in the built environment, which also appear “wetted, fused and confused in their outlines” due to the thick humidity in the intervening atmosphere. Ford thus takes advantage of a familiar visual effect to specify a recognizable visual perception that, due to our tendency to look through the atmosphere, might otherwise remain unremarked.

In visual art, contour blurring may accompany an additive effect, or work on its own. An unusual example of contour blurring by itself may be seen in Chiang Yee’s watercolour Fog in Trafalgar Square (Fig. 4), in which Nelson’s column is painted in discontinuous, light grey lines that bleed into a white background. Chiang describes the origin of the technique as follows:
In a Chinese landscape-painting a few spaces left blank suggests the fog and mist, but I myself have found sometimes that our great masters have specially avoided painting the foreground, such as buildings and so on. After I had watched the London fogs very closely, I ventured to try the same method. (63-64)

The fog in Trafalgar Square is suggested by the unpainted parts of the background that would normally be viewed as negative space. This minimalist atmospheric effect differs significantly from Markino and Hyde’s eminently visible urban fogs—and from visible rain effects in Chiang’s painting *Coalman in Rain* (Fig. 5).

Fig. 5. Chiang Yee, *Coal-Man in Rain*, 1938, watercolour (Plate: Chiang, 43, © Country Life).
More often than not, additive effects and contour blurring effects work in tandem. As the opacity of the atmosphere increases, the visibility of solid objects decreases so that their outlines appear to dissolve and disappear—see, for instance, the vague suggestion of a dark building in the middleground of Hyde’s *Rain, Smoke, and Traffic* (Meynell and Hyde 29; Ford, *England* 72; Fig. 6). In response, viewers may try to peer through the fog instead of looking at it. Markino’s *Christmas Shopping: Regent Street* (Loftie and Markino xxxvj; Fig. 7) provides a good example of the useful ambiguity that results: the fog and the half-obscured stone building provide alternating objects of interest for the eye, so that rare matter is foregrounded by the very process of deciding whether to *look at* or *look through*. Whether the focus is on adding visibility to rare matter, or implying its presence through blurred contours, the success of the technique depends on reconceptualizing the picture’s virtual space as “full” rather than “empty.”

Fig. 6. William Hyde, *Rain, Smoke and Traffic*, 1898, photogravure (Plate: Meynell and Hyde, 29).

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46 Many paintings by Turner and by French and English Impressionists combine these effects. For some fine distinctions about their differing artistic motives for blurry effects, see Eric Shanes’s “Three Varieties of Indistinctness,” a review of the Tate Britain’s exhibit *Turner, Whistler, Monet* (93).
Fig. 7. Yoshio Markino, *Christmas Shopping: Regent Street*, 1910, watercolour (Plate: Loftie and Markino, xxxvj).
But does the image provoke this shift, or does it occur at the discretion of the viewer? In multistable images, both are involved: a gestalt results from the viewer’s activation of a referential ambiguity inherent in the image. Accordingly, Chiang relies on viewers to infer the materiality of the fog in Trafalgar Square: “It might be an excuse for me to say that I left the blanks there to suggest fog, but I just want to ask the onlookers whether they saw only blank spaces, or felt them to be not quite empty” (64). A viewer, responding to ambiguously blank space by intuiting the presence of fog, may end up looking curiously at the blank parts of the painting, in a visual gestalt that throws Nelson’s Column into the background. Additive effects may also leave room for viewer discretion: in Hyde’s *The Clock Tower, Westminster* (Fig. 1), a viewer may fix the eye on the rain represented in the foreground, or squint past it to discern the outlines of the clock tower, whose blurred contours suggest imperfect visibility conditions. When I claim that these illustrations “foreground” rare matter, I use the term figuratively to suggest this shift in emphasis through which the atmosphere, normally understood as a background or stage-setting element, takes on visual interest by virtue of its semi-opacity, and becomes a central (if amorphous) “object” of interest for the eye. While such visual gestalt effects may not be directly achievable in a verbal medium, they lend valuable detail to the “foregrounding” metaphor, providing (by analogy) a rough sense of the material attributes of rare matter that I am encouraging readers to look for in verbal texts.

A second category of gestalt effects based on the particle/substance ambiguity of rare matter is more easily prompted by the verbal medium. Tim Newcomb’s paper for the 2009 MSA Seminar on modernist objects contextualizes poetic images of asphalt—a modern building material characterized by a visibly conglomerate structure—within a
broader modernist pattern of interest in what he calls a “particulate model of reality” (2). Newcomb argues that the destabilization of objective models of vision through nineteenth-century optical techniques and technologies—described by Jonathan Crary in *Techniques of the Observer* (1990)—fuelled a desire to “identify and render visible the basic constituents of matter” in order to locate “explanatory clarity” at resolutions beyond the power of the human eye, through developments in microscopy, cellular anatomy and atomic and subatomic theory. The resulting particulate focus marks a surprising range of cultural and scientific disciplines. As Newcomb explains:

> An understanding of matter as comprised of particles, insignificant or invisible individually yet collectively adhering to more or less describable structural principles, informs new disciplinary styles and practices throughout the 19th century: the insistent brushstrokes of Manet and the dots of Seurat, the copper plates of Daguerre and the hand-cranked filmstrips of the Lumières, the atomic theory of Dalton and the quantum theory of Planck. (2)

This historical pattern helps to explain verbal gestalt effects based on the particle/substance ambiguity. In line with Gestalt theory’s claim that “the whole is different from the sum of its parts” (I. Gordon 68), the collective relationships among the component particles of a gaseous suspension define certain properties (opacity, humidity, density, etc.) that cannot be attributed to the particles in isolation. By scattering light, the suspended particles affect the transparency of the atmosphere, making it easier to notice

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47 Connor makes a similar point about modernist interest in the particulate structure of matter: “Haze is particulate. The characteristics of haze, fog and mist derive from their scattering of light. Haze instances and anticipates what might be called the particulate dream of modernism, the dream of being able to register and merge with the infinite multiplicity of the atomic constitution of matter” (“Haze” 9).
and contemplate its physical presence. At the same time, the capacity for component particles to settle out of suspension (as condensation or sooty residue, for instance) provides an important reminder of the invisible particulate structure underlying not only fogs and clouds, but all forms of matter. A verbal text can imitate the figure/ground ambiguity of a picture, but it can also use changes in diction to shift back and forth between a focus on constituent particles and a focus on the collective properties that characterize the suspension as a whole (whether viewed as a “discrete” object like a cloud or a continuous substance like fog or haze). Like the multistability that permits the gestalt shift between _looking at_ and _looking through_ the fog, this structural availability to multiple levels of interpretation (particulate cluster, compound object, continuous substance) makes rare suspensions particularly flexible for modelling spatial relationships. Shifting from one reference to another defamiliarizes the atmosphere and prompts readers to think more closely about the physical properties of matter.

In the close readings that follow, I will argue that the pictures and written texts in the London books share a common tendency to draw attention to the substantiality of rare matter; however, hermeneutic bias may foster or prevent recognition of these textual features. Because their multistability must be activated by an audience, rare existents are more likely to be found when one is looking for them. James Phelan’s work on the “recursive relationship among authorial agency, textual phenomena, and reader response” (631) suggests that such reader involvement is a function basic to any critical study of literature. While it might be argued that a conscious hermeneutic bias in favour of material atmospheres might itself produce the effects I am tracing, I suggest that, like Rubin’s vase/faces illustration, my focus simply draws attention to a potential viewing
strategy—a gestalt shift that, once accomplished, remains as one of several co-existing alternatives for interpretation.

5. Interpreting Ford’s London: The Multistability of Rare Images

Among the four London books, Ford’s *The Soul of London* has received the most critical attention, making it a good test case for the interpretative contribution of a close reading approach based on the rarity-density spectrum and the foregrounding of rare matter. Recent scholarship tends to locate in Ford’s representation of the metropolis a modernist anxiety about social fragmentation, accompanied by a “desire for totality” that is either thwarted or partially fulfilled, depending on the reading (Attridge 298; Cianci; Britzolakis; Haslam “England and Englishness”). The extent to which London can be comprehended as a whole, let alone represented, is clearly a major preoccupation of this “Survey of a Modern City,” as expressed in the book’s most quotable claim: “For England is a small island, the world is infinitesimal amongst the planets. But London is illimitable” (16). Such statements have prompted a number of critics to link the book’s “impressionist” style to a “crisis of representation” (Britzolakis 3; Cianci 50) provoked by urbanization and the “neurological predicament of modernity” (Britzolakis 3). These claims strike me as overly pessimistic. Taken in context, Ford’s observation that the “bird’s-eye-view of London as a whole” (15) has been replaced with that of “the eye of a bird that is close to the ground […] seeking for minute fragments of seed” (18) sounds more meditative than alarmist in tone. Faced with “the irreconcilability of concrete experience with the idea of the whole” (Attridge 303), Ford constructs his city imagery through ingenious combinations of rare attributes to express the complexity of urban spatial experience.
A closer look at the cloud imagery that saturates the text reveals the subtlety with which Ford equivocates between fragmentation and totality in his effort to “get the atmosphere” of London’s modernity (Soul xi-xii). To be specific, Ford harnesses the multistability of particulate suspensions to make the “vast cloud” that symbolizes London oscillate between multiple and contradictory meanings. In this sense, it is the ideal vehicle for Ford’s impressionism, which, in the words of Sara Haslam, “is about using layered perspectives […] showing what things look like and feel like from different angles, through different lenses, with different focal points” (“England and Englishness” 55). For many critics, the book’s discontinuous, multi-perspectival literary style is part of what marks it as impressionist, but the degree of fragmentation remains a matter of dispute. Some critics see little evidence of any ordering principle, characterizing the representational strategy as “a syntax of apparently random visual snapshots” (Britzolakis 3) or “a definitive surrender to the demands of plurality” (Attridge 303). Others suggest that a complex form of order, analogous to avant-garde techniques in visual art, underlies the overall form of Ford’s text. Haslam argues that the figure of the composite photograph, introduced explicitly in Ford’s later volume The Spirit of the People, helps Ford to balance totality and fragmentation through the “overlaying of visual images” in which each image “retain[s] its essence” but also “contribute[s] to a multiple whole” (“England and Englishness” 55). Similarly, Gasiorek’s observation that Ford’s images of the city co-exist in the manner of a collage supports his view of Ford’s “complex and

48 Saunders makes the unusual and largely unsubstantiated claim that The Soul of London represents “a shift away from Impressionism” in Ford’s career (“Ford, the City, Impressionism and Modernism” 68). Conversely, Haslam claims that Ford uses literary impressionism “to brilliant effect” in this, his “first literary success” (“England and Englishness” 52), and Cianci insists that the book “has been wrongly neglected by the commentators on Ford’s impressionist technique (49).
ambiguous stance” toward fragmentation (63, 77). Both of these composite models suggest that the apparently disparate views of the city are layered to produce a kind of multistability that invites complex modes of reader engagement with city spaces. The rare existents in the book, serving alternately as symbols of the city’s porous and variable boundaries, its random crowd movements, or its susceptibility to mental simplification, help to build up Ford’s multi-layered image of London.

Rare matter reinforces the “illimitable” quality of London when Ford uses it to imagine the city’s boundaries as porous and dynamic. As an alternative to the “visible bounds, walls, or demarcations” that defined the fixed boundaries of pre-modern cities, Ford proposes (only somewhat facetiously) that “London begins where tree trunks commence to be black” (36, 163). This reformulation of the boundary substitutes loosely-spaced markers for fixed linear demarcation, creating the room for negotiation that Boer locates in threshold spaces. The porosity of the city’s thresholds in *The Soul of London* has so far been interpreted mainly at the level of social analysis. Andrzej Gasiorek situates the cloud imagery in the context of Ford’s opposition to the Aliens Act of 1905, which sought to limit immigration and reduce the points of entry into the city. He argues that the “nebulous” image of the city “hints at the blurring of outlines and boundaries that signifies the city’s assimilationist spirit” (67). Christina Britzolakis broadens this social context to include an “instability of the imperial metropolis’s imagined boundaries” produced by “cognitive dissonance in the face of violently reconfigured relations among urban, national, and global space” (2, 4). This sense of social porosity and political instability at the boundaries of the capital city is certainly important, but Ford’s
representation of London’s city limits incorporates multiple layers of analysis, including but not limited to the social sphere.

Ford adds useful complexity to his spatial modelling by harnessing the particulate model underlying the rarity-density spectrum. In one scene, Ford reveals the particulate structure of the built environment itself. Partaking of the cloud’s capacity for diffusion; the city spreads out, “sending out bee swarms of small houses,” and intermixing suburban and rural space at its periphery (50). The traces of air pollution that blacken the trees also suggest the overlap of natural and human landscapes in London. Ford may be half-joking about the tree-bark boundary, but he succeeds in demonstrating its value as an amorphous border that “takes in at least nearly all the looser elements of the sphere of London influence” (36). The loosely spaced boundary markers (the blackened trees) create a threshold space flexible enough to incorporate differing definitions of the London area as a unit defined at once by cultural, administrative, and natural criteria.

Ford employs the particle/substance ambiguity of cloud imagery elsewhere in *The Soul of London* to reinforce this synthetic, multi-layered approach to city space. Near the end of the book, he compares the whole of London to “a vast cloud beneath a cloud as vast” (159). In this synoptic simile, the cloud above may be taken as the physical atmosphere, but the cloud beneath is made up of various diffuse groups of urban features: “And beneath and amongst all those clouds—thunderclouds, the cloud of buildings, the clouds of corporations—there hurries still the great swarm of tiny men and women, each one hugging desperately his own soul, his own hopes, his own passions, his own individuality” (160). The “swarm” of individual citizens permeates the “clouds” of the physical and social infrastructure, just as water droplets in a cloud may permeate the
space between the molecules of other gases and vapours. This interpenetrability allows Ford to image the simultaneity of urban components often separated out (into architectural, economic, social geographies) for the sake of analysis. It is a means to his synthetic end.

While the “tiny” human particles within the “great swarm” manage to retain some sense of individuality, in other passages they fade into the anonymity of the larger cloud, for “That, too, is the Modern Spirit: great organisations run by men as impersonal as the atoms of our own frames” (Soul 40-41). Thus, the particulate close-up of the “vast cloud” can emphasize either the diversity of individual Londoners, or their anonymous interchangeability, a tension that Haslam presents as part of the complexity Ford wishes to preserve in his image of the city (“England and Englishness” 56). In contrast, the more removed view of the cloud, its vague substantiality from afar, contributes a simplifying function to Ford’s urban modelling. The problem is posed in terms of both quantity and quality: “London, with its sense of immensity that we must hurry through to keep unceasing appointments, with its diffuseness, its gatherings up into innumerable trade-centres, innumerable class districts, becomes by its immensity a place upon which there is no beginning” (Soul 8). To tackle both diffuseness and innumerability, the Londoner economizes the effort of mental mapping by grouping and blurring particles into clouds:

The memory cannot otherwise conceive of all these gray buildings, of all these gray people. You do not, for instance, call up in your mind all the houses you would pass between Charing Cross and Knightsbridge: they fade into one mass, and because that mass is one you will never touch and finger, it seems cloudlke enough. But all the limitless stretches of roofs
that you have never seen, the streets that you will never travel, the miles and miles of buildings, the myriads of plane-trees, of almonds, of elms—all these appalling regions of London that to every individual of us must remain unknown and untraversed—all those things fuse in our minds into one cloud. And the Corporations, the Water Boards, the Dock Boards, the Railway Organisations, the bodies of men who keep the parks in order, the armies who sweep in the streets—all these are cloudlike too. (159-60)

Thus the cloud metaphor, drawing on the particle/substance ambiguity that characterizes rare suspensions, permits both simplification and synthesis, two processes essential (as any cartographer knows) to the coherent symbolic representation of a heterogeneous urban landscape. Far from foundering in the face of a crisis of representability, The Soul of London actively responds to the challenges of urban heterogeneity by taking advantage of the cloud’s full range of material attributes.

6. “Suddenly Space Exists”: Fog and the Narration of Three-Dimensional Urban Space

In all of the London books, rare matter functions not only to address the challenges of representing complex social spaces, but also to reinforce the sense of London’s atmosphere as a palpably material medium that permeates the three-dimensional space of the city. Gestalts based on both figure/ground ambiguity and particle/substance ambiguity draw attention to the spaces between the solid objects of the built environment, so that city space is projected into the third dimension not through architectural schematics, but through a concrete sense of bodily motion and immersion.
The sheer variety of rare existents in *The Soul of London* confirms its recognition of the atmosphere as a material constituent of urban space in its own right. From the “slow and clinging veils of steam” in the hat factories (xii), to “horizons that are the blur of lamps in fogs” (5), Ford builds the city out of air and steam and smoke as much as buildings and people. Smoke takes many concrete forms: a “gush […] escaping in great woolly clots of smoke” past a “platform of the Underground” (28); a “puff” that “writhed very white, melted and vanished” against the silhouette of a steam crane (40); “rare jets” from the pipes of workers as they take their leisure on a Sunday afternoon (126). These smaller clouds are analogous to the discrete rare objects painted into the foreground of a canvas. They echo the overarching image of London as “a vast cloud,” just as, in illustrations like *Utilitarian London* (Fig. 9), puffs of industrial smoke from chimneys and locomotives visually echo the dark clouds overarching the city (Meynell and Hyde 10; Ford, *England* 290).

Fig. 8. William Hyde, *Utilitarian London*, 1898, photogravure (Plate: Hyde and Meynell, 10).
More subtle additive effects occur in the spaces between built structures. Constructing the place where, “for the river, psychological London begins” (*Soul* 66), Ford explicitly includes rare matter to give the space a felt extension: “On the other bank a square, large red hotel faces these pile structures across the broad gray sweep of water and air” (65-66). The river’s breadth is palpable at this location because the description encompasses the entire view: hotel, pile structures, and “the broad gray sweep of water and air” that separates them. This kind of three-dimensional effect can be reinforced, in verbal descriptions, through shifts in the focalization and the implied angle of view. In *London Impressions*, Meynell takes advantage of objects at various heights and distances from the urban observer to highlight several types of rare matter through which light must travel to reach the eye. Moving vertically up shafts of light and down chimneys to the steam used to power the underground trains, Meynell uses additive effects to lead the eye along a complicated trajectory, extending the space of the street in multiple directions:

> London at night has begun, of late, so to multiply her lights that they make all her scenery. A search-light suddenly draws the eye up to the chimney-pots (sweetly touched, they too, on the westernmost of their squalid sides) and to the unbroken sky; and then at once the eye travels down its shaft, revealing clouded air; and here a puff of steam from some machine at work on the new underground railway takes colour on its curves. (14-15)

Revealing the air in puffs, shafts, and clouds, London’s lamps foreground the rare matter that permeates city space. Similarly, the halos that surround street lamps in paintings like Markino’s *Night: Lights in Piccadilly Circus* (Fig. 2) provide a visible reminder of the suspended vapour particles that further redirect light during a heavy fog.
This immanent quality of the atmosphere is reinforced by the three-dimensional trajectories in “A Pilgrim,” a chapter of *London Impressions* which describes the flight of an airborne thistle-seed through the streets of the city (4). Sibilantly characterized as “a silver-white seed with silken spokes or sails” (4), the seed blows around the streets, rising, falling, or hanging suspended in the air currents between the buildings (much like a single particle of smoke or fog). It is quintessentially rare, with its solid matter spread out in tendrils: “Every limb, itself so fine, is feathered with little plumes that are as thin as autumn spider-webs” (4). The seed is characterized as a “flâneur” (4), but the vertical dimension of its journey distinguishes it from the usual urban pedestrian. Meynell specifies and manipulates the seed’s movements to delineate spatial depth, linking its essential rarity to its ability to infiltrate every corner of space: “There is no depth of the deep town that this visitant does not penetrate in August—going in, going far, going through, by virtue of its indescribable gentleness” (4). Though aloft, the thistle seeds do not travel in “a bee-line over the top of the houses” but instead “conform, for the time, to human courses, and stroll down Bond Street and turn up Piccadilly, and go to the Bank on a long west wind—their strolling being done at a certain height, in moderate mid-air” (4). Like the mid-air flight of the airplane that makes Byron Newton aware of the “great ocean of air above us” (226), the mid-air flight of Meynell’s seed makes visible the mobile currents of air that also “penetrate” the “depth of the deep town” (4). No longer conceptually confined to the sky “over top of the houses,” the west wind carries the seed through the street routes lined with buildings. In its mid-air flânerie, the seed serves as “the most delicate of all the visible signs of the breeze” (4). By following the motion of one tiny rare object along its trajectory through urban space, Meynell’s narration draws
attention to the unobtrusive motion of the gas particles that occupy the spaces between buildings, even on clear days when the atmosphere itself is invisible to the eye.

Visible manifestations of the air’s material presence can be combined with contour blurring to reinforce the impression of a three-dimensional atmospheric surround. In a remarkable passage that, according to Max Saunders, “transforms and disturbs our sense of space and reality” (“Ford, the City” 68), Ford sets up his atmospheric effects in three stages, building layers of multistability through narrative juxtaposition. Describing the view outside on a foggy day, Ford begins with a blurring effect, as the “uniform opacity” of the air obscures the solid contours of the landscape: “There is no colour visible anywhere but gray save for the red of a letter box that seems to float, blotted, in vapour, and the white triangular tops of the lamp-posts” (159). Because there is no horizon to situate these objects, they seem to float ambiguously in the space of the street. Ford then temporarily sets up a conventional foreground-background division for the purpose of contrast: “Through the gloom hail falls steadily and close, like fine rain, and behind it everything is flat, dim, as if the house fronts, the garden walls, the pavements, were cloudy forms printed in gray upon a large cloth” (159). This two-dimensional composition contrasts with the remarkable spatial transformation that follows:

Suddenly space exists: it is as if a red torch were shaken in the air and quenched. That is lightning, a reminder of the outside world that we have half forgotten. A broad shaft of sunlight reddens for an instant, in the distance, the white square face of a house […] it fades, and the eye is drawn upwards to an immense and sullen glow, the edge of a heavy cloud that towers perpendicularly on high. (159)
Having narrated the upward movement of a hypothetical viewer’s eye toward the cloud that “towers” above, Ford makes even more explicit the momentary gestalt effect that foregrounds rare matter: “The vast mass of vapour that overspreads London, becomes for that moment visible and manifest on account of that rift in its surface” (159). When the flash of lightning illuminates the night, space gains concreteness: the materiality of the cloud has transformed the formerly flat composition into a volumetric representation, one in which “space exists,” full of vapour that is at least potentially (at the next lightning strike) “visible and manifest.” The dimensionality of the scene has changed: the houses are located in a newly described locale, a space invested with concreteness by the juxtaposition of the original two-layer image (colourless weather against a gray-printed cloth backdrop) and the amorphous cloud torn by lightning. Although the rift immediately “joins again,” so that the “houses once more look like clouds” (159), the momentary revelation of rare matter models a verbal analogue to the gestalt shift in a multistable illustration, adding to the scene a layer of spatial ambiguity which can be hermeneutically re-activated at the reader’s discretion.


While Meynell and Ford foreground immersive atmospheres through forms of descriptive narration designed to harness multistability, Chiang goes one step further by addressing explicitly the perceiver’s role in activating the spatial ambiguities presented by rare matter. Having set up his use of negative space in *Fog in Trafalgar Square* as an application of Chinese painting techniques, he extends the cultural contrast to encompass a broader visual paradigm, in which Westerners’ practice of looking at scenery is
contrasted with the Chinese practice of going sightseeing in the fog with the expressed intention “to see nothing” (62). Citing Lin Yutang’s book *The Importance of Living*, he tells the story of an American woman who accompanies some Chinese friends on a walk in Hangchow. Despite the fact that there is “nothing to be seen but fog” (62), they urge her to climb to a local summit, where they are greeted by “an expanse of mists and fogs, with the outline of distant hills barely visible on the horizon” (62). Still protesting that “there is nothing to see here,” she is told: “‘That is exactly the point. We come up to see nothing’” (62, emphasis in original). In her determination to see through the fog, the American woman has missed the view that her friends deliberately seek out. Chiang experiences the same kind of misunderstanding in London when an English friend apologizes that fog has obscured his view of famous landmarks from the tower of Westminster Cathedral. Chiang observes wryly: “Really I could not understand what he meant by saying that there was nothing to see that day. I thought I had enjoyed the view immensely” (60). He repeats the experience deliberately:

Some time later I went up the tower again on my own. When I reached Westminster Cathedral the lift conductor advised me not to waste a shilling to go up and see nothing, as it was very foggy that day. I replied that I was wanting just to see nothing, and he smiled while he took me up. I was the only one there, and as I walked round all four sides of the tower I thought that I was living in heaven. I could not see the near-by chimney-pots underneath my feet and really had the feeling of having got away from London’s noisy traffic for a while, although it was quite near me still. (61-62)
By insisting that “nothing” is precisely that which he desires to see, Chiang re-enacts the foregrounding effect at work in his Trafalgar Square painting: he actively looks at what others perceive as negative space. He is rewarded with the pleasurably disorienting sensation of “living in heaven,” immersed even from below by the atmosphere floating “underneath [his] feet” (62). Unlike the “chance people on the bridges peeping over the parapets” in Dickens’s foggy city, who stumble upon the sense of “fog all round them” by accident (Bleak House 13), Chiang deliberately alters the focus of his attention to provoke the sensation of three-dimensional immersion within the atmosphere. In doing so, he models for readers the opportunity to deliberately activate the shift between looking at and looking through rare matter.

Gestalt shifts that provoke a sense of physical immersion in the atmosphere can radically defamiliarize our habitual sense of spatial orientation. As Chiang illustrates in an anecdote about walking through London on a day of thick fog, the blurring of visual cues like horizons or object contours is only one aspect of what is in fact a multi-sensory process of spatial defamiliarization. Chiang sets up the anecdote by explaining, “During my first winter here, a friend of mine wrote jokingly from China, asking whether the London fog really was as thick as pea-soup or able to be cut by a knife. I gave a negative answer as I had not then met it at its worst” (56). When, on New Year’s day, a “thick, yellowish shroud” envelops the city, the fog lives up to these clichéd expressions of its substantiality: “I felt I had to walk on the way more strongly and heavily than usual, as if I had to push something which was pouring around my body. It was not only I who had to do so, but the buses had to move very slowly as if they were hindered by the same thing” (57). The reduced visibility creates a palpable sense of immersion, as the fluid
substance of the atmosphere pours around the narrator’s body. This resistance leads him to a further reflection on the atmosphere’s material make-up, prompting him to speculate that “such minute particles of fog, when they were gathered together in a great mass, could be a strong factor in any sort of struggle” (57). Perceiving its dual status as both a continuous substance and a particle cluster, this observant Londoner encounters the fog as a thing to be reckoned with, in all its materiality. It affects not just his ability to navigate, but how he conceptualizes the relationship between his body and the space through which he moves. Once the materiality of the atmosphere is called to mind through any of the various gestalt effects, other experiential properties of rare matter vie for our attention—the smell of pollution, the sound of the wind, the touch of a cool mist. In each case, the sensory organ (the receptor inside the nose, the eardrum, the skin) represents a point of physical contact between the human body and its physical environment. Thus, the awareness of the atmosphere as a physical substance that is constantly touching the surfaces of the body draws attention to the spatiality of our interface with the outside environment.

Returning briefly to Woolf’s essay “Flying Over London,” I want to emphasize how atmospheric immersion provides an opportunity for enacting dramatic shifts in the way self-world thresholds are conceived and valued. Like Chiang, Woolf’s narrator in “Flying over London” actively seeks out an embodied, experiential sense of aerial immersion, and finds substance even in sensory deprivation. According to the narrator’s imagined recollection, when the plane took off, “[n]othingness was poured down upon us like a mound of white sand” (170). Defamiliarized by the novelty of the flight, the atmosphere takes on the palpable three-dimensionality of an immersive substance: “all
this soft ripeness seethed about us, and the eye felt as a fish feels when it slips from the rock into the depths of the sea” (170). In this odd synecdoche, Woolf captures the uncanny proximity of the rare medium that surrounds the eyeball even as it filters the light waves that provide visual stimulus. Woolf thus marks out the full, volumetric space of the air as a sensory medium in which both subject and object are immersed.49 As the airplane swoops in and out of cloud banks, the passenger is struck by the need to translate between “air values” and “land values” (71). The discreteness of “fields […] meted into yards” contrasts with the amorphous, variable outlines of clouds “vanishing and melting at the touch of each other without concussion” (167). These rapid shifts in the contours of the landscape destabilize the narrator’s sense of embodiment: at take-off, “one becomes conscious of being a little mammal, hot-blooded, hard-boned, with a clot of red blood in one’s body, trespassing up here in a fine air” (167). Higher up, beyond the clouds, there is “no crease to break the steep wall ascending for ever up, for ever and ever” and “the ribs and the entrails of the sprout-eating mammal” seem to be “pulverized, frozen to lightness and whiteness” by the absence of defining contours (170). Then, as the plane dips down into a cloudbank, the passengers experience a renewed sense of “ponderosity” as they fall down “into fleeciness, substance, and colour” (170). With each shift in the immersive atmosphere, Woolf’s narrator expands her perceptual vocabulary for articulating the

49 This “filling up” of the apparently empty distance between the perceiving eye and object of perception resembles a movement that José Ortega y Gasset traces through art history from “proximate” vision, which clearly distinguishes objects from backgrounds, to “distant” vision, which attempts to take in simultaneously the entire visual field between the eye and the limits of the visual horizon (101-05). This pattern may be discerned in several of the texts I consider. Near the end of To the Lighthouse, Lily Briscoe stares into the distance separating her from the island where the lighthouse stands, and observes of the intervening space: “Empty it was not, but full to the brim” (192). Meynell makes a similar observation in London Impressions: “And if, from a heart of glowing lights, you look into the streets, you find them so filled with blue air that there is evident blue between you and the houses opposite” (15). The concept of distant vision also gives extra resonance to Ford’s description of the “third state between work and amusement” as “a bathing in the visible world” (Soul 123).
variations in her embodied sense of space. This disorienting whirl of rapidly changing spatial impressions dramatizes the ultimate instability of the self-world threshold, its openness to reconfiguration in relation to the immersive medium of the atmosphere. In the chapters that follow, I discuss how D. H. Lawrence and Virginia Woolf combine the spatial ambiguities presented by rare materiality and the dynamic techniques of narrative to further explore this dynamism at the boundaries where individual subjects meet and interact with their surroundings.
Chapter 2. “Herself Melted Out Like Scent”: Body Thresholds and Self-World Relationships in D. H. Lawrence’s Essays and Early Novels

1. Lawrence’s Dynamic Approach to Self-World Relationships

In a striking passage from D. H. Lawrence’s *Sons and Lovers*, the protagonist Paul Morel describes his emotional vulnerability toward his lover Miriam as a sensation of physical amorphousness and permeability: “Why did she make him feel as if he were uncertain of himself, insecure, an indefinite thing, as if he had not sufficient sheathing to prevent the night and the space breaking into him?” (231). Miriam’s overwhelming need for intimacy has disrupted Paul’s sense of his body as a clearly demarcated container for an “interior” self to the extent that he feels vulnerable to penetration by the night air. He pictures his body as taking on the rare properties of the air, becoming spatially “indefinite” instead of being delineated by a “sufficient” boundary. In response to such images, Daniel Albright observes that Lawrence’s characters are typically “engaged in a perpetual struggle of self-definition; their main business is the determination of exactly where they stop” (21-22). Albright identifies this pattern in Lawrence’s work as representative of a broader trend in modernism characterized by “a loss of the clear division between perceiver, perception, and object perceived” (20). Lawrence’s work, in particular, values both dissolution and differentiation as essential to the processes of self-definition. In the course of explicating the elaborate technical vocabulary in Lawrence’s *Psychoanalysis and the Unconscious*, Albright explains:

> The “first mode of the upper consciousness” […] tends to eradicate boundaries; the second mode […] attempts to determine the limits of the self and also to articulate the beloved. What counts is the balance: it is
fatal to identify oneself with the universe [...]; it is equally fatal to try to exist as a wholly separate, discrete creature. Proper love will preserve in delicate tension the isolate self and the oceanic self. (24-25)

Albright resolves the apparent contradictions between the first and second modes by suggesting that Lawrence seeks to hold self-dissolution and self-differentiation in “delicate tension.” Picking up on this logic of tension between opposed but equally necessary modes of self-definition, Rochelle Rives has recently described Paul’s interactions with Baxter Dawes in terms of “‘managed’ self-diffusion” (15). She argues convincingly that Lawrence’s approach to impersonality and subject-object relations in the novels depends on a tension between dissolving “the boundaries that separate individuals” and “retaining order” through “some device [...] to guard against the complete dissolution of literary form and space” (9, 17). Leaving room for both dissolution and differentiation, managed self-diffusion represents an alternative to the logic that “posits a binary between the self and its own dissolution” (15).

The problem with describing the relationship between self-dissolution and self-differentiation as one of “balance” or “tension” is that it reinforces the logic of the binary opposition. Implied in the concept of “managing” self-diffusion, on the other hand, is an alternative, temporal logic: “managing” suggests adapting to or permitting variation over time (within certain limits), rather than trying to preserve a static balance between the two modes. My analysis will build on this implication of temporal variation in the spatial definition of the self. I suggest that Lawrence frequently advocates an alternation or narrative fluctuation between differentiation and diffusion that never stabilizes into a static compromise; one might picture this dynamic in terms of elastic motion, rather than
balanced tension, between the extremes of the “isolate” and “oceanic” selves. In keeping with his vitalist emphasis on continuous self-renewal, Lawrence advocates a constantly shifting self-world dynamic that maintains an alert, responsive relationship to changes in both the individual and the surrounding environment. Rare matter, with its amorphous and variable contours, provides concrete imagery uniquely suited to representing these spatial complexities of self-world thresholds as they vary over time.

Much of the existing criticism that attends to the principles of dissolution and differentiation in Lawrence’s work focusses primarily on *Women in Love*. The foundational (and still the most substantial) work in this area is Colin Clarke’s 1969 study *River of Dissolution*, which traces the influence on Lawrence of English Romantic poetry’s morally ambivalent treatment of extreme dissolution. While unusually attentive to the complex materiality of dissolution imagery (22-26, 30), Clarke focusses on the proliferation of meanings at the one extreme and leaves out the contrary movement in Lawrence’s work toward self-differentiation. Gouirand and Rowley, who also limit their attention to *Women in Love*, pick up on both principles, but overlook the ambivalence of the differentiation imagery, characterizing “husks” and “contours” as invariably limiting rather than potentially liberating. Critics who consider a broader range of Lawrence’s

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50 In an analysis of how Lawrence’s essays on the novel inform his fictional practice, Leo Dorbad neatly captures this need for constant subtle adjustments to preserve the dynamic equilibrium in interpersonal relations. For Lawrence, he explains, “Healthy identity depends solely upon a modulated sensitivity between vital singleness and rewarding connection […] it is a sensitivity his characters must master for themselves; it becomes the central thrust of their lives” (37). My analysis, while more focussed on the materiality of embodied imagery, reaches similar conclusions about the dynamism of Lawrence’s approach to self-definition.

51 Macadré’s analysis of *Women in Love* is more balanced, recognizing that the “presence, absence, or erasure” of contours and limits all contribute to the characters’ processes of self-definition; however, her conclusions are largely about the aesthetic manipulation of “boundaries and closure” (117) in the form of the text itself, rather than on the material dynamics of characterization that will be my primary focus in this chapter.
texts tend to recognize a dynamic oscillation between dissolution and diffusion, a position more in line with my own reading. With reference to the psychoanalytic works as well as the novels, Tangas discusses Lawrence’s view that fusion between two lovers “must be temporary and at the same time complete,” using a comparison to Plato to highlight Lawrence’s dynamic view of relationships (85). Doherty’s analysis of *Sons and Lovers* detects a “dialectic of confinement and liberation in the rhetoric of the narrative” that also “maps the main relations between the characters in the text” (328). Also concerned with balanced oscillation, Gutierrez examines “figures of centripetality and centrifugality” in Lawrence’s representations of death in the period from 1926-1930 (16, 24). To examine how the rarity-density spectrum facilitates this dynamic approach to diffusion and differentiation in Lawrence’s work, I will first draw broadly from his essays and then concentrate on the two early novels *Sons and Lovers* and *The Rainbow*. These works, I argue, offer clear insights into Lawrence’s complex negotiation of rarity and body thresholds; once the approach has been defined and fine-tuned through close readings, I will argue that the variability of threshold dynamics in Lawrence’s work poses important hermeneutic challenges that can re-orient how we approach his later texts as well.

Lawrence’s consistent interest in characters’ body thresholds derives from his search for a dynamic alternative to the opposed extremes of self-differentiation and self-diffusion. I argue that his destabilization of contours fulfills a deliberate mimetic function: it serves to describe a distinctive view of selfhood that combines materialism

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52 Although Doherty’s analysis of oscillating threshold imagery in specific passages resembles my own approach, his insistent pairing of closed spaces with literal language and open spaces with metaphorical language does not account for rare matter’s capacity to destabilize boundaries through its physical (rather than figurative) properties.
with flux philosophy, a model I will call *dynamic individualism*. Lawrence prefers embodied to transcendent notions of selfhood, and views human beings as utterly unique individuals that nevertheless change and mutate as part of the greater flux that surrounds them. Dynamic individualism drives an innovative approach to body thresholds, which must define the limits of the discrete individual but also maintain the openness and mobility that Lawrence views as essential to self-development. At the edges of the body, Lawrence experiments with the rarity-density spectrum as he works to delineate the boundaries of the self without fixing them so firmly as to imply a static, isolated form of individuality.

Although rare images of the body’s thresholds are necessarily somewhat figurative (since the skin does not actually evaporate under normal conditions), my method of pausing on the concrete attributes of the imagery through close reading has important advantages over more abstract approaches to the spatial ambiguities of embodiment. Sara Cohen Shabot addresses the problem of abstraction in her analysis of Mikhail Bakhtin’s conception of the grotesque, which he defines in terms of an “unfinished and open body” that “is not separated from the world by clearly defined boundaries” but rather “blended with the world, with animals, with objects” (26-27, qtd. in Shabot 67). Elaborating on Bakhtin’s model, which closely resembles modernist images of partial self-diffusion, Shabot suggests that the grotesque body resists representation within any rational system because its elements cannot be framed as clearly delineated abstract concepts (70). Like the “grotesque figuration” that Shabot describes, rare body images offer a concrete alternative for representing the “intertwining” of the embodied subject and its surroundings (70). In Lawrence’s work,
characters’ body thresholds are alternately pictured as rigid or diffuse, solid or gas-like, depending on the situation. Self-diffusion and self-differentiation, rather than being mutually exclusive, function as flexible character responses to psychological pressures imposed by interpersonal and self-world relationships. Lawrence is quite clear about the need to preserve both options: the openness of the ambiguously bounded self, and the discreteness of the clearly delineated individual. His insistence that the self-world relationship must be one of ongoing, interactive responsiveness means that either differentiation or diffusion can be appropriate in a given situation; danger lies in getting stuck at one extreme or the other, so that adjustment becomes impossible. Between the extremes of differentiation and dissolution, Lawrence sees not an abstract tension, but a concretely figured narrative movement among more or less discretely bounded models of the embodied subject. Threshold imagery drawn from across the rarity-density spectrum expands the options for the material differentiation of subject and world to include porous, mobile boundaries as well as more clearly delineated ones.

In a series of essays published in the 1920s, Lawrence reworks in more explicit form many of principles underlying the narrative experiments with body thresholds in *Sons and Lovers* and *The Rainbow*. Having established, using the essays, that rare imagery is a primary means by which Lawrence resists both overly differentiated and overly diffuse constructions of the subject, I will propose to reread these early novels with an eye to the participation of rare materiality in the narrative representation of characters’ spatial boundaries. Two essays published near the end of the decade, “Chaos

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53 As Paul Morel’s struggles with interpersonal relationships will illustrate, such adjustments may be unconscious responses to fears and desires, or more deliberate attempts to consciously control self-world boundary dynamics.
in Poetry” (1928) and “Introduction to these Paintings” (1929), help to identify the role of
the rarity-density spectrum in linking body imagery to the broader ontological issues of
differentiation and dissolution. These later works of literary and cultural criticism serve
to contextualize the more specific spatial configurations articulated in a number of earlier
essays dealing with literature and body thresholds. The first of these, “Whitman” (1920),
describes an oscillation between diffused and condensed models of selfhood, introducing
the narrative dynamics that, in more elaborate forms, organize movement among spatial
models in the novels. “Poetry of the Present” (1922) and “The Novel” (1925) reveal clear
affinities between Lawrence’s brand of vitalism and the flux philosophy expressed in
Walter Pater’s “Conclusion” to The Renaissance. Elaborating on the spatio-temporal
intricacy of Pater’s flame and water imagery, these essays help to establish the
importance of the rarity-density spectrum to Lawrence’s model of dynamic
individualism. Along with “Why the Novel Matters” (1925), they draw attention to the
thresholds between animate and inanimate matter, using rare images to build up complex
spatial models of the embodied self.

Taken together, these essays throw into question the body-as-container metaphor
associated with the highly differentiated view of subject-object relations. Ever the
materialist, Lawrence consistently rejects mind-body dualism, refusing to acknowledge a
division between matter and any concept like spirit or mind that would locate selfhood as
an entity separate from the body. In “Why the Novel Matters,” he champions fiction’s
capacity for dramatizing embodied knowledge as an alternative to the more abstract,
dualistic knowledge systems of religion, philosophy, and science. Insisting on a holistic
model of selfhood, he declares: “I absolutely flatly deny that I am a soul, or a body, or a
mind, or an intelligence, or a brain, or a nervous system, or a bunch of glands, or any of
the rest of these bits of me” (206). Integrating the various “bits” poses several challenges,
ot least of which is the spatial problem of containment. Lawrence observes: “We have
curious ideas of ourselves. We think of ourselves as a body with a spirit in it, or a body
with a soul in it, or a body with a mind in it. *Mens sana in corpore sano.* The years drink
up the wine, and at last throw the bottle away, the body, of course, being the bottle”
(204). Rather than viewing the body as a solid container for the immaterial components
of the self (figured here as fluids that take the shape of their container), Lawrence
complicates the body-as-container metaphor by challenging the inside-outside dichotomy
that supports it. In the context of Lawrence’s model of embodied consciousness, the
physical flux of particulate exchange between the body and the environment makes the
notion of mental and emotional “interiority” untenable. The logical result is his unique
brand of dynamic individualism, articulated more or less explicitly in the essays and
expressed dramatically in the narrative dynamics of the early novels.

2. Essays I: Rare Matter and the Dynamics of Immersion in an Infinite Material Universe

In the first group of essays I will address, Lawrence employs rare matter to
emphasize the concrete materiality of a universe so vast that Western tradition has
attempted (wrongly, in Lawrence’s view) to contain its threatening immensity by relying
on processes of intellectual abstraction and spiritual transcendence which reinforce mind-
body dualism.⁵⁴ Although Lawrence is determined to recognize the alterity of the object

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⁵⁴ Lawrence acquired a broad familiarity with the Western literary canon through his voracious reading
habits. During his early twenties, he and Jessie Chambers engaged in a “kind of orgy of reading,”
borrowing from the local library a broad range of novels (including Scott, Brontë, Eliot and Thackeray),
poetry (including Milton, Blake and Swinburne) and criticism (including Lamb, Emerson, Thoreau,
world, he seeks a form of subject-object differentiation that does not require complete objectivity or detachment, but retains, instead, an active process of ongoing negotiation at the self-world threshold.

The intensely dynamic nature of the self-world relationship is a repeated motif in Lawrence’s essays from the 1920s. In “Art and Morality” (1925), Lawrence locates in Paul Cézanne’s still life paintings evidence of an active form of subject-object engagement that challenges conventional morality. By departing from photorealism, Lawrence argues, the painter disrupts the illusion of detached objectivity associated with photographic “Kodak-vision” (172), and instead explores the subtleties of active subject-object relationships. In explaining why these paintings represent a “finer morality” than the conventions they challenge, Lawrence details his understanding of how the universal flux requires constant adjustments to the configuration of the self-world relationship:

The universe is like Father Ocean, a stream of all things slowly moving. We move, and the rock of ages moves. [...] There is nothing to do but to maintain a true relationship to the things we move with and amongst and against. [...] Each thing, living or unliving, streams in its own odd, intertwining flux, and nothing [...] is fixed or abiding. All moves. And nothing is true, or good, or right, except in its own living relatedness to its own circumambient universe; to the things that are in the stream with it.

(171-72)

Carlyle, and Ruskin) (Worthen D. H. Lawrence: The Early Years 122). Although he attended University College, Nottingham from 1906-08, he found informal discussions with his peers far more intellectually stimulating, and pursued outside of school interests in the ideas of Schopenhauer, Wagner, Nietzsche, T. H. Huxley, Darwin, William James, and Haeckel, among many others (ibid. 168-171, 179-180, 210).

Maintaining a “true relationship” with this universal flux is easier said than done. Lawrence’s notion of the “circumambient universe” has some similarities with the immersive atmospheres I discuss at the end of Chapter 1, but whereas Chiang and Woolf describe experiences of immersion in mid-air, Lawrence extends the scale outward to encompass unbounded, interstellar spaces beyond the range of skyscrapers and airplanes. Although some sense of interconnectedness with our local environment can be assimilated with reasonable comfort, a truly materialist view of the universe insists on physical continuity at vaster, cosmic scales.

Such an expansion of the spatial horizon has profound psychological and ontological implications. Since the advent of the heliocentric model of the universe in the sixteenth century called into question the enclosure of the planet within successive layers of celestial spheres, the knowledge of an unbounded exterior space has been a potent psychological force in Western thought. In the essay “Chaos in Poetry,” Lawrence portrays this immersive totality as a distinctly material form of the infinite, one that has been mistakenly replaced by idealized abstractions throughout history, due to a kind of cosmic agoraphobia. Originally written as an introduction to Harry Crosby’s poetry collection *Chariot of the Sun*, the essay finds hope in a generation of young poets who, through a “new effort of attention,” are overcoming self-consciousness and conventional forms to seek out a renewed receptivity to the flux of experience.

Throughout the essay, rare matter is associated with the flux: the new poets seek a “liberation into the wild air of chaos” (242). Their contribution is contextualized in terms of a cultural pattern in which poetry’s capacity for defamiliarization is continuously

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56 For further references to the “circumambient universe,” see also “Morality and the Novel” (173-74).
neutralized as radical new forms are co-opted to support the status quo. According to Lawrence, people (unlike animals) fear the “open and windy chaos” that actually surrounds them, and therefore employ abstractions to create a false sense of security: “Man must wrap himself in a vision, make a house of apparent form and stability, fixity. In his terror of chaos he begins by putting up an umbrella between himself and the everlasting whirl” (235). Great artists may temporarily make “a slit in the umbrella” and let in a “genuine draught from chaos” but even radical artistic innovations eventually become incorporated into the “painted vault” that separates mankind from “the sky of fresh air” (235). Depending on its receptiveness to the flux of experience, poetry may either disrupt and renew our powers of perception, or become complicit in the artificial and deadening forces of habit: while the “desire for chaos” constitutes the “breath” of poetry, that which fills it with meaning and makes it alive, the “fear of chaos” is revealed in poetry’s conventional forms, its ability to provide comfortable but ultimately evasive simulations of self-world contact. In broader terms, art uses abstraction to tame the infinite; it provides a false sense of enclosure, a kind of bounding surface that protects us from the terrifying immensity of the sky. Only a continuous effort of renewal can keep us in touch with the “vast and potent living chaos” from which we “draw our breath of life” (238).

Lawrence’s holistic view of the individual, his insistence on the inseparability of mental, spiritual, and physical identity, prompts him to resist the relegation of infinite space to the realm of the abstract or the supernatural. To understand the self as being fundamentally in touch with the chaotic universe, one must first acknowledge the concrete nature of the infinite. At one point in “Chaos in Poetry,” Lawrence seems to
undermine my claim that he is describing a distinctly material form of infinite space, when he specifies that he is referring to “the chaos alive, not the chaos of matter” (237). However, in Lawrence’s idiosyncratic usage, words like “alive” do not distinguish between brute matter and something endowed with an animating spirit (a distinction dependent on mind-body dualism). In “The Novel,” an earlier essay that also fuses vitalism and literary criticism, he explains clearly that both animate and inanimate bodies may possess “quickness” as opposed to “deadness” (183). Looking around the room where he is writing, he observes that “a little table” and “several books” are dead, whereas “a ridiculous little iron stove,” “an iron wardrobe trunk” and “a sleeping cat” are all quick (183). The distinction refers to the existence of a responsive relationship between the object (or living being) and its environment. Quickness, the essential quality of successful fiction, lies “in a certain weird relationship” between a particular object or character and “all the rest of things” (183). In contrast, that which is dead is cut off from relationship, a “mere disconnected lump” that “doesn’t belong” (“The Novel” 183). With these distinctions in mind, I take Lawrence’s phrase “the chaos alive” to refer to the material universe in flux, and the phrase “the chaos of matter” to refer to the “dead,” mechanistic universe as objectified by the rational, deterministic knowledge systems that Lawrence mistrusts.

An emphasis on the physical continuity of the self and the material world permits Lawrence to shift with unusual fluency away from the familiar human scale, toward tiny (molecular) or vast (interstellar) spaces. In his exploration of embodied knowledge in fiction, Lawrence reaffirms his materialist view of infinite space: “If you are a philosopher, you talk about infinity, and the pure spirit which knows all things. But if you
pick up a novel, you realize immediately that infinity is just a handle to this self-same jug of a body of mine” (“Why the Novel Matters” 205). To avoid associating infinity with “pure spirit” Lawrence relies on the amorphous substantiality of rare matter to mark the physical continuity between the apparently finite human body and the open flux of a material universe with unknown borders. In “Him with His Tail in His Mouth” (1925), a mocking criticism of transcendent ideals in Platonic philosophy and Christianity, he redefines even the human soul as something immanent to the world, rather than abstract and separate: “But what is the soul of a man,” he demands, “except that in him which is himself alone, suspended in immediate relation to the sum of things?” (198). Thus the “sum of things” is an immersive medium, and the human soul is “suspended” within the material world (much like a fog particle in air), and not “isolated or cut off” as in the Platonic tradition of abstraction.57 When he calls the universe an “open and windy chaos,” Lawrence specifically invests the unknown, ungraspable reality of our surroundings with the substantial attributes of rare matter: its invisible but palpable presence in the world.

The problem, however, is that the same tradition that has built a roof of abstractions between humanity and material chaos has also very effectively co-opted rare matter to symbolize the purity of the bodiless abstraction. Lawrence, at times, reinforces the symbolic appropriation of rare matter as the “insubstantial substance” that pervades idealist thought. In “Introduction to These Paintings,” he provides an account of Western art’s flight from the body, a pattern he attributes to a longstanding cultural preoccupation

57 Lawrence associates Platonic thought with mind-body dualism: “The Greeks began the cutting apart business. And Rodin’s re-merging was only an intellectual tacking on again” (Lawrence, “Him with His Tail in His Mouth” 198). Tangas (2005) argues that Lawrence’s anti-Platonic stance is based on a misreading of Plato’s view of love.
with the “denial of the existence of matter, and the proof that matter is only a form of spirit” (266). In the course of this history, he presents Cézanne’s still life paintings as the sole evidence of progress back toward an embodied, materialist approach to representation. In discussing the history of painting, Lawrence rejects the idealist differentiation between body and spirit, and manipulates the rarity-density spectrum to preserve a form of subject-object differentiation more in keeping with his materialist philosophy. As he discusses the objectivity required to represent concrete objects authentically, Lawrence’s concern with subject-object relations draws attention to the ambiguous contours of solid objects and the amorphous forms of rare matter.

In describing artistic attempts to dematerialize the body, Lawrence initially uses rarity as a figure for the insubstantiality that marks artists’ estrangement from material experience. Shelley’s transcendent poetry “is pure escape: the body is sublimated into sublime gas” (“Introduction to These Paintings” 259), while in the somewhat less spiritualized poetry of Keats, “the body can still be felt dissolving in waves of successive death” (259). In Lawrence’s view, Impressionist painters take this escapist logic to the extreme: “the real outburst of delight came when the body was at last dissolved of its substance, and made part and parcel of the sunlight-and-shadow scheme” (261). This Impressionist move is specifically described as “a grand escape into freedom, into infinity [...] into the open air” and away from “the tyranny of solidity” and the “dark procreative body” (261).Implicitly, Lawrence interprets the Impressionists’ blurring of object and body contours as a move toward both rarity and immateriality. By conflating the two, he inadvertently reinforces the very processes of abstraction and spiritualization that he sees Cézanne as combating. Continuing his survey of art history, Lawrence goes
on to argue that the post-Impressionists, who “still hate the body,” are able to grudgingly admit the existence of matter but, in a “sulky and rebellious mood [...] paint it as huge lumps, tubes, cubes, planes, volumes, spheres, cones, cylinders, all the ‘pure’ or mathematical forms of substance” (262). In other words, they are still erecting a wall of abstraction between themselves and the materiality of their surroundings, this time through geometrical shapes and contours. Only with Cézanne does art make “its first tiny step back to real substance, to objective substance” (265). In order to emphasize this objective approach to “real substance,” and to make a point about the overvaluation of vision at the expense of touch, Lawrence initially emphasizes the solidity of matter in Cézanne’s work.

Lawrence applauds Cézanne’s efforts to re-integrate object autonomy into visual art, particularly in the still life paintings, where he manages to “shove the apple away from him, and let it live of itself” (266). In Lawrence’s view, Cézanne seeks to go beyond the Impressionists’ “purely optical vision,” in order to “displace our present mode of mental-visual consciousness, the consciousness of mental concepts, and substitute a mode of consciousness that was predominantly intuitive, the awareness of touch” (277). Lawrence here downplays rare materiality by expressing this new consciousness of touch using the more conventional association of solidity and substance. Figuring “We, dear reader, you and I” as ghostly shadows out of touch with the material world, he laments the deadening effects of our abstract identities:

58 For a detailed discussion of the relationships between vision, touch and knowledge in Lawrence’s work (particularly in “The Five Senses” chapter of Fantasia of the Unconscious), see Becket (87-92).
We are not solid. We don’t live in the flesh. Our instincts and intuitions are dead, we live wound round with the winding-sheet of abstraction. And the touch of anything solid hurts us. For our instincts and intuitions, which are our feelers of touch and knowing through touch, they are dead, amputated. (268)

There is no particular reason why “knowing through touch” should pertain exclusively to contact between solid flesh and a solid object; breezes, thick fogs, and raindrops are all palpable to the skin. But Lawrence, who includes himself among the spectres, fails to escape completely the symbolic tradition he seeks to undermine; in associating rare matter with abstraction and death, he relies on the same philosophical and religious iconography that uses the figure of the “insubstantial substance” to picture mental and spiritual ideals as distinct from bodily materials.

Nevertheless, near the end of the essay, rare matter appears once again as the real substance beyond the false ceiling of artifice. When Cézanne becomes conscious of “the tyranny of mind, the enclosed ego in its sky-blue heaven self-painted,” and wants to be “a man of flesh, a real man,” the solution he seeks is “to get out of the sky-blue prison into real air” (266-67). In this brief reference to “real air,” Lawrence distinguishes between rare matter’s symbolic function as the “insubstantial substance” of abstraction (the “sky-blue” painted on the inside of the prison’s roof) and the palpable materiality of the sky itself, the “windy” chaos that lies beyond this false protective barrier.

The quality of “objective substance” that Cézanne approaches, then, has more to do with materiality in general than with solidity as such. Nevertheless, the well-defined contours of solid objects conveniently illustrate the principle of differentiation. What
impresses Lawrence most about Cézanne’s still life paintings is that the artist makes “a real attempt to let the apple exist in its own separate entity,” as a discrete object rather than a form bathed impressionistically in “the delicious oneness of light” (265). In reiterating the well-known contrast between the blurred contours in Impressionist painting and the firmer delineation of objects in Cézanne’s work, Lawrence attributes a kind of monistic fervour to the Impressionists, who ostensibly worship light as a “universalizer” and proclaim, “We are not divided, all one body we—one in Light” (263). This exaggerated portrait of Impressionist fusion is partly a rhetorical pose, but it derives from the blurring of contours in many Impressionist paintings. As I explained in Chapter 1, Impressionist efforts to paint the entire visual field undermine clear distinctions between objects and backgrounds; they therefore pose a challenge to the “objective” distance that Lawrence works to establish here between the painter and the “real substance” of the autonomous object. But Lawrence expresses elsewhere a mistrust of the egotism with which, influenced by the snapshot-style vision of photography, man views himself as “a complete little objective reality [...] existing by himself, absolutely, in the middle of the picture,” while “the rest is just setting, background” (“Art and Morality” 169). “Objective” distance, then, is both a necessity and a risk: it establishes object autonomy as a materialist response to the problem of extreme dissolution, but also threatens to over-differentiate the subject, cutting off its vital relationship with the surrounding world.

59 Charles Sterling argues that Cézanne’s rejection of Impressionism has been overstated, but concedes that he sought to convey a “palpable density” that Impressionist paintings lacked (125). For an analysis of the contrasts between what Cézanne wrote about his use of lines and edges and what he practiced in his paintings, see Loran (11-15).
Near the end of “Introduction to these Paintings,” Lawrence acknowledges that Cézanne’s quest for a sensual apprehension of the apple runs into the same problem of object boundaries that the Impressionists had been exploring: “he had to fight with the *edges* of his forms and contours” (275, italics in original). Indeed, while the apples in Cézanne’s still life paintings appear crisply outlined from a distance, a closer look reveals considerable blending and distortion at their edges. From Lawrence’s perspective, precisely defined edges would simplify the task of considering an apple as “its own separate entity,” but they would also reinforce the static quality often associated with the term *still life*. Thus, he notes with approval that Cézanne incorporates “gradual flux of change” into his still life paintings, making “the universe slip uneasily” around the objects in the painting, destabilizing the background, and setting “the unmoving material world into motion” (279). Ultimately, Cézanne’s strength is his continuous struggle to combine objectivity, concreteness and dynamism. Lawrence may criticize the Impressionists for their efforts to dissolve the contours that define the geometrical forms of solid objects, but he cannot embrace the discreteness of objects wholeheartedly or absolutely without undermining his basic view of the dynamic relationship between the individual body and the universal flux. This need for mobility at the self-world threshold is investigated in greater detail in Lawrence’s literary criticism from the first half of 1920s.

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60Temporal change and decay are, in fact, common themes in the *vanitas* tradition of still life painting. The transience of life is implied by the inclusion of perishable flowers and food items, as well as the more obvious reminders of death (e.g. animal skulls) known as *memento mori* (Stokstad 797-800).
Between 1920 and 1925, Lawrence published a series of essays that, in detailing his understanding of dynamic individualism, explicitly address the role of motion and physical interaction at the self-world boundary. Instead of using painting as a touchstone, these essays tend to allude to poetry. Whitman, rather than Cézanne, becomes the exemplar who struggles to integrate the materiality of flux experience into art. Harnessing the narrative properties of language, the poet approaches this goal not by blurring contours, but by dramatizing their mobility. In his 1920 essay “Whitman,” Lawrence introduces the rare properties of dilation and contraction to articulate a narrative approach to the extremes of differentiation and dissolution in the self-world relationship. His analysis suggests that these two principles are mutually exclusive only as long as the spatial categories of inside and outside are considered statically, as if boundary conditions could be separated from the flux, frozen at an instant rather than flowing dynamically through the temporal dimension. The essay introduces a narrative framework that can help to understand how shifting boundary conditions play out in the fiction.

Lawrence sees Whitman as the master of a particular form of self-diffusion; by identifying himself “item by item” with his surroundings in his famous catalogues, Whitman becomes “in his own person the whole world, the whole universe, the whole eternity of time” (83). Recognizing the danger of self-loss inherent in this “endless dilation of sympathy,” Lawrence warns that it must be matched by “the reverse of merging [...] the retraction into isolation and pride” (84). Because “identities are manifold,” too much merging results in a dangerous homogeneity, a loss of integrity
which Lawrence expresses in terms of a liquefaction of bodily tissues: “the motion of merging becomes at last a vice, a nasty degeneration, as when tissue breaks down into a mucous slime” (84). Self-diffusion “brings a man to his maximum,” but only temporarily: “Even if you reach a state of infinity, you can’t sit down there. You just physically can’t. You either have to strain still further into universality and become vaporish, or slimy [...] or you have to come back to common dimensions” (84). Merging and its opposite, then, are interdependent vectors of motion “away from” and “towards” the self, which together form a dynamic oscillation analogous to the “systole diastole” of the heart or the rising and setting of the sun (84). At the maximum extension—the “vaporish” extreme of the rarity-density spectrum—diffusion becomes associated with self-loss, and must be corrected by condensing the self back toward its “common dimensions” (84). Lawrence therefore advocates neither a total dissolution of the barrier between self and world, nor a strict differentiation, but rather an alternation of the two in sequence. In the novels, this dual movement becomes considerably more complex, as characters negotiate the variable boundary conditions of interpersonal and ontological relationships over the course of their lifetimes. Instead of choosing between the diffused and discrete spatial models of the self, Lawrence represents the interaction of self and world as a complex problem of autonomy and interrelationship, something to be worked out dynamically through narrative movement.

As Cézanne’s struggle with object contours demonstrates, combining dynamism and subject-object differentiation is a tall order, especially when only solid objects are recognized as substantial forms of matter. Lawrence is most successful in articulating his view of dynamic individualism when he takes advantage of the full range of the rarity-
density spectrum. In “Poetry of the Present” (1925), Lawrence again points to Whitman as the trailblazing master of a renewed, vitalistic form of poetry that emphasizes continuous motion: “the unrestful, ungraspable poetry of the sheer present” (77). Seeking to express this new poetry’s combination of materialism with flux philosophy, the essay reworks the oxymoronic combination of solid and gas in Pater’s well-known image of the “hard, gem-like flame” (152). The first half of Pater’s “Conclusion” to The Renaissance is broadly organized around a spatial contrast between “that which is without—our physical life” and “the inward world of thought and feeling” (Pater 150-51). This division between outer and inner worlds is supported by the famous image of the “narrow chamber of the individual mind” isolated from the world by a “thick wall of personality” (151). However, Pater’s representation of the body’s perpetual motion—its exchange of molecules and forces with the inanimate environment—subtly undermines this spatial dichotomy. Pater gestures toward but does not fully articulate this challenge to the inside-outside binary, since his primary concern is the temporal experience of the flux, the transient momentaneity to which both physical and mental experience are ultimately reducible. Lawrence, however, being particularly sensitive to the problems posed by mind-body dualism, investigates in greater depth the spatial implications of the flux model.

Pater’s strong influence on Lawrence is partly explained by their common belief that individuals can only develop their full, unique potential through a vivid awareness of temporal flux: each passing moment brings with it an opportunity for exploring what Lawrence calls “the inexhaustible, forever-unfolding creative spark” (76). For Pater, the gem-like flame represents the continuous ecstasy produced by an aesthetic receptivity to
the richness of each passing moment. He never really explains what is “hard” or “gem-like” about the flame, but Lawrence clearly finds these solid attributes provocative because they imply a static quality at odds with the dynamism of the flux. Disassembling Pater’s paradox, Lawrence temporarily decouples the contrasting elements of the image, and applies the descriptor “gem-like” to the polished lyric masterpieces of his Romantic precursors (Shelley and Keats); in his view, these “crystalline, pearl-hard jewels, the poems of the eternities” have a finished quality that contrasts with the “seething,” unfixed fluidity of modern poetry—poetry that seeks to express the moment-in-progress, the “incarnate Now” (77). To describe this more agile, dynamic language, Lawrence harnesses the other half of Pater’s oxymoron, the rare materiality represented by the flame. Thus, he seeks a form of poetry whose “permanency” lies not in its finished, “gem-like” qualities, but “in its wind-like transit” (77). Because wind manifests physically as a flow of rare matter that is both palpably present and continuously in motion, it neatly expresses the combination of materiality and motion-through-time that characterizes life in the flux.

The vital, mobile presentness of free verse poetry derives from its source, “the instant, the immediate self” of an artist (79). Since Lawrence defines free verse as “the soul and the mind and body surging at once” (79), his metaphorical descriptions of “the rare new poetry” apply by extension to the poet’s embodied experience of the flux. As the essay continues, Lawrence adds to the complexity of the rare imagery by mixing his metaphors: having described free verse poetry as “wind-like,” he then compares it to a bird riding the wind currents. While the wind metaphor suggests that poetry (and by extension, the poet) is an indistinguishable part of the flux, the bird metaphor suggests a
more discrete existence, while retaining the sense of extreme responsiveness to the flux that both Lawrence and Pater see as essential to aesthetic success. The following lines, then, simultaneously express Lawrence’s conviction about how life ought to be lived, and how art ought to be made: “The bird is on the wing in the winds, flexible to every breath, a living spark in the storm, its very flickering depending upon its supreme mutability and power of change. Whence such a bird came: whither it goes: [...] this is not the question [...] Now, now, the bird is on the wing in the winds” (79). As in Pater’s “Conclusion,” the aesthetic and ontological levels of experience are here inseparable. Earlier described as “wind-like,” free verse poetry now floats upon the wind as a bird immersed in its native air. As the instantiation of the poet’s “immediate self,” free verse takes on the material attributes of a body that is simultaneously part of and distinct from the surrounding flux. The mixed bird/wind metaphors symbolize not only the new poetry’s responsiveness to minute-by-minute experience, but also the subject’s ambiguous material relationship to its mutable surroundings.

Lawrence further refines this material model of flux experience by reworking Pater’s flame imagery. Substituting an animate rose for Pater’s inanimate gem, Lawrence describes the (solid) body of the flower as a flame: “Life, the ever-present, knows no finality, no finished crystallization. The perfect rose is only a running flame, emerging and flowing off, and never in any sense at rest, static, finished” (76). This image of life as “a running flame” allows Lawrence to express embodied experience as dynamic and material at the same time. Like the “perfect rose,” the ideal character for Lawrence is one who manifests an ongoing interaction with the surrounding world. In “The Novel,” an interactive, relational notion of character is elaborated through the rare image of the
flame: “Character is a curious thing. It is the flame of a man, which burns brighter or
dimmer, bluer or yellower or redder, rising or sinking or flaring according to the draughts
or circumstance and the changing air of life, changing itself continually, yet remaining
one single, separate flame” (187). The complex materiality of the flame in this metaphor
is designed to capture the paradoxical quality of an individuality that is at once discrete
and interactive. The “single, separate flame” has an identifiable (though variable) edge,
and yet its substance is in flux; when a candle burns, the chemical bonds that knit its
molecules into a solid substance are broken, releasing photons of heat and light (which
make the flame visible and palpable) along with molecules in suspension (invisible
vapour and visible smoke). The colour of the flame depends on the chemical constituents
of the surrounding air. Thus, the boundary of the flame represents a space of interchange
between the hot, illuminated air immediately around the candle wick, and the “draughts”
and “changing air” in the space surrounding it.

Similarly, the “flame of a man” encompasses both individual identity and a
dynamic, continuous interaction with the universe in which it is immersed. The metaphor
only works because the human body, like the flower, is made up of the same elements
that constitute the rest of the material universe. Pater himself highlights the fact that, at
the molecular level, all material objects are in flux; processes like combustion or decay
simply accelerate and make visible this material interaction between bodies and their
environment. In this context, the apparent discreteness of the body is an illusion:

Far out on every side of us those elements are broadcast, driven in many
currents; and birth and gesture and death and the springing of violets from
the grave are but a few out of ten thousand resultant combinations. That
clear perpetual outline of face and limb is but an image of ours, under
which we group them—a design in a web, the actual threads of which pass
out beyond it. (Pater 150)

The attributes of rare matter are what enable this expression of the interconnectedness of
the physical life: through the flow of the currents, the perpetual recombination of
elements, and the delicate continuity of threads in a web, the flesh of the body
intermingles with the material world. The body maintains a reasonably continuous outline
in the same way that flowing water, when seen from a distance, appears to be at rest
(Pater 151). Physical life is “flame-like,” therefore, because it is “the concurrence,
renewed from moment to moment, of forces parting sooner or later on their ways” (Pater
150). The continuous flow of matter and physical forces across the body’s thresholds
precludes any stable division between the body’s inside and outside.

Lawrence shares this dynamic view of the body, but his forceful refusal to
separate identity from its physical incarnation heightens the metaphysical importance of
the “flame-like” interactions at the self-world threshold. According to Lawrence’s
incarnate model of the self, the experience of temporal flux necessarily manifests through
a physical interaction with the environment. As he continues to describe the “running
flame” of the flower, Lawrence dismisses any form of Platonic idealization, and instead
tries to get at its physical unfolding in time:

If you tell me about the lotus, tell me of nothing changeless or eternal. Tell
me of the mystery of the inexhaustible, forever-unfolding creative spark.
Tell me of the incarnate disclosure of the flux, mutation in blossom,
laughter and decay perfectly open in their transit, nude in their movement
before us. [...] Let me feel the mud and the heavens in my lotus. Let me feel the heavy, silting, sucking mud, the spinning of sky winds. (“Poetry of the Present” 76)

This passage incorporates matter in all three states: the solid flower blossom, the liquid suspension of the “heavy, silting, sucking mud,” and the mobile air of “sky winds.” What is critical, however, is less a taxonomy of material states than a sense of imbricated continuity: “Let me feel the mud and the heavens in my lotus” is a plea to recognize the common materiality of elements across the rarity-density spectrum. Nor is it a merely metaphorical suggestion, since a plant does indeed take in nutrients from the mud and exchange oxygen and carbon dioxide with the air. Like the flower, the human body sustains its vitality through an ongoing exchange of particles among the solid, liquid and gaseous states. By calling attention to this “incarnate disclosure of the flux,” Lawrence seeks to ground his relational approach to selfhood in a detailed awareness of the very real physical connections between the body and the variably dense matter around it. Ultimately, the point is not to contrast the fixity of solid objects with the fluidity of rare substances, but to employ the full range of the rarity-density spectrum to emphasize the material nature of the self-world bond.

Paying attention to the interactions between rare and dense matter at the molecular level highlights the complexity of determining where an object or body ends and its environment begins. While we tend to think of solids, and even liquids, as having clearly defined linear outlines, what actually occurs at the bounding surface of an object is a meeting of material substances that differ in density. The surfaces where gaseous matter meets liquids or solids constitute one basic type of spatial boundary that is
reasonably easy to delineate and locate—the surface of a lake or a stone, for instance. However, even the most obvious boundaries become problematic when one considers the continuous exchange of molecules between the states, and the selective permeability of bounding surfaces to particles of different sizes. For instance, we tend to think of the skin as a bounding surface that marks the end of the body and the beginning of the world, but as I have discussed, at the molecular scale it is actually a permeable membrane that is constantly absorbing and releasing molecules across the inside-outside divide.

The ambiguity of such three-dimensional boundaries is perhaps easier to visualize through an analogy with the more familiar problems of two-dimensional cartography. Lines on a map represent territories on the ground through a process of mathematical abstraction and simplification. While some cartographic boundaries (the 49th parallel, for example) represent spatial divisions equally abstract in origin, others are linear simplifications of broader transitional zones. To define the border of a woodland, for instance, one must set an arbitrary limit for tree density, below which an area is defined as “outside” the woods and “inside” the neighbouring field or meadow. Motion also complicates border zones: if the high tide and low tide borders of a seaside beach are several hundred meters apart, most maps will show a single linear boundary representing the average extent of the beach over time. Both motion and variable density feature prominently in Lawrence’s play with body thresholds, as he questions fundamental assumptions that underlie the body-as-container metaphor. Thus, his attention to the rarity-density spectrum allows Lawrence to express the spatial ambiguities that materialism introduces into flux philosophy. Using his own versions of Pater’s flame and
water imagery, Lawrence reconceives the individual’s physical interface with the material world as a meeting place, a zone of exchange, rather than a discrete border.

“Why the Novel Matters” addresses in detail the spatial complexity of subject-object boundary spaces. This essay’s advocacy of fiction as the best medium for conveying embodied knowledge anticipates “Introduction to These Paintings” in its rejection of mind-body dualism, and in its use of the sense of touch to explore the body’s spatial limits. Lawrence begins by insisting on a clear distinction between his body and the inanimate matter it encounters through touch. Unlike the insensate, abstracted bodies in “Introduction to the Paintings,” the body in “Why the Novel Matters” is not only vitally in touch with the world, but also able to incorporate abstract and concrete knowledge simultaneously. Lawrence describes a holistic, incarnate model of selfhood in which consciousness may be located in any body part:

Is there really any huge difference between my hand and my brain? Or my mind? My hand is alive, it flickers with a life of its own. It meets all the strange universe in touch, and learns a vast number of things, and knows a vast number of things. My hand, as it writes these words, slips gaily along, jumps like a grasshopper to dot an i, feels the table rather cold, gets a little bored if I write too long, has its own rudiments of thought, and is just as much me as is my brain, my mind, or my soul. Why should I imagine that there is a me which is more me than my hand is? Since my hand is absolutely alive, me alive. (204)

Thus, the hand, through its specialized functions, acquires a uniquely corporeal kind of knowledge; “me alive” integrates both abstract and embodied knowledge within a single
consciousness. At the outset, Lawrence explicitly locates this consciousness within a body that is spatially defined by its outer skin surface, the organ of touch through which the hand encounters the outer world. Lawrence establishes the spatial limits of “me alive” by contrasting the hand with the pen it holds: “My pen isn’t me alive. Me alive ends at my finger-tips” (204, italics in original). In other words, while denying the division between mind and body, Lawrence insists on a clear differentiation at the material level between “me alive” (the integrated, non-dualistic self) and the inanimate pen.

In drawing attention to the fingertip boundary, Lawrence is attempting something similar to the operation he would later attribute to Cézanne—in this case it is the pen, rather than the apple, that Lawrence tries to “shove [...] away from him” (“Introduction to These Paintings” 266). The hand pressed against the pen ought to provide “knowing through touch” and thereby counteract Lawrence’s anxiety that, as a result of the mind-body rupture, “We are not solid. We don’t live in the flesh” (“Introduction to These Paintings” 268). By defining the spatial limits of “me alive” using a pen, Lawrence appears to be contradicting his own claim that inanimate matter may possess quickness, and playing into the logic that Douglas Mao attributes to modernist authors, wherein the solid object becomes ontologically important due to its role “as not-self, as not-subject” (Mao 4). Whereas Cézanne is portrayed as affirming object autonomy for its own sake—letting the apple “live of itself” (“Introduction to These Paintings” 266)—Lawrence establishes the pen’s autonomy in order to better define the autonomy of a human body part, the hand “with a life of its own” (“Why the Novel Matters” 204). The distinction initially seems straightforward, even banal—the fingers are alive and the pen is not—but
Lawrence’s discomfort with the inside/outside dichotomy introduces a series of complications that undermine the apparent stability of the fingertip boundary.

The first sign of doubt occurs in an apparently innocuous aside about fingernails. After insisting that “every tiny bit” of his hands, down to “freckle and hair and fold of skin” is part of “me alive,” Lawrence admits an exception: “Only my finger-nails, those ten little weapons between me and an inanimate universe, they cross the mysterious Rubicon between me alive and things like my pen, which are not alive, in my own sense” (204). The historical context of this comparison is revealing. When Caesar ordered the 13th Roman legion to cross Rubicon, a river in Italy marking the boundary of his newly acquired territory in Gaul, he effectively declared war on his rival Pompey, and initiated the civil conflict that ultimately resulted in the demise of Republican Rome (Holland xv-xvii). The story is so notorious that “Rubicon” came to be used as a synonym for “boundary” in both literal and figurative senses, and “to cross the Rubicon” became established as a phrase meaning “to take a decisive or final step” (“Rubicon, n” 1a, 2). These established meanings would seem to underline the decisive nature of the dividing line between “me alive” and the “inanimate universe,” but Lawrence’s characterization of the Rubicon as “mysterious” points to an element of useful vagueness in the historical reference. Although the boundary between Gaul and Rome was painfully clear to Caesar and his soldiers, the story’s fame outlived historical records of the exact location of the river (Holland xvii). The full semantic content of the Rubicon allusion therefore includes both the idea of a decisive boundary and the inability to pin down its precise location. The fingernails, insensate at their extremities but lodged at one end in sensitive flesh, complicate the idea that fingertips mark a precise dividing line: the nails occupy a liminal
space “between” the body and the inanimate world. Furthermore, through their continuous growth, the nails represent a material flux akin to the river’s flow across the riverbed—while the location of a fingernail remains fixed, its material substance is in flux.

Lawrence’s attempt to use the solidity of the pen to establish the solidity (and consequent boundedness) of the body is undermined not only by the Rubicon allusion, but also by the fact that the hand’s life “flickers,” suggesting the ambiguous, mobile boundary of a flame rather than the stable boundary of a solid object. Here, as in the other essays, rare imagery destabilizes the inside-outside dichotomy. From the “bird [...] on the wing in the winds” (“Poetry of the Present” 79) to the “single, separate flame” of character (“The Novel” 187), Lawrence employs the amorphism of rare matter to express the dynamism of the threshold where the body meets the world. This innovative use of rare imagery allows Lawrence to model dynamic relationships even within the expository constraints of the essay form; when he harnesses the narrative properties of fiction, however, he can convey the mobility of the self-world threshold in greater depth and detail. To demonstrate how Lawrence’s destabilization of self-world thresholds opens up new models of embodied spatial experience, I turn now to his early novels, which employ the rarity-density spectrum to develop techniques for characterization that accord with his model of dynamic individualism.

4. Rare Imagery and the Destabilization of Self-World Thresholds in *Sons and Lovers*

While some narrative movement makes it into the essays through extended metaphors, anecdotes and historical sketches, Lawrence’s novels more clearly dramatize spatial modulations in the self-world relationship over time, as characters respond
(consciously or unconsciously) to their social and material surroundings. 

Sons and Lovers, a semi-autobiographical novel widely recognized as a variation on the traditional coming-of-age story typical of the Bildungsroman,61 places particular emphasis on self-definition. Although the action of the novel begins with the courtship of his parents, the plot centres around Paul Morel’s struggle toward autonomy—a struggle which is figured in peculiarly spatial terms, as he endeavours to avoid being absorbed by relationships that seem all-consuming without cutting himself off from the people around him.62 As a result, Sons and Lovers provides ample opportunity to observe Lawrence’s narrative experimentation with ambiguous boundary conditions at the body’s thresholds.

In Sons and Lovers, the need to manage self-diffusion—to prevent the “endless dilation of sympathy” that Lawrence warns against in the Whitman essay—is particularized to apply to emotional connections between people: Paul is constantly alert to the temptation and danger of merging with another person and losing his grasp on a discrete sense of self. He also proves particularly susceptible to what I have termed “cosmic agoraphobia,” an anxiety-laden response to the potential for extreme dissolution in the self-world relationship. Paul’s anxiety is counterproductive because it limits his

61 For discussions of how Sons and Lovers modifies the generic patterns of the traditional Bildungsroman, see Seret; Beards; Buckley; and Daleski, “Lawrence, Family, and the Bildungsroman.”

62 The dominance of Paul’s relationship with his mother Gertrude has prompted considerable attention to the Oedipal pattern in the novel. Lawrence began the early drafts around the time that his mother became terminally ill, and was certainly working through emotional issues related to her death during its composition (SL xxiv-xxvii). The Freudian subtext was enhanced, however, during the final stages of revision, when Lawrence discussed the work with Jessie Chambers (widely acknowledged as the model for Paul Morel’s first lover Miriam Leivers), and with his future wife Frieda Weekley. No doubt influenced by their personal experiences as Lawrence’s lovers, both Chambers and Weekley saw Paul Morel’s love for his mother as the paramount force behind the interpersonal tensions in the novel (SL xxxiv, xlii). Oedipal readings of the novel are complicated by the fact that Lawrence himself generally mistrusted Freud’s theories, which he associated with scientific determinism (C. Gordon 28). In a letter to Barbara Low in 1916, he denounced an early psychoanalytical interpretation of Sons and Lovers, claiming that the “vicious half-statements” of Freudian “complexes” misrepresent the book (rpt. in Salgado 26-27).
ability to move freely between differentiation and dissolution in response to changing circumstances. While other characters model more comfortable threshold dynamics, Paul exemplifies the dangers of a static, psychologically-motivated preference for extreme differentiation. Before he can resolve his interpersonal difficulties, he must confront the ontological anxiety at the root of his agoraphobia.  

Rare materiality provides a key vehicle for Lawrence’s exploration of the relationship dynamics at the heart of this novel. Even before Paul arrives on the scene, readers are sensitized to ambiguous boundary conditions, first by descriptions of the atmospheric landscape, and then by physical descriptions of Paul’s parents that challenge the body-as-container metaphor. The relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Morel is a volatile one, frequently expressed in terms of the flame imagery so ubiquitous in Lawrence’s essays. These initial descriptions establish rare matter as a key component of Lawrence’s innovative approach to the drama of self-definition.

In descriptions of the rural-industrial setting at the beginning of *Sons and Lovers*, rare matter already plays the role of softening contours in the landscape, thanks to the coal dust from Minton mine. The hazy atmosphere dominates the view, hanging “like fine black crape at the back of a summer morning” (102) and lending a certain soft-focus to the landscape outside the Morels’ house:

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63 Paul has a revealing conversation about agoraphobia with Clara Dawes on the day they first meet, as they are picking flowers at the border of a wood. Noticing the bluebells that have “flowed over into the field” (279), Paul observes to Clara: “It makes me think of the wild men of the woods, how terrified they would be when they got breast to breast with the open space. [...] I wonder which was more frightened among old tribes—those bursting out of their darkness of woods upon all the space of light, or those from the open tiptoeing into the forests” (279-80). While he associates Clara with the second group, Paul clearly sympathizes with the agoraphobic forest-dwellers.
Opposite her small gate was the stile that led uphill, under the tall hedge between the burning glow of the cut pastures. The sky overhead throbbed and pulsed with light. The glow sank quickly off the field; the earth and the hedges smoked dusk. As it grew dark, a ruddy glare came out on the hilltop, and out of the glare the diminished commotion of the fair. (14)

The “burning glow” and “ruddy glare”—both products of the diffraction of sunlight by coal dust—lend to the solid features of the landscape a lambent quality worthy of a painting by Turner or Whistler. As the sun sets, contours are rendered mysterious; the throbbing, pulsing, sinking light diffuses at different angles through the thick atmosphere, making the hedges appear to “smok[e]” with darkness. Many years later, Paul notices similar atmospheric effects during an evening walk through the same rural-industrial landscape. He sees the “lights of the town, sprinkled thick on the hills, fusing together in a blaze in the valleys” and the “red glare of the furnaces, playing like hot breath on the clouds” (140). As in an Impressionist painting, landscape features fuse at the edges, always suggesting a shimmer of movement in the fiery, coal-saturated air. The boundary ambiguity expressed through this combination of air and flame imagery has profound implications for the characters’ embodied relationships with their surroundings.

Building on this atmosphere of spatial ambiguity, Lawrence extends the flame imagery to character bodies as well, bringing into play interpersonal dynamics that further ambiguates the boundaries of the self. The Morels’ marriage is characterized by an initial attraction, and subsequent conflict between two strong characters who figuratively occupy opposite ends of the rarity-density spectrum. Whereas the wife, raised by a hard, satirical, puritan father, is frequently characterized as tough, unbending, and reliable, the
husband is volatile, soft, and unpredictable as the wind. Early on, both characters find the contrast appealing. Walter Morel, impressed by her sophistication, seems “melted away” by the young Gertrude Coppard (17). She, in turn, appreciates the dynamic sensuality of her future husband, “the dusky, golden softness of this man’s sensuous flame of life, that flowed off his flesh like the flame from a candle” (18). Morel’s “sensuous flame” is a sign of embodied vitality: it is a zone of interchange, a “flow” that connects his entire incarnate being (the integration of his physical, spiritual, emotional and mental bits) with the world around him. Her life, on the other hand, is “baffled and gripped into incandescence” by the rigours of “thought and spirit,” lending her physical presence a quality of detached self-containment. When she realizes, several months after the wedding, that her husband does not own their house, and has secretly been paying rent to his mother, resentment further hardens her demeanour: “Something in her proud, honourable soul had crystallised out hard as rock” (21). The marriage never really recovers, but Mrs. Morel’s hardy endurance stands her in good stead as her husband’s deteriorating health and irresponsible drinking sink the family into increasingly dire poverty.

Although Mrs. Morel is frequently described as solid and concentrated in contrast with Mr. Morel’s more diffuse presence, the image that poses the most extreme challenge to the body-as-container metaphor describes her sense of self-dissolution in the moonlit garden after a violent and inebriated Morel locks her out of the house. In this moment of

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64 Whereas a flame always involves rare matter, incandescence can refer to the glow emitted from a solid at extremely high temperatures. Visible flames technically also involve incandescence, but the term is strongly associated with lamps or bulbs that use solid mantles or filaments to increase their luminosity. For an account of these developments roughly contemporary with Lawrence, see Luckiesh’s Artificial Light: Its Influence Upon Civilization (1920).
overwhelming anger and fatigue, she finds release in a temporary relaxation of the boundary between herself and the darkened landscape. Since she is pregnant with Paul at the time, Mrs. Morel’s temporary self-diffusion has implications for her son’s sense of enclosure within the womb at a crucial point in his development. This scene is the most explicit fictional example of the dynamics of expansion and contraction that Lawrence describes in the Whitman essay, but its rich imagery and subtle focalization allow him to elaborate on this basic pattern.65

The spatiality of the scene is complicated by Mrs. Morel’s pregnancy, which produces sensations from within her body that mirror her tumultuous emotions. The anger inspired by her conflict with Mr. Morel is figured with flame and heat imagery, which destabilizes the inside-outside distinction and sets the stage for the more pronounced sense of self-diffusion which follows:

Mrs. Morel, seared with passion, shivered to find herself out there in a great white light, that fell cold on her, and gave a shock to her inflamed soul. She stood for a few moments helplessly staring at the glistening great rhubarb leaves near the door. Then she got the air into her breast. She walked down the garden path, trembling in every limb, while the child boiled within her. (33)

Lawrence characteristically describes Mrs. Morel’s volatile emotions in physical terms, so that the emotional and physical traumas blend within the same (ostensibly internal)

65 Michael Bell describes this passage as “exemplary” because “the emotional process undergone by Mrs. Morel enacts a paradigmatic Lawrencean structure in her loss and recovery of wholeness” (43). Bell’s analysis captures the potentially positive emotional and psychological connotations of Mrs. Morel’s experience of self-diffusion (44), but does not fully explore its implications in terms of her sense of embodiment.
space. The shock of the cold air distracts her from the roiling emotions within, until her body’s physical functions refocus her attention inward: once she “[gets] the air into her breast,” she feels “the child boil[ing] within her.” This fusion of mental and bodily experience fits with Lawrence’s overall emphasis on embodied consciousness. Whereas the flame/flux model and the fingernail “Rubicon” destabilize the inside-outside dichotomy by ambiguation the boundary between self and world, this scene defamiliarizes the notion of interiority itself by playing on the distinction between the emotional “interior” and the actual internal spaces of the body, Mrs. Morel’s lungs and womb.⁶⁶

The potential subjectivity of the unborn child creates an unsettling tension within the body-as-container metaphor; Mrs. Morel’s pregnant body literally contains another body, even as it is simultaneously figured as a container for her own subjective turmoil. The odd embeddedness of one character/body inside another during pregnancy constructs the womb as both a bodily interior and a bodily exterior, depending on which character’s point of view the reader chooses to identify with. The boiling, which doubles as an emotional and proprioceptive sensation, is figuratively “inside” Mrs. Morel’s body; however, the mention of the foetus draws attention to the potentially separate point of view of the child. Indeed, “the child” can function grammatically as either the subject or the object of the verb “boiled.” Is Paul-the-foetus also “boiling” with emotion in reaction to his mother’s physiological stress? Or is he physically enclosed within a “boiling” womb, an interpretation that subtly hints at the danger that his mother’s “delirious

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⁶⁶ While the rare substances filling these cavities (air in her lungs and amniotic fluid in her womb) are literally contained within her body, they are also liminal in the sense that they are waiting to be released back out, through exhalation and childbirth respectively.
condition” (34) might pose to the pregnancy? Either way, his vulnerable position results from an experience of immersion in the womb that is anything but safe and secure.

As the description continues, insides and outsides become further confused, as figurative and literal uses of spatial language overlap in the description of Mrs. Morel’s emotional pain:

For a while she could not control her consciousness; mechanically she went over the last scene, then over it again, certain phrases, certain moments coming each time like a brand red-hot down on her soul; and each time she enacted again the past hour, each time the brand came down at the same points, till the mark was burnt in, and the pain burnt out, and at last she came to herself. (33-34)

As she re-enacts the conflict with her husband, Mrs. Morel’s emotions are described in specifically spatial and somatic language, as the memories brand her “soul” repeatedly, in an image that fuses the re-enacted memories, the physical pain of branding (echoing the physical violence of Morel’s domestic attacks), and the psychic scarring that results. The “mark” and the “pain” are respectively the external and internal manifestations of branding, but they do not map neatly onto the exterior and interior of Mrs. Morel’s body, since she is being branded by “hot” emotional memories rather than a physical instrument.

If the brand’s penetration of the body, then, is figurative and spatially ambiguous, what wakes Mrs. Morel to her surroundings is an oddly literal penetration of her embodied consciousness by rare matter, conveyed in part through free indirect discourse as she inhales the scent of the lilies in the garden: “She became aware of something about
her. With an effort she roused herself to see what it was that penetrated her consciousness. The tall white lilies were reeling in the moonlight, and the air was charged with their perfume, as with a presence” (34). The materiality of the air she inhales is emphasized by the thick scent it carries. The “reeling” of the lilies and the “presence” of the perfume might be read as hallucinatory by-products of Mrs. Morel’s emotional turbulence, except that the third-person narration in the rest of the paragraph adds to the ambiguation of subject-object boundaries.

In light of Lawrence’s precise attention to the fingertip boundary in “Why the Novel Matters,” Mrs. Morel’s subsequent tactile investigations of the lily gain added significance as explorations of the liminal boundary where her “me alive” meets the world. Having already problematized the inside-outside dichotomy of Mrs. Morel’s pregnant body, the narration uses a progression through the senses of touch, vision, and smell to further blur the spatial distinction between Mrs. Morel and her environment. Mrs. Morel’s response to the perfume-charged air is first to touch the petals of the flowers, then to “put her hand into one white bin,” effectively moving the tactile contact from the surface to the partially-enclosed interior space of the flower. When she withdraws her hand, her fingers carry a thin layer of pollen, a golden trace “scarce” visible in the moonlight. Her fingertip, having entered the space of the flower, has not

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67 In his lecture on “Intersensoriality,” Connor summarizes a long critical tradition associating the five senses with variable degrees of subject-object differentiation: “More than any other sense, perhaps, and differently from any other sense, the role of vision seems to be to pick things out from their backgrounds. [...] The ear, nose, tongue and fingertips all depend upon the meeting or mingling or admixture of things; something must come up against another thing, or impart something of its substance to us” (n.p.). Bell, commenting specifically on this scene from Sons and Lovers, notes that although the smell of lilies initially triggers the swoon, the smell of phlox is what draws Mrs. Morel back to active consciousness: “When she comes around from this ‘swoon’ her mood, and her capacity, are very different. The same senses of sight, touch and smell govern her response but in a different order and to a contrary effect. The smell, rather than being the point of merging with the whole, is now the stimulus to a distinctive attention” (43).
come away clean. Because of the pollen transfer and the dimness, neither the fingertips
nor the eyes can clearly locate the spatial boundaries of the flowers.

The peculiar nature of the sense of smell, which involves the absorption of small
odour particles into the sense organ, enhances the sense of physical mingling between
Mrs. Morel, the night air, and the flower: “Then she drank a deep draught of the scent. It
almost made her dizzy” (34). Having taken the “draught of scent” (a distinctly material
image) into her body, Mrs. Morel teeters on the edge of self-diffusion, “almost”
assimilated into the dizziness of the reeling flowers. The hesitation is only momentary:
the passage proceeds to heighten the spatial ambiguity to the point where Mrs. Morel
herself takes on the properties of the rare matter that both surrounds her and fills her
lungs. For a time, she effectively evaporates:

Mrs. Morel leaned on the garden gate, looking out, and she lost herself
awhile. She did not know what she thought. Except for a slight feeling of
sickness, and her consciousness in the child,68 herself melted out like scent
into the shiny, pale air. After a time the child, too, melted with her in the
mixing-pot of moonlight, and she rested with the hills and lilies and
houses, all swum together in a kind of swoon. (34)

An enigmatic departure from her usual rigidity, Mrs. Morel’s self-dissolution in this
scene has distinctly positive connotations. To melt out “like scent into the shiny, pale air”
suggests a sensual experience, while “rested with the hills” conveys relaxation as well as
exhaustion. Temporarily released from her prenatal confinement within the home, Mrs.

68 This odd phrase reinforces the scene’s dual focalization: “her consciousness of the child” would refer
unproblematically to Mrs. Morel’s awareness of the foetus inside her, but “her consciousness in the child”
again suggests the oddly split subjectivity of the mother-foetus bond, especially because it is the last part of
“herself” to melt outwards.
Morel lets go and experiences a moment of communion with the wider world. For the perennially responsible mother, such a lapse into unconscious sensation must seem a rare luxury. Whether or not Mrs. Morel’s self-diffusion has been caused by a trauma, she does not experience it as traumatic in itself. Unlike Whitman’s extreme merging, which “becomes at last a vice” and threatens to render the subject “either vaporish, or slimy” (“Whitman” 84), Mrs. Morel’s merging outward into her environment is a temporary release, not a permanent loss of integrity, and when she returns to “common dimensions” she retains a trace of expansiveness that makes her smile as she returns to sleep beside her drunk husband (36). While the scene is not mentioned again, it tempers subsequent descriptions of Mrs. Morel’s hard, impervious character.

Self-dissolution, then, can be a positive experience, but its emotional connotations depend greatly on the psychological state of the character in question. Paul, enclosed in his mother’s womb at the time of the garden scene, arguably experiences the swoon much differently; his later anxieties suggest that the experience may be both formative and much more ambivalent from his point of view. If the focalization is indeed shared by the mother and her unborn foetus, his reaction may explain the brief delay between Mrs. Morel’s melting and the moment when “the child, too, melted with her” (34). Assuming that Paul has sufficient agency at this point to momentarily hesitate while his mother lets go, this early, probably instinctual need for self-differentiation prefigures his later agoraphobia.

5. Paul’s Development Toward Dynamic Self-World Relationships in Sons and Lovers

As the novel continues, varying levels of comfort with diffuse or ambiguous boundaries become an important means of characterization, serving to distinguish
characters from one another and to articulate the interpersonal dynamics among them. 

For instance, Paul’s very different spatial impressions of his lovers Miriam Leivers and Clara Dawes show how profoundly his fear of dissolution affects his social interactions. Miriam makes Paul feel “indefinite” partly because she seems naturally inclined toward self-diffusion. Drawing on a long tradition linking the transcendent spirit with the body’s breath, the narrator initially characterizes both Miriam and her mother as “inclined to be mystical, such women as treasure religion inside them, breathe it in their nostrils, and see the whole of life in a mist thereof” (173). Miriam’s aloofness from the day-to-day details of life on the Leivers’ farm, along with her abstracted tendency to daydream about romantic novels, creates a sense of physical vagueness that leads Paul to repress his physical attraction in favour of an ostensibly platonic friendship. Beneath this idealized image of the relationship, sexual tension builds, creating an intensity that is frustrating for both parties. Miriam, who is not the asexual, ethereal being that Paul makes her out to be, tries to get closer to him through a feeling of “communion” (195) in the presence of natural beauty. Her efforts to provoke him into greater intimacy eventually threaten Paul’s sense of self-differentiation.

Paul, perhaps influenced by his mother’s complaints about the relationship, employs rare imagery to express the risk of self-loss in his intimate connection with

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69 Paul eventually admits that his disembodied idealization of Miriam is distorting the relationship, but by the time they sleep together, he is already drifting away from her emotionally (321-31).
70 For a discussion of Miriam’s communion with flowers in relation to Lawrence’s criticism of Wordsworth, see Spilka (45-47).
71 Mrs. Morel claims that Miriam threatens Paul’s independence and monopolizes his attention. She characterizes the danger in terms of the spatial dynamics of permeability and absorption, as if Miriam’s spiritual “mistiness” has created a kind of emotional vacuum: “She’s not like an ordinary woman, who can leave me my share in him. She wants to absorb him. She wants to draw him out and absorb him till there is nothing left of him, even for himself. He will never be a man on his own feet—she will suck him up” (230). While Miriam does display a calm possessiveness toward Paul, believing that they are fated to be together,
Miriam. Since they rarely talk about their relationship directly, he instead criticizes her desire to mingle herself with other objects of affection: “To her, flowers appealed with such strength she felt she must make them part of herself. When she bent and breathed a flower, it was as if she and the flower were loving each other. Paul hated her for it. There seemed a sort of exposure about the action, something too intimate” (210). Paul’s disproportionate hostility toward Miriam’s enjoyment of the flowers is driven by his broader fear of self-dissolution. His impression that she wants to merge with the flowers by inhaling their scent—as if to “make them part of herself”—reflects his fear that she will figuratively inhale him in an effort to merge with the object of her love. He observes: “All his strength and energy she drew into herself through some channel which united them. She did not want to meet him, so that there were two of them, man and woman together. She wanted to draw all of him into her” (232). Miriam’s all-encompassing affection exacerbates Paul’s latent fear of self-dissolution. Instead, he needs a relationship that allows him some sense of differentiation: a chance to “meet” with a woman rather than merge with her.\footnote{A similar struggle characterizes the early stages of Ursula and Birkin’s relationship in \textit{Women in Love}, although Birkin makes a much more overt argument in favour of differentiation.}

Reacting to these ontological anxieties, Paul develops a more clearly differentiated relationship with Miriam’s friend Clara Dawes, an independently-minded married woman who is estranged from her husband. Not only is she somewhat unavailable, having never actually divorced her husband, but her manner is more detached—she appears to have no interest in possessing Paul. When they first meet, she

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Mrs. Morel’s criticism is clearly biased by her own possessive attachment to her son. The language of absorption helps her to express a conflicted desire to see her son as a differentiated individual—“a man on his own feet”—without relinquishing her “share in him” to another woman.
seems out of place in “Miriam’s beautiful twilighty parlour” and comes off as “perfectly amiable, but indifferent, and rather hard” (269). Paul’s perception of her body is also less abstracted and sexually inhibited than his misty view of Miriam: he repeatedly notices the curve of Clara’s neck, the outlines of her breasts, and the texture of her skin (236, 279, 302-03). Picking out the edges of her body for admiration helps Paul to imagine a relationship with Clara that preserves some distance between them. Inhibited by both parties’ continuing attachment to their previous partners, Paul’s idealized vision of a detached but intimate relationship with Clara never really materializes.

Paul’s difficulties with interpersonal relationships are rooted in a broader ontological anxiety—the same cosmic agoraphobia that explains humanity’s tendency to erect false barriers between itself and the “open and windy chaos” of an unbounded material universe (“Chaos in Poetry” 235). This connection between the social and ontological aspects of boundary definition becomes particularly apparent at moments of emotional extremity. Mrs. Morel’s self-dissolution in the garden following a violent domestic conflict represents only the first of many such scenes in *Sons and Lovers*. For Paul, an acute awareness of the vast spaces of the cosmos accompanies three of his most intense experiences: overhearing domestic violence between his parents, having sex with Miriam for the first time, and grieving for his mother’s death. Over the course of the novel, his response to the night sky modulates from a terror of space in the abstract to an acceptance of the concrete materiality of the infinite. Like the false barriers of abstraction described in “Chaos in Poetry,” Paul’s fear of the void severs his contact with the “circumambient universe.” The gradual replacement of his near-pathological insistence
on self-differentiation with a more flexible attitude to spatial ambiguity is a sign of personal growth.

As a child, Paul associates the “great space” in front of the family home with “a feeling of night, of vastness, and of terror” because the shrieking of the wind outside muffles the sounds of his parents fighting (84). The night sky becomes a symbol of terror and violence rather than an emotionally neutral element of the landscape. A limited sense of material continuity is introduced when, after his first orgasm, Paul’s fear of the night sky transmutes into a broader sensation of communion with the cosmos: “[H]e felt as if nothing mattered, as if his living were smeared away into the beyond, near and quite lovable. This strange, gentle reaching-out to death was new to him” (331). Grounded in a bodily experience, this newfound sense of continuity with the universe has an element of materiality, but it is still heavily associated with abstract conceptions of self-loss: “[N]ight, and death, and stillness, and inaction, this seemed like being. To be alive, to be urgent and insistent—that was not-to-be. The highest of all was to melt out into the darkness and sway there, identified with the great Being” (331). There is a certain morbidity in Paul’s acquiescence here; since he associates orgasmic release so strongly with death, it is clear that his agoraphobia has not really disappeared.

Paul’s most important breakthrough comes after a particularly acute experience of threshold disruption following his mother’s death. During the first stage of grief, Paul’s sense of differentiation seems to fail completely: “The days passed, the weeks. But everything seemed to have fused, gone into a conglomerated mass. He could not tell one day from another, one week from another, hardly one place from another. Nothing was distinct or distinguishable” (455). Unlike his mother’s relaxed diffusion in the garden
scene, or Miriam’s easy mingling with her environment, Paul’s rigid sense of fusion with the world’s “conglomerated mass” indicates psychological paralysis. Rather than being a sign of dynamism in the self-world relationship, this catastrophic collapse of subject-object boundaries reduces his responsiveness. His surroundings feel unreal. He tries to talk to strangers at a bar, but cannot “get into touch” with anyone (457). He is stuck in suspension, unable to move or adjust: “There was nowhere to go, neither back to the inn, nor forward anywhere” (457). Feeling trapped, he nearly decides to follow his mother into the dissolution of death: “She was the only thing that held him up, himself, amid all this. And she was gone, intermingled herself. He wanted her to touch him, have him alongside with her” (464). In order to “touch” his mother, Paul would have to accept permanently the state of cosmic interfusion that he experienced temporarily after his first orgasm; there would be no further oscillation between differentiation and diffusion, no returning to “common dimensions,” but only permanent self-loss.

Paul’s newly ambivalent attitude toward diffusion alters him perceptibly in the eyes of other characters. Clara describes the change in him as a shift from solidity to rarity. Following his mother’s death, she observes that there is “nothing stable about him [...] he would never make sure ground for any woman to stand on” (450). Instead, he has become “evanescent [...] shifting and false,” like a cloud that will “waft about with any wind” (450). Perhaps attempting to resist further diffusion, he seems also to be “shrinking together, getting smaller” (450). These rare images express Clara’s vague sense that Paul seems to be fading away and withdrawing from life. Readers, who may detect echoes of the garden scene in Paul’s temptation to join a mother who has “intermingled herself”
with the night, are in a position to interpret the crisis more precisely: Paul again hesitates on the brink of self-dissolution, conscious that this time the release will be irreversible.

Paul perceives the temptation to suicide in spatial terms, as a sense of static continuity with the vast darkness he has always feared: “From his breast, from his mouth, sprang the endless space, and it was there behind him, everywhere. [...] Everywhere the vastness and terror of the immense night [...] There was no Time, only Space” (464). In order to reclaim a living, interactive relationship with the cosmos, Paul must find a way to overcome his grief and agoraphobia without defensively shutting himself off from his immediate surroundings. According to the logic of Lawrence’s essays, he must reject the abstract fear of the void (which signifies for him both empty space and death), and acknowledge a dynamic, concrete connection with the “open and windy chaos” of the vast material universe (“Chaos in Poetry” 235).

The final scene of *Sons and Lovers* may be interpreted as an embrace of the flexible boundary dynamics that Lawrence attributes to embodied flux experience. Balanced on the verge of complete and permanent self-dissolution, Paul discovers in the outlines of his own body one last chance to salvage his hold on life: “But yet there was his body, his chest, that leaned against the stile, his hands on the wooden bar. They seemed something” (464). Where even his closest friendships have failed, the pressure of a solid object against his torso finally convinces him of his own substantiality. For the first time, Paul is able to picture himself in relation to the cosmos without losing his sense of spatial integrity:
On every side the immense dark silence seemed pressing him, so tiny a spark, into extinction, and yet, almost nothing, he could not be extinct.

Night, in which everything was lost, went reaching out, beyond stars and sun. Stars and sun, a few bright grains, went spinning round for terror, and holding each other in embrace, there in a darkness that outpassed them all, and left them tiny and daunted. So much, and himself, infinitesimal, at the core a nothingness, and yet not nothing. (464)

What has changed in Paul’s apprehension of the “immense dark silence” is the inclusion of a temporal dimension that permits motion and interaction. The night is “pressing” and “reaching out,” while the stars are “spinning” and “holding each other in embrace” (464). Instead of a “conglomerated mass” (455), Paul now sees the potential for differentiated relationships even in the vastness of outer space. His agoraphobia has been based on a false either/or dichotomy between his own separate existence and his unity with the terrifying void. Instead, he now recognizes the continuity of the personal and cosmic scales: “so much, and himself, infinitesimal,” all unified by a common materiality.

Having found a way to face the complexity of the self-world threshold, Paul decides to reject suicide.

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73 In *Women in Love*, Lawrence elaborates on astral models for relationship dynamics when Birkin explains his desired bond with Ursula in terms of “a strange conjunction […] not meeting and mingling […] but an equilibrium, a pure balance between two single beings:—as the stars balance each other” (148). The dynamism of this “star-equilibrium” derives not only from the orbital motion of the stars, but also from their rare attributes. As gaseous bodies of flame adrift in dark space, stars maintain separate identities with flickering, variable edges; in addition to influencing others through fields of gravitational attraction, they radiate heat and light, as well as the streams of charged particles commonly known as solar winds. And yet, the bulk of a star’s mass is held together by the force of its own gravity. The rare materiality of stars illustrates a kind of individuality that is able to maintain a certain degree of boundary fluctuation without losing its integrity.
The novel ends on a hopeful image, one that embraces spatial ambiguity and dynamism. Deciding “not to take that direction, to the darkness, to follow her,” Paul turns back to face the “gold phosphorescence” of the city. The novel concludes as Paul starts off in a new direction: “He walked towards the faintly humming, glowing town, quickly” (464). The odd syntax of this last sentence draws attention to the word “quickly,” suggesting that it describes not only the speed of Paul’s gait, but a newly “quick” (i.e. living, spontaneous) relationship with his surroundings. Furthermore, if we take Paul to be the focalizer in this scene, his view of the town’s vibrant, spatially ambiguous outline against the night sky reinforces the impression that his reaction to ambiguous thresholds has changed. This newfound understanding of spatial complexity may help resolve some of his interpersonal anxieties and enable him to develop a more flexible, interactive relationship with the world around him. Thus, the Bildungsroman ends with a sense of new beginning—Paul’s progress toward self-determination has been tracked throughout the novel by variations in his capacity to demarcate a space for himself within his own body. Rather than resolving his search for individuation by embracing one extreme or the other, the novel ends by emphasizing the need for a mobile middle ground.

6. The Variety and Mobility of Self-World Threshold Spaces in The Rainbow

The Rainbow is a very different novel from Sons and Lovers—it chronicles three generations of the Brangwen family in a highly symbolic, almost visionary prose style strongly influenced by the King James Bible. Despite their disparate styles, however,

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74 John Worthen’s analysis of the final sentence interprets the word “quickly” in this sense (D. H. Lawrence and the Idea of the Novel 27).

75 For a detailed treatment of Lawrence’s engagement with the King James Bible throughout his work, see T. R. Wright’s D.H. Lawrence and the Bible (2000).
the two novels share some basic assumptions about the spatial dynamics of self-development. In his 1981 introduction, John Worthen describes *The Rainbow* as “a history of the relation between man and what lies beyond him, and the history of the struggle of men to become conscious, to become themselves” (21). These two histories are, from Lawrence’s point of view, intimately intertwined: self-development is inseparable from the development of one’s relation with the world “beyond” the self at both the interpersonal and the cosmic scales.

In *Sons and Lovers*, differentiated and diffused states of being are most prominently reflected in images of the body’s thresholds. *The Rainbow* expands the metaphorical vocabulary for expressing the spatial configurations of self-world relationships using character-focalized descriptions of spaces outside the body. These range from distinct aura spaces surrounding certain individual characters, to architectural spaces like the local cathedral, to interstellar spaces that provide a context for self-development at the cosmic scale. At each scale, rare materiality helps to defamiliarize boundaries and emphasize the dynamism and materiality of the self-world connection. The exploration of embodied spatial experience culminates in two particularly well-known images—the rainbow and the split acorn husk—both used by Ursula Brangwen near the end of the novel to articulate a new understanding of her place in the world. Each of these hybrid images incorporates an architectural component that combines the principles of differentiation and diffusion into a single, partially-bounded spatial construct. Along with the inclusion of multiple protagonists, this expanded symbolic language for spatial experience allows Lawrence to move beyond the basic oscillation
between the extremes of differentiation and diffusion, to explore a range of dynamic
approaches to spatial self-definition that incorporate both principles at once.

In *The Rainbow*, the rarity-density spectrum plays an explicit role in defining the
ways in which characters mingle with and differentiate themselves from one another.
When viewed through the eyes of others, certain characters seem to carry around with
them an “atmosphere”—a personal aura—that either helps them stand out as individuals,
or reveals the diffuseness of their identities. These personalized atmospheres rely on rare
attributes to materialize interpersonal dynamics in a concrete spatial form that is
sensually perceptible to the characters. For instance, Ursula Brangwen (the protagonist in
the third generation) views her uncle as an insufficiently differentiated individual,
someone who defines himself only in relation to other people. When Tom begins an
affair with Ursula’s lesbian mistress Winifred Inger, his amorphous character combines
with a “clayey” quality in Winifred to create a heavily saturated atmosphere that Ursula
finds revolting (325). The couple’s mingled auras create “the same brackish, nauseating
effect of a marsh, where life and decaying are one” (325). This effect is physical as well
as emotional, reinforcing the rare materiality of the auras: “Their marshy, bitter-sweet
corruption came sick and unwholesome in her nostrils. Anything, to get out of the foetid
air” (326). This expression of the couple’s self-diffusion in terms of pungent odour and
atmospheric humidity foregrounds the palpable interpersonal effects of poorly defined
personalities.

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76 The intensity of Ursula’s revulsion may be partly caused by a hint of incestuousness in her former lover’s
relationship with her uncle.
Differences in the perceived quality of these auras have demonstrable effects on character interactions. A basic contrast in disposition underlies Ursula’s recoil from Tom’s cloying personal atmosphere: “He was repellant to her, who was so dry and fine in her fire. Her very bones seemed to bid him keep his distance from her” (325). The “dry” fire and the solidity of her bones express her need to differentiate herself from the damp “half-corrupt element” (326) that surrounds Tom. Conversely, she is attracted to the differentiated aura of her future lover Anton Skrebensky, who seems to stand alone, “isolated within his own clear, fine atmosphere” (271). Ursula’s mother Anna notes a similar quality in the aura of Anton’s grandfather, the Baron Skrebensky, a Polish immigrant whose aristocratic bearing makes her “aware of another, freer element, in which each person was detached and isolated” (184-85). The contrast between Tom and Winifred’s “marshy” presence and the finer atmosphere surrounding the detached Skrebensky men helps to define the emotional give and take among characters.

By making descriptions of personal space explicit and concrete, the narrative introduces new ways of describing interpersonal dynamics. Aura spaces are akin to the boundary blurring effects applied to character bodies in *Sons and Lovers*, in that they play on the rarity-density spectrum to define interpersonal dynamics in concrete terms. However, they are a step removed from the body, describing not its physical thresholds, but a characteristic atmosphere against which a particular focalizer views those thresholds. In other words, the character-focalized descriptions of personal auras foreground the negative space between characters (where interpersonal relationships play out) by attributing characteristic material qualities to the air that surrounds specific individuals. Combined with the notion of modulating body thresholds, these auras can
represent directional flows of emotion and sensation that move between people, who may in turn “open” or “close” themselves according to their need for differentiation or mingling in the relationship. Lawrence views such adjustments as essential for achieving full responsiveness to the flux of experience. Interpersonal relationships can enhance the self-world relationship by teaching characters to dissolve their conscious self-definitions without collapsing their sense of individual differentiation.

The relationship of Lydia and Tom Brangwen further illustrates how atmospheric images articulate this interaction of self-world thresholds and interpersonal relationship dynamics. The first of the couples to receive extended treatment in the narrative, Tom and Lydia share a strong bond characterized by fluid shifts between mingled and separate identities. The intimacy they share during their courtship co-exists with Lydia’s characteristic differentiation, which results from her foreignness (she is a Polish widow) and separateness (she is lost in memories of her former life). Rare imagery surrounding the couple initially describes an expectant pause wherein dissolution and differentiation are held in tentative equipoise. As Tom drives Lydia and her daughter Anna home from a nearby town, “There was a vagueness, like a soft mist over all of them, and a silence as if their wills were suspended” (39). Tom notices the wedding ring from Lydia’s former marriage, and feels that its “closed circle” excludes him from an important part of her life, but at the same time, the intimate mist of the three “suspended” wills reassures him that “beyond all this, there was herself and himself which should meet” (39). The sensation of personalities permeating the nearby air and mingling outside the body helps to articulate the indirect intimacy between these two strangers, who are distinctly conscious of each others’ presence but hesitant to show their interest overtly. This
explains why Tom’s first glimpse of Lydia makes him feel “as if he were not living inside himself, but somewhere outside” (33)—he is so hyperaware of the space between their bodies that he projects his sense of self into the gap. Lydia is similarly conscious of his proximity, and wonders why “this strange man” feels “at once so near to her” (37). As the relationship progresses, the shared atmosphere that envelops the couple alters to express changing interpersonal dynamics.

During their courtship, the opening and closing of personal thresholds and the resulting “flows” of emotion create an alternation of mutual differentiation and mingling. When they become engaged, Lydia finds herself “opening, unfolding, asking, as a flower opens in full request under the sun” (54). Like a flower responding to sunlight, Lydia maintains a flexible response to the changing emotional atmosphere by adjusting her degree of receptivity or openness. When Tom fails to recognize that she is “unfolded, ready to receive,” she gradually closes up and becomes “sheathed over, impervious to him” (54). When he reverses course and makes tentative romantic advances, she begins “to open towards him, to flow towards him again” (55). Tom and Lydia’s capacity to tolerate these shifting dynamics makes their relationship particularly rich and durable. Furthermore, the combination of intimacy and distance seems to put them in touch with something visionary and eternal in the world around them. To understand how this works, the image of Lydia opening like a flower must be situated within the broader context of Lawrence’s work.

The flower opening to the atmosphere appears frequently in Lawrence’s discussions of the individual’s need to live in contact with the unknown reaches of the cosmos. As Mark Spilka points out, it is no coincidence that the scent and touch of lilies
provokes Mrs. Morel’s moment of cosmic communion in *Sons and Lovers*; lilies appear again as “a symbol of vital individuality” (Spilka 44) in *Aaron’s Rod*, where they are described as “Flowers with good roots in the mud and muck [...] fearless blossoms in air” (*AR* 232). In Lawrence’s “Study of Thomas Hardy” (1936), a posthumously published manuscript that heavily influenced *The Rainbow* (Worthen “Introduction” 13), a poppy serves as the governing image of the process of healthy individual development, while the air into which it unfolds stands for the vast circumambient universe with which it must interact. According to Lawrence, such fearless openness is a rare virtue:

[...] instead of producing our flower, [...] climbing and clambering till, like the poppy, we lean on the sill of all the unknown, and run our flag out there in the colour and shine of being [...] we hang back, we dare not even peep forth, but, safely shut up in bud, safely and darkly and snugly enclosed, like the regulation cabbage, we remain secure till our hearts go rotten, saying all the while how safe we are. (“Study of Thomas Hardy” 406)

Perched on “the sill of all the unknown,” the poppy asserts its individual identity in relation to the broader cosmos, the intimidating vastness of which keeps most people “shut up” and “snugly enclosed” within themselves. Tom and Lydia, through their daring openness with each other, occasionally move beyond the snug enclosure of mundane experience, and approach the threshold of the unknown.

This opening to the cosmos is, for Lawrence, the true purpose of male-female unions. For Tom and Lydia, love is only the door to something beyond individual egos, something greater: “They had passed through the doorway into the further space, where
movement was so big, that it contained bonds and constraints and labours, and still was complete liberty. She was the doorway to him, he to her” (R 90). In the “further space” opened up by their detached intimacy, Tom and Lydia achieve what most of Lawrence’s characters can only sense as a distant potentiality: a passionate union that reinforces, rather than undermines, their separate cosmic journeys. Through the unknown in each other, they confront the infinite unknown beyond them. This “transfiguration” (91) is momentary, however, as is fitting for individuals living authentically in the flux. The relationship remains strong, but the levels of intimacy continue to fluctuate as the Brangwens get older, raise a family, and pursue their separate lives in a loose tandem that leaves them free to think and feel separately. As the first Brangwen couple in the saga, Tom and Lydia set the tone for the book by opening themselves (through each other) to the world beyond. They do so not by dissolving outwards (like Mrs. Morel), but by making their thresholds permeable to the flows of emotion expressed in their aura spaces.


The concept of permeable enclosure comes up in later generations through The Rainbow’s representation of the relationships between personal and architectural space. When rare matter is used to defamiliarize the outlines of public buildings, the resulting perceptual gestalt affects characters’ subjective sense of enclosure, which depends as much on the spatial focus of their attention as it does on the nature of the boundaries nearby. If the walls and ceiling of a building are perceived not as abstract boundaries between interiors and exteriors, but as solid objects surrounded by air, the sensation of being safely enclosed within a building may give way to an awareness of the broader
spatial context within which the building’s interior is embedded. To those for whom roofs and walls represent security and shelter, this spatial gestalt can provoke cosmic agoraphobia, but other characters identify the expanded perceptual horizon with a sense of liberation.

The chapter entitled “The Cathedral” dramatizes the perceptual consequences of the spatial gestalt effect, as Anna Brangwen deliberately disrupts her husband Will’s association of enclosed architectural space with cosmic order and ontological security. For Will, the safely bounded interior of the cathedral permits a kind of spiritual release that contrasts with his carefully-ordered daily routines. His soul, which “leap[s] up” into the dark vault (187), is figured as both a bird in flight and a seed enclosed in a dark womb, so that its freedom of movement is tempered by the comforting limits of protective walls. From Anna’s perspective, the cathedral’s vaulted interior is an inadequate symbol for the cosmos: it is too ordered and neatly bounded to account for her husband’s awe.

Like the protective umbrella of artifice that humanity erects to shut out the “open and windy chaos” (“Chaos in Poetry” 235), Will’s understanding of the cathedral space as an ontological symbol depends on an erasure of the sky above its roof. Anna objects: “But she would never consent to the knitting of all the leaping stone in a great roof that closed her in, and beyond which was nothing, nothing, it was the ultimate confine”

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77 This sense of enclosure being destabilized by a character’s consciousness of the surrounding exterior space recurs throughout The Rainbow at moments of stress or upheaval. For instance, when Lydia Brangwen is in labour with Anna’s younger brother, the house seems to her husband “empty [...] or exposed to the winter night, as if it had no walls” (71). Later, when the baby has been successfully delivered, and his wife is absorbed in feeding him, Tom Brangwen wishes the “air were not so close and narrow” with newfound domesticity, and wants to “smash the walls down, and let the night in” (87). Exposure, then, may be both a threat and a liberation; air enclosed within the walls of a building may aggravate a broader sense of confinement.
Unlike Will, she refuses to exclude from her vision the open space outside the walls: “After all, there was the sky outside, and in here, in this mysterious half-night, when his soul leapt with the pillars upwards, it was not to the stars and the crystalline dark space” (188). Anna does not reject the impulse to exult in a spatially-inspired free flight of the soul; she simply identifies this sense of liberation with interstellar space instead: “the open sky was no blue vault, no dark dome hung with many twinkling lamps, but a space where stars were wheeling in freedom, with freedom above them always higher […] She claimed the right to freedom above her, higher than the roof. She had always a sense of being roofed in” (188-89). Anna’s roofless, infinite sense of space closely resembles the “open and windy chaos” (“Chaos in Poetry” 235) and aligns her with Lawrence’s view of a successfully interactive relationship with the material universe.

Anna’s perspective relativizes Will’s sense of the cathedral as an abstract, protective enclosure by reinstating the connection between the building’s interior and the spatial context in which it is embedded:

He felt that his cathedrals would never again be to him as they had been. Before, he had thought them absolute. But now he saw them crouching under the sky, with still the dark, mysterious world of reality inside, but as a world within a world, a sort of side show, whereas before they had been as a world to him within a chaos: a reality, and order, and absolute, within a meaningless confusion. (190-91)

Will and Anna’s conflict over how to interpret the cathedral space reframes the walls and roof of the building; once the outer limits of the space conceived as bounded interior,
they now appear as two-sided objects within a larger, unbounded cosmos. While they screen much of the outside world from view, these structural features are in contact with the air on both their interior and exterior surfaces, so that they serve as a spatial interface (or meeting surface) as well as a boundary.

Viewed from this perspective, architecture can serve as a reminder of the embedded spatial scales within which the self-world relationship must operate. Critics have often remarked upon the peculiar fusion of the mundane and eternal realms in this novel. Referring to the simultaneous evocation of evolutionary, generational, and personal time scales, Michael Bell argues that *The Rainbow* represents “human identity as inhabiting different time scales simultaneously, so that personal consciousness is radically conditioned by incommensurate orders of time” (Bell 67). This idea of embedded time scales in *The Rainbow* can be usefully extended to describe the simultaneity of different spatial scales as well—the Brangwen family (especially in earlier generations) seems unusually aware of how daily farm and village life is spatially embedded within the broader cosmic setting. Will’s new sense of the cathedral’s interior as “a world within a world” evokes the continuity between architectural spaces at the human scale, and the infinite interstellar spaces at the cosmic scale.

Once a sense of material continuity has been established, an awareness of embedded spatial immersion need not always provoke fear. Will eventually embraces a more contextually responsive view of sacred architecture: “it seemed, a temple was never perfectly a temple, till it was ruined and mixed up with the winds and the sky and the herbs” (191). In the roofless ruin, the flow of rare matter across the building’s thresholds marks the interior as spatially continuous with the broader material cosmos, rather than
isolated from the outside world to serve as a symbol of a transcendent absolute. The resulting sense of partial, permeable enclosure is of central importance to the visionary imagery with which the novel concludes.

After nearly a century of efforts to interpret Ursula’s vision of the rainbow on the last page of the novel, critical consensus remains elusive. While often mentioned only in passing, Ursula’s earlier vision of the split acorn—when adequately contextualized as an example of partial enclosure—provides a clue that opens up the rainbow vision to new, more satisfying interpretations. Thematic readings tend to treat the two images separately, since the acorn first appears during Ursula’s fever, while the rainbow accompanies the renewed vitality she feels in recuperation. However, the text weaves the two images together at the end: a “horny covering” and a “new germination” are mentioned along with the rainbow in the novel’s penultimate sentence (459). Both images, I will argue, incorporate partial enclosure in order to represent the self-world threshold as a doorway, an interface where the known and the unknown meet. Inherent in both images is the potential energy created by a boundary zone that simultaneously differentiates and connects interior and exterior spaces, inviting Ursula to venture outward and encounter the unknown.

The sense of partial enclosure is somewhat more explicit in the acorn image. During her fever, Ursula has a vivid memory of “acorns in February [...] with their shells burst and discarded” and goes on to identify them with her own self-world relationship: “She was the naked, clear kernel thrusting forth the clear, powerful shoot, and the world was a bygone winter, discarded” (456). The “kernel” represents Ursula’s sense of incipient new life, while the split husk represents the “vast encumbrances of the world”
that have been holding her back. The husk’s symbolism is complicated: it seems to refer at once to her own (pregnant) body and to all of the self-world connections from which she wishes to “extricate herself”—her connections to her parents and her former lover, to the local landscape, and to the entire “world of things” that surrounds her (456). Were this rejection of the concrete world complete, it would serve as a danger signal, given Lawrence’s belief in the necessity of embracing embodied flux experience. The positive tone of the narration may be explained by the fact that, despite her protestations, Ursula (as acorn kernel) does not in fact discard the husk, but remains semi-enclosed. In a passage that associates rare matter with access to a new kind of freedom, she takes stock of the newly permeable boundary zone in her self-world relationship:

When she opened her eyes in the afternoon and saw the window of her room and the faint, smoky landscape beyond, this was all husk and shell lying by, all husk and shell, she could see nothing else, she was enclosed still, but loosely enclosed. There was a space between her and the shell. It was burst, there was a rift in it. Soon she would have her root fixed in a new Day, her nakedness would take itself the bed of a new sky and a new air, this old, decaying, fibrous husk would be gone. (456)

Burst but not shaken off, the acorn husk symbolizes a detached but ongoing relationship with the material world. The “space between her and the shell” is the crucial detail: as in Lawrence’s ideal interpersonal relationship, Ursula has room to differentiate herself and manoeuvre. Recognizing rare matter as a key part of the “world of things” (456) requires a reinterpretation of this extra roominess within the husk. The space is not empty; the “rift” in the husk connects her directly to “a new sky” filled with “a new air” so that, even
as solid “fibrous” matter of the husk decays, she explicitly maintains a connection with rare matter. Thus, the acorn with its split husk is not an index of her desire to completely transcend the material world, but rather an intriguing spatial hybrid between interior and exterior space, similar to Will’s ruined temple or Lydia’s unfolding flower. Such semi-enclosed spaces suggest differentiation without precluding dynamic interactions in the boundary zone.

This concept of partial enclosure also characterizes the rainbow image that follows. Rainbows in Lawrence’s work tend to be broadly associated with the reconciliation of polarities. In addition, several critics have observed that *The Rainbow* consistently associates the title image with architectural imagery, as a natural echo of the built arches that feature so prominently in the “Cathedral” chapter (Friedman 143-49; Hyde 10-11; Engelberg 249). The pattern is not hard to spot, but it has important implications for the sense of character’s personal spaces as partial enclosures bordering on the unknown. Alan Friedman, noting the recurrence of rainbow imagery at regular intervals throughout the novel, observes that “in each case the rainbow arch is conceived as a circle half concluded, as an open circle leading out and beyond, in short, as a

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78 This connection is reinforced during Ursula’s convalescence, when she feels “frail and fine and clear [...] like the most fragile flower that opens in the end of winter” (457).

79 The rainbow’s semicircular shape helps to picture Lawrence’s concept of the “Two-in-One” (“Study of Thomas Hardy” 513), and has often been interpreted conceptually, as the harmonization (in the bow) of two opposing forces (the rainbow’s two ends, pictured as feet pushing upward and inward in opposite directions). See, for instance, Bryant (81-88), Spilka (95), Daleski *Forked Flame* (88).

80 Both interpretations find support elsewhere in Lawrence’s writing. For instance, the poem “Rainbow” (*Complete Poems* 818) supports the Two-in-One interpretation (Bryant 83-84), while a different poem, “The Rainbow” (*Complete Poems* 692), explicitly takes up the architectural metaphor. The latter poem plays suggestively on rare materiality to convey the elusiveness of the symbol’s ultimate significance: “Even the rainbow has a body / made of the drizzlin g rain / and is an architecture of glistening atoms / built up, built up / yet you can’t lay your hand on it, / nay, nor even your mind” (692). With reference to this poem, Fiona Becket suggests that an architecture made up of light and air suggests its own duality, that of “continuity and change, the twin dynamic of fixity and transformation” (126).
doorway to the next generation and the next story” (143). Here, Friedman articulates the
dynamism of the semi-enclosed space, which invites passage through a doorway into
active relationship with the surrounding world. When interpreted in light of the patterns
of imagery that have preceded it, the rainbow image at the end of the novel reveals a
complex, three-dimensional spatiality. If the vertical dimension of the archway expresses
the meeting of opposed vectors at the apex of the semicircle (Lawrence’s Two-in-One),
the horizontal dimension includes the empty space beneath the bow, an analogue to the
doorway onto the unknown that characters seek through their love partnerships.

Paradoxically, a couple may both form the archway and pass through it: Tom sees
Lydia as “the gateway and the way out” as well as the space “beyond” (91), but during
Anna’s childhood he forms one half of the archway that ushers his step-daughter into her
future: “father and mother now met to the span of the heavens, and she, the child, was
free to play in the space beneath, between” (91). Many years later, Anna associates “a
slight expectant feeling, as of a door half opened” with a vision of “a rainbow like an
archway, a shadow-door” calling her to travel toward “something beyond” (181). Instead
of passing through the door, she chooses instead to bear children and become their
threshold instead: “She was a door and a threshold, she herself. Through her another soul
was coming, to stand upon her as upon the threshold, looking out, shading its eyes for the
direction to take” (182). One soul who comes through this threshold is her daughter
Ursula, whose vision of the rainbow orients the book’s final scene toward the unknown
future.

In Ursula’s final vision, the rainbow is also a doorway. It forms first “in the
blowing clouds” and gradually gathers colour until it “stands” on the earth, “making great
architecture of light and colour and the space of heaven, its pedestals luminous in the corruption of new houses on the low hill, its arch the top of heaven” (458). With its “pedestals” rooted in the mundane scale of the unimpressive modern houses, the bow arches above, inviting the attention not only upward to the “top of heaven,” but through to the “space of heaven.” Like the arched thresholds encountered in the earlier generations, this doorway leads to the “further space,” the immanent “beyond” that represents the adventurous fullness of individual being.

Peeking out past the threshold of the cathedral, past the rift in the acorn husk, through the space of the rainbow’s arch, is a new life that is “loosely enclosed” and that leads to “a new sky and a new air” (456). These key images in The Rainbow represent neither the outward movement into dissolution, nor the contraction and stabilization of differentiation, but the doorway that links the two—from liminal space of the archway, characters have access to both the potential for continuity and mingling and the potential for division and boundedness. In drawing attention to this pivot, Lawrence reinforces the dynamic inter-relatedness of dissolution and differentiation, and the necessity of both to the healthy constitution of the self-world bond. Ultimately, these images of partial enclosure suggest that, by preserving the options of “opening” and “closing” one’s thresholds, it is possible to self-differentiate without sacrificing one’s dynamic connection with the circumambient universe.

8. Paul and Ursula at the Brink: Dynamic Individualism and the Frustration of Hermeneutic Closure

Both novels end abruptly, at turning points in the protagonists’ lives rather than moments that mark the culmination of their respective journeys into adulthood. In
keeping with the spontaneity of individual action in his model of dynamic individualism, Lawrence leaves the characters’ motivations in these last scenes undefined and unpredictable. He thereby disrupts the conventional expectation for closure and integration at the end of a novel (particularly a novel of personal development). In its place, he substitutes an ethical distance between character and reader that opens the possibility of a character’s life unfolding spontaneously, unencumbered by externally imposed expectations about the propriety or verisimilitude of consistency in self-world interactions. Paying attention to the way that threshold imagery situates selfhood in a responsive, embodied relationship to the cosmos does not allow us to sum up the meaning of the characters’ journeys, but it does clarify the position they find themselves in at the end of the narrative. Both Paul and Ursula end up poised uncertainly, like a flower on the edge of a cliff, facing a radically indeterminate future within a vast unending material space. Both show signs of having changed in ways that may free them to move forward more spontaneously, but we cannot be certain how they will proceed.

Many critics have interpreted this lack of resolution (especially in *Sons and Lovers*) as a sign that Lawrence is not fully in control of his material. In an early and highly influential formalist analysis, Schorer uses the last line of *Sons and Lovers* to claim that “the book may reveal certain confusions between intention and performance” because “nothing in his previous history persuades us” that Paul could turn back from suicide “towards […] life” (76). More recently, Michael Black has claimed that “[t]he end of *Sons and Lovers*, like the end of *The Rainbow*, is positive because Lawrence wants it to be” (187). Insisting that the dominant tone of the final scenes in both novels is one of despair, he suggests that Lawrence artificially “will[s] his central characters into the effort
to move towards the world” (187). John Stoll sums up the objections of many Freudian critics when he claims that the ambivalence of the ending derives from “the author’s uncertainty over the outcome” and functions “to conceal the formal problem, the lack of coherence between the realistic and symbolic levels of the work, between the psychoanalytic and life matrices” (62). I propose, instead, that the “uncertainty over the outcome” reflects Lawrence’s desire to release the characters’ trajectories of self-development from authorial control; although he cannot help but control the ending by writing it, the gesture reveals his continued sensitivity to paradoxes of subject-object differentiation.

If we consider reader-text relationships as a subset of self-world relationships, we can see how Lawrence also implicitly extends the concept of dynamic thresholds to apply to the ethics of reading and interpreting modernist texts. Both novels end with the protagonist contemplating a blurry-edged image—Paul’s view of the glowing town and Ursula’s vision of the rainbow. Working as embedded models for interpretation, these final scenes suggest a similar blur at the edges of the texts we have been contemplating. Positioned just where we expect the text to end, both scenes imply that the boundaries of the text are less clearly delineated than we may expect. Instead of neatly wrapping up the story to mark a clear division between the text as an object and the reader as an observing subject, Lawrence ends with ambiguously-bounded images that suggest the need for more dynamic reader-text interactions. Given Lawrence’s insistence, in “Poetry of the Present,” that “Life, the ever-present, knows no finality, no finished crystallization” (76), we might reinterpret these abrupt endings not as artistic failures, but as deliberate challenges to our hermeneutic dependence on predictable patterns. By deviating from
expectations established earlier in the novel, the equivocal endings put us in a position to respect the alterity of the text in the same way that Cézanne respects the alterity of the apples: not through detached objectivity, but through a “fight with the edges” (“Introduction to These Paintings” 275), this time at the boundary zone between reader and text. If the novels leave Paul and Ursula at a moment of spontaneous “quickness” in their relationship to the world, we will not be able to predict or even interpret their actions from the outside. Instead, these unsettling final scenes invite us to adopt a “quick” relationship to the text itself—to adjust in response to a change that we cannot presume to explain without modifying our viewpoint to suit the particular case. Forced to confront our own desires to absorb Paul and Ursula (and their respective visions) into our narrative patterns of choice, we are instead faced with their alterity. If their lives have actually changed, we cannot know what that means, or what they will do next. For the first time, the lives ahead of them are unscripted.

As I argued in the introduction, Lawrence experiments with self-world thresholds partly to resist the pressure (reflected in bioscientific discourse) to integrate threshold imagery too predictably into narratives of social control. Encouraging a “quick” form of reader-text interaction, he undermines generic expectations that might otherwise constrain his capacity to portray narratives of self-development as spontaneous and unpredictable. But while Lawrence’s materialist model of dynamic individualism provides a particularly clear illustration of how the rarity-density spectrum contributes dynamic movement to threshold imagery, the implications of the pattern extend well beyond his particular political and aesthetic goals. The remainder of this study will explore how the destabilization of threshold imagery works more broadly within
modernist writing as a figure that links the ethical dynamics of self-world and reader-text interactions. I will argue that dynamic threshold imagery has the potential to simultaneously reshape both our understanding of interpersonal and political affiliations among characters, and our view of the interactive narrative strategies that many modernist texts deploy to encourage active reading.

In the texts I have considered so far, Lawrence dramatizes the dynamism of self-world thresholds primarily through familial and romantic relationships. The next chapter seeks to extend the concept of dynamic thresholds to a wider variety of interpersonal and communal interactions. My analysis of Lawrence has deliberately focussed on the essays and early novels that most clearly establish the connections between the rarity-density spectrum and his particular brand of dynamic individualism. Although Lawrence’s later works provide ample opportunity to discuss dynamic thresholds in relation to broader communal relationships, Lawrence’s reputation for political idiosyncrasy, as well as his increasing isolation from European intellectual circles late in his career, limits the potential for connecting his representations of communal processes with broader patterns in modernist writing. Rather than pursuing this line of inquiry through an exclusive focus on Lawrence, the remaining chapters therefore establish a comparative perspective based on the spatial configurations that drive his formulation of dynamic individualism.

In the next chapter, I will argue that Virginia Woolf, like Lawrence, uses rare imagery to destabilize self-world thresholds out of a similar concern to free up interpersonal relationships from habitualized social patterns. Comparing Woolf and

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81 Further research might, for instance, examine how self-world thresholds function dynamically in the volatile and multi-faceted relationships of *Women in Love*, or in the controversial social formations dramatized in Lawrence’s later leadership novels.
Lawrence’s uses of the rarity-density spectrum reveals unexpected similarities in their narrative techniques. Both authors rely on narrative movement to model the instability of self-world boundaries and thereby reveal the ethical complexities of subject-object dynamics. Both express process-oriented views of social interactions not only in their representations of fictional characters, but also in the open-ended forms of their novels and essays. Not coincidentally, Woolf also shares Lawrence’s interest in cultivating a “quick” reader-text dynamics. Extending the notion of dynamic self-world thresholds to refigure the relationships between readers and texts, both authors seek to encourage individual agency and critical thinking in their readers through gestalt shifts built on the rarity-density spectrum. My close readings of Woolf’s essays and novels will reveal further connections between the dynamics of self-world relationships and the active reader-text interactions that modernist writing tends to demand. In the conclusion, I will show how this refiguration of rhetorical dynamics can help us meet the challenges posed by a variety of modernist texts that seek to destabilize and reinvigorate the ethical relationships between narrators, authors, readers and texts.
Chapter 3. “The Wild Yet Controlled Dance of the Atoms”:

Rare Imagery and Virginia Woolf’s Dynamic Spatial Models of Community

Drawing on close readings of Virginia Woolf’s fiction and non-fiction, this chapter examines the value of the rarity-density spectrum for exploring social interactions and modes of political affiliation, both within fictional communities and within the reading communities that Woolf seeks to cultivate through her writing. Because Woolf aims to encourage democratic habits of mind in her readers, provocative narrative strategies are essential to her modelling of communal interactions. Accordingly, my analysis will connect the rarity-density spectrum not only to representations of community within Woolf’s narratives, but also to formal techniques that foreground the dynamism of the reader-text relationship. Thus, the representations of variable self-world thresholds that I discuss in this chapter are not limited to explicit images of rare matter, but instead draw from the wider range of material attributes that the full rarity-density spectrum brings to our attention. As I demonstrated in the chapter on London’s fog, gestalt effects prompted by amorphousness and semi-transparency of rare matter can serve as a powerful reminder that all material substances are basically clusters of particles in constant motion. The dynamic particulate structure of matter becomes, in Woolf’s work, the vehicle for a series of analogies related to the dynamic relationships between individuals and the social and political communities they comprise.

82 In the last chapter, I treated Lawrence’s essays separately from his fiction because the relevant selections were composed five to ten years after the early novels I discussed. Woolf’s re-use of key images throughout her career and her tendency to blur the lines between narration and exposition motivate the less strictly chronological approach of this chapter. Nevertheless, I endeavour to remain alert to the changing historical context of her work by signalling shifts in usage and audience that significantly affect the interpretation of images and concepts under discussion.
As I have discussed, perceptual gestalts related to particulate structure make rare images particularly suitable for modelling complex relationships between parts and wholes. In the fog chapter, I argue that Ford Madox Ford’s *The Soul of London* takes advantage of the particle/substance ambiguity of cloud and fog imagery to juxtapose individual elements of London’s social geography with the totality of the urban community. Depending on the focus of the reader’s attention, the same cloud image may call to mind a cluster of discrete particles or a continuous rare substance. Like the distinction between *looking at* and *looking through* the fog, this particle/substance ambiguity enables a gestalt shift that can open up new ways of perceiving spatial relationships: in this case, the simultaneous availability of the particle and substance views means that rare matter (and molecular substances more generally) can provide a powerful model for thinking through the ways in which individual citizens interact to make up larger social and political communities.

Woolf’s most famous description of narrative technique, her 1925 essay “Modern Fiction,” demonstrates the advantages of alternating between images of particles and rare substances in descriptions of the self-world threshold. The “incessant shower of innumerable atoms” that “shape themselves into the life of Monday or Tuesday” (160) suggests both a series of individual elements (the atoms) and a continuous substance (the shower or the shape they form). The particle view lends precision, a sense of sequential, discrete impressions: “Let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall” (161). The substance view lends continuity and a useful element of
vagueness. “Life is not a series of gig lamps symmetrically arranged; life is a luminous halo, a semi-transparent envelope surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end” (160). The image of the “luminous halo” relies primarily on the substance view to suggest an atmospheric threshold similar to the personal auras in Lawrence’s *The Rainbow*. The “semi-transparent envelope” implicitly combines the substance and particle views to suggest a porous self-world boundary, similar to the many images of permeable thresholds in Lawrence’s essays and fiction. Presented in rapid succession, the “shower of atoms,” the “luminous halo,” and the “semi-transparent envelope” confirm that the particle and substance views are complementary rather than mutually exclusive components of Woolf’s metaphorical repertoire. The full view, then, involves both the atoms and the substance, both the parts and the whole, both discrete and continuous metaphorical vehicles. Shifting back and forth between the particle and substance views lends flexibility to the narrative voice in its attempts to “convey this varying, this unknown and uncircumscribed spirit” that Woolf calls “life itself” (“Modern Novels” 33).

Like Ford, whose cloud imagery builds up a portrait of London without losing sight of individual Londoners, Woolf uses images of clouds, atoms, and other clusters of particles to investigate the overlaps between individual and collective identity. Woolf’s most striking use of cloud imagery to represent social groups occurs in *Pointz Hall*, an early typescript of her last novel, *Between the Acts* (1941). During the intermission of the village pageant, the audience (elsewhere compared to the “orts, scraps and fragments” of a splintered civilization), wanders into spontaneous groups which, “as they [tail] off, then

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83 For a discussion of Woolf’s deliberate use of vagueness in the context of contemporary trends in philosophy, see Megan Quigley (111-22).
[gather] together,” resemble “clouds which sometimes lose their substance, then increase” (144, 163). At the end of the pageant, the departing crowd is again compared to the dissipating tendrils of a dispersing cloud (177-78). Although much of the meteorological imagery in Pointz Hall was cut from the published version of the novel, its presence in the typescript suggests that Woolf (like Ford) found the particle/substance ambiguity helpful for modelling group dynamics. Moving fluidly between the particle view (separate people) and the substance view (cohesive groups) allows Woolf to represent the shifting, temporary forms of affiliation at the heart of the novel’s grassroots approach to community formation. Here and elsewhere, Woolf’s counterpointing of particle and substance images allows her to interrogate the processes and meanings underlying political structures, and to offer alternative ways to understand the dynamics of collective behaviour.

Looking at fluid images of interpersonal space and particulate clusters representing crowd interactions, this chapter will employ the particle/substance distinction to analyse Woolf’s complex models of community and emphasize their

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84 Textual criticism provides strong arguments for refusing to dismiss the significance of material from earlier drafts that does not appear in later published texts. As Brenda Silver has observed, the posthumous publication of Woolf’s manuscripts, typescripts and notebooks significantly alters the reception history of the work: “Once seen, once read, the words and the images found in the previous versions shadow and illuminate the impressions we receive from the familiar words on the well-thumbed page and create something new. […] What was once perceived as the single, integral work—the published novel—becomes multiple, intertextual” (206). It seems particularly appropriate that the cloud imagery in Pointz Hall should “shadow and illuminate” the repeated refrains about unity and dispersal in Between the Acts, a novel so explicitly concerned with questions of cultural transmission and intertextuality (Cuddy-Keane “Introduction” xlv-lix). Whittier-Ferguson suggests an analogy between the “dynamic, never fully resolved” relationships between past and present in the novel, and the intertextual relationships among successive versions of the text, the latest of which was still under revision at the time of Woolf’s death (298-299). If the novel’s self-conscious emphasis on cultural gaps and continuities functions in part to invite reader engagement, it seems appropriate pursue intertextual relationships among multiple versions of this text now that they are available, even if they did not circulate publicly during Woolf’s lifetime.

85 In a sense, the condensed, elliptical structure Between the Acts, which leaps from fragment to fragment in constructing its representation of community, refigures (at a formal/rhetorical level) the logic of the particle/substance structure expressed more explicitly in the cloud imagery of the earlier drafts.
salience to contemporary debates about the nature of group behaviour, an urgent public question at a time when fascist, socialist, and democratic ideologies were competing for political dominance in Europe. In particular, I focus on how Woolf takes advantage of rare attributes like permeation, fluid motion, and variable particle spacing to examine the tension (especially in women’s lives) between social autonomy and collective identity. By analyzing how Woolf uses rare imagery to model community dynamics, this chapter supports ongoing efforts to understand her innovative narrative strategies as active interventions in contemporary political debates about individual responsibility and collective action, and as pedagogical tools for instilling critical thinking skills essential to democratic citizenship.

1. The Spatial Dynamics of Democratic Community

In a radio lecture for the BBC in 1931, Woolf’s husband Leonard identifies the difficulty of resolving “the claims of the whole community with the claims of the individual” as the fundamental problem of democracy (Cuddy-Keane, VW Intellectual 37). Throughout the modernist period, pro-democracy thinkers faced anxieties about social fragmentation, which might limit a democracy’s capacity to mobilize in the face of ideological or military threats, or indeed undermine the fundamental democratic goal of working for the common good. Nevertheless, individual voters’ capacity for independent judgment forms the very basis of the franchise. To balance the need for social cohesion with the need for individual autonomy requires careful attention to both the connections and the gaps between citizens. As we have seen, rare imagery can be a powerful means of foregrounding the complexities of interpersonal space. From an ethical perspective, the spaces between people may be seen not simply as negative markers of isolation and
fragmentation, but as positive markers of interpersonal restraint. I will use the phrase *ethical spacing* to describe the maintenance of interpersonal distance to uphold individual autonomy by leaving room for disagreement, respecting privacy, and refusing to appropriate another’s subject position.

My close readings will demonstrate how images of both atmospheric substances and particle clusters draw attention to issues of ethical spacing in Woolf’s work. The importance of the spatial element of democratic community is reflected in Melba Cuddy-Keane’s assertion that Woolf’s *Between the Acts* is “thoroughly political in substituting, for the definition of politics as the exercising of power, a model of community as the dynamic inhabiting of mutual space” (“Comic Modes” 248). Woolf’s use of the rarity-density spectrum contributes to the dynamic spatial modelling of community in several ways. As I discuss later in this chapter, Woolf uses well-known models of molecular motion (which explain the differences in density between solids, liquids and gases) as analogies for the ways in which ephemeral communities cohere and separate in the course of everyday events. She also uses rare imagery to fill up and foreground the spaces between characters, in order to consider how individuals can balance their needs for self-differentiation and communal connection. Cuddy-Keane underlines the value of ethical spacing for preserving democratic freedom when she explains, “In *Between the Acts*, the conventional desirability of close ties of shared identity is challenged by Woolf’s sense of the vital spaces and silences in human communication—gaps that may fragment but also bestow individual freedom” (“Comic

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86 Such communal interactions may be carefully orchestrated, like Mrs. Ramsay’s dinner party (*TTL* 82-109) and Miss La Trobe’s pageant (*BA* 53-129), or they may be relatively spontaneous, like the sense of “splendid unanimity” that Bernard shares with fellow train passengers upon arriving in London (*W* 80).
Modes” 279). At the formal level, the “vital spaces and silences” in Woolf’s work have been the subject of intense scrutiny by generations of critics, many of whom describe her texts as porous and open to permeation by the reader’s mind. 87 By connecting critical work on textual gaps and reader response with politically-oriented analyses of Woolf’s representations of community dynamics, my focus on the rarity-density spectrum draws together two important strains in Woolf criticism to demonstrate how Woolf’s narrative strategies help her to address the particular political challenges of her time.

At the level of narrative strategy, ethical spacing lends political weight to Woolf’s formal experiments. Her diaries confirm that she saw her writing as a form of political intervention. 88 Nevertheless, her reluctance to employ coercive rhetoric, which might shut down her audience’s opportunity for critical thinking, has frequently led scholars to underestimate the degree of her political engagement. 89 In recent years, Woolf criticism has increasingly recognized the political import of narrative gaps and discontinuities, which leave room for interpretation and thereby elicit active involvement from readers.

87 Harvena Richter (1970) suggests that Woolf uses “negative ‘blank spaces’ or ‘intervals’ in a positive way” to contribute to subjective feeling (228-29), and to make us “consult our own minds” (a phrase from Woolf’s essay on Sterne’s Sentimental Journey) (Richter 231). Geoffrey Hartman (1961) discusses the importance of “power failures” in Woolf’s fiction, among which he includes the verbal spaces and rhythmic breaks in Between the Acts, along with the “vacuum” between Miss La Trobe’s pageant and its audience (41). To these, J. Hillis Miller (1982) adds the “blank spaces on the page” (220), a more literal form of textual gap. In a comparison of the American and British editions of Jacob’s Room, Edward Bishop (2004) reinforces the connection between textual gaps and reader response: “The gaps, then, do not merely pace the reader, they allow her or his mind to move into the silence” (31).

88 For instance, in one oft-quoted entry from 15 May 1940, Woolf considers the imminent possibility of England’s invasion by Hitler’s forces, then observes: “This idea struck me: the army is the body: I am the brain. Thinking is my fighting” (D5 285).

89 Even in her non-fiction, Woolf employs what Cuddy-Keane has called the “trope of the twist” to raise controversial questions “through a process of settling and unsettling, as we are urged simultaneously to form opinions and never to allow opinion to harden into ‘truth’” (“Rhetoric” 143). When Woolf advances theories, she “simultaneously disempowers the authoritative stance by situating her interpretation within an ongoing process of provisionality and exploration” (ibid.). For discussions of Woolf’s insistence on non-coercive rhetoric as a counterbalance to patriarchal and authoritarian rhetoric, see also DuPlessis (175), Connolly (53), and McIntire (30).
For instance, Michele Pridmore-Brown argues that Woolf’s use of “open-ended and provisional” forms that require readers to perform “individual acts of interpretation” can “subvert authoritarianism” by reinforcing individual agency and providing a direct contrast to fascist efforts to “create the nation as a work of art in which one perspective prevailed” (419). Taken in historical context, Woolf’s open-ended rhetoric takes on political significance as a form of anti-authoritarian resistance.\footnote{Margaret Connolly makes a similar point about the “cooperative, anti-Fascist form of The Years” which “shuns the loudspeaker” of charismatic leadership and “opens out to include its readers among the ‘ordinary people’ needed to carry on the search for truth and beauty” (68, 72).} Formal innovations are thus crucial to Woolf’s modelling of community: to fully understand her politics, we must look not only at the fictional communities she represents, but at how her narrative strategies work to cultivate the forms of public community she hopes to support.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, ideological pressures from both fascism and communism, combined with concerns about urban alienation, fuelled public debate about crowd interactions and group psychology. Woolf and her circle read and discussed well-known treatises by Wilfred Trotter (\textit{Instinct of the Herd in Peace and War}, 1916) and Sigmund Freud (\textit{Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego}, 1922), which sought to explain the formation of group bonds through evolutionary instincts and libidinal desires respectively.\footnote{For further discussion of responses to Freud and Trotter among the Woolfs and other members of Bloomsbury, see McLaurin, “Group Consciousness” (36-38); Cuddy-Keane, “Comic Modes” (274, 280); Cramer (166-67); DuPlessis (164); and Goldstein.} The didactic tone and academic format of these systematic studies limit their accessibility to non-specialists.\footnote{The same is true of Leonard Woolf’s comprehensive three-volume study of communal psychology, \textit{After the Deluge}. The first volume was published in 1931, the same year as \textit{The Waves}. The second and third volumes appeared in 1939 and 1953.} Furthermore, in attempting to account for large-scale societal patterns, Trotter and Freud downplay the role of
individual agency in group behaviour. In contrast, Woolf creates accessible working models of community featuring well-developed fictional characters, and uses narrative gaps to further encourage active reader participation. Portraying the processes of self-differentiation and self-diffusion in a variety of public and private contexts, her work investigates the political implications of subtle, momentary shifts in interpersonal dynamics. As a result, she is able to articulate the nuances of individual negotiations with collective identity in ways that invite critical thinking rather than imposing reductive generalizations. In addressing the problem of democratic community, Woolf proceeds indirectly: her shifting patterns of imagery never coalesce into rigid, prescriptive political analogies, but instead retain a rhetorical fluidity that matches the forms of flexible cohesion she advocates in communal life.

2. Using the Rarity-Density Spectrum to Model Group Behaviour

To investigate group interactions, Woolf foregrounds the spaces between people using three types of image that draw upon the rarity-density spectrum: permeable thresholds, immersive atmospheres, and particulate clusters. Like Lawrence, Woolf frequently represents the self-world boundary as a wall or partition that is permeable to flows of rare matter or airborne stimuli. In “Notes on D. H. Lawrence” (published posthumously), Woolf notes that she knew Lawrence’s work primarily by reputation until April 1931. Her observation that the “world of Sons and Lovers is perpetually in process of cohesion and dissolution” shows that she was conscious of threshold imagery in his work (354). Woolf was both frustrated and somewhat impressed by Lawrence’s use of the “incandescent body” as a “magnet that tries to draw together the different particles of which the beautiful and vigorous world of Nottingham is made” (354).
some part of the self “spills over” to mix with the larger environment; in Inge Boer’s
terms, the partition represents the boundary of the self as a “demarcating lin[e],” whereas
the permeation represents the boundary as a porous threshold or, as Boer expresses it “a
space in which events can happen” (12). Images of the self overspilling its bounds seem
initially to suggest a reliance on the body-as-container metaphor, but in Woolf’s work the
referents are more varied, so that the container is sometimes the body, sometimes the
privacy of individual consciousness, and sometimes a room that seems to externalize
social or interpersonal divisions.94

Appearing early in Woolf’s experimental novel *The Waves* (1931), Bernard’s
claim that “we are edged with mist” succinctly captures the porosity of the self-world
threshold in much of Woolf’s writing (9). The misty or blurred edge, like Pater and
Lawrence’s descriptions of particulate exchange at the skin’s surface,95 foregrounds the
individual’s physical continuity with the immersive medium that surrounds the self.
Woolf’s approach to this medium has a slightly different emphasis: whereas Lawrence
often contextualizes self-dissolution within a natural or cosmic setting, Woolf blends the
natural and social elements of the world outside the self, producing a more

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94 Radio waves and telephone wires contribute to the sense of permeable architectural thresholds in Woolf’s
1927 essay “Poetry, Fiction and the Future,” in which she describes what one might observe during “a walk
on the streets of any large town”: “The long avenue of brick is cut up into boxes, each of which is inhabited
by a different human being who has put locks on his doors and bolts on his windows to insure some
privacy, yet is linked to his fellows by wires which pass overhead, by waves of sound which pour through
the roof and speak aloud to him of battles and murders and strikes and revolutions all over the world” (431-
32). Patricia Laurence argues that the intrusive ubiquity of the wartime news media (including radio)
intensifies Woolf’s interest in the oscillation of “the private and the public [...] the individual and the
communal” between 1935-41 (228-29). See also Whitworth’s “Woolf’s Web: Telecommunications and
Community,” which reflects on the role of telecommunications networks in shaping Woolf’s use of
“filaments, nets and threads” as metaphors for communal interconnectivity (164).

95 See Chapter 2, pp. 113-14.
metaphorically-loaded immersive medium.⁹⁶ For reasons discussed below, I call this medium the *communal element*, modifying a term used by Woolf to describe the “nameless spirit” that occupies an empty room (*PH* 61). Throughout Woolf’s fiction, a sense of shared emotional or cultural experience, similar in some ways to the idea of a collective unconscious, finds concrete expression in images of an immersive medium that fills interpersonal space and represents a particular kind of social fusion. For instance, in *To the Lighthouse* (1927), when Mrs. Ramsay learns that two of the guests at her family’s summer home have become engaged, she experiences “that community of feeling with other people which emotion gives as if the walls of partition had become so thin that practically [...] it was all one stream, and chairs, tables, maps, were hers, were theirs, it did not matter whose” (113-14). Working in tandem, the thin “walls of partition” and the flow of the communal element express Mrs. Ramsay’s sense self-dissolution within the “one stream” of communal feeling.

Especially in her later works, Woolf alternates between fluid and particulate metaphors for community in order to model the tensions between self-delineation and social permeation that characters experience as they negotiate individual and group identities. While self-dissolution can create a sense of communion within a larger social whole, self-differentiation is crucial for avoiding dangerous forms of social conformity. Balanced against images of collectivity as an immersive substance are images that treat crowds as clusters of particles, using analogies to dancing atoms, flocking birds or other natural models to explain the movement of individuals in and out of unison with a group.

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⁹⁶ For discussions of Woolf and the natural world which touch briefly on the concept of self-dissolution, see Scott; Westling; Levy; Bartkevicius.
Woolf uses such images to suggest the crucial role of individual volition in free, democratic forms of political behaviour. Whereas extreme self-dissolution or complete unison may represent militaristic (even fascistic) political tendencies, temporary self-dissolution or partial unison can represent positive efforts to negotiate the balance between individual freedom and civic engagement. The rest of this chapter will focus on the ways in which the permeable threshold, the communal element and the various particulate images of the crowd help Woolf to describe the interpersonal and political dynamics of group behaviour.


Woolf’s narrative experiments with the permeability of the self-world threshold have long been discussed in formal terms, but scholarly efforts to explain their political implications are ongoing. It is relatively common for scholars to articulate Woolf’s unusual methods of characterization and narration by imitating her reliance on the language of the rarity-density spectrum. James Naremore describes Woolf’s overall prose style in terms of rarity: “Instead of hard permanency and clarity, she chose evocative generalization, and prose in which things are slightly blurred, as in a fine mist” (20). The language of blurring, dissolution, and semi-transparency takes on ethical dimensions in discussions of the boundaries and consequent power relations among the author, narrator, and characters. J. Hillis Miller mentions Woolf’s “dissolution of the traditional limits of plot and characters” (176), suggesting a transgression of ethical spacing when he claims: “Though the characters are not aware of this narrating presence, they are at every moment possessed and known, in a sense violated, by an invisible mind, a mind more powerful than their own” (178). Daniel Albright extends this sense of dissolution even
further when he includes *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) in a category of modernist novels characterized by “a dissolution, a blurring, an eating away of outline, a loss of the clear division between perceiver, perception, and object perceived” (20). In Albright’s view, the “loose pervasive sentience of the narrator” in such novels actually undermines the possibility of representing characters as individual agents: due to “the enormousness of the author’s sensibility” and “a certain loosening of the boundaries between characters and characters,” individual perceptions give way to “the reflex of a single controlling mind” (1, 8). Such statements about the dominance of the narrator or the authorial voice clearly telegraph the anxieties about self-loss that images of permeable self-world thresholds may provoke.

Other critics view the erosion of narrative boundaries in a more positive light, as enabling ethical relationships rather than undermining individual agency. James Naremore argues that, in the experimental biography *Orlando* (1928), Woolf productively challenges the boundaries of subjectivity, suggesting that “the envelope surrounding individual lives is in some sense permeable, permitting some contact with what lies ‘outside’” (191). Rachel DuPlessis emphasizes the positive political implications of porous self-world thresholds in her discussion of *The Years* (1937), a novel in which “characters constantly question the substantiality, effect, and borders of the ego” (167), so that individuals like North Pargiter “awaken” to the sense of a “communal and porous self” (171). Numerous critics, challenging the assumption that narrators are always controlling, point to Woolf’s creation of a non-authoritarian, non-possessive narrative voice. For Naremore, Woolf’s narrator becomes “the voice of everyone and no one” (75); for John Graham, her narrator is “omnipercipient” as opposed
to omniscient (204). Gabrielle McIntire goes further to propose that Woolf’s narrator actually participates in a socially-progressive form of communal permeability: in *The Waves*, “the boundaries between Woolf as author, the narrator whose presence is felt most acutely in the interludes, and the voices of the characters, are constantly intermingling to produce a hybridized and heteroglossically constituted subjectivity that the text consistently performs” (32). Michael Whitworth sums up the connections between porous self-world thresholds and community modelling using an atomic metaphor to which I will return later in the chapter: if “our concepts of the atom provide metaphors for the concept of individuality” then the “porous atom” models “a very different kind of individual, one without clear boundaries,” along with a “very different kind of group relationship, one of invisible interfusion and interdependency” (“Porous Objects” 153). If, as these critics argue, the blurring or porosity of the self-world threshold is crucial to Woolf’s attempts to refigure communal interactions, then the rarity-density spectrum provides an invaluable tool for connecting Woolf’s narrative practices with the historical terms of debate about the interface between individual and group behaviour.

Comparing critical responses to a novel like *Between the Acts*, which thematizes social cohesion and fragmentation in part through dramatic textual disruptions, helps to demonstrate what is at stake in connecting formalist and politically-oriented approaches to gaps and spacing in Woolf’s work. Set in a small English village just before World War II, the novel shows a heterogeneous mix of characters assembling to participate (as

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97 Critical discussions of cohesion and fragmentation in Woolf’s work often focus on *Between the Acts* due to its particular form and content. As Miller explains, the novel self-reflexively “interrogates its own order” by presenting many different kinds of fragments “on a small and large scale,” each of which is “marked by the question of its relation to the whole” (204).
either actors or audience members) in an outdoor pageant. The play, written and directed by the eccentric Miss La Trobe, compresses each of the canonical eras of British literary history into a highly intertextual scene that parodies the dominant literary styles and social customs of each corresponding period. To this elliptical aesthetic form are added the everyday interruptions that mark the distance between the ideal text and its reception in practice: the wind blows away words, the gramophone sticks, the audience members’ attention wanders. As a result of these multiple levels of disruption, the novel links together questions about the viability of aesthetic and social forms of continuity.

Miss La Trobe’s varying estimate of the success or failure of her pageant has tempted many critics to comment on the success or failure of the novel as a whole, a verdict which necessarily depends on the critics’ own views about the political functions of art and the relative desirability of “unity” and “dispersity” in social relations. Like Lucy Swithin and Bartholomew Oliver, the novel’s representatives of the “unifier” and “separatist” types respectively (BA 81), critics often fall into one of two camps: those who value “unity” as a positive marker of community cohesion, and those who value “dispersity” as a positive sign of social diversity and ethical spacing. The sheer diversity of scholarly interpretations of Woolf’s “ultimate” belief in either unity or diversity attests to the novel’s openness on this question. Hartman claims that the novel reveals a “voracious desire for continuity” that only makes the gaps more evident (42). Miller claims that the novel questions “the ability of art to create an other than factitious stay against fragmentation” (221). In Hinnov’s more optimistic view, Between the Acts “reveals that [Woolf] had not completely lost faith in humanity’s ability to form a communal ethos” and that her portrayal of community includes a “stabilizing” sense of
“interconnectedness and [...] permanence” (16, 19). Cuddy-Keane argues that Woolf succeeds by doing just the opposite: her comedy “celebrates an irreversible dismantling of order and actually advocates a permanent instability” (“Comic Modes” 280).

Similarly, Pridmore-Brown sees the novel as a process-oriented model of “a pluralist politics that affirms internal difference and that consists in a perpetual formation, expansion, and linking of subject positions” (417). Such interpretations differ not only in their criteria for evaluating the “success” or “failure” of Woolf’s community models, but also in their assumptions about Woolf’s implicit attitudes toward social cohesion and diversity.

Miller suggests that Woolf’s “unifier” and “separatist” characters model “incompatible interpretations” of the pageant, and that Woolf is “caught” between “irreconcilable necessities,” unable to resolve a “penchant for discord” with “the need for the grand affirmative order” (222). But does Woolf fail to resolve these two perspectives, or does she deliberately equivocate between them? According to Cuddy-Keane, Woolf criticism has been divided throughout its history by a “foundational opposition” between critics who “celebrat[e] integration, resolution, and closure in Woolf’s form” and those who “fin[d] value in flux, indeterminacy, and open-endedness” (“Narratological Approaches” 18). For the second group, the success of Miss La Trobe’s pageant lies not in its achievement of either “unity” or “dispersity” but in its “redemptive dedication to process,” which stimulates audience members (and by analogy, Woolf’s readers) to reflect on the need for ongoing negotiations between individual and collective identities (Cuddy-Keane, “Comic Modes” 279).
The dynamism of Woolf’s rare images supports the process-oriented view, suggesting that Woolf uses narrative movement to advocate a flexible attitude to “unity” and “dispersity,” rather than implicitly favouring a single community model. Her rare imagery generally represents spatial patterns that are in constant motion—patterns whose coherence resides in dynamic principles, rather than stable positioning. Like Lawrence, and for similar reasons, Woolf uses the rarity-density spectrum to insist on narrative oscillation between cohesion and dispersal, avoiding a static opposition in favour of the freedom and potential afforded by the temporal dimension. A number of critics have recognized the importance of an oscillation between union and separation in Woolf’s depiction of interpersonal and communal interactions. DuPlessis sees in *Between the Acts* “an oscillating balance” which creates a paradoxical “unity of dispersion or diversity, simultaneously ‘un-disp’” (173). Naremore observes that Rachel and Hewet, the lovers in Woolf’s first novel *The Voyage Out* (1915), “fluctuate between a sense of union and a sense of separateness” (52). Hinnov detects in *The Waves* (1931), and in the feminist-pacifist polemic *Three Guineas* (1938), a “sense of waxing and waning inherent in the creation of choran communities that welcome outcasts and outsiders into the fold” (7). According to Jessica Berman, the six main characters in *The Waves* “form a group that has no static, organic identity” but “is constantly in the process of becoming, without ever resolving itself into a common being” (149). My analysis builds on these arguments by locating, in Woolf’s particle/substance gestalt shifts, a method for helping readers to

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98 Narrative provides one way of undermining the stable binary that opposes “unity” to “dispersity.” Miller proposes resonance across distance as another alternative to the binary opposition, wondering if Woolf conceives of “some third, perhaps unnamed, possibility, neither yes nor no, neither unity nor dispersity, but the echoing of elements which remain at a distance” (205).
envision this fluctuation of spatial relationships. In other words, one of the functions of dynamic rare imagery is to demonstrate the value of preserving our capacity to move from one community model to another. For a community to remain democratic, each member must be free to shift the focus between communal integration and individual differentiation from one moment to the next.

4. Dynamic Spatial Models I: Permeation

The permeable self-world threshold, which can alternately function as a spatial limit or a porous opening, is one means by which Woolf introduces dynamic movement into her models of interpersonal relations. As we saw with Lawrence, the self-world threshold is an important locus for the oscillation between self-differentiation and self-diffusion (the latter being analogous, in Woolf’s work, with communal as well as romantic or sexual union). In accordance with her tendency to focus on process rather than static spatial divisions, Woolf’s images of permeable self-world thresholds resist the mind-body dichotomy. Rather than focussing on permeability and containment as such, Woolf’s threshold imagery often emphasizes motion or pressure dynamics at the self-world boundary. Consider, for instance, Lily Briscoe’s desire to fuse with Mrs. Ramsay as she sits “with her arms round Mrs. Ramsay’s knees” in To the Lighthouse. Lily wishes she could penetrate into “the chambers of the mind and heart of the woman who was, physically, touching her” and read the “sacred inscriptions” stored within (51).

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99 This technique is one example of Woolf’s “strategy of enacting perceptual shifts” to introduce multiple perspectives without allowing “the narrative voice to stabilize into any one position” (Cuddy-Keane, “Narratological Approaches” 30).

100 Woolf addresses this dichotomy with mocking irony in A Room of One’s Own, suggesting that while, at present, the “human frame” consists of “heart, body and brain all mixed together,” these elements will “no doubt” be “contained in separate compartments […] in another million years” (18).
the walls of the “secret chambers” as potentially porous, Lily wishes to “press through” them so that she and Mrs. Ramsay can mix together like two liquids in a single container. The exact nature of the interpersonal barrier is less important to Lily than the fact that it blocks her desire for union. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Clarissa’s inability to connect with her husband is expressed through a similarly vague image of permeation, difficult to locate in terms of its relationship to standard mind-body divisions: “She could see what she lacked. It was not beauty; it was not mind. It was something central which permeated; something warm which broke up surfaces and rippled the cold contact of man and woman, or of women together” (31). The “something” she claims to lack is recognizable by its spatial and functional attributes rather than its association with either physical or mental life. Instead of a precise noun, we have only its rare attributes, its capacities to permeate outward, break up surfaces, and ripple. “It was not beauty; it was not mind”—no particular relationship between the body and the mind is intended. The entire description represents something more general: the dynamic spatial relationship between self-diffusion and self-differentiation, and the associated processes of interpersonal connection and separation.

The world of solid objects often works as a testing ground for characters’ perception of the balance between differentiation and dissolution. Several of Woolf’s novels describe scenes in which a blurring in the outlines of objects serves to signal a character’s sensitivity to what happens at surfaces and threshold zones. In *Night and Day* (1919), Ralph Denham draws a symbol to describe his perception of blurry outlines:

> It represented by its circumference of smudges surrounding a central blot all that encircling glow which for him surrounded, inexplicably, so many
objects of life, softening their sharp outline, so that he could see certain streets, books, and situations wearing a halo almost perceptible to the physical eye. (519)

The “circumference of smudges surrounding a central blot” is remarkably similar in structure to Clarissa Dalloway’s “something central that permeated”—its exact referent varies so that anything from the generic “objects of life” to a certain book or a situation can wear the “encircling glow” or “halo” that extends beyond more obvious physical limits.¹⁰¹ In describing this diffuse structure, Ralph (like Clarissa) relies on rare matter’s capacity to permeate outward into the surrounding space. Eleanor draws a similar diagram in *The Years*, a “dot with strokes raying out round it” (91). Though more stylized than Ralph’s smudges, the radiating “strokes” still represent permeation outward from a centre. The context connects Eleanor’s diagram to questions of object discreteness: she has just been contemplating the independent existence of a “solid object” (a walrus figurine) which is also “part of other things—her mother for example” (91). Immediately after drawing the diagram, Eleanor notices “a drift of smoke; a sharp acrid smell” and the sound of a barrel-organ carried on the wind. Such airborne stimuli are reminders of how apparently discrete objects interact over distance. Both diagrams, then, suggest that discrete objects may bleed out into the surrounding space on a variety of literal and figurative levels.¹⁰²

¹⁰¹ Quigley locates a source for the diagram in a passage by Henry James describing his technique in writing *The Awkward Age*, which Woolf quoted in the essay “The Method of Henry James” (1918). As Quigley points out, the blurriness of Ralph’s diagram is Woolf’s innovation (121). The softened outline of “books” is particularly evocative, suggesting a blurring of textual boundaries similar to that implied by Lawrence’s use of blurry images in the final scenes of *Sons and Lovers* and *The Rainbow*.

¹⁰² Attention to the contours of objects is quite common in Woolf’s fiction. In *The Voyage Out*, Rachel Vinrace feels as though the presence of Hewet and Hirst “stripped some cover off the surface of things”
A scene in To the Lighthouse confirms that blurry and discrete object outlines are not mutually exclusive, but represent alternative models for understanding the same physical object. Near the end of the novel, James ranges across the rarity-density spectrum to acknowledge the equal validity of two seemingly opposed views of his long-sought destination: the lighthouse is both “a silvery, misty-looking tower” and a “tower, stark and straight [...] barred with black and white” (186). “Nothing,” he concludes, is “simply one thing” (186). The oscillation between blurred and definite edges is in part a perceptual shift, but it conveys an ambiguity rooted in the particulate nature of matter itself. Both the blurred and the discrete view of the lighthouse’s edge describe valid configurations of the threshold space: as I have argued in previous chapters, the concrete spatial division between a solid object and the surrounding atmosphere is constantly blurred by the processes of particulate exchange. By refusing to favour either perspective, James models the perspectival mobility that makes room for both dispersion and differentiation over the course of the narrative. This dynamic variation in the definiteness of objects’ outlines echoes and reinforces reciprocal variations in spatial configurations of the self-world threshold.

In The Waves, object outlines are explicitly linked with characters’ perceptions of their own differentiation and dissolution. The experimental form of The Waves, in which six distinct narrators frequently echo one another’s words and thoughts, makes the permeable threshold imagery in this novel particularly versatile. Rhoda, a narrator
characterized by her discomfort with embodiment, repeatedly reassures herself that she is not dissolving by touching the solid objects around her (17, 45, 115). Early in the novel, she asserts: “Month by month things are losing their hardness; even my body now lets the light through” (31). Her image of herself as sea foam (77) prefigures suicidal thoughts of drowning in which she imagines that “the waves will shoulder me under” so that “everything falls in a tremendous shower, dissolving me” (151). Pulling herself away from the brink, she again reassures herself by pressing her foot against the ground and her hand against a hard door (151). Near the end of the novel, her fellow narrator Bernard has absorbed Rhoda’s doubts about the solidity of the object world: “I begin now to forget; I begin to doubt the fixity of tables, the reality of here and now, to tap my knuckles smartly upon the edges of apparently solid objects and say, ‘Are you hard?’” (214). Bernard explicitly links these doubts about the self-world relationship to questions about his own individuality:

I have lost in the process of eating and drinking and rubbing my eyes along surfaces that thin, hard shell which cases the soul, which, in youth, shuts one in […] And now I ask, ‘Who am I?’ I have been talking of Bernard, Neville, Jinny, Susan, Rhoda and Louis. Am I all of them? Am I one and distinct? I do not know. […] we are divided […] Yet I cannot find any obstacle separating us. There is no division between me and them.

(214)

The “thin, hard shell which cases the soul” no longer seems to separate one character from another. Bernard’s sense of self-differentiation has, at this moment, been challenged by a failure to locate any partition between himself and the other characters. One might
say this is just Bernard’s biased viewpoint. After all, his edgeless view of individuals is often contrasted with Neville’s, who observes early on: “I feel my own solitude. He sees every one with blurred edges” (35). But while the sense of porous boundaries is a clear bias of Bernard’s, it is also, as we have seen, a key thematic and formal feature of Woolf’s approach to narration and characterization.

Thin, permeable walls serve to express continuity among individuals in several of Woolf’s novels, beginning with *The Voyage Out* (1915). As the characters journey across the Atlantic toward an obscure South American port, their common experience of the ocean voyage provokes unusual forms of intimacy. Referring initially to the nightmares of Mrs. Dalloway, a minor character in this novel, the narrator describes an uncanny communion among the travellers:

The dreams were not confined to her indeed, but went from one brain to another. They all dreamt of each other that night, as was natural, considering how thin the partitions were between them, and how strangely they had been lifted off the earth to sit next each other in mid-ocean, and see every detail of each others’ faces, and hear whatever chance prompted them to say. (52)

The “partitions” in question are, on a literal level, the thin walls between the ship’s cabins, but given the transmission of dreams “from one brain to another,” they also function at the self-world threshold. This dual referent allows the partition image to convey the kind of uncanny materiality through which Woolf often represents interpersonal connectivity. Not only is the narrator able to report on the characters’ unconscious perceptions, but the dreams are “not confined” to “one brain,” so that the
content of the dreams seems to mingle across the “partitions” that traditionally separate one character’s thoughts from another.

Thin walls suggest the tenuity of the self-world boundary at other levels as well. Rhoda, always uncomfortable in her body, pictures the process of perception in terms of the permeable boundaries of the mind: “there are moments when the walls of the mind grow thin; when nothing is unabsorbed” (164). Later, she describes a “disembodied mood” in which “the walls of the mind become transparent” (168). Bernard, who has a talent for transforming his experiences of daily life into stories, renders a more generalized version of the same image, this time explicitly incorporating rare matter to describe the tenuity of the threshold space: “The crystal, the globe of life as one calls it, far from being hard and cold to the touch, has walls of thinnest air” (189). This substitution of rare matter for the solid surface of the globe is consistent with Bernard’s image of social communion among individuals: “when we sit together, close [...] we melt into each other with phrases. We are edged with mist” (9). The edges of the body, the mind, the brain, the “globe of life” itself—all blend and “melt into each other” with the fluidity of rare matter, calling into question any stable delineation of the self-world boundary. As my discussion of Sons and Lovers has shown, this tendency of characters to blur and blend at their edges creates opportunities for both emotional intimacy and violations of ethical spacing.

Under the right circumstances, the porosity of the self-world boundary can reinforce communal ties and mitigate social isolation. Questions of community take on particular urgency in Woolf’s later work, including The Years (1937), a novel that seeks to represent historical change through the lens of one family’s daily interactions.
Beginning with a chapter entitled “1880” and ending with the “Present Day” (ostensibly 1937), the novel follows the Pargiter family through many of the social upheavals that characterize the modernist period. In a key scene in *The Years*, Eleanor Pargiter explicitly connects a sense of blurred objects with her own sensations of self-dissolution, which are provoked by a combination of immediate circumstances and broader historical conditions. Eleanor and several family members dine together during the London bombing in 1917, drinking wine and eating dinner in a lull between air raids. Noticing that “the wine goes to one’s head,” Eleanor contemplates an odd feeling of intimacy that accompanies ordinary conversation in war-time: “She was feeling already a little blurred; a little light-headed. It was the light after the dark; talk after silence; the war, perhaps, removing barriers” (284). These barriers are removed not only between people, but also at the edges of solid objects:

> A little blur had come round the edges of things. It was the wine; it was the war. Things seemed to have lost their skins; to be freed from some surface hardness; even the chair with gilt claws, at which she was looking, seemed porous; it seemed to radiate out some warmth, some glamour, as she looked at it. (287)

The “warmth” and “glamour” that radiate outward from the chair carry a mixture of physical, aesthetic and emotional connotations. Wine and war suggest alternative physiological and psychological explanations for Eleanor’s odd sensations. While inebriation may contribute to the blur, it is no coincidence that the chair, a typical
representative of the object world,\textsuperscript{103} seems “porous” under threat of an air raid, when life
depends on the solidity of the roof overhead. When the company is forced by a siren to
hide in the cellar, Eleanor claims not to mind the air raids (289), but her sensation of
vulnerability finds expression in her minute attention to the oscillation of a spider’s web
on the stone arch above their heads, along with her sensitivity to changes in the air
pressure as the bombs fall from the sky (290). The juxtaposition of rare and dense
materials serves to express her sense of spatial exposure, even within the relative safety
of the stone cellar.

Perhaps in response to the common experience of exposure and confinement
associated with the bomb shelter, interpersonal barriers seem to dissolve as well. After
the air raid, Nicholas and Eleanor (who have just met) have a hesitant but remarkably
intimate conversation, speaking quietly so as not to draw the attention of the other people
in the room. Wondering vaguely about “the new world,” Eleanor asks Nicholas; “D’you
think we’re going to improve?” (295). Responding in the affirmative, he describes the
necessary societal change as an expansion of the human soul, using language that
depends on contrasts between rarity and density:

“The soul—the whole being,” he explained. He hollowed his hands as if to
enclose a circle. “It wishes to expand; to adventure; to form—new
combinations?”

“Yes, yes,” she said, as if to assure him that his words were right.

“Whereas now,”—he drew himself together; put his feet together; he

\textsuperscript{103} Ann Banfield argues that tables and chairs serve as paradigmatic representatives of the object world in
Woolf’s fiction, a function drawn from the philosophical tradition associated with Bertrand Russell and
other members of Bloomsbury (65-67).
looked like an old lady who is afraid of mice—“this is how we live, screwed up into one hard little, tight little—knot?”

“Knot, knot—yes, that’s right,” she nodded.

“Each is his own little cubicle; each with his own cross or holy books; each with his fire, his wife . . .” (296)

Nicholas’s physical gestures (his hollowed hands and his curled posture) emphasize the concrete spatial qualities he attributes to the soul. In its current state, the soul is both tense with contraction, and isolated within a “little cubicle”; permitted to permeate outward, it might form “new combinations,” overcoming the isolation to create a more interconnected community (296). In a sense, Nicholas’s prescription for social improvement involves the same porousness, the same blurring of boundaries, that Eleanor has already observed in the objects around them. Eleanor’s ready agreement suggests that Nicholas has managed to articulate her half-formed thoughts, removing the barriers between them on yet another level. Eleanor, who has recently found out that Nicholas is a homosexual, overcomes a momentary “shiver of repugnance,” quickly realizing that “it touched nothing of importance” (297). The persistence of their new friendship suggests that, even as the bombs threaten to remove the physical walls that protect them, the war is “removing barriers” (284) at emotional and cultural levels as well, already allowing for “new combinations” within Eleanor’s increasingly heterogeneous social circle. The blurred boundaries in this scene, therefore, do not result in a complete collapse of ethical spacing—the porous threshold still allows space for social difference.
The dissolution of interpersonal barriers can be interpreted as desirable or threatening, depending on a character’s point of view. Bernard, in *The Waves*, recognizes that not all of the people around him agree with his mist-edged conception of the individual: Louis and Neville, two of the other narrators, “feel the presence of other people as a separating wall” (47). Bernard works hard to overcome such walls, which signal to him an overemphasis on self-differentiation: “An elderly and apparently prosperous man, a traveler, now gets in. And I at once wish to approach him; I instinctively dislike the sense of his presence, cold, unassimilated, among us. I do not believe in separation. We are not single” (48). The rare image of a smoke ring describes how Bernard uses his facility with language to “thaw” the old man’s detachment and bridge the gap between them: “A smoke ring issues from my lips (about crops) and circles him, bringing him into contact” (48). Bernard is unusually skilled at this kind of social facilitation, at overcoming the partitions of self-containment, but he is not alone. Dissolving walls between people is an essential function of the party hostess, represented by both Mrs. Dalloway and Mrs. Ramsay, and also seems to be a feature of high-quality educational environments, like the Cambridge of *Jacob’s Room* (1922, 45) and the fictional “Oxbridge” in *A Room of One’s Own* (1929). In the latter text, which contrasts the educational opportunities available to men and women, this sense of interpersonal dissolution manifests in contexts of educational privilege. Examples include the “subtle and subterranean glow, which is the rich yellow flame of rational intercourse”

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104 The Cambridge of *Jacob’s Room* represents educational privilege as well, though the issue of unequal access to education is subordinated to the broader memorial theme of the novel. Written shortly after the death of Woolf’s brother Thoby, the novel fictionalizes scenes from his experiences at Cambridge, but does not overtly address the family’s gender bias in sending Woolf’s brothers to Cambridge while educating Virginia and her sister Vanessa primarily through home education, self-education, and private tutors.
inspired by a delicious meal at the men’s college, and the mysterious “humming [...] under the breath” which the narrator imagines as a feature of the pre-war discourse at similar luncheons (11, 13). Inebriation may also facilitate social diffusion, as many of Woolf’s dinner and party scenes attest.  

Despite the desirability of certain forms of interpersonal communion, efforts to overcome the self-differentiation of others sometimes take a negative form, violating of the principle of ethical spacing. While the social skills of a talented facilitator can make or break a party, overly coercive attempts to dissolve interpersonal barriers violate individual privacy, often reflecting structural power imbalances within the community. In *To the Lighthouse*, for instance, Woolf uses boundary imagery to interrogate the power dynamics of traditional Victorian gender roles. Mr. Ramsay, a brilliant but self-absorbed scholar, demands emotional support from Mrs. Ramsay with no recognition of the emotional cost of his requirements. This cost is conveyed through rare imagery expressing the sense of expansion and contraction that Mrs. Ramsay experiences as she provides the reassurance he seeks. Sensing his need for sympathy, “Mrs. Ramsay, who had been sitting loosely [...] seemed to raise herself with an effort, and at once to pour erect into the air a rain of energy, a column of spray [...] as if all her energies were being fused into force” (37). Fulfilling the role of the supportive partner, Mrs. Ramsay experiences “the rapture of successful creation” (38), but the effort also takes its toll. The energy she exerts to project this “capacity to surround and protect” leaves her drained: “there was scarcely a shell of herself left for her to know herself by; all was so lavished

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105 Eleanor’s wine in the cellar is one example; others include the dinner at the men’s college in *A Room of One’s Own* (11), and the final party scene in *The Years* (409-10).
and spent” (38). In response to her husband’s exploitative emotional needs, Mrs. Ramsay nearly relinquishes her sense of self-differentiation entirely; “scarcely a shell” remains of her over-porous self-world boundary, through which her inner resources spill too freely.

In contrast, Lily Briscoe, when confronting the potential violation of the self’s porous threshold, upholds the need for ethical space. Lily, who embodies a modernist, feminist rebellion against Victorian gender roles, defiantly resists the expectation that a woman should sacrifice her sense of differentiation to provide emotional support for men. In the first section of the novel, her devotion to Mrs. Ramsay overcomes her instinct to ignore Charles Tansley when he seeks to assert himself at the dinner table; to preserve social harmony, she compromises and plays her assigned role (92). Ten years later, when called upon to comfort Mr. Ramsay over his wife’s death, Lily refuses to play the part: “No; she could not do it. She ought to have floated off instantly upon some wave of sympathetic expansion: the pressure on her was tremendous. But she remained stuck. There was an awful pause” (151). The pressure to dissolve herself in sympathy in response to a man’s needs is a function of the “Angel in the House” role that Woolf described as a barrier to women’s professional careers (“Professions for Women” 285-86). Lily, experiencing the ambivalence of a generation for whom the old roles do not suit, resists the constructed role but still feels guilty about it: “His immense self-pity, his demand for sympathy poured and spread itself in pools at her feet, and all she did, miserable sinner that she was, was to draw her skirts a little closer round her ankles, lest she should get wet” (152). As Mr. Ramsay’s emotions pour out into the common space between them, Lily squeamishly wishes for “[to] staunch this effusion” (152). When no men are present, Mr. Ramsay seems to cede all sense of emotional self-
responsibility, and expects a woman to take over. Unwilling to turn herself inside out to
cater to his needs, Lily feels like a “traitor to her sex” but succeeds in maintaining the
detachment that upholds her self-sufficiency. In both of these episodes from *To the
Lighthouse*, flows of liquid across the self-world threshold dramatize the palpable effects
of the failure to preserve ethical spacing between men and women.

5. Dynamic Spatial Models II: Fluid Motion

While images of permeable thresholds emphasize the pressure dynamics that
drive self-differentiation and self-dissolution, Woolf’s fluid images of social immersion
allow her to highlight subtle shifts in interpersonal relationships. Just as fog can
foreground the atmospheric spaces between buildings in an urban environment, Woolf’s
images of spraying energy and pooling emotion foreground the saturation of
interpersonal space with invisible emotions and power relations.106 Bernard’s smoke
rings travel across this space, foregrounding the atmosphere that surrounds each body in
the room. Similarly, when Lily Briscoe looks toward the lighthouse, where Mr. Ramsay
has finally landed with his two children, she remarks of the space that separates them,
“Empty it was not, but full to the brim” (192). This sense of fullness in the space between
people is a matter of emotional charge, but also of self-delineation. In *The Years*, as
Peggy and Eleanor ride through London in the quiet, intimate space of a cab, Peggy is
struck with a sense of doubt about their separate identities: “Where does she begin, and
where do I end?” (334). Although she recognizes that they are “two sparks of life

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106 Another notable example is the purported distraction of male office workers by the “aroma” of sex,
which the narrator of *Three Guineas* offers as a possible reason for the continued exclusion of women from
full access to the workplace: “‘Miss’ may carry with it the swish of petticoats, the savour of scent or other
odour perceptible to the nose on the further side of the partition and obnoxious to it. What charms and
consoles in the private house may distract and exacerbate in the public office” (255).
enclosed in two separate bodies” (334), this image of differentiation does not adequately explain her feeling of closeness to Eleanor. Rather, the space of the cab fills up with a sense of dissolving, intermixing identities.

Woolf often exaggerates the substantiality of this emotionally saturated interpersonal space by substituting liquid images for atmospheric ones. This technique results in somewhat surreal scenes, metaphorically set underwater. In Jacob’s Room, the intimacy of a gathering of friends at Cambridge is described in these terms: “Simeon said nothing. Jacob remained standing. But intimacy—the room was full of it, still, deep, like a pool. Without need of movement or speech it rose softly and washed over everything, mollifying, kindling, and coating the mind with the lustre of pearl” (45). This still pool of water expresses what Peggy is unable to describe to her own satisfaction as she rides in the cab—a sense of intimacy that saturates interpersonal space.

By grouping images of this socially-saturated medium under the label communal element, I am combining ideas from two studies that address Woolf’s treatment of self-dissolution in very different ways: James Naremore’s study of Woolf’s water imagery in The World Without a Self (1973), and Emily Hinnov’s conception of the “choran community” in Woolf’s late work (2007). Naremore dwells on metaphors of self-dissolution, and downplays the importance of self-differentiation in Woolf’s writing, but he also combines imagery and terminology in a way that aids the conceptualization of my own approach. Naremore claims that “throughout Woolf’s work, the chief problem for her and for her characters is to overcome the space between things, to attain an

107 He claims, for instance, “One cannot, at least not in the terms of Virginia Woolf’s fiction, come to a heightened awareness of one’s unity with what is ‘out there’ and at the same time conceive of significant individuals” (26).
absolute unity with the world, as if everything in the environment were turned into water” (242). The image of a fluid medium that fills in “the space between things” finely captures what Naremore explains in other terms as Woolf’s creation of “a sense of multipersonal subjectivity, emphasizing the total emotional life composed of the feelings of different characters” (23). At one point, he borrows Woolf’s term “common element” to describe this sense of multipersonal unity (76). In its original context in *Pointz Hall*, the “common element” refers specifically to “that which notes that a room is empty” and “enters rooms when the company is still in the kitchen” (61). In Woolf’s words, this “nameless spirit [...] who is not ‘we’ or ‘I,’ nor the novelist either” creates something eternal through its power of impersonal perception: it “goes from mind to mind and surface to surface, and from body to body creating what is not mind or body, not surface or depths, but a common element in which the perishable is preserved, and the separate become one” (*PH* 61). Like the “certain airs” that substitute for a human narrator in the “Time Passes” section of *To the Lighthouse*, the “common element” embodies the idea of an eternal, impersonal observer through the tangible omnipresence of the natural elements.

The word “element” has long been associated with both materiality and immersion: the “four elements” (air, fire, water, and earth) were once believed to be the native habitat for “elementals” or natural spirits, leading to the sense of vital immersion

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108 Naremore’s tendency simultaneously to analyze Woolf and her characters stems from a broadly psychoanalytic approach, in which erotic desire and the death-drive motivate both author’s and characters’ obsession with self-dissolution. I am wary of this approach, in part because it downplays Woolf’s equally prominent interest in self-differentiation, and in part because it seems to play into a troubling method of retroactive biographical criticism that reads backwards from Woolf’s suicide to interpret earlier work.
implied by the phrase “to be in one’s element” (“element, n.” def. 9a, 11, 12). Lawrence frequently uses the word “element” to express a congruity between characters and their immediate surroundings, as when he describes in *The Rainbow* the marshy, “half-corrupt element” that lingers around Tom Brangwen and the “freer element” that Baron Skrebensky carries with him (184, 326). As his contrasting adjectives suggest, Lawrence tends to personalize each character’s native “element” to emphasize individuality; this is why I use the term *aura* to describe such images in his work. Woolf’s use of “common element” instead suggests a shared immersion, one “common” to all of the minds, surfaces, and bodies that it touches and links together. In the term I propose for her work, I retain the word “element” to preserve the sense of an enveloping material that “fills up” apparently empty spaces, but I modify Woolf’s original usage, the “common element,” by substituting “communal” for “common” to achieve greater analytical precision. “Communal” highlights the way Woolf fills up interpersonal spaces, not with Lawrence’s individualized personal auras, but with a shared medium of social interaction. 

Rather than merely filling an empty room, the communal element occupies what Emily Hinnov refers to as “the communal space in between”—the social space in which characters are immersed. Hinnov’s notion of the “choran community” identifies the importance in Woolf’s work of “a genuine interface between self and other which also implies an awareness of the larger, interconnective community” (1). By focussing on the

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109 Note that the four elements cover the full range of the rarity-density spectrum and all three states of matter: earth is dense and solid, water is medium-dense and liquid, and air (and arguably fire) is rare and gaseous. The term “element” also helps to keep in mind the particulate structure of matter, due to its association in contemporary scientific discourse with the distinct types of atom enumerated in the *Periodic Table of the Elements*. 

in-between spaces that both separate individual citizens and link them into communities, Hinnov activates the political implications of Woolf’s inscription of social space. However, Hinnov derives the term “choran community” from Julia Kristeva’s psychoanalytical concept of the chora (Hinnov 1), an approach which I hesitate to adopt because of its intertwining of materiality with a strongly-gendered symbolic vocabulary. Instead, I use “communal element” to combine the political valences of Hinnov’s approach to interpersonal space with the concrete properties associated with the rarity-density spectrum.

The materiality of the communal element emphasizes immediate, local social conditions rather than community in the abstract. When Peter Walsh describes Clarissa at her party, moving among her guests “with the most perfect ease and air of a creature floating in its element” (170), he captures her comfort within the communal element of a specific social milieu. Clarissa can at times be very uncomfortable in social situations, but as a party hostess wearing a “silver-green mermaid’s dress” (169), she “swims” in a communal element that suits her well. Needless to say, not all of the guests are equally comfortable; nevertheless, they all contribute to the blend of social dynamics that characterizes the party at any particular moment; it is the fluidity of this blend that delights Clarissa, though it sometimes lets her down momentarily as well.\(^\text{110}\)

\(^{110}\) Clarissa thinks of her parties as an opportunity to bring together her diverse acquaintances, “to combine, to create” (119), and momentarily fears that it is “a complete failure” when she sees people isolated within the crowd, “wandering aimlessly” or “standing in a bunch in the corner” (163-4). At the party in the 1914 section of *The Years*, Martin Pargiter expresses a similar sentiment; he fears that the party is “not going to work” because it lacks the required blending of contours and sounds: “He preserved clearly his sense of the identity of different objects, and their differences. When a party worked all things, all sounds merged into one” (249).
The communal element foregrounds the substance-like immersiveness of social relations, pointing to Woolf’s sense of the almost palpable presence of community “in the air” of a local place. It is in this communal sense that Woolf uses the phrase “nameless common element” later in *Pointz Hall*, to describe “a certain air” conveyed by the assembling audience: they are “not a mob” because they are “specialised” due to their conversance with the history of local families, and are therefore “sure of their places” (*PH* 91). One advantage of the communal element over other conceptualizations of community is the way it expresses this localized occupation of space as a context for self-differentiation and self-dissolution. The concreteness of the immersive medium allows for the accretion and transmission of collective identity over time in a given place.

Woolf substantializes community connections elsewhere in *Pointz Hall*, often to suggest a connection not just among contemporaries, but also among past and present inhabitants. Early in the typescript, as characters respond differently to a quotation from Byron, “the common feeling (about poetry) fluttered round the lamp for a moment” and someone asks, “What breadth of time; what river of people feeling, talking; and putting it into words; ran between those islands of speech [...?]” (40). This “river” of accumulated language resembles the “reservoir of common belief” that Woolf describes in her unfinished work “Anon,” an attempt to account for collective, anonymous contribution of the common people to England’s literary heritage (“‘Anon’ and ‘The Reader’” 384). The lily pond that features prominently in both *Pointz Hall* and *Between the Acts* is another materialization of the collective past. With its slow accumulation of silt, its lilies seeded “centuries ago” by the wind and viewed by “many that lay in the churchyard” (*PH* 67), the pond represents “time’s dark pool” (*PH* 35), and recalls Woolf’s description of the
collective unconscious in her 1929 essay “The Fascination of the Pool.”\textsuperscript{111} In the essay, the pool acts as a cultural reservoir for the whispers of those who sit by its banks over the years:

\begin{quote}
[It] held in its waters all kinds of fancies, complaints, confidences, not printed or spoken aloud, but in a liquid state, floating one on top of another, almost disembodied. [...] The charm of the pool was that thoughts had been left there by people who had gone away and without their bodies their thoughts wandered in and out freely, friendly and communicative, in the common pool. (220)
\end{quote}

Accumulating private confidences and holding them “in a liquid state [...] almost disembodied” the pool preserves those aspects of communal history that elude the public record. It is as if the thoughts and voices of the dead are held in solution, waiting to mix with the currents of communal life through events like the pageant in \textit{Between the Acts}. The pageant is remarkable for its incorporation of anonymous communal voices, particularly in the form of the chorus. La Trobe’s dependence on the anonymous reservoir of common language is emphasized by her desire, after the play is over, to retreat to the common space of the village pub. In \textit{Pointz Hall}, the link between the pub and the “common pool” of language is particularly explicit: Bartholomew Oliver observes that the author wants to refresh herself with “darkness in the weeds; a whisky and soda at the pub; and coarse words descending like maggots through the water” (\textit{PH} 170). To recover from the pageant and begin her next work, the author must steep herself

\textsuperscript{111} For an analysis of this essay as a “feminist revisioning” of the Narcissus myth to encompass the collective unconscious, see Cuddy-Keane (\textit{VW Intellectual} 125-32).
in the “common pool” of ordinary pub language, where the anonymous voices of past and present mix. The communal element, then, refers to a rare substance that represents social immersion. Materializing social interactions in tangible forms associated with the natural environment, the communal element foregrounds interpersonal space, occupies a particular locality, and incorporates the lingering presence of the past in a given community.

Representing the fluid aspect of the particle/substance ambiguity, the communal element tends to emphasize continuity, but its eddies and currents can also convey differentiation within the flow of social intercourse. At a public dance, for instance, the interpersonal dynamics of crowd behaviour blend with the subtler currents of romantic intrigue between individuals. In *The Voyage Out*, liquid flows within the communal element express the shifting, mingling intimacy among individuals, couples, and larger groupings on the dance floor. When the music begins, a gestalt shift suddenly foregrounds the communal element in which the dancers are submerged: “It was as though the room were instantly flowed with water. After a moment’s hesitation first one couple, then another, leapt into mid-stream, and went round and round in the eddies. The rhythmic swish of the dancers sounded like a swirling pool” (152). The immersive medium retains some atmospheric qualities at odds with the underwater imagery: “By degrees the room grew perceptibly hotter. The smell of kid gloves mingled with the strong scent of flowers” (152). The changing ambient temperature and the mingling of odours mildly destabilize the underwater fantasy scene. As the dance continues, the music-filled air and the eddying currents of water blend into a single, substantial if somewhat surreal medium of shared experience. Within this communal element, couples
alternate between differentiation and dissolution according to the patterns of motion on
the dance floor:

   The eddies seemed to circle faster and faster, until the music wrought
   itself into a crash, ceased, and the circles were smashed into little separate
   bits. [...] There was a pause, and then the music started again, the eddies
   whirled, the couples circled round in them, until there was a crash, and the
   circles were broken up into separate bits. (152)

The turbulence of rough water expresses how couples coalesce into a moving crowd and
separate out again, in rhythmic succession. The dance scene also illustrates the value of
the communal element for expressing power dynamics between the sexes. As is natural at
a dance, the degree of intimacy varies. When Rachel’s aunt Helen asks Terence Hewet to
dance, “She seemed to fade into Hewet, and they both dissolved in the crowd” (153).
This is a temporary connection, a function of the social milieu, and has no bearing on the
much more profound intimacy that later develops between Terence and Rachel.
Meanwhile, Rachel and St. John Hirst take an awkward turn on the dance floor, then
subside into uncomfortable conversation. In a room full of swaying couples, both are
self-conscious and unable to connect, and the encounter leaves Rachel with a sense of the
divisions rather than the connections between people. She remarks to Terence a few
minutes later: “It’s no good; we should live separate; we cannot understand each other;
we only bring out what’s worst” (156). Instead of a pool of intimacy, Rachel feels at this
moment a defensive need to preserve the gaps between people.

When she falls in love with Terence, Rachel struggles with the need to define
herself not just in relation to their romantic attachment, but within the broader context of
the natural world and the specific community that has formed at their hotel. Patterns of flow in the communal element surrounding the hotel help to differentiate Rachel’s desire for romantic fusion with Terence from her competing desire for a more anonymous, group-based form of social blending. As Naremore has observed (52), Rachel and Terence’s love affair is characterized by an oscillation between a sense of communion, often expressed through underwater imagery, and a keen sense of separateness (VO 270, 303). At the beginning of the novel, Rachel’s lack of worldly experience makes her seem unformed, amorphous; according to her aunt Helen, her face is “denied beauty” by its lack of “definite outline” (20). Over the course of the voyage, however, Rachel gains a sense of independence. When Helen suggests to her that she can now “be a person on [her] own account,” Rachel is struck by a “vision of her own personality, of herself as a real everlasting thing, different from anything else, unmergeable, like the sea or the wind” (84). Even after her engagement to Terence, Rachel retains this sense of herself as “unmergeable”; Terence responds jealously to her ability to “cut herself adrift from him, and to pass away to unknown places where she had no need of him” (302). Despite their intense involvement, Rachel is never quite prepared to submit to the kind of absolute merging that Terence wants. Nevertheless, she expresses a desire for overcoming interpersonal barriers in general: “I hate these divisions, don’t you, Terence? One person all in the dark about another person. [...] Why should one be shut up all by oneself in a room?” (302). When Terence berates her for “always wanting something else” besides him, Rachel mentally agrees with him, realizing that she would prefer a broader, more general communion: “It seemed to her now that [...] she wanted many more things than the love of one human being—the sea, the sky. She turned again and looked at the distant
blue, which was so smooth and serene where the sky met the sea; she could not possibly want only one human being” (302). The smooth junction of the sea and sky at the horizon represents the possibility of a less confining union—the option of merging with a larger whole.

The rare imagery surrounding Rachel’s death from fever suggests that, in her final dissolution, Rachel merges not with Terence individually, but with the communal element that surrounds the whole group at the hotel. As Rachel quietly ceases to breathe, Terence has the impression that “their complete union and happiness filled the room with rings eddying more and more widely” (353). This posthumous romantic union is probably wishful thinking on Terence’s part, given the strength of Rachel’s instinct for self-differentiation within the relationship. However, Rachel’s inchoate desire for a broader union within the communal element is fulfilled in the chapters that follow. On the day after her death, the natural elements seem to echo the breath that has left her. An incoming storm begins with a silence, in which “one sound only was audible, the sound of a slight but continuous breathing which never ceased” (355). As the sun rises, smoke begins to “ascend in wavering breaths over the houses” (355). Meanwhile, in the hotel, news of Rachel’s death spreads gradually, so that the scene shifts from Terence’s deathbed vigil to the community response to grief (356-67).

The sense of communal experience is reinforced by the storm in the final chapter, which picks up Rachel’s imagery of the meeting of sea and sky. The clouds gather and

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112 At certain times during her illness, Terence does show some evidence of a broader perspective, expressed in terms that recall the communal element and Rachel’s sea and sky imagery: “he thought of the immense river and the immense forest [...] the air washed profoundly between the sky and the sea [...] Rachel, a tiny creature, lay ill beneath him [...] The nearness of their bodies in this vast universe, and the minuteness of their bodies, seemed to him absurd and laughable” (345-46).
seem to “narrow the space between earth and heaven, so that there was no room for the air to move in freely” (368). The palpable atmospheric shift brings the hotel guests together. When the storm hits, they “congregated in the hall, where they felt more secure” and “collected in little groups under the central skylight, where they stood in a yellow atmosphere, looking upwards” (369). Like the cloud particles condensing into raindrops, the individual guests form clusters that ultimately renew their sense of communal continuity in the face of death. After the storm peaks, the “atmosphere [becomes] lighter” (369) as the “great confused ocean of air” passes “out to sea” (369). Relieved, the guests resume their conversations and “the room [is] full of the indescribable stir of life” (370). Hirst, who has been an outsider throughout most of the novel, enters the room and feels vaguely connected to the other guests for perhaps the first time. It is on this note that the novel ends: “Across his eyes passed a procession of objects, black and indistinct, the figures of people picking up their books, their cards, their balls of wool, their work-baskets, and passing him one after another on their way to bed” (375). It is as if Rachel’s death has indeed “filled the room with rings eddying more and more widely,” only her union is not with Terence exclusively, but with the broader communal element that, however momentarily, connects strangers into a community of shared emotion.

Woolf’s first novel has been criticized from a feminist point of view for disrupting the conventional marriage plot only at the expense of the heroine’s life.113 Rachel’s death from fever may symbolize a kind of release from the constrictions of her impending marriage, and thus signify the author’s resistance to the generic conventions

113 Froula makes a convincing case for interpreting The Voyage Out as an important contribution to the “genre of the failed female artist-novel” which stands “not as an ultimate failure but as a challenging and transforming critique” which paved the way for “the more powerful representations of female creativity” in Woolf’s later novels (136-37).
of the *Bildungsroman*, but it hardly constitutes a viable model for balancing individual differentiation with communal participation. Rachel’s self-dissolution is involuntary, and so extreme that it ultimately amounts to self-loss. Later in Woolf’s career, female characters’ dissolution within the communal element takes on the partial, temporary qualities that permit a more active, affirmative response to social pressures. One-on-one encounters with men still tend to provoke self-differentiation, as female characters struggle to preserve certain barriers to protect their individuality. On the other hand, a more general, anonymous type of merging within the communal element seems to provide women with an alternative form of self-dissolution—one that neutralizes some of the power imbalances associated with traditional gender roles.

Accordingly, women’s oscillation between diffusion and differentiation within the communal element is a key component of Woolf’s broader strategy for rethinking the dynamics of community formation. In many cases, the sensation of merging with an anonymous crowd or an ambient environment strikes the female protagonists as particularly desirable, freeing them from established domestic roles and enabling a particular form of creative reflection. Duplessis has pointed to Woolf’s use of anonymity “to suggest a mediation between the poles of individual assertion and group similarity” (173). Female pedestrians in London’s streets seem especially alert to the opportunities for self-differentiation and self-dissolution provided by the anonymity of the urban environment. Responding actively to currents in the communal element, Clarissa Dalloway and the anonymous narrator of the short story “Street Haunting” seek new kinds of freedom by dissolving anonymously into a larger whole.
Although her parties are restricted to a select social circle, as a pedestrian Clarissa exuberantly embraces a broader communion with the general, public atmosphere of London life. In fact, she seems more comfortable with self-dissolution in London’s anonymous crowds than in the privacy of her own home. In private, her capacity for self-dissolution is balanced by her recognition of “a dignity in people; a solitude [...] a gulf [...] that one must respect” (117). An advocate of ethical spacing, Clarissa believes that a certain degree of self-differentiation must be maintained in the private sphere, “even between husband and wife” (117). She even attributes her rejection of Peter Walsh’s marriage proposal to his refusal to recognize this essential distance: “But with Peter everything had to be shared; everything gone into. And it was intolerable [...] she had to break with him or they would have been destroyed” (7-8). While she sometimes worries about her aloofness from her husband Richard (31), she deliberately chooses to marry the man who will allow her to maintain a sense of privacy within the one-on-one marital relationship. In public contexts, however, Clarissa embraces a form of self-dissolution that joins anonymous crowds and provides continuity across generations. Walking through London, thinking about how the life of the city will go on after she is gone, she pictures death as a kind of preservative dissolution, and finds it “consoling to believe” that she and her friends will survive in “the ebb and flow of things, here, there [...] she being part [...] of people she had never met; being laid out like a mist between the people she knew best, who lifted her on their branches as she had seen the trees lift the mist” (9). Like a mist, her identity permeates outward: “it spread ever so far, her life, herself” (9). This communion extends beyond her immediate social circle, to embrace strangers and even inanimate elements of the local environment. Her friend Peter Walsh recalls this
philosophy of Clarissa’s, remembering that “she felt herself everywhere; not ‘here, here, here,’” and noting her “odd affinities” with “people she had never spoken to [...] even trees, or barns” (149). Clarissa’s imagery of self-dissolution pictures, on the one hand, a ghostly kind of immaterial existence after death, but it also describes her ongoing sense of connection with the local environment and community. Her belief that her presence will persist in the “ebb and flow” of the city is based on the sense that she is already intermixing with the general, unlocalized vitality that she associates with life in London.

In the short narrative “Street Haunting,” another London pedestrian illustrates in detail the dynamic balance between individual and communal identity that the anonymity of the street facilitates. Though ostensibly in search of a pencil, the narrator’s real purpose is to experience the “greatest pleasure of town life in winter—rambling the streets of London” (480). The pleasure is a shared one, common to Londoners in general, as signalled by the use of first-person plural pronouns: “We are no longer quite ourselves. As we step out of the house on a fine evening between four and six we shed the self our friends know us by and become part of that vast republican army of anonymous trampers, whose society is so agreeable after the solitude of one’s own room” (481). This move from particularity to anonymity as one leaves home is pictured as a loss of defining walls. The image of the house as an oyster shell fuses the social/architectural and personal/bodily levels of the partition image: “The shell-like covering which our souls have excreted to house themselves, to make for themselves a shape distinct from others, is broken, and there is left of all these wrinkles and roughnesses a central oyster of perceptiveness, an enormous eye” (481). As this synecdochal eye rambles down lamplit streets, in and out of shops, the narrator’s highly receptive consciousness wanders
strangely, beyond the usual spatial limits of the body. The eye rests on beautiful surfaces “like a butterfly,” and retrieves perceptions as if they were material substances: “it brings back the prettiest trophies, breaks off little lumps of emerald and coral” (482). Like Clarissa Dalloway’s image of the self as a mist spreading through London, this image of “haunting” expands the thresholds of bodily space outward to represent the individual walker’s connection with the urban environment.

The accompanying process of social negotiation, the “ebb and flow” of dissolution and differentiation at work, takes place in the immersive atmosphere that flows through the street and surrounds the characters. At one point, a dwarf who has just triumphantly bought a pair of new shoes re-enters the street, and changes the mood entirely by “call[ing] into being an atmosphere” that seems to accent “the humped, the twisted, the deformed” (484). At another point, the narrator walks into a store and disrupts a domestic quarrel, palpably altering the interpersonal balance: “It is always an adventure to enter a new room; for the lives and characters of its owners have distilled their atmosphere into it, and directly we enter it we breast some new wave of emotion. Here, without a doubt, in the stationer’s shop people had been quarrelling. Their anger shot through the air” (489-90). When asked for a pencil, the stationer responds “with the distraction yet effusiveness of one whose emotions have been roused and checked in full flood” (490). Within the communal element, the emotional life of strangers spills out beyond them and saturates interpersonal space. These blurred thresholds reflect the narrator’s fluid concept of identity: “we are streaked, variegated, all of a mixture; the

114 Given the largely sympathetic portrayal of the dwarf, I read this passage as conveying the narrator’s interest in social heterogeneity, rather than a sense of revulsion or rejection of socially marginalized characters; for an interpretation more critical of the story’s approach to social marginality, see Susan Squier (46-47).
colours have run” (486). But despite the difficulty of drawing a clear outline that contains all of the colours that make up an individual, the narrator acknowledges that our mixing with others is necessarily limited: “Walking home through the desolation one could tell oneself the story of the dwarf, […] of the quarrel in the stationer’s shop. Into each of these lives one could penetrate a little way, far enough to give oneself the illusion that one is not tethered to a single mind but can put on briefly for a few minutes the bodies and minds of others” (490-91). At the end of the walk, after all of this merging and separating, self-differentiation returns with a sense of comfortable homecoming: “Still as we approach our own doorstep again, it is comforting to feel the old possessions, the old prejudices, fold us round, and shelter and enclose the self which has been blown about at so many street corners” (491). The narrator’s wandering, round trip voyage allegorizes the to-and-fro motion at the self-world threshold, as social and personal identities meet and interact.

Up to this point, my analysis has examined the oscillation between self-differentiation and self-diffusion as expressed through the fluid motion associated with the communal element. I have, in other words, focussed primarily on scenes that emphasize spatial dynamics associated with the substance view of matter, in order to build up a clear picture of how communal relations may be pictured as liquid or atmospheric flows. By itself, this picture is incomplete. Woolf’s most innovative models of democratic community invoke the particle/substance ambiguity, shifting between images of a fluid communal element and particulate images of individuals clustered together in crowds. Before I can demonstrate how these particle/substance gestalt shifts express Woolf’s process-oriented model of the relationships between individual and
collective identity, I must first examine the functions of particulate imagery in Woolf’s representations of community. Having established the patterns of fluid and particulate motion by examining them separately, I will then bring them together at the end of the chapter to illustrate the full complexity and political significance of Woolf’s dynamic community models.

6. Dynamic Spatial Models III: Particle Motion

Woolf’s use of particulate imagery to represent crowd dynamics needs to be understood with reference to the scientific developments of the New Physics, which gradually gained cultural currency over the course of her career. In examining these scientific contexts, I do not support a unidirectional theory of cultural influence, in which scientific discoveries predate and determine the direction of broader cultural imagery. In fact, I would like to suggest that the particle/substance ambiguity inherent in rare imagery allowed Woolf to develop complex spatial models of crowd dynamics that complement, rather than originate from, concepts like particle/wave duality or quantum mechanics.

Nevertheless, Woolf’s interest in the patterns of motion associated with atoms and molecules makes it essential to consider in some detail the ways in which she participated in the popular scientific discourse of her time.

An emerging body of scholarship on Woolf’s engagement with scientific discourse has already begun to establish the importance of atomic imagery in her models of community. Particularly relevant to my argument is Michael Whitworth’s study of

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115 Whitworth has noted that Woolf, like many theorists of group behaviour at the time, tends to “employ metaphors of invisible forces, derived from physics, to describe social phenomena” (Virginia Woolf 148). More specifically, Pridmore-Brown claims that Woolf often pictures interpersonal connections as “reflections of the physical forces of attraction and repulsion that constitute the fabric of matter” (13).
atomic models for porous thresholds in Woolf’s work, which I mentioned briefly near the beginning of this chapter (“Porous Objects”). While I will express some reservations about his argument, I agree with Whitworth’s key claim that the apparent continuity of substances and their divisibility into atoms provides an ideal vehicle for considering group interactions. He explains: “From a wider cultural perspective, our concepts of the atom provide metaphors for the concept of individuality, and vice versa. Moreover, the interactions of atoms are often spoken of as if they were the interactions of individuals in crowds” (153). In discussing the influence of scientific developments on Woolf’s deployment of atomic structure as a social analogy, Whitworth emphasizes the broad cultural impact of the discovery of X-rays (1895) and Rutherford’s atomic model (1911), which served to highlight the porosity of matter at the atomic and sub-atomic scales respectively. He draws connections between these developments in atomic theory and Woolf’s narrative innovations in the representation of self-world thresholds; as I have already mentioned, he connects the model of “the porous atom, and the atom surrounded by a field of force” with Woolf’s representation of individuals “without clear boundaries” and groups characterized by “interfusion and interdependency” (153). While I agree with Whitworth’s assertion that atoms help Woolf to model group dynamics, I would like to suggest that her usage does not always justify Whitworth’s emphasis on the sub-atomic scale. Instead, I propose that Woolf’s linking of social interactions, atoms, and the porosity of matter draws more directly on models of particle interaction that had already been in circulation for several centuries, and that found contemporary support in

Gillian Beer and Holly Henry have both written extensively on Woolf’s engagement with aspects of the New Physics, and Allen Thiher considers Woolf alongside several of her contemporaries in his examination of interconnections between literary and scientific discourse in the modernist period.
Einstein’s experimental verification of the Brownian motion of atoms and molecules in 1905.\footnote{116} Particle interactions are the foundation of the rarity-density spectrum: the molecules that make up a substance are in constant motion; the balance between the kinetic energy of the molecules and the electromagnetic forces between them affects the state (solid, liquid or gas) and density of the substance at a given temperature and pressure. Many of the narrative effects that Whitworth associates with the “porous atom” can be accounted for at the molecular scale. As Whitworth himself admits, theories about atomic structure continued to change and develop over the course of Woolf’s career, both within scientific circles and within broader public discourse. There is little doubt of Woolf’s exposure to both molecular theory and to developments in quantum mechanics,\footnote{117} but both the timing and the impact of such exposure are difficult to reconstruct.\footnote{118}

Despite the difficulty of determining the precise model of particle structure that Woolf had in mind at any given time, I have chosen to focus on the molecular scale partly

\footnote{116} For a detailed historical account of nineteenth-century developments leading up to Einstein’s 1905 paper on Brownian motion, see Maiocchi.

\footnote{117} Gillian Beer discusses Woolf’s avid interest (during the 1930s) in the popular science writing of James Jeans, an expert on “kinetic theory of gases and forms of energy radiation” (Wave, Atom, Dinosaur 5-6) who, along with Sir Arthur Eddington, also wrote about quantum mechanics and relativity for a general readership. Both Jeans and Eddington are mentioned by name in Between the Acts (14).

\footnote{118} Whitworth fully acknowledges that making connections between literary and scientific discourse “requires tentative reconstructions, speculative movements, and imaginative leaps” (“Porous Objects” 152), a caution that applies as much to my argument as to his own. Sarah Cain effectively sums up the challenges of determining the precise nature of literary allusions to post-Newtonian physics: “Literature may use terminology derived from physics to support or legitimate concerns that it has already been preoccupied with, that seem to date from new scientific theories but actually derive from processes or ideas already manifesting themselves. [...] poets may have a confused or limited understanding of such theories, and elements that could be considered to embody themes derived from them may actually derive from earlier conceptions of the physical world” (50-51). For instance, attributing Woolf’s porous self-world thresholds to Rutherford’s “porous atom” may obscure literary antecedents for porous subjects (like Pater’s Renaissance, see pp. 113-14), as well as allusions to older scientific models.
because her scientific usage of the word “atom” tends to allude only very tangentially to sub-atomic structure. In fact, “the nature of the atom” is a phrase that recurs throughout Woolf’s non-fiction as an object of curiosity, detailed knowledge of which is reserved for the university-educated specialist. Two references specifically lament women’s lack of access to this specialized knowledge. In the short story “A Society” (1921), a group of women decide to survey the knowledge that men have produced while women have been focussed on bearing children. They are impressed to discover that “man flies in the air, talks across space, penetrates to the heart of an atom, and embraces the universe in his speculations” (125). Similarly, A Room of One’s Own lists “the nature of the atom” among the research areas not accessible to female scholars, due to lack of resources for women’s universities (21). These passages suggest that, whether or not Woolf herself understood some of the more conceptually difficult aspects of quantum mechanics, she may not have wanted to assume such knowledge on the part of her readers, or to attribute it to all of her characters. In practice, we have to assume that novelists’ influences are multiple, and that appropriation of scientific concepts may be partial, limited not just by access to the information, but by the novelists’ selection and filtering of information to meet the goals of a particular text.

What Woolf does repeatedly refer to, and have her characters contemplate, are the interactions among the atoms and molecules that make up solids and fluid substances. In

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119 Rutherford’s innovation was to concentrate the atom’s positive charges within a tiny nucleus surrounded by negatively charged electrons orbiting at a distance. According to a search of Mark Hussey’s Major Authors CD-ROM, Woolf’s work does not contain any references to sub-atomic particles like electrons, and her usage of the word “nucleus” is consistent with the longstanding meaning of “a central part or thing around which other parts or things are grouped or collected” (“Nucleus, n.” def. 3a.).
The Years, for instance, Eleanor is momentarily struck by the particulate structure of her teacup:

But what vast gaps there were, what blank spaces, she thought, leaning back in her chair, in her knowledge! How little she knew about anything. Take this cup for instance; she held it out in front of her. What was it made of? Atoms? And what were atoms, and how did they stick together? The smooth hard surface of the china with its red flowers seemed to her for a second a marvellous mystery. (155)

In this scene, Eleanor experiences (and thereby models for readers) a gestalt shift between the substance and particle views of matter. Her vague knowledge of molecular theory reminds her of the invisible particulate structure underlying the cup’s “smooth hard surface.” The “vast gaps” and “blank spaces” in her knowledge mimic the porosity of the cup at the molecular level. In this moment of defamiliarization, she recognizes that she is not quite sure how the atoms “stick together” to produce solidity.120 This renewed attention to molecular structure opens up the possibility of using atomic motion as a model for the interactive relationships between parts and wholes (and by extension, between citizens and communities). In the essay “Royalty,” Woolf suggests that a public disabused of its reverence for the aristocracy might eventually “spend [its] curiosity” on scientific wonders such as “the wild yet controlled dance of the atoms which makes, it is

120 Whitworth notes that this scene is set in the 1908 chapter, so that any allusion to the Rutherford atom would be anachronistic (“Porous Objects” 155). While Whitworth sidesteps the dilemma by focussing on the metaphor of “paring,” the anachronism is resolved if we assume that Eleanor’s question about how atoms “stick together” refers to the attractive forces between atoms, which are described by older molecular models, rather than to the sub-atomic forces described in Rutherford’s model.
said, the true being of the kitchen table” (186). This evocative description is structured along the lines of longstanding molecular theory rather than emerging sub-atomic physics. The “wild” (i.e. random) motion of the atoms is “controlled” by chemical and physical forces to produce the solidity of the table. While the table appears to be a single, solid thing, its “true being” is particulate: it is a whole made up of innumerable parts. The atoms, while moving individually in random directions, are nevertheless unified in a single action, the “dance” which allows the whole group to be identified as a single unit—the kitchen table.

On a figurative level, the “wild yet controlled dance of the atoms” represents the paradox of continuity and divisibility that makes the particulate structure of matter so helpful for modelling group dynamics. For instance, near the end of *The Years*, Eleanor wonders how all of the separate moments of her past add up to make a whole: “Millions of things came back to her. Atoms danced apart and massed themselves. But how did they compose what people called a life?” (366-67). The dynamic spacing between the atoms that “danced apart” and “massed themselves” suggests that individual moments are separable from one another, but they must also, paradoxically, compose a continuous stretch of time, “what people called a life.” This scene focusses not on the nature of individual atoms, but on the nature of their interactions. It is the collective dance, rather than the individual units, that fascinates Eleanor at this moment. Whereas Whitworth’s “porous atom” primarily models group “interfusion,” the collective dance of atoms effectively expresses the alternation of interfusion and differentiation within a group, as

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121. This essay, composed in 1939 and published posthumously in *The Moment and Other Essays* (1947), should not be confused with a review of Marie, Queen of Roumania’s *The Story of My Life*, published in the same volume also under the title “Royalty,” and originally published in *Time and Tide* in 1934. See Leonard Woolf’s editorial note in *The Moment and Other Essays* (7).
individuals “dance apart” and “mass themselves,” echoing the particle/substance ambiguity at the level of group cohesion.

Attending to the physical forces governing the “dance of the atoms” reveals some of the political issues that Woolf sought to address as she modelled the processes of community formation in her fiction. On the one hand, the electromagnetic forces acting between atoms can be either attractive or repulsive (depending on the electrical charges involved), so that both social cohesion and individual differentiation are accounted for. Commenting on *Between the Acts*, Pridmore-Brown points out how the forces between atoms can express the oscillation between group cohesion and dispersal:

> The electromagnetic [...] imagery suggests that the characters are not separate entities but are held together by patterns of emotion reflecting a cosmic architecture: like stars and molecules, like the armies on the Continent, the members of the audience are described as retreating and advancing, being attracted and repulsed, making visible the invisible through the motions of their bodies. (414)

However, if the forces made visible by the “wild yet controlled dance of the atoms” can model the dual vectors of interconnection and ethical spacing, the force of magnetism can also model the process by which a crowd becomes unified around a common centre. Woolf draws on the language of magnetism to illustrate how the audience at the pageant in *Between the Acts* is at times momentarily unified by the gramophone music: “Like quicksilver sliding, filings magnetized, the distracted united” (128). This image of a crowd “magnetized” into unison suggests an element of coercion, an inability on the part of the individual audience members to resist the pull of group cohesion. In Woolf’s
modelling of group dynamics, the difference between “wild yet controlled” particle
motion and the unifying force of magnetic attraction helps to distinguish between
coercive and non-coercive causes of synchronized behaviour. In what I take to be a key
political manoeuvre in her narratological repertoire, Woolf combines fluid and particulate
models to differentiate voluntary and involuntary forms of social unison, and to consider
a range of mechanisms that can foster or challenge such communal responses.

7. Combining Dynamic Spatial Models: The Key to Process-Oriented Democratic
    Community

Anonymous urban crowds provide an obvious point of departure for examining
Woolf’s use of the particle/substance gestalt to model groups dynamics. My analysis of
female pedestrians focussed on their immersion in the common element, but particulate
imagery also comes into play as urban crowds are alternately viewed as collective entities
or differentiated clusters of disparate individuals. In a well-known street scene in Mrs.
Dalloway, the crowd’s reaction to a passing motor car, which is rumoured to contain an
important political figure, usefully highlights the political implications of Woolf’s shifts
between particle and substance metaphors in descriptions of public assemblies. By this
point in the novel, the role of London’s atmosphere as a communal element has been well
established, particularly through its role as the material medium that transmits sound. The
sounds of horse races and cricket games are “wrapped in the soft mesh of the grey-blue
morning air” (5), and the tolling of Big Ben publicly marks the passage of time as “the
leaden circles dissolved in the air” (4). A warm breeze conveys the vitality of urban
public spaces: “Arlington and Piccadilly seemed to chafe the very air in the Park and lift
its leaves hotly, brilliantly, on waves of that divine vitality which Clarissa loved” (7).
This same rare medium helps to express the common response to the passing motor car. When the car backfires loudly, it draws together the attention of the nearby citizens, who stop their various errands to stare and wonder. If we think of the individual bystanders as particles clustered along the street, the shift to the substance view happens as the focalization shifts from an individual to a group perspective. The communal element provides the means by which the crowd collectively attempts to identify the car’s mysterious occupant: “rumours were at once in circulation [...] passing invisibly, inaudibly, like a cloud” (14). The faces of a crowd, “which a second before had been utterly disorderly,” take on a uniform expression, a “sudden sobriety and stillness” (14). While the speculations of several minor characters lend some variety to the common reaction (thereby keeping the particle view in play), a kind of group consensus develops around the mystery: “Whose face was it? Nobody knew” (14). This sudden unison suggests the kind of “mass hypnosis” that Naremore observes in Woolf’s work when, under the influence of “elemental emotions,” “the group becomes like a single person” (24-25).

It is fitting that Septimus Smith, the shell-shocked war veteran, is terrified by this “gradual drawing together of everything to one centre” as the car passes by (MD 15). Flowing through the communal element of post-War London, just beneath the surface of everyday life, is a strong current of nationalism. After the car has gone, it leaves a “slight ripple” in the atmosphere that expresses the emotional tug of this collective identity on the individuals that make up the general public: “something had happened. Something so trifling in single instances that no mathematical instrument [...] could register the vibration; yet in its fullness rather formidable and in its common appeal emotional; for in
all the hat shops and tailors’ shops strangers looked at each other and thought of the dead; of the flag; of Empire” (17). This common emotion is embodied metaphorically in the breeze that lifts “some flag flying in the British breast of Mr. Bowley” (19), a man who “was sealed with wax over the deeper sources of life but could be unsealed suddenly, inappropriately, sentimentally, by this sort of thing—poor women waiting to see the Queen go past—poor women, nice little children, orphans, widows, the War” (19). The sudden unsealing of the “wax” that represents Mr. Bowley’s self-world threshold results from a harmfully passive form of social fusion: lacking sufficient critical distance, he is “inappropriately” susceptible to the simplistic, populist view of nationalism that links political and military institutions with “nice little children” and “widows.” This “unsealed” (i.e. permeable) interface between the communal element and the individual identity is the precise locus of the “single instances” of sentimentality that add up to the “formidable” common emotions of nationalism. Judging from Woolf’s insistence in *Three Guineas* that destructive military ideology is rooted in everyday life, Septimus’s terror makes sense: the apparently harmless currents of group emotion in the streets of London express a reverence for authority that has serious cumulative implications. Most troubling is the sense that individual citizens like Mr. Bowley are drawn into this common emotion involuntarily, as if the public symbols of the state overwhelm their capacity for self-differentiation and interfere with their ability to think for themselves.

A very different public dynamic is at work in a passage from *The Waves* that revisits this sense of spontaneous communal emotion, this time in a less ominous tone. In the scene from *Mrs. Dalloway* discussed above, the sudden stillness of the previously “disorderly” crowd expresses a common, almost mystical susceptibility to symbols of the
state: “But now mystery had brushed them with her wing; they had heard the voice of authority; the spirit of religion was abroad” (14). In *The Waves*, Bernard experiences a more positive moment of unison in a crowd, a “splendid unanimity” among train passengers who have been “brushed into uniformity” by a “grey wing,” representing not a voice of authority, but simply their common desire to arrive at the station (80). The scene, characterized by a free play between communal and individual identity, conveys a less insidious or coercive version of spontaneous communal feeling. Bernard welcomes the sense of “community in the rushing train sitting together” and feels somewhat reluctant to “assume the burden of individual life”; however, as the crowd arrives at the station and begins to disperse, he finds himself “satisfied […] at liberty now to sink down, deep, into what passes, this omnipresent, general life” (80-81). The members of the crowd each assert themselves, “impelled by some necessity,” so that the momentary sense of unanimity gives way to a heterogeneous public life that enfolds the individual within a larger whole without compelling uniformity beyond the common eagerness to end the daily commute and return to one’s own pursuits.

Linked by the image of the wing brushing a crowd, these scenes from *Mrs. Dalloway* and *The Waves* express two different models for explaining the unison that occasionally develops within an anonymous public assembly, converting a particulate collection of individuals into a fused, fluid community. In *Mrs. Dalloway*, the intimation of authority suggested by the passing car produces what we might call “unison around a centre,” a model consistent with Freud’s theory of groups, which holds that the appeal of a leader figure (as a psychoanalytic father substitute) creates the libidinal ties between members of a group (Freud 25-27, 54-61). The scene from the train in *The Waves*
suggests a more spontaneous, de-centred group structure, based upon a sudden consciousness of participating in a common activity. In this case, it is the train’s imminent arrival at the station that provokes Bernard to notice his affiliation with the other passengers, who (he realizes) are similarly eager to end their journey. This kind of group formation has strong affinities with *unanimisme*, a concept of group consciousness developed in France in the early twentieth century; it is no accident that Woolf chooses the words “splendid unanimity” to describe Bernard’s perception of the collective experience at this moment. As Allen McLaurin has demonstrated, Woolf’s revisions to this passage suggest an effort to bring it in line with the concept of the *unanime*, a cluster of individuals that becomes a group spontaneously through an event that triggers group awareness (“VW and Unanimism” 118-20). The unanimist model of group formation differs from Freud in that it refers to ephemeral affiliations, often on a smaller scale, that need not be centred around a leader figure. This model fits with Woolf’s tendency to picture communities based on “fluctuating connections within small-scale groupings” (J. Berman 130).

122 An anonymous review of Jules Romains’s unanimist novel *Les Copains*, which McLaurin attributes to Virginia Woolf, has been identified as the work of Leonard Woolf instead (Kirkpatrick and Clarke 304). The review praises Romains’s ability to “trace the mysterious growth, where two or three are gathered together, of a kind of consciousness of the group in addition to that of each individual of the group” (McLaurin, “VW and Unanimism” 117; L. Woolf, “Les Copains” 330).

123 André Cuisenier’s 1935 explication of Romains’s unanimist theories reveals numerous thematic parallels with the aspects of Woolf’s imagery that I discuss in this chapter. These include: 1) the narrative oscillation between social fusion and self-differentiation: “le poète conçoit [l’individu, dans ses rapports avec la vie collective] comme une suite de mouvements d’abandon, de révolte ou d’amour” [the poet conceives [the individual, in relation to collective life] as a series of movements of abandon, of revolt, or of love] (231); 2) the use of rare imagery to express group interfusion and the permeability of the self-world boundary: “se fondre dans cet être collectif de la ville, qui de tous côtés l’entoure et l’envahit” [to melt in this collective being of the city, which from all sides surrounds and invades him] (235-36); 3) the sense of individuals participating provisional communities (232); and 4) the sense of an immersive social medium analogous to a natural fluid element: “l’individu baigne dans le milieu humain, en ressent les mouvements et les influences, aussi fortes que celles du sol, de l’air ou du soleil” [the individual bathes in the human environment, feels its movement and its influences, as strong as those of the soil, the air or the sun] (11-12). [These are my own translations.]
The capacity for an individual to dissent from the group emotion is critical for establishing forms of collective identity that do not result in an abdication of individual responsibility. As several scholars have persuasively argued, Woolf resisted Freud’s leader-centred model of group psychology, which, in its reduction of group members to passive agents hypnotized by the charisma of a powerful father-figure, resembled too closely the crowd dynamics typical of fascist states and military manoeuvres. A war scene from *Jacob’s Room* illustrates the disturbing passivity that Woolf associates with the submission of the individual will to a military hierarchy: during a battle in the North Sea, soldiers obey orders to sink a boat, with the result that “a dozen young men in the prime of life descend with composed faces into the depths of the sea; and there impassively (though with perfect mastery of machinery) suffocate uncomplainingly together” (164). The “nonchalance” of the soldiers faced with death stems from a disturbingly mechanical obedience to the commander in charge, inspired by indoctrinated belief in the heroism of war (164). In *The Waves*, the hypnotic appeal of such military virtues is ominously rehearsed in the young Louis’s admiration for the “boasting boys” who “are always forming into fours and marching in troops with badges on their caps,” turning and saluting in unison “the figure of their general,” and embodying in Louis’s envious eyes “majestic [...] order” and “beautiful [...] obedience” (32-33). Louis sees in the unison of these play-acting troops the possibility of group identity and belonging, but being an outsider, he does not experience the coercive discipline that produces such homogenized behaviour.

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124 For discussions of leader-centred models in relation to Woolf’s response to fascism, see Cuddy-Keane (“Comic Modes” 274), McIntire (30), DuPlessis (164), and Connolly (54).
To address the problem of coercive social fusion, Woolf makes some important modifications to the atomic model represented by the “wild yet controlled dance of the atoms” (“Royalty” 186). The random trajectory of individual particles in molecular theory works against “simultaneity of [...] movements” that characterizes Louis’s vision of marching troops (W 33). However, because atoms are essentially interchangeable, they do not adequately represent the heterogeneity of human crowds or the individual autonomy of citizens. In itself, the “dance of the atoms” lacks a recognition of what Miller calls the “recalcitrant particularity” that nearly always balances Woolf’s representations of group interfusion (207). Woolf resolves this dilemma, I would suggest, by grafting the basic spatial dynamics of the “dance of the atoms” onto descriptions of animate flocks of birds and insects, which add an element of individual agency to the imagery of the moving particulate cluster.

Flock images retain the multi-directionality of atomic clusters (i.e. they “dance apart” and “mass together,” producing gestalt shifts between particle and substance views), but they also express a more fluid relationship between individual autonomy and group behaviour. The patterns of motion exhibited by flocks of birds are evocatively described in several novels. In Mrs. Dalloway, a flock of swallows models an appealing blend of freedom and unified movement: “Up in the sky swallows swooping, swerving, flinging themselves in and out, round and round, yet always with perfect control as if elastics held them” (68). Such “elastic” motion recurs in To The Lighthouse to describe Lily Briscoe’s thoughts as a cloud of gnats: “All of this danced up and down, like a company of gnats, each separate, but all marvellously controlled in an invisible elastic net—danced up and down in Lily’s mind, in and about the branches of the pear tree”
While the gnats represent thoughts within Lily’s mind, they dance among the branches of the pear tree she is looking at. This slippage between the mental and physical worlds serves to generalize the metaphor, so that it represents not just Lily’s thoughts, but a pattern of semi-controlled motion that becomes recognizable in other contexts. In *The Waves* a similar flock metaphor, heightened by a further comparison to schools of fish, describes Bernard’s words: “‘They flick their tails right and left as I speak them,’ said Bernard. ‘They wag their tails; they flick their tails; they move through the air in flocks, now this way, now that way, moving all together, now dividing, now coming together’” (13). This sense of variable motion, alternately unified and separate, ultimately expresses human relationships, but it is elaborated through familiar images of moving clusters drawn from the natural world.

The birds in the interludes of *The Waves* are particularly evocative, since they possess a kind of individual agency both in song and in flight that is alternately subsumed in and separated from that of the flock. In the third interlude, they begin by singing “erratically and spasmodically,” then fuse their identities and sing “together in chorus” (52). In response to danger—a black cat in the bushes—they “swerv[e], all in one flight” but then revert to semi-independence, “singing together as they chased each other, escaping, pursuing” (52). Finally, they settle down on the tree as individuals again, each “aware, awake; intensely conscious of one thing, one object in particular” (52). This alternation between individual and group identity is also reflected in the alternate blending and severing of voices in the bird chorus: “Now and again their songs ran together in swift scales like the interlacings of a mountain stream whose waters, meeting, foam and then mix, and hasten quicker and quicker down the same channel brushing the
same broad leaves. But there is a rock; they sever” (79). These fluent transitions between individual and group identity create a key variation on the “wild yet controlled” dance; as an alternative to coercive unison, the partial unison of the flock represents a positive model for human interactions. By combining aspects of fluid and particulate motion, the flock of birds models a flexible form of negotiation between individual and group identity that, when extended to human groups, can help to preserve both group cohesion and democratic agency.

While flock behaviour in the animal world is largely a matter of instinct, human beings can learn to adjust their degree of group affiliation more consciously. Enhancing the capacity of democratic citizens to move fluidly between social fusion and self-differentiation is a crucial element of Woolf’s response to political trends in the 1930s. At the party in the “Present Day” section of The Years, a series of characters express concerns about the boundaries separating individuals from one another, and the need for both independent and communal problem-solving to face the challenges of the modern world. North Pargiter, who has recently returned from an isolated sheep farm in Africa after serving in World War I, sips champagne as he watches his aunt and uncle from across the room (285, 307-09, 363). Reflecting on the gap between generations, he describes the problem in terms that summarize the link between Woolf’s particle/substance imagery and contemporary politics. The older generation, he reflects, has “had their day” but his generation must find “another life; a different life” (410). He rejects the paramilitary model, with its “halls and reverberating megaphones” and “marching in step after leaders, in herds, groups, societies” (410). Suggesting uncomfortable connections between fascist groups and other “caparisoned” societies, he
also rejects “black shirts, green shirts, red shirts—always posing in the public eye” (410). Obsession with the obvious markers of group identity represents, to this former soldier, a dangerous kind of social conformity.

Acknowledging the appeal of breaking down interpersonal divisions, North also understands the value of self-differentiation in preserving social heterogeneity: “Why not down barriers and simplify? But a world, he thought, that was all one jelly, one mass, would be a rice pudding world, a white counterpane world” (410). North believes that his generation must seek a compromise that addresses citizens’ needs for both self-differentiation and social interfusion. In seeking “a life modeled on the jet [...] on the spring, on the hard leaping fountain,” he describes a form of active individual participation within the communal element. The flexibility to self-identify as both an individual and a member of the community is essential:

To keep the emblems and tokens of North Pargiter—the man Maggie laughs at; the Frenchman holding his hat; but at the same time spread out, make a new ripple in human consciousness, be the bubble and the stream, the stream and the bubble—myself and the world together—he raised his glass. (409-10)

Silently raising his glass of champagne, North Pargiter toasts his vision of a mode of “human consciousness” that encompasses both the particle and the substance views of the crowd, “the stream and the bubble—myself and the world together.” Had Woolf followed an earlier plan to develop the last chapter of the novel around a formal speech by North

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125 In the early 1930s, the British Union of Fascists (BUF) adopted uniforms with black shirts, imitating the uniforms of Italian fascist paramilitary groups under Mussolini (Pugh 134). In Three Guineas, Woolf criticizes ostentatious ceremonial costumes and rituals as part of a comparison between fascism abroad and patriotic tendencies in British society (24-27).
(Woolf, *D4* 332; Levenback 84), his diagnosis might have reached the rest of the crowd and inspired a round of toasts. Instead, it takes the form of a private reflection, one of the many unshared insights in the novel that reflect both social fragmentation and, more positively, the individual capacity for critical appraisal of social trends.

Woolf’s de-centred, process-oriented models of community shift the onus for collective engagement onto individual citizens; rather than relying on a leader to unify them around a common set of beliefs or goals, citizens must learn to actively modulate the individual and collective aspects of their own identity, moving nimbly between self-differentiation and social interfusion as the situation warrants. By using rare imagery to draw analogies between the particle/substance ambiguity and the dynamics of group behaviour, Woolf involves her readers in the process of modelling forms of community cohesion that maintain ethical spacing and respect individual particularity and autonomy. While much work has already been done on the importance of narrative gaps for facilitating reader response, the rarity-density spectrum allows us to focus in on material models that draw attention to particular patterns of dynamic spacing: the blending of personal and social perspectives at porous thresholds, the currents and eddies of interpersonal power dynamics in the communal element, and the motion of particle clusters representing democratic citizens’ capacity for fluid transitions between individual and collective identities. Rather than advocating either the “unifier” or the “separatist” perspective, Woolf uses the fluid forms of rare matter to foreground the paradoxical need for both interconnectivity and critical distance, and to provoke reflection about how we move from one perspective to another as we engage in community-as-process.
Just as Lawrence, through his indeterminate endings and gestalt effects, provokes readers to participate in the responsive self-world adjustments that his characters model, Woolf also invites her readers to shift flexibly between self-differentiation and self-dissolution at the level of the reader-text relationship. She employs a range of innovative narrative strategies—from gestalt effects to narrative gaps to permeable self-world thresholds—to foreground and dramatize the complexities of ethical spacing. Woolf’s process-oriented models of community thus incorporate readers as democratic agents by continually disrupting and refiguring the balance between critical detachment and critical engagement. Rather than reinforcing a stable set of reading practices, her narrative techniques invite diverse and variable responses from readers, making the reader-text relationship analogous to the variable self-world relationships enacted within the text as characters negotiate the complexities of their individual and collective identities.
Conclusion. Cultivating “Quick” Reader-Text Dynamics in Modernist Studies

As we have seen, dynamic negotiations between the self and the world are integral to relations between fictional characters in modernist texts. Such negotiations also play a fundamental role in the reader’s relation to the text. The inseparability of narrative dynamics and self-world negotiations highlights the reciprocity between modernist object studies and narratology and suggests the way insights derived from the rarity-density spectrum can be applied to the analysis of a broad range of modernist texts. In this final section, I will argue that the varying dynamics of the self-world threshold revealed by the rarity-density spectrum can help us to conceptualize a responsive form of reading practice that depends on an alternation between independent and collaborative relations to the text. Experimental modernist novels are well-known for their widespread use of frame narratives, free indirect discourse, and other self-reflexive narrative devices. In the works I have analyzed, rare materiality and particulate structure help modernist authors to picture concretely the complex rhetorical relationships that such techniques invoke. Reconceiving subject-object interactions in terms of dynamic variation within a boundary zone opens up for analysis the processes by which readers alternately identify with and differentiate themselves from the unfamiliar points of view presented in a text. In several well-known modernist texts, storytelling is specifically figured through rare imagery to foreground the embodied, relational nature of narrative activity. My analysis of these scenes will suggest that interactions between readers and texts entail processes of self-differentiation and self-dissolution analogous to the interpersonal and communal dynamics I have identified in Woolf and Lawrence’s novels.
1. Rare Matter, Self-World Thresholds and Narrative Dynamics

In the introduction, I argued that modernist writers use the rarity-density spectrum to make room for perceptual innovation in order to challenge prescriptive constructions of the subject’s relationship with the surrounding world. In contrast to biomedical models that stress regulation, organization, and control at the body’s edges, the rarity-density spectrum reveals the self-world threshold as a dynamic zone of material interchange. Within this zone, the subject’s spatial limits are productively tested and negotiated in a narrative process that has no inherent endpoint. To avoid stabilizing self-world relationships into predictable patterns, these texts experiment with open-ended and fundamentally flexible forms of subject-object relations. The spatial ambiguities of rare imagery help to destabilize the subject-object binary in favour of a more process-oriented attention to variable thresholds and interactive relationships. Instead of describing subject-object relations in an abstract way, the texts I have discussed imbue their threshold imagery with narrative dynamism using the concrete attributes of rare substances—their amorphous, variable shapes and flows.

Images of dancing atoms, permeating fogs, eddying water, and porous partitions expand the available options for picturing self-world thresholds as variable and dynamic. These images serve an important mimetic function: they help modernist writers to convey the complexity and variability of the processes that connect us to and differentiate us from our surroundings. In addition to this descriptive function, rare imagery also helps to convey specific political viewpoints. Ford’s engagement with urban complexity, Lawrence’s insistence on dynamic individualism, and Woolf’s process-oriented modelling of democratic community all address key socio-political issues of the day. At
the level of narrative strategy, these authors also intervene in political discourse by cultivating active forms of critical engagement on the part of their readers. Throughout my argument, I have highlighted the way narrative techniques involving the rarity-density spectrum tie into processes of perception, reader response and community modelling. At the formal level, the spatial ambiguities created by rare matter enable gestalt effects that must be activated by a shift in the reader’s attention; for instance, while a writer’s diction can call attention to both the particle or the substance views of a cloud, it is the reader’s ability to imaginatively shift between the two views that makes the particle/substance gestalt useful for modelling group behaviour. Active reader engagement is further encouraged through indeterminate endings, rapidly shifting focalization, narrative gaps, and process-oriented views of individual and communal development.

All these narrative strategies create opportunities for readers to try out the flexible forms of subject-object relations modelled within the fiction. To better define these reading practices, I will examine how rare matter helps to picture concretely the dynamics of narration in several key scenes from well-known modernist texts. The traditional view based on the subject-object dichotomy tends to conceptually separate authors, narrators, texts, and audiences for the purpose of analyzing narrative transactions. Instead, the rare images I will discuss represent the thresholds between these functional categories as variable and dynamic. Rather than remaining fixed, the relationships among narrators, stories and audiences alternate between spatial discreteness (which suggests clearly differentiated roles) and threshold blending (which suggests a more collaborative narrative dynamic). By analogy, I will argue that the thresholds among authors, texts, and readers display similar variability.
2. Rare Images of Narration and “Quick” Reader-Text Dynamics

Critics have long recognized that Nick Carraway, the narrator in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* (1925) is a protagonist as well as a witness, noting that the novel presents a double plot of the stories of Nick and of Jay Gatsby. In scenes of both speaking and listening, however, Nick’s role goes further to shed light on the complex dynamics of narration itself. In this novel, the spatial ambiguities introduced by the atmosphere’s role as a sensory medium reveal how both narrators and audiences struggle to balance self-differentiation and empathetic involvement. Nick expresses the difficulty of relating and interpreting events from a position both “within and without” the story: his descriptions are inevitably coloured by both his admiration for Gatsby and his discomfort with the ethical norms of the East Egg socialites, even though he claims to be an outsider playing a minimal role in the events he observes. Early in the novel, the rich and self-centred Tom Buchanan, the husband of Gatsby’s former lover Daisy, insists on organizing an impromptu party with his mistress Myrtle Wilson at the apartment he keeps for her in New York. Disgusted by Tom’s careless infidelity, Nick is nonetheless attracted to the glamour of this illicit urban lifestyle. As a result of his mixed feelings and his marginal social status, Nick feels like both a “casual watcher” peeking in through the “high [...] yellow windows” of the rich, and like a complicit participant in the gathering: “I was within and without, simultaneously enchanted and repelled” (30). Unreliable narrators like Nick Carraway call into question the very possibility of an objective perspective. Like an immersive medium, their presence in the narrative occupies the negative space that would allow for detachment; like a semi-transparent atmosphere, their

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126 For an early example, see Jerome Thale, “The Narrator as Hero” (1957).
unconcealed bias invites us to look at as well as through the act of narration. Just as Lawrence portrays Cézanne as struggling with edges and contours in an effort to respect the autonomy of objects, Fitzgerald dramatizes through spatial paradox Nick’s unsuccessful efforts to differentiate himself from the story he tells. 

As the party scene continues, the sense of being “within and without” a story is extended to the act of listening as well, when Myrtle Wilson interrupts Nick’s narration to tell her own story. The shift in focalization draws further attention to the ethical ambiguities that Nick faces as an observer struggling to maintain objectivity. Myrtle’s oral account of her affair with Tom is figured as an immersive atmosphere that fills the space between their bodies with erotic tension: “Myrtle pulled her chair close to mine, and suddenly her warm breath poured over me the story of her first meeting with Tom” (30). Struggling to maintain his critical distance, Nick is enveloped by Myrtle’s “warm breath” and her story simultaneously. This rare image literalizes the idea of being immersed in a story, drawing on the atmosphere’s role as an auditory medium: an oral narrative travels with the breath of the teller, through the air, to envelop the auditor’s body. Brushing the skin and entering the ear, the story-as-breath physically links the teller and audience, hanging in the air between them to create an intimate connection. In such cases, material exchange at the self-world threshold draws attention to how both narrators and audiences oscillate between autonomy and interdependence.

127 Although oral narration entails physical proximity between teller and listener, it does not invariably produce a sense of interpersonal connection. In a persuasive rhetorical analysis of dialogue in the novel, Dan Coleman argues that Daisy’s flirtatious style of storytelling serves both to attract the attention of listeners and to “loosen her connection to things and people and the commitments they require” (61). Barbara Hochman suggests that Nick’s role as a listener who alternates between absorption and incredulity models necessary fluctuations in reader-text dynamics.
Fitzgerald openly acknowledged how much he had learned from Joseph Conrad, and the affinity between the two writers is evidenced, in part, in their mutual fascination with the teller-listener relation. The connection between atmospheric immersion and oral narration in *The Great Gatsby* may indeed derive from one of the most well-known and enigmatic representations of storytelling in modernist literature, the description of Marlow’s distinctive narrative style near the beginning of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1902). The unnamed narrator of the outer frame story, who listens to Marlow’s tale aboard a boat anchored in the Thames, sets up the scene of narration and describes his impressions of Marlow. Highlighting the ambiguity that distinguishes this story from the usual sailor’s adventure tale, the narrator employs rare imagery to describe Marlow’s narrative strategy:

> The yarns of seamen have a direct simplicity, the whole meaning of which lies within the shell of a cracked nut. But Marlow was not typical (if his propensity to spin yarns be excepted) and to him the meaning of an episode was not inside like a kernel but outside, enveloping the tale which brought it out only as a glow brings out a haze, in the likeness of one of these misty halos that, sometimes, are made visible by the spectral illumination of moonshine. (5)

The amorphous qualities of the “haze” and “misty halos,” combined with the indeterminate and shifting sources of illumination, establish a spatial ambiguity that undermines the inside-outside dichotomy informing this extended metaphor. Depending

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128 Fitzgerald mentions Conrad’s influence in both private correspondence and published writing (Rude 117-20).
on its origin, the unspecified “glow” might illuminate a haze from within, but moonshine illuminates from a different angle, above the atmosphere that diffuses its light. Despite the apparently straightforward contrast of “not inside [...] but outside,” the metaphor does not simply convey a shift from contained meaning to enveloping meaning. Significantly, the metaphorical language shifts across the rarity-density spectrum, contrasting the spatial definiteness of the solid nutshell to the material amorphousness of hazes and misty halos, whose contours depend on the penetration of light rather than their own outlines. The spatial ambiguity of these rare images creates a sense of shifty, mobile obscurity—of a tale whose meaning drifts and wanders, spreading outward on the night air.

In explaining that Marlow is “not typical” as a spinner of yarns, the frame narrator seems to be offering guidance about how to shift from one set of generic expectations to another. Instead, the comparisons that follow suggest an unpredictability in Marlow’s style that requires his audience not simply to look for meaning in a new place (“outside” instead of “inside” the tale), but to respond to its mobility, its lack of a fixed edge. Unlike the nutshell image, the haze image suggests that meaning permeates the space between the tale and its auditor, creating both a potential for intimate connection and a vulnerability to penetration. Should the auditor (and by extension, the reader) open up to this tale and risk empathy, or shut defensively against it, attempting to avoid complicity through an act of self-differentiation from the dark events of the story? While reading *Heart of Darkness*, can any reader really choose one option without the other? Or must we alternate, accepting a position “within and without” the story, shifting between trust and mistrust, complicity and critical distance from one moment to the next, in much the same way that Marlow and Nick do? We call them unreliable narrators, but what about
our own inconsistencies as readers? Must we hold ourselves apart and defend our existing beliefs from the challenges a text like *Heart of Darkness* presents, or can vacillation on the part of the reader be valuable, even essential, to interpreting such a text?

Virginia Woolf, for one, actively encourages such vacillation. In the essay “Joseph Conrad” (1925), Woolf presents Conrad’s creation of Marlow as a unique and fascinating innovation in the relationships between tellers, tales, and audiences. In words remarkably similar those that describe Nick Carraway’s narrative dilemma, Woolf claims that to write of the sailor’s life as vividly as Conrad does, “one must be possessed of the double vision; one must be at once inside and out” (229). Woolf argues that Conrad, who spent much of his life as a sailor, achieves this double vision by being “compound of two men”: the “sea captain” and “that subtle, refined, and fastidious analyst whom he called Marlow” (229). Creating a composite of the Marlow characters in *Heart of Darkness*, *Lord Jim*, *Chance*, and “Youth,” Woolf pictures Marlow as Conrad’s alter ego, a man who loves to sit on the deck of a ship, puffing smoke and telling stories until the air is thick with both: “Marlow liked nothing better than to sit on deck, in some obscure creek of the Thames, smoking and recollecting; smoking and speculating; sending after his smoke beautiful rings of words until all the summer’s night became a little clouded with tobacco smoke” (229). As I have already discussed, Woolf later adopts the image of blowing smoke rings to describe Bernard’s power to generate community through narrative in *The Waves*: “if I find myself in company with other people,” he explains, “words at once make smoke rings—see how phrases at once begin to wreath off my lips […] A smoke ring issues from my lips […] The human voice has a disarming quality—(we are not single, we are one)” (48). Like the “warm breath” that pours over Nick as
Myrtle tells her story, Bernard and Marlow’s smoke rings render tangible the connection between storytelling and breath, so that the “beautiful rings of words” (“Joseph Conrad” 229) dissipate outward but hang in the air, suggesting a communal element that encompasses teller, tale and audience in an ongoing, interactive relationship.

Rather than simply dissolving and becoming indistinguishable, these three components of narration, in Woolf’s view, constantly shift and adjust in response to one another. Woolf makes this point most obviously by describing Marlow’s capacity to move swiftly from contemplative self-absorption to incisive observation: “Nor did Marlow live entirely wreathed in the smoke of his own cigars. He had a habit of opening his eyes suddenly and looking—at a rubbish heap, at a port, at a shop counter—and then complete in its burning ring of light that thing is flashed bright upon the mysterious background” (229-30). Here Woolf reverses the progression described in the frame narrator’s move from nutshell to misty halo: in her description, Marlow skilfully delineates the solid object, making it stand out vividly through powers of observation that suddenly punctuate the languor of his smoky recollections. The Conrad/Marlow composite impresses Woolf with his flexibility, his capacity to move freely from dissolution to differentiation as he narrates a story from “both inside and out” (229). If Conrad-as-sea-captain lives the tale from within, while Conrad-as-Marlow listens and recounts and fabricates from somewhere not quite outside the action, then the “double vision” Woolf describes entails a dynamic threshold between teller and tale. Elsewhere, she makes clear that a similarly dynamic relationship defines the role of the reader in relation to both author and text.
Woolf’s essay “‘Robinson Crusoe,’” published in the second Common Reader (1932), insists on the value of interactivity and mobility in the reader-text relationship. Here, as in the essay “How Should One Read a Book?” at the end of the volume, Woolf argues that analyzing biographical information and constructing critical interpretations should come after an immersion in the text itself. A reader’s first task, she insists, is to grasp the writer’s perspective from within: “All alone we must climb upon the novelist’s shoulders and gaze through his eyes until we, too, understand in what order he ranges the large common objects upon which novelists are fated to gaze” (377). She goes on to criticize negative reviewers of Hardy and Proust for “trying to control the novelist’s perspective so that it shall resemble and reinforce their own” (378). Instead, she encourages readers to interact with the text, allowing it to alter their existing perspectives. Turning back to Robinson Crusoe, she writes:

Before we open the book we have perhaps vaguely sketched out the kind of pleasure we expect it to give us. We read; and we are rudely contradicted on every page. […] Obviously, then, we must alter our attitude. Reality, fact, substance is going to dominate all that follows. We must hastily alter our proportions throughout; […] Finally, that is to say, we are forced to drop our own preconceptions and to accept what Defoe himself wishes to give us. (378-79)

Woolf encourages this willing relinquishment of our own perspective not as a permanent submission, of course, but as a necessary step in making sense of a text for ourselves. In “How Should One Read a Book?” the sequence is even more explicit. Having affirmed that “independence […] is the most important quality that a reader can possess,” she
nevertheless recommends that readers “steep” themselves in the details of a text before judging it: “Do not dictate to your author; try to become him. Be his fellow-worker and accomplice. If you hang back, and reserve and criticise at first, you are preventing yourself from getting the fullest possible value from what you read” (573). To respond judiciously to a text, a reader must work collaboratively at first, and then independently, tempering critical distance with a willingness to suspend judgement and consider a text on its own terms. Irrevocable fusion with a text might threaten our powers to think about it critically, but unwavering differentiation, as Woolf suggests, can be equally paralyzing for our powers of analysis. In a sense, the reader is called upon to make the same strategic decisions as Woolf’s democratic citizen—to move among various models of collaboration and differentiation in a continuous process of adjustment that preserves the freedom to innovate new forms of relationship to meet changing conditions.

As I have argued, Lawrence’s abrupt, genre-bending endings similarly encourage open-ended, adaptive reading practices that respect and respond to the alterity of a text and its characters. In “Morality and the Novel” (1925), he argues that fiction exercises our capacity for morality, which he defines not as adherence to a set of predetermined rules, but as “that delicate, for ever changing and trembling balance between me and my circumambient universe, which precedes and accompanies a true relatedness” (174). Dealing in particulars rather than generalities, the novel, more than any other art form, “demands the trembling and oscillating of the balance” (175). Like Woolf, Lawrence insists that to fully profit from a text, we must be willing to risk an active, “oscillating” relationship between our own values and those embodied in the text: “Obviously, to read a really new novel will always hurt, to some extent. There will always be resistance. The
same with new pictures, new music. You may judge of their reality by the fact that they
do arouse a certain resistance, and compel, at length, a certain acquiescence” (177). This
oscillation between critical “resistance” and “acquiescence” exercises the reader’s
capacity to maintain vital dynamism or “quickness” in the self-world relationship.

If we recall that Lawrence’s term “quickness” may apply to inanimate objects as
well as subjects, it becomes easier to picture the reader-text relationship as fully
reciprocal and interactive. Using a rare image to picture a story’s meaning in concrete
terms helps us to think of it both as an immersive atmosphere that may permeate across
self-world thresholds, and as something concrete and separate from either the auditor or
the teller. Myrtle’s “warm breath” and Marlow’s glowing “haze” and spreading smoke
rings represent narratives through moving, fluid shapes that suggest shifting, process-
oriented rhetorical dynamics.129 Such rare images identify the text as “quick” in
Lawrence’s sense, as existing through vitalistic exchange with the surrounding world.
The text, pictured as a rare substance, permeates outward into interpersonal space, like
Lawrence’s personal auras or Woolf’s communal element, and opens up the possibilities
of both fusion and differentiation between narrator and audience.

Keeping in mind the broad range of possible configurations that the rarity-density
spectrum lends to dynamic thresholds, it is possible to conceptualize a broad range of
reading strategies that support the “quickness” of a text rather than fix its meaning. The
smoke ring, for instance, suggests a structural order that originates with the author and
gradually dissipates, its temporarily visible shape giving way to a persistent odour that

129 Donald R. Benson similarly interprets the haze that surrounds Marlow’s tale as a concrete medium for
rhetorical interactivity: “The meaning […] somehow inheres in the atmosphere to be precipitated out by the
telling of the tale or the experience of the action” (“The Crisis of Space” 172).
may in turn be inhaled by an auditor nearby. The warm breath of an attractive woman, “poured over” an auditor already struggling to resist her allure, provokes a more visceral, less contemplative response. The possible relationships are as variable and shifting as the rare images that make them visible, tangible, concrete, and specific. It is one thing to talk in the abstract about responsive reader-text relationships, and another to perceive them vividly, to explore their variations and particularities, to actively sense their “quick” volatility. Rare images of narration help us to understand each reader-text interaction as an “incarnate disclosure of the flux,” an embodied, open-ended, living relationship that must not be fixed and deadened by habit.

3. Connecting Modernist Object Studies and Narratology: Methodological Implications

The preceding chapters have demonstrated in various ways the benefits of bringing narratological methodologies to bear on the study of materiality within modernist texts. Understanding how modernists draw on the full range of the rarity-density spectrum to model dynamic spatial relationships encourages new hermeneutic orientations in literary study: an increased awareness of atmospheric materiality and rare existents, accompanied by a heightened sensitivity to the mutual imbrication of embodied characters and physical settings. A materialist, embodied approach to subject-object relations must therefore combine the methods of object studies and narratology, taking into account not only the textual treatment of rare existents and self-world interactions that fluctuate within narrative time, but also the formal organization of the narrative, the way it unfolds over the course of the reading process. Such a perspective promises to expand and reinvigorate modernist object studies by supporting less dichotomized, more process-oriented views of subject-object relationships—views that are arguably more in
keeping with the representational practices and ethical priorities of authors like Ford, Meynell, Chiang, Markino, Lawrence and Woolf.

In these concluding remarks, I have sought to establish an additional benefit of connecting these two sub-disciplines: the possibility that object studies, when expanded to encompass gases and liquids as well as solids, might contribute to narratology a concrete language particularly suitable for discussing the complexities of modernist narrative dynamics and for advocating “quick” relationships with modernist texts. Scholars developing rhetorical and ethical approaches to narratology have been debating for years how best to balance a respect for the alterity of the text with a sense of the reader’s agency and responsibility. Too often, twenty-first century political perspectives dominate scholarly responses to modernist texts, producing the same kind of self-reinforcing readings that Woolf criticized in contemporary reviewers of Hardy and Proust. When attachments to causes—no matter how worthy—become normative and habitual, they risk privileging ideology over responsiveness to the language of the texts and thereby interfering with the interactivity of the reader-text relationship.\footnote{We should not, by the same token, reductively assume all political readings lack sensitivity to the text. For a nuanced and stimulating discussion of the tension between formalist and political criticism, see Andrew Dubois’s introduction to \textit{Close Reading: The Reader} (2003).} Instead of reproducing existing viewpoints, a dynamic relationship with literary texts would lead us to involve ourselves as readers in the challenging hermeneutic activities that modernist narrative innovations make available to us. Rather than suggesting consistent and invariable roles for readers, texts, authors, characters or existents, rare images of narration invite us to remain open to the possibility of shifting relationships, willing to notice the tug of alternative positions and to give way long enough to empathize before
we differentiate ourselves from other perspectives. In keeping with the dynamism of the reader-text threshold, we must be prepared to alternate between critical differentiation and empathetic fusion with a text if we are to fully confront the challenges that modernist texts present to our own beliefs and worldviews.
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