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'It was as if she had said....': May Sinclair and reading narratives of cure

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'IT WAS AS IF SHE HAD SAID....'

MAY SINCLAIR AND READING NARRATIVES OF CURE

LEIGH WILSON

**A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements of the University of Westminster
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy**

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Abstract

May Sinclair was one of the most widely read and successful English women novelists of the first half of the twentieth century. She had interests and themes in common with many of those now considered to have been at the heart of English modernism. In terms of formal experimentation too her concerns chime with the aesthetic innovations of, for example, Pound, Eliot and Woolf. Her early interest in psychoanalysis and support for the suffrage campaign also mark her out as a modern. Despite some work from feminist literary critics and her partial categorisation as modernist, however, her work still lacks a critical framework within which it can be read. Indeed, some of the work done by feminist critics on her has paradoxically re-marginalised her.

In this thesis I aim to provide one critical framework through which Sinclair's work can be read. My contention is that the occluding of one aspect of her work and thought – its movement toward intellectual, emotional and aesthetic wholeness – has marred previous critical readings of her. By paying attention to this through a focus on discourses of cure, this thesis reads Sinclair's work with an awareness of its language, cultural context and intertextual relations. Early twentieth-century medical discourse, psychoanalysis, mysticism, the chivalric and the psychical are all used to read the works. At the same time, my aim is to read Sinclair's work without eliding its difficulties. Rather, I aim to read her in a way that acknowledges the difficulties of and fraught moments in her writing as markers of its significance.

For my parents

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Preface

'It was as if she had said...': May Sinclair and the difficulty of reading

In this thesis I will use the trope of cure to read and understand the work of May Sinclair. Many of her plots and many of her interests revolve around the broadly medical; a number of her characters are doctors, nurses, psychotherapists, patients. More than this, though, the idea of cure, in terms of theme, content, and formal choices, is alien to contemporary ways of reading, implying as it does the possibility of wholeness, stability, and a final and proper way of being for characters and for texts. I have chosen cure as the major model around which to structure my reading of Sinclair because it emphasises all that is lost in any reading of her in which contemporary critical positions are privileged over the concerns of the text. In the two main critical discourses through which Sinclair is now read - feminism and modernism - the assumptions and agendas of feminist literary critics and critics of modernism have tended to marginalise or misread Sinclair.¹ Her work, while fitting these critical categories in some ways, in others contradicts, exceeds or ignores them. She cannot be claimed by either without damage to her work, without forcing her work to 'say' things which may limit, disfigure or distort meaning. The central place of cure in this thesis is a reassertion of respect for Sinclair's work and the way it makes its meaning. In this preface I want to look

¹ Very few critical works engage rigorously with these two together. For an interesting exception see Astradur Eysteinnsson, *The Concept of Modernism*, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1990, Chapter 1, on Gilbert and Gubar's *No Man's Land*. Even here, however, the impulse to hierarchise intrudes; modernism helps to sort the men from the boys:

Confronting modernism has brought out significant differences within feminism and this helps us avoid rigidly confining its discourse to a single file.

briefly at the ways she has been (mis)read in the recent past, place these within debates about the construction of literary critical practice, and propose a model for reading her work to be used in the thesis.

The difficulty of misreading...

From her first successful novel in 1904, until the end of her writing career in the early 1930s, May Sinclair was one of the most prolific, widely-read and well-regarded women writers in Britain. She published twenty-four novels, six collections of short stories, poetry, criticism and philosophy. She was involved with a number of avant-gardes, literary and otherwise, and in the suffrage movement, and showed a very early interest in psychoanalysis. She was friends with, among others, Henry James, Thomas Hardy, Dorothy Richardson, HD, Ezra Pound, HG Wells, TS Eliot, Rebecca West and Ford Madox Ford. By the time of her death in 1946, while obituaries recognised her as 'a novelist of keenly analytical intellect, a careful and finished stylist, and the possessor of a comprehensive and imaginative grasp of character',² her reputation was already on the wane. Now, after three decades of feminist revision and reinterpretation of literary history and literary values, Sinclair still lacks most of those markers of presence within the world of literary studies. Only one of her works (*Life and Death of Harriett Frean*) is still in print, and until very recently there had been no

² *The Times*, 15 November 1946, quoted in T.E.M. Boll, *Miss May Sinclair: Novelist: A Biographical and Critical Introduction*, New Jersey: Associated University Presses, 1973, p. 155.

critical work devoted entirely to her since the 1970s.³ Of the work that is done on her, in much of it Sinclair's name acts as a kind of subplot, mentioned only in relation to the really important figure, as an illustration of a wider thematic point or general trend, or as one example in a list of several. So in Hanscombe and Smyer's *Writing for Their Lives: The Modernist Women 1910-1940*, when talking about Harriet Monroe's journal *Poetry*, they write, 'Subsequent issues carried work by Frances Greg, Amy Lowell and Marianne Moore...Dorothy Richardson, Bryher and May Sinclair',⁴ and from the Endnote: 'Many women seem to have found the model offered by their parents sufficient to dissuade them from establishing anything similar. May Sinclair, whose shipowner father, etc.'⁵ She is mentioned in the chapter on HD, for her reviewing of Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage* novels, and because of her role in introducing Ezra Pound to London's literary society. Elsewhere, in Nicola Beaman's *A Very Great Profession: The Woman's Novel 1914-1939*, Sinclair's novels are written about in some detail, but again as examples, of war novels, or of novels that use psychoanalysis.⁶ In works of feminist literary history, works specifically about the relationships between women writers, about a rethinking of aesthetics and what makes novels worthwhile, and in works explicitly rejecting the 'individual genius' view that has supported both the idea of the canon and male dominance of it, Sinclair's marginalisation, her only-just-rememberedness, is strangely reinstated.

³ Suzanne Raitt's biography of May Sinclair, *May Sinclair: A Modern Victorian* (2000) came out just as this thesis was finished.

⁴ Gillian Hanscombe and Virginia L. Smyers, *Writing for Their Lives: The Modernist Women, 1910-1940*, London: Women's Press, 1987, p. 154.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 246.

⁶ Nicola Beaman, *A Very Great Profession: The Woman's Novel, 1914-39*

Not all of Sinclair's work, however, has been treated in quite this partial way. A number of feminist literary critics have done detailed readings of her writing, fiction and non-fiction. Terry Phillips, in her reading of *Mary Olivier: A Life* (1919), begins to discuss the relationship between Mary and her mother in terms of the pre-Oedipal. She continues:

However, to analyse characters in a novel as though they are patients in a case study is an unproductive way of proceeding and it seems to me that, in its treatment of the relationship between Mrs Olivier and her daughter, the novel represents something common to the mothering and 'daughtering' experience of many women.⁷

So in this feminist reading, it is inappropriate to treat characters like patients, but they can be treated like 'real' people, or more importantly, 'real women'. Sinclair's work was indeed criticised by some of her contemporaries for reading like 'anecdotes from a case-book'⁸ and Phillips here seems to be implicitly rescuing it from this charge. Phillips locates this 'unproductive' tendency in the analysis rather than the text itself, suggesting that what the text represents is, like 'many women', perfectly proper; that is, not odd, strange, excessive or inappropriate. Certainly, one part of feminist literary practice has been the rescue of women and 'woman' from the margins, the abnormal, the pathological. However, it seems to me that this claim for the possession of Sinclair on the part of some sections of late twentieth-century feminism obscures the complexity of her texts, their possible

(1983), London: Virago, 1995.

⁷ Terry Phillips, 'Battling with the Angel: May Sinclair's Powerful Mothers', in Sarah Sceats and Gail Cunningham (eds) *Image and Power: Women in Fiction in the Twentieth Century*, Harlow: Longman, 1996, p. 133.

⁸ Review of *Uncanny Stories*, *Times Literary Supplement*, 6 September 1923, p. 586.

status as problematic. For these critics, Sinclair's work, then, is not allowed to be marginal or difficult.

Further, while a central interest of *Mary Olivier* is certainly the relationship between Mary and her mother, and Sinclair has clearly constructed this using her knowledge of 'the New Psychology', an assumption of an unproblematic fit between this and current feminist literary critical uses of psychoanalysis is again distorting. The usefulness of psychoanalysis in critical practice now is as a hermeneutics of subversion, as potentially radical and destabilising of the symbolic order, or as a way of revealing the symbolic order as already fissured and destabilised. Lacanian psychoanalysis, positing inter alia the subject's division from itself and the continual traversing of language by the disruptive forces of desire, offers the possibility of a flexible and sophisticated analysis of gender. Its productiveness for feminist literary critics does not need to be detailed. For Sinclair, though, psychoanalysis is a cure. What attracted her to it and, in particular, to analytical psychology was their seeming offer of the possibility of wholeness, of the possibility of completion; what she is interested in is the development of a coherent subjectivity within particular physical and metaphysical circumstances. While in what follows I shall be focusing on the textual tensions and struggles which result from these aims of Sinclair's, that is not the same as reading contemporary practice *into* her work.

This potential distortion of Sinclair's work is implicated in another way - the place given to historical difference. For feminist literary critics, keen to make visible and

unpick the operations of gender and sexuality, this difference is too easily ignored. As Eve Sedgwick argues at the beginning of *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*, the choice for us as critics could well seem to be between the analyses of 'Marxist feminism', or the transhistorical 'drama of gender difference' of both 'radical' and 'French' feminisms.⁹ In my reading of Sinclair I want to follow Sedgwick's model in picking a path between the two that takes account of historical difference while at the same time acknowledging the useful insights to be gained from a reading informed by post-structuralism and psychoanalysis. So, in this way, my reading can be seen as an attempt to work out what certain key words mean in Sinclair's work - love, the medical, ecstasy, wounds, death - by both reading her work against contemporary texts from other discourses, and by a reading sensitive to 'the odd truths revealed in the accidental material of language'.¹⁰

Change through time is something that concerned Sinclair very much. It is her concern for questions of tradition, the burden of inheritance and the effects of the past that is partly responsible for her categorisation as 'modernist'. The novel still in print, *Life and Death of Harriett Freen* (1922), is the most clearly modernist of Sinclair's works. That it is published by Virago makes clear the crossover here of the two discourses of remembering. One of the recent feminist justifications for reclaiming Sinclair as important has been her place in modernism, as apologist and practitioner. Modernism, whatever the current state of the debate over definitions

⁹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Homosocial Desire* (1985), New York: Columbia University Press, 1993, p. 11.

¹⁰ Jane Gallop, *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: The Daughter's Seduction*,

and categorisations, is a valorised moment within literary studies. Claiming Sinclair as a modernist is way of asserting her right to be remembered. However, even in her more obviously 'modernist' works, she is not unproblematically modernist. To see her thus ignores both some of things she is trying to resolve in her works, some of the tensions, and her continued allegiance to discourses questioned by mainstream (male) modernists - biological models, progress, democratic political discourse, the acquisition of a coherent subject position, curative possibilities that are not just formal, the present moment as a possible 'curing' of the past - and can therefore have only a partial grasp of the way her works make meaning. The 'modernist moment' of this novel occurs two-thirds of the way through Sinclair's career as a writer, not at the end. The categorisation of her as 'modernist' writer, as well as obscuring many of her concerns, either makes a critical reading of her later works redundant, or narrates her writing career as a gradual falling off.

The difficulty of reading...

Suzanne Raitt, who has done the most important and thorough work on Sinclair, has attempted to face rather than obscure the 'problem' of reading her. Responding to Clare Tylee's criticism of Sinclair's *Journal of Impressions in Belgium* (1915), the published version of her three weeks spent with an ambulance corps in September 1914, as 'narcissistic and myopic',¹¹ 'It is not enough' Raitt argues, to

London: Macmillan, 1982, p. 17.

¹¹ Claire M. Tylee, *The Great War and Women's Consciousness: Images of Militarism and Womanhood in Women's Writing, 1914-1964*, London: Macmillan, 1989, p. 30.

dismiss Sinclair's journals thus.¹² The words and phrases Raitt uses most in her reading of the *Journal* revolve around the idea of perversity and a sense of awkwardness and their link to an experience of ecstasy, a concept Sinclair uses over and over again in her writing. It seems that, for Raitt, the 'not enough' of Tylee's judgement is because Sinclair is guilty of far more perversions than just narcissism. So the war journal offers 'a unique opportunity to explore the perversity of her position';¹³ Sinclair's support for the war 'seems to come not from her political awareness, but from her attraction to war's perversity',¹⁴ from the opportunity it gives to 'experience sexual excitement without the guilt of sexual responsibility'.¹⁵ Raitt sees war in Sinclair's fiction as 'a perversely bodiless affair'¹⁶ and Sinclair's presence in Belgium with the corps as 'perverse and unjustifiable'.¹⁷ Raitt sees her chapter as an analysis of 'the dynamics of this perversity' and in particular of the 'awkwardness of [Sinclair's] position'.¹⁸ Finally, it is in the descriptions of the wounded Belgian soldiers Sinclair comes across and feels intensely for that Raitt sees Sinclair's work as being 'so hard to read and even harder to interpret'.¹⁹

Raitt's chapter on the *Journal* is one of the most interesting readings of Sinclair I have seen. However, it prompts a number of questions. What does Raitt's 'hard to

¹² Suzanne Raitt, '"Contagious Ecstasy": May Sinclair's War Journals', in Suzanne Raitt and Trudi Tate (eds), *Women's Fiction and the Great War*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1997, p. 71.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 65-6.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 67,

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 77.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 67.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 78.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 67.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 79.

read' mean - does it mean difficult in the sense of a hard mathematical problem, hard in sense of painful for the reader to acknowledge what the text 'means', and what that means about Sinclair, hard especially for the feminist critic of a feminist writer? How does 'hardness' relate to the perversity Raitt finds in Sinclair's text? What makes a text difficult to read?

The relationship between critic and text is, of course, at the core of many debates in literary studies. In an article which attempts to recuperate the notion of close reading, Isobel Armstrong suggests that the master/slave, subject/object relation between critic and text in conventional models of close reading is in the main a controlling of the effect of affect, a resistance to being seduced by the text. Armstrong attempts an alternative close reading, one where affect is not resisted, but rather the opposition between thought and feeling is broken down. She suggests

another paradigm of reading, refusing that most fundamental of all post-Enlightenment binaries, feeling and thought. Critique supported by the feeling/thought dichotomy actually rests on an account of the text as *outside*, something external which has to be grasped - or warded off. Despite the anti-positivist language of so much modern criticism and theory, the text is seen as *other*: it is object to a Kantian subject who stands over against the world in a position of power. This is distance reading, not close reading.²⁰

As an example of the manoeuvres of 'distanced' close reading, Armstrong highlights the gendered language of William Empson in *Seven Types of Ambiguity*. Armstrong quotes from, paraphrases and comments upon Empson's distinction

²⁰ Isobel Armstrong, 'Textual Harassment: The Ideology of Close Reading,

between two types of criticism:

The first [distinction] is between 'analytic' and 'appreciative' criticism ('one may call that feminine') and, a distinction which follows on the first, between reading for meaning and reading for the suasive, somatic elements of a text....

Analytic criticism (by implication masculine) explains textual meaning and in doing so undoes the 'strong [hymenal?] defences' of habit. 'Feminine' appreciative criticism 'produces literary effects similar to the one he [*sic*] is appreciating' because it aims to recreate the art object or poem and its affect in alternative form. Appreciative criticism thus *fixes* and confirms an uninterrogated reading, conservative because it is in the text's own terms. Analytic criticism explains, but does not reproduce, a text, demystifying, defamiliarizing, and questioning.²¹

The image of the critic as male and the text as female is a familiar one, but the implications of the assumed critical practices of a 'feminine' criticism on a 'feminine' text are worth exploring further, particularly in terms of *feminist* literary criticism and its relationship with the text.

Empson's 'appreciative criticism' merely repeats or mimics the effects and affects of the text. As Armstrong has shown, his language is pejoratively gendered; 'femininity' is mimicry rather than originality, repetition rather than analysis. How do feminists, redefining the terms of sexual difference, fit in or rework this either/or relation to the text? What should a feminist practice of close reading be like? Empson saw 'ideology' as one of the things that could distort a proper reading. For feminist literary critics of 'masculine' texts, a particular ideological position does away with the mendacious veil of style or aesthetics to reveal the

²¹ or How Close is Close?', *Textual Practice*, 9(3), 1995, p. 403.
Ibid., p. 405.

manoeuvres of power; and for feminist critics of feminist texts, repetition is pleasurable because the texts are seen as, to varying degrees, ideologically sound.²²

These characterisations are exaggerated, but what they flag up is the possibility that, either way, our readings are tidy fits over the texts, the texts are rejected or incorporated, meanings are revealed or repeated; there is no space left for strangeness, for excess, for *difficulty*. In Armstrong's terms, this 'tidy fit' is paradoxically possible because a distance is maintained:

Arguably, close reading has never been close enough. It has always been the rationalist's defence against the shattering of the subject. It has always been engaged with mastery, and the erotics of the text have been invoked to endorse the reader's power over it.²³

In the remainder of this Preface, I want to show how Sinclair's texts themselves participate in these tensions around 'hardness', distance and difficulty, and ask a number of questions, the echoes of which will remain during my reading of her work in this thesis. In 1920, in a letter to the editor of a small magazine, mildly critical of some poems she had read in it because of their lack of 'firmness', Sinclair excuses herself - 'But Mr Middleton Murry laughed at me last night for my love of "hardness"!'²⁴ Around this time, Sinclair wrote several reviews and critical pieces defending the aesthetics of the Imagists, of Dorothy Richardson and of T.S. Eliot. In particular, she is keen to defend these writers against charges of obscurity, of

²² I am indebted here to Jane Gallop's reading of Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, and her consideration of reading, pleasure, feminism and politics. Though ten years old, the questions Gallop asks of the place where these come together are still pertinent. Jane Gallop, *Thinking Through the Body*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1988, pp. 100-15.

²³ Armstrong, 'Textual Harassment', p. 410.

²⁴ Letter to Thomas Moulton, 12 February 1920, Moulton Correspondence,

indeed being difficult to read. She describes these writers' sense of 'Reality', which she shares, in terms of being stripped, naked, clean, clear, pure and indeed hard. These are images of exposure, of surface, and are very different from Raitt's central image - of shame - and its associated coverings and veils. However, elsewhere, speaking of the writers' methods, Sinclair uses very different images. This is from her review of Dorothy Richardson's *Pilgrimage*:

Reality is thick and deep, too thick and too deep, and at the same time too fluid to be cut with any convenient carving-knife. The novelist who would be close to reality must confine himself to this knowledge at first hand. He must... simply "plunge in".... [Richardson] has plunged so neatly and quietly that even admirers of her performance might remain unaware of what it is precisely that she has done. She has disappeared while they are still waiting for the splash.²⁵

In her review of 'Prufrock', Eliot, she says

does not see anything between him and reality.... Unless you are prepared to follow with the same nimbleness and straightness you will never arrive with Mr Eliot at his meaning.... There is also an obscurity of remote or unusual objects, or of familiar objects moving very rapidly. And Mr Eliot's trick of cutting his corners and his curves makes him seem obscure where he is clear as daylight.... Reality, stripped naked of all rhetoric, of all ornament, of all confusing and obscuring association, is what he is after.²⁶

Where is 'Reality', the 'thing itself', is it a bright, shiny surface, or is it far below the surface; to get there, must you cut curves, get rid of all excesses, and go straight, or does its fluidity demand incorporation, a breaking down of surfaces? If

²⁵ Brotherton Collection, Brotherton Library, University of Leeds.
Reproduced in Bonnie Kime Scott (ed.), *The Gender of Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990, pp. 442-3.

perversion can be understood as something not in its proper place (sexual desire veering off toward an 'improper' sexual object or aim), as something that lacks a function when it should have one (sexual ecstasy without the possibility of reproduction), is the perversity of Sinclair's writing that things, indeed the Thing itself, do not stay in their proper place, that this intense concern with 'Reality' does not produce what is expected? What is Sinclair as critic expecting of the reader? Reading Sinclair, as the quotes from her criticism show, is often a strange mixture of a sense of the density of the text, which demands the reader plunge in, and a resistance, a pushing away, an insistence that the reader keeps her distance. I want to argue in the chapters that follow that Sinclair's writing is constantly shifting. It is constantly shifting in its attempts never to settle on either one possibility in a series of oppositions that structure her work - the individual or the corporate, decency or revelation, surface or depth, ecstasy or shame, writer or woman, aesthetics or what she calls elsewhere 'strong human passion',²⁷ and the opposition that overarches all of these, proximity and distance. This makes Sinclair hard to read because it makes us uncomfortable. Paying close attention to her texts makes impossible bounded critical categories and stable ideological positions.

There is something strange, something perverse, about Sinclair's work. It is indeed hard to read. I want to argue, in addition to those things Raitt picks out, that this strangeness is the strangeness of Sinclair's attitude to writing itself, that a kind of impossibility forces a constant vacillation between distance and proximity, and the related oppositions, that it becomes our strangeness. Raitt finds Sinclair hard to

²⁶ Ibid., pp. 449, 450, 451.

²⁷ From a letter to Charlotte Mew, quoted in Boll, *Miss May Sinclair*, p. 109.

read but 'even harder to interpret'. Near the end of her chapter Raitt suggests that, for the questions that surround the relations between women, men, war, fear, and sexual desire, while she is important for asking them, 'Sinclair has no answers'²⁸ - is this most perverse thing about her writing, it provides no satisfactory endpoint? Is the fact that feminist critics (myself included) find Sinclair hard to interpret an indication that we are still asking for coherence and unity from texts we would make our own, maybe a different coherence and unity from that of the 'well wrought urn', but still one that produces pleasure, comfort, agreement - that things be in their proper place, and at their proper distance? The relationship between feminism and pleasure is still a difficult one, particularly when it comes to the perverse. On the other hand, perverse pleasure, pleasure where it should not be, it could be argued, has become a central tactic of subversion in feminist theory and practice. So does it have to be the right sort of perversion for it to be feminist, and if it is the right sort, is it any longer perverse?

The trope of cure which runs through this thesis is a paradoxical attempt to negotiate with this perversity. Cure, although it assumes that a stable, unified position is possible, at the same time necessitates an engagement with others, a going beyond the boundaries of the self. Its centrality as a motif is suggested by Sinclair's texts, but it is too an attempt constantly to question the relation between the texts and the critical process. Whose perversity? Whose definition of propriety? Whose difficulty?

In *Fame*, a short story by Sinclair from 1929, the desire of Liston Chamberlin, an

²⁸ Raitt, "'Contagious Ecstasy'", p. 82.

avant-garde writer, for immortality through his work leads, after his death, to the dissolution of his integrity as a person. The narrator and his friend, a literary critic who wants to write Chamberlin's biography, try to discover the truth of his life by talking to a number of women who knew him. The story is punctuated with the phrase that occurs again and again in Sinclair's work - 'It was as if she had said...'

the narrator tells us about the women the two men interview. This filling in the gaps, this stabilisation of the meaning of the words of others comes to be what the story is about, and an insistence on it becomes disastrous. The narrator and his friend discover unsavoury things about Chamberlin and the critic is torn between his commitment to 'the hard firm beauty of the unbiassed report'²⁹ and to decency, between the whole truth and discretion. In the end two biographies come out, our critic's which 'quivered all over like a jelly with his agitations - and as if you couldn't read between the lines where he'd left whole chunks out', and another by an unscrupulous critic 'with all the gaps filled'.³⁰ In a story about literary reputation, about being remembered as a writer, about literary critics who want to force things into their 'proper' places, it is as if Sinclair had said....

²⁹ May Sinclair, *Fame*, London: Elkin Mathews & Marrot, 1929, p. 33.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

conventions and meanings of love, of proximity, of subjectivity and of desire as opposed to knowledge, the objective, the scientific, the clean, the explicable, the rational. Her work constructs itself around both a rhetoric of touch and a rhetoric of distance, and attempts a resolution, a cure, through very specific textual manoeuvres.

Throughout this work I shall use the metaphor of cure to describe not only elements of character or plot, or the various social discourses on which Sinclair draws, but also the possibilities of form and language. Conventionally, the end of a work of fiction will cure the 'problems' that have created the dynamic of the plot. For the pre-twentieth century European novel, using the tradition of romance that preceded it, the primary textual resolution was marriage. In this formal use of marriage as resolution cluster together both the ontological ballast that the construction of sexual identity is in the west in the modern period and the creation of marriage as social preventative medicine in bourgeois ideology as it mediates between the public and private spheres. As these meanings loosen, slip and change in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, what replaces marriage as formal, textual resolution? How do Sinclair's fictions negotiate a path between the danger of formal incoherence and her desire to engage with modernity and change?

At the same time, interwoven with my argument is an awareness of language, and its own existence as both pathology and cure. The anxiety caused throughout the nineteenth century by the coming together of women and the language of novels is

Chapter 1

From 'fascinating speculation' to 'a series of symptoms'

Placing Sinclair within narratives of modernity

The second half of the nineteenth century was characterised by very particular kinds of sickness - metaphorical, social, organic - that were perceived as a response to the circumstances of modern life. Images of degeneration, contagion and breakdown structure meaning during this period. Most emblematically, of course, this dynamic of disease was seen to leave its mark on the bodies of women. Hysteria, the daughter's disease, in its complexity reveals the interlocking and overlapping functions of *fin de siècle* sickness. The hysterical woman experienced physical breakdown, and at the same time was both an effect of and responsible for wider fissures and possible social collapse. For the American neurologist, Silas Weir Mitchell, an 'hysterical girl is...a vampire who sucks the blood of the healthy people about her';¹ for Horatio Bryan Donkin, who treated both Eleanor Marx and Olive Schreiner, the hysteric 'is preeminently an individualist, an unsocial unit'.² And further, women, such as Marx and Schreiner, who took part in the feminist movement in the second half of the century, who acted and argued for change, were with ease labelled hysterical, sick and perverse. In Sinclair's texts, however, a reconfiguration of these elements - social relations, women's bodies, sickness, psychology, science - is attempted around very particular notions of cure. Her fiction engages with the split between love and understanding; that is, between the

¹ Athena Vrettos, *Somatic Fictions: Imagining Illness in Victorian Culture*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1995, p. 87.

² Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980*, London: Penguin, 1987, p. 134.

well documented.³ In particular, what caused concern was writing that provoked feeling, or sympathy, writing that demanded a *physical* response. From warnings against Gothic fiction in the early part of the century, through dismissive criticism of the romantic outpourings of 'lady novelists', the scandalous nature of Sensation fiction and the threat from the New Woman novels, much criticism concentrated on 'saving' the reader - passive, impressionable and therefore feminine - from the dangers of her own corporeal responses. Underlying these criticisms were fundamental assumptions about the gendering of aesthetics, about the desirability of order, distance and containment, and the dangers of excess, proximity and chaos.⁴ In my reading of Sinclair, part of my concern will be to investigate the texture of her language with reference to these debates. How does Sinclair's *language* attempt a resolution between distance and proximity given the nature of the content of her work and the structural context just outlined?

In this chapter, I will look back at the late nineteenth century in order to map the context of meaning from which Sinclair's texts were produced. Two readings, one of a short story by Henry James and the other of Sinclair's first novel, *Audrey Craven* (1897), are attempts to mark those places, textual and contextual, where a rhetoric of sickness becomes a rhetoric of cure, and where knowledge replaces marriage as narrative resolution. Sinclair acknowledged her indebtedness to James. She wrote in 1915 to the poet Charlotte Mew that he 'has influenced *me*

³ See Kate Flint, *The Woman Reader, 1837-1914*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993; Jane Eldridge Miller, *Rebel Women: Feminism, Modernism and the Edwardian Novel*, London: Virago, 1994, especially Chapter 1.

⁴ See Naomi Schor, *Reading in Detail: Aesthetics and the Feminine*, New York: Methuen, 1987.

considerably, and I'm not a bit ashamed of it. He is a good master, if you're strong enough not to be totally swamped by him.'⁵ However, I want to use her difference from him as a marker of a shift, of a going beyond what James offers as 'master' made possible by various movements - cultural, political, literary. Frank Swinnerton, in his *The Georgian Literary Scene: A Panorama* (1935), distinguishes between two types of British novelist, those pre- and those post-Freud:

If one compares a psychological novel by Henry James...with a psychological novel written nowadays...the differences in assumption will be found most startling. For one thing, the gentle discreetness of James has disappeared; its place has been taken by outspoken declaration and a much more professional vocabulary. For another, and as an accompaniment to the vocabulary, explanations of personal vagary have ceased to be romantic and have become medical. An eccentric woman who in James's eyes (or at any rate in a novel by James) was incalculable, material for endless and to the author fascinating speculation, is given nowadays a series of symptoms which can be checked by any quasi-psychologist.⁶

Swinnerton uses James, both in this passage and throughout his book, as a point of origin and contrast. Although, in chronological terms, James overlaps with those writers Swinnerton sees as Georgian, his style and concerns mark him out as belonging to a different moment. For in James' 'psychological romances', what is interesting, what motivates plot, narrative and characterisation is often hidden, a secret; a 'something' to be speculated about, but never known. James' prolix

⁵ Quoted in T.E.M. Boll, *Miss May Sinclair: Novelist: A Biographical and Critical Introduction*, New Jersey: Associated University Presses, 1973, p. 109.

⁶ Frank Swinnerton, *The Georgian Literary Scene: A Panorama*, London: William Heinemann, 1935, pp. 397-8.

narrative technique of 'successive alternatives'⁷ spins out from a thing that cannot be known, offering a possibility of knowledge that ensnares the reader, only to be endlessly deferred. In James' short story 'The Beast in the Jungle' (1903), character and relationship are explicitly shaped around such an absence. After a gap of ten years, John Marcher and May Bartram meet for the second time. He struggles to remember the details of the first occasion, but accepts her version of events. She reminds him that he had told her something about himself which, she then learns, he has never told another person.

'You said you had had from your earliest time, as the deepest thing within you, the sense of being kept for something rare and strange, possibly prodigious and terrible, that was sooner or later to happen to you, that you had in your bones the foreboding and the conviction of, and that would perhaps overwhelm you.'⁸

As a result of their second meeting, the two decide to 'watch' together for this thing that is to happen to Marcher. He realises that the 'real form' that their relationship should take is marriage, but, because he figures his fate as 'a crouching beast in the jungle', he sees this as impossible.

The definite point was the inevitable spring of the creature; and the definite lesson from that was that a man of feeling didn't cause himself to be accompanied by a lady on a tiger-hunt.⁹

⁷ Ibid., p. 26.

⁸ Henry James, 'The Beast in the Jungle', *Selected Tales*, selected by Peter Messent and Tom Paulin, London: Dent, 1982, p. 237.

⁹ Ibid., p. 243.

Marcher and May Bartram continue to meet over the years, to wait and to watch. They speak about Marcher's sense of his fate as 'the real truth', and gradually this becomes May Bartram's real truth also. During a conversation late in their relationship, Marcher begins to believe that his friend knows something he does not; that she knows what his fate is to be, but is afraid to tell him. May Bartram does not deny this, but evades his questions. When she develops a 'deep disorder in her blood'¹⁰ and is clearly dying, Marcher again attempts to find out what she knows. Eventually, at their last meeting, she tells him that the 'thing' has already happened without his realising it, but still will not tell him what the 'thing' is. After May Bartram's death, Marcher travels. When he returns to England, he has a moment of revelation at his friend's grave. He glimpses, in the face of a mourner at a grave nearby, grief at an intense desire thwarted by death; 'No passion had ever touched him, for this was what passion meant; he had survived and maundered and pined, but where had been *his* deep ravage?'¹¹ This moment of knowledge causes Marcher, at the end of the story, to collapse onto May Bartram's grave. Romance should have been the cure; the story's 'lateness', as a feature of Marcher's knowledge, and in terms of historical moment and James' career, makes this impossible.

If James' narratives find a dynamic and a resolution away from 'a series of symptoms which can be checked by any quasi-psychologist', how can the meaning of 'The Beast in the Jungle' be read in terms of the notion of cure? At the point

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 255.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 281.

where Marcher realises he and May Bartram have met before, and before she tells him that he told her then about his 'something rare and strange', he wishes that more had passed between them at their first meeting.

Marcher said to himself that he ought to have rendered her some service - saved her from a capsized boat in the Bay, or at least recovered her dressing-bag, filched from her cab, in the streets of Naples, by a lazzarone with a stiletto. Or it would have been nice if he could have been taken with fever, alone, at his hotel, and she could have come to look after him, to write to his people, to drive him out in convalescence.¹²

Marcher imagines a number of conventional figurations: of relations between men and women, of desire, of the dynamics of the plot, of change, of time, the conventional narrative movements from problem to resolution. In James' romance, however, neither characters nor readers are allowed the easy tropes of chivalric knight or ministering angel. If the story rejects the figurative certainties of earlier narrative convention, what kind of dynamic and resolution replaces them? In an obvious way, May's illness and death, and Marcher's response to this, resolve the story. The story is constructed entirely around their relationship, when one of them disappears the narrative cannot be sustained. It only re-starts when, once again, they come together - May and Marcher lying together either side of a tombstone. However, what May's illness also does is articulate what it is that the relationship and the story are structured around. May's body becomes the surface which gives shape to the 'something' behind. Part of her function in her relationship with Marcher has been for her, and for her alone, to reveal a 'truth' about him. It is her

¹² Ibid., p. 232-3.

knowledge which enables her to 'dispose the concealing veil in the right folds'.¹³ Yet at the same time, her body conceals. It conceals the 'truth' about Marcher from those around them - 'I'm your dull woman, a part of the daily bread for which you pray at church. That covers your tracks more than anything'¹⁴ - and until the end it seems to conceal from Marcher his own truth. In her examination of James the critic's response to the figure and work of George Sand, which she reads as hysterical, Evelyn Ender suggests that James' theory of representation is one that 'relies on screens and turns them into instruments of aesthetic, moral, but also sexual discrimination'.¹⁵ At the core of James' rhetorical manoeuvres Ender sees modesty, a notion of what should be revealed and what should not, of what can be safely known and what cannot.¹⁶ While this reliance on modesty, on veils and screens, is at one level an attempt by James to make secure the otherwise unstable circulation of knowledge and desire, of masculinity and femininity, it also reinserts James into that complexity. As Ender suggests by looking at nineteenth-century medical writings, modesty was seen as both a protection against hysteria and as one of its causes.¹⁷ And, of course, while veils and screens cover, they also inevitably draw attention to that which is being covered. At their penultimate

¹³ Ibid., p. 245.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 248.

¹⁵ Evelyn Ender, *Sexing the Mind: Nineteenth Century Fictions of Hysteria*, Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1995, p. 67.

¹⁶ The revelation of that which should remain hidden is, of course, Freud's definition of the moment of the uncanny. The connections between narrative manoeuvres, proximity, distance and the uncanny are explored further in Chapter 5.

¹⁷ Ender, *Sexing the Mind*, pp. 50-7.

meeting, Marcher sees May

[a]lmost as white as wax, with the marks and signs in her face as numerous and as fine as if they had been etched by a needle, with soft white draperies relieved by a faded green scarf, the delicate tone of which had been consecrated by the years, she was the picture of a serene, exquisite, but impenetrable sphinx, whose head, or indeed all whose person, might have been powdered with silver. She was a sphinx, yet with her white petals and green fronds she might have been a lily too - only an artificial lily, wonderfully imitated and constantly kept, without dust or stain, though not exempt from a slight droop and a complexity of faint creases, under some clear glass bell.¹⁸

If chivalrous or ministering deeds are no longer possible as external markers of gendered identity and the relations between men and women, then May Bartram's body is a sign of that with which they have been replaced. James' use of the emblems of aestheticism - the sphinx, the artificial lily - suggests the descent of the romantic into the decadent. May is beautiful because non-fleshly, artificial. The description remains on the surface - there is no attempt to go beyond the 'marks and signs'. In the end, what May's body covers, the mystery it conceals, is nothing but absence; it is the covering that is the point. When her body has disappeared, when death robs it of its ability to cover over, Marcher's revelation is of what he has not had, what he lacks, what has never been.

At the level of the plot, then, the 'cure', the resolution, comes through death and a revelation of lack via the body of a woman. At another level, James' story is *about* the problem of figuration, about the problem of the narrative use of 'woman'.

¹⁸ James, 'The Beast in the Jungle', p. 259.

Women are 'conductors and revealers',¹⁹ they resolve and explain and finish things. May, as he discovers too late, is Marcher's resolution. The problem with this reading, however, is that it reinscribes the text's denial of her subjectivity. She remains merely a mirror, a veil, an answer for Marcher. As Eve Sedgwick suggests, the text revolves around a number of secrets; one of which, at least, belongs to May - the secret of what Marcher's secret means.²⁰ Not only has May had her man, she has had her knowledge too, and this implies a subjectivity, however much it is ignored by the text. That the 'sphinx' has a knowledge that is secret both suggests an interiority beyond the 'marks and signs', and means that nothing can be known beyond those surface 'marks and signs'. Sedgwick argues that Marcher's revelation at the end of the story is that May (or rather his desire for her) should have been the cure of his mystery, his 'unspeakable' thing, that is, for Sedgwick, his homosexuality.²¹ For May to have functioned as cure, however, her subjectivity would have to have been allowed - Marcher would have to have had knowledge of and responded to *her* desire. The implication that a woman must be a subject in order to be cure is an interesting one, but of course it is the very lack of May's subjectivity that the text leaves us with. As readers of 'The Beast in the Jungle' we are really, at the resolution of the plot, no wiser about the thing May Bartram has both covered over and revealed. James' style, his 'successive alternatives', his subordinate clauses that purport to clarify but in fact endlessly

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 254.

²⁰ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'The Beast in the Closet: James and the Writing of Homosexual Panic', *Epistemology of the Closet*, Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990, p. 204.

²¹ Ibid., p. 201.

defer the moment of revelation, engage us as readers in a search for meaning from which we are never released. We too experience lack. Reading 'The Beast in the Jungle' is an acting out of absence. The 'fascinating speculation' that Swinnerton attributes to James is itself a cover for a lack of explanation. James' texts ask: what is the nature of relations between people, what is desire, how can it work, what is identity based on, how do we move between a sign and its meaning? They do not give an answer.

Sinclair's novels share with James' a central interest in the processes of individuation, and in the part taken in this by the dynamics of relationships, particularly sexual relationships. Swinnerton, however, classifies her explicitly as a post-Freudian writer and therefore contrasts her directly with James. He believes her novels began to change in 1904, with the publication of *The Divine Fire*, and cites as an example of this the reaction of a friend to the novel: '[he] shook his head...[and] said gravely: "She knows too much."²² Swinnerton is rather ambiguous in his praise of Sinclair, but he is not alone in seeing her works from the beginning as practising a very particular kind of knowledge and explanation. In her relatively early feminist criticism, Patricia Stubbs writes of the 'mysterious illness' that dominated the representation and often the lives of women in the second half of the nineteenth century. She locates very specifically the moment when fiction could face this phenomenon, could make it central because it had begun to find a cause and a cure: 'It was not until the post-Freudian twentieth century that the decline [associated with hysteria] became the central theme of a novel - May

²² Swinnerton, *The Georgian Literary Scene*, p. 401.

Sinclair's *The Three Sisters*.²³ If James' later texts construct themselves, in all their complexity, over an absence of meaning, a lack of explanation, Sinclair's resolve themselves through explanation and exposure. In suggesting what has made the 'too much' knowledge of her texts possible, I will go on to read a number of moments in the second half of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that centre around illness and cure, knowledge and women.

The final decades of the nineteenth century saw the establishment of the biological as a, if not *the*, privileged discourse. Taking as its foundation mid-century scientific discoveries, in particular Darwinian theory, this model explained the world through heredity, a purely physical view of the body, and an extrapolation of this view of the individual body onto the social and political.²⁴ So, for Henry Maudsley, the most influential Darwinian psychiatrist of the period, 'There is a destiny made for each one by his inheritance; he is the necessary organic consequent of certain organic antecedents; and it is impossible he should escape the tyranny of his organization.'²⁵ The integration of readings of Darwin (however far many of them were from Darwin's original intention) into scientific, medical and social orthodoxy meant that even resistance to biological materialism was of necessity articulated through materialist models of the body. So, for example, for Spiritualists in the 1870s, materialisation of spirits was the strongest evidence for the truth of their

²³ Patricia Stubbs, *Women and Fiction: Feminism and the Novel 1880-1920* (1979), London: Methuen, 1981, p. 11.

²⁴ For a discussion of biologism and the challenge to it from modern physics, see Chapter 3.

²⁵ Henry Maudsley, *The Pathology of Mind*, London: Macmillan, 1879, p. 88.

beliefs. In particular, Spiritualists placed their mediums in a hierarchy of materialisation: full-body materialisations became the 'acme of mediumistic development',²⁶ and mediums would strive to progress from faces to hands and arms, then to legs and torso, and so to the whole body. Even within heterodoxy, physical integrity is a marker of success, the pinnacle of some kind of evolutionary achievement. This was as true for movements of political rather than religious dissent. In the New Woman novels of the 1890s, the discourse of evolution is engaged with and attempts are made both to make its notion of change useful to a feminist analysis and to undermine the reactionary tenets of social Darwinism.²⁷ In Mona Caird's *The Daughters of Danaus* (1894), the straitjacket of determinism and the possibility of change coexist in an uneasy tension. At one point, Valeria, a feminist novelist, argues:

'A woman cannot afford to despise the dictates of Nature.... There is no escape. The centuries are behind one, with all their weight of heredity and habit; the order of society adds its pressure - one's own emotional needs. Ah, no! it does not answer to pit oneself against one's race, to bid defiance to the fundamental laws of life.'²⁸

At the end of the novel, however, the focus is on intervening in the processes of slow, gradual change to effect liberation.

²⁶ Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England*, London: Virago, 1989, p. 42.

²⁷ See Sally Ledger, *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997, especially Chapter 1, and Lucy Bland, *Banishing the Beast: Sexuality and the Early Feminists*, New York: The New Press, 1995.

²⁸ Mona Caird, *The Daughters of Danaus*, London: Bliss, Sands and Foster, 1894, p. 71.

'Ah!' Hadria drew a deep sigh. 'I wish the moment of sisterhood were a little nearer.'

'Heaven hasten it!' cried Algitha.

'Perhaps it is nearer than we imagine. Women are quick learners when they begin. But, oh, it is hard sometimes to make them begin.'²⁹

Throughout the nineteenth century, the assumptions of biological discourse were increasingly expressed through the model of public health. Illness, its aetiology, contraction and spread, was analysed and surveyed in ways which made the articulation of particular knowledges possible. In 1848 the Public Health Act set up the General Board of Health, with Edwin Chadwick as its chief commissioner, and established the position of local medical officers of health. Legislation in the second half the century enshrined the responsibility of the state for the health of the body politic, emblematically around the diseases of smallpox and syphilis.

The Vaccination Acts and the Contagious Diseases Acts suspended what we might call the natural liberty of the individual to contract and spread infectious disease, in order to protect the health of the community as a whole.³⁰

The anti-vaccination campaign that sprang up following the first act to make vaccination compulsory challenged medically orthodox ideas of the nature and aetiology of disease, much of the challenge focusing on a contestation of the

²⁹ Ibid., p. 473.

³⁰ Dorothy Porter and Roy Porter, 'The politics of prevention: anti-vaccination and public health in nineteenth-century England', *Medical History*, 32, 1988, p. 231.

nature of 'filth'. John Gibbs, one of the earliest to articulate anti-vaccination arguments, wrote of dissenting parents' 'natural disgust to the transfer of a loathsome virus from a diseased brute, through they know not how many unhealthy human mediums, to the veins of their children'.³¹ In sections of the campaign, the cry became 'sanitation not vaccination'. Charles Creighton, a prominent member of the anti-vaccination campaign and a believer in the atmospheric theory of disease causation, argued that vaccination amounted to nothing more than a poisoning of the blood with contaminated material, and that this was no protection from a disease caused by 'effluvia arising from decaying organic matter'.³² The possibility of contracting syphilis through vaccination was a major concern of the campaign, bringing together the two central incarnations of Victorian concerns around contagion, proximity and moral purity.³³ William White ends his intellectual history of the anti-vaccination campaign:

Vaccination is an attempt to swindle Nature.... Smallpox with its alternatives and equivalents can only be avoided through compliance with

³¹ Quoted in William White, *The Story of a Great Delusion in a Series of Matter-of-Fact Chapters*, London: E.W. Allen, 1885, p. 501.

³² Charles Creighton, *Natural History of Cowpox and Vaccinal Syphilis*, 1887, quoted in *ibid.*, p, 237. A significant section of the anti-vaccination campaign consisted of people active in other contemporary heterodoxies - Spiritualism, homeopathy, Swedenborgism and so on. What these areas have in common is a challenge to nineteenth-century science's explanations for various 'affects at a distance'.

³³ Margaret Pelling argues that, because of the semantic slipperiness of the terms contagion and infection, both concepts have accrued layers of metaphor and analogy: 'Ideas of contagion are inseparable from notions of individual morality, social responsibility and collective action.' Margaret Pelling, 'Contagion/Germ Theory/Specificity,' in *Companion Encyclopedia to the History of Medicine*, vol. I, W.F. Bynum and R. Porter (eds), London: Routledge, 1993, p. 310.

the old-fashioned prescription, 'Wash you, make you clean; cease to do evil, learn to do well.'³⁴

It was not the *notion* of pollution that was contested by most anti-vaccination campaigners, rather the *nature* of that pollution and, in particular, where pollution was located. The biological model - as expressed through the discourses of evolution and public health - had become dominant, not in the sense that the hegemonies associated with it were unchallengeable, but rather that any position taken was articulated using its language.

One of the main beneficiaries of the status accorded to the biological discourse was the medical profession. Throughout the second half of the nineteenth century the institutions that made up the profession, the exclusivity of medical practice and the power invested in the individual 'medical man' grew and were consolidated. During the same period, the women's movement began. The relationship between these two was balanced between mutual suspicion and mutual need, an enmeshing that often hinged around the relations between women and knowledge.³⁵ Feminists pathologised ignorance in their campaigns around women's education and entry to the professions. At the same time they scorned what they saw as the medical profession's attempt to create 'a whole sex of Patients' on which to practise and its materialistic worldview.³⁶ Increasing specialisation within the medical profession at

³⁴ William White, *The Story of a Great Delusion*, p. 595.

³⁵ See Frank Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities: Medico-moral Politics in England Since 1830*, 2nd edn, London: Routledge, 2000.

³⁶ Frances Power Cobbe quoted in Ornella Moscucci, *The Science of Woman: Gynaecology and Gender in England 1800-1929*, Cambridge: Cambridge

the end of the century secured further its authoritative position. In particular, gynaecology was seen as the study of the whole woman, and therefore afforded the opportunity for knowledge of, not just the female reproductive organs, but 'woman' herself.

The study of the diseases centred in the sexual system of women is no more than the application of general pathology to this particular system. Any disease occurring in a woman will almost certainly involve some modifications in the work of her sexual system. On the other hand, the ordinary or disturbed work of her sexual system will influence the course of any disease which may assail her, however independent this disease may seem in its origin.³⁷

In the second half of the nineteenth century, with the primacy of the biological discourse established, women were seen to be even more firmly determined by their bodies. The 'economic' theory of the organisation of the body dominated medicine at this time. The body was seen as a closed system, with a finite supply of physical and mental energy. Exertion in one area, mental or physical, would inevitably deplete the supply of energy to other areas. Because, as shown above, a woman's health was seen to be overdetermined by the state of her reproductive organs, and more 'energy' therefore needed to be directed there, doctors warned that intellectual work would result in gynaecological problems and general physical weakness.³⁸ Henry Maudsley predicted menstrual problems and, in some cases,

University Press, 1990, p. 108.

³⁷ Robert Barnes in *A Dictionary of Medicine* (1882), quoted in *ibid.*, p. 103.

³⁸ See Sally Shuttleworth, 'Female Circulation: Medical Discourse and Popular Advertising in the Mid-Victorian Era', in Mary Jacobus, Evelyn Fox Keller and Sally Shuttleworth (eds) *Body/Politics: Women and the Discourses of Science*, New York: London, 1990; and Janet Oppenheim, 'Shattered Nerves': Doctors,

hysteria, epilepsy and chorea.³⁹ It is not surprising, then, that as a whole doctors continued to argue that women's different relationship with knowledge was a reason for keeping them out of the profession.

Despite the tensions between the medical profession and those critical of women's conventional roles in society, the various movements and campaigns that began to cohere into a women's movement in the 1860s and 1870s used the language of sickness and health. They saw society as an ill body and female emancipation as its cure, and focused much of their energy in the area of overlap between organic illnesses and moral sickness. The notion of cure in this movement for social change in the late nineteenth century, the way it was used to construct a coherent rhetoric, and how this in turn constructed a particular model of the female body, can be seen if we look in particular at the beliefs, tensions and contradictions around the place of sex.

The social purity rhetoric that dominated British feminism at the end of the nineteenth century had been carried into the women's movement from its early associations with the campaign against the Contagious Diseases Acts. The campaign had sustained itself, had gained support, credibility and, crucially, some kind of respectability, despite steering a treacherous course between competing and contrary discourses of contagion and knowledge. It is this that Ray Strachey,

Patients, and Depression in Victorian England, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991, Chapter 6.

³⁹ Henry Maudsley, 'Sex in Mind and in Education', *Fortnightly Review*, 21, 1874, pp. 466-83.

in *The Cause*, puts at the centre of her account of Josephine Butler's initial problems in finding support from her middle-class peers.

The two worlds [of middle-class women and women who were prostitutes] existed side by side, but the women of the one had no contact with the women of the other. Men could, and did, pass freely between them, but for women there was a great gulf fixed. If they were 'respectable' they might not even know of the existence of prostitutes, or of the problems which their existence created. For these victims of society had no claims upon and no relationship with the virtuous woman. It was contamination for her to touch them, or even to know of them, for they were outcast.⁴⁰

Knowledge and contagion - the problem for Butler and the early campaigners was how to make the former acceptable without incurring the latter. Strachey, in her explanation of conventional attitudes, links knowledge and touch. It is proximity of any kind, mental or physical, which is dangerous. Butler and her campaign were kept at arm's length even by women who 'knew'. The early campaigns to open various knowledges to women - the professions and higher education - came up against other types of knowledge and froze. Within the women's movement:

Practically all those who were working for education felt wholly unable to touch this new crusade at all...the majority felt obliged to leave this crusade alone....

There were other people from whom they might have hoped for support and from whom they did not get it, and these were the new women doctors who were just struggling into existence. Dr Elizabeth Blackwell was strongly opposed to the Acts, but most of the others took the official medical view and believed that, unpleasant as the Acts were, they were necessary for the health of the districts, and were effective as protection

⁴⁰ Ray Strachey, *The Cause: A Short History of the Women's Movement in Great Britain*, London: G. Bell & Sons, 1928, p. 189.

against contagion.⁴¹

The reluctance of these sections of the women's movement to align themselves to Butler's campaign is suggestive of the rhetorical construction around which they worked. The 'economic' model of female physiology was being challenged. Women's bodies were not closed systems containing finite amounts of energy. Women could interact and engage with all manner of things 'outside' without physical or psychological damage. However, as Strachey's account suggests, while some models of femininity were being challenged, others were rigorously adhered to.

The need for appearing at all times intensely solemn and conventional weighed heavily upon all these adventurous young women.... Elizabeth Garrett...worried over the way some of the other medical students dressed. 'I do wish the Ds. dressed better,' she wrote to Emily [Davies]. 'She looks so awfully strong-minded in walking dress...she has short petticoats and a close round hat and several dreadfully ugly arrangements.... It is abominable, and most damaging to the cause.'⁴²

If women were to be opened out to knowledge and experience through intellectual engagement, and yet were to remain respectable - recognisably 'women', with all that suggested - some other way was necessary to maintain this integrity. The social purity organisations set up and joined by women during the campaign against the Contagious Diseases Acts, and more particularly after their repeal, centred around a protest and an attempt to legislate against sexual acts which they

⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 197-8.

⁴² Ibid., p. 173.

saw as being solely for the gratification of men and resulting in harm to women - prostitution, rape, child abuse, incest, all types of sexual harassment in public. For many of the explicitly feminist members of these organisations, the violence of the sexual act was not limited to the above list of abuses, but was inherent in penetration. Elizabeth Wolstenholme Elmy's *Phases of Love* (1897), an evocation of the ideal relation between men and women, propounds 'psychic love' in order to free women from the 'degradation of her temple to solely animal uses'.⁴³ Wolstenholme Elmy's evolutionary, linear view of history sees a slow but gradual progress from the animal-like and barbaric attitudes of 'ancient times', where anything but a physical relation between men and women was impossible because women were little more than slaves, subject to men and numerous unwanted pregnancies, to what was 'in the world's present age, a swiftly advancing and ever loftier concept of the newer and higher faculty - the psychic emotion and impulse between two human beings'.⁴⁴ This development Wolstenholme Elmy sees as the result mainly of 'the growing emancipation and autonomy of woman - her fuller measure of intellectual culture and physical strength, of social status and individual freedom'.⁴⁵ Women's increased knowledge through access to experience and education is intimately linked to a recognition of their 'right of physical inviolability'.⁴⁶ As women struggled to open up their physical and psychical

⁴³ Quoted in Sheila Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies: Feminism and Sexuality 1880-1930*, London: Pandora Press, 1985, p. 32.

⁴⁴ Elizabeth C. Wolstenholme Elmy, 'From *Phases of Love* (1897)', *The Sexuality Debates*, Sheila Jeffreys (ed.), London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987, p. 343.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 344.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 350.

economies in one way, the integrity of the body was shored up in another.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, those with a feminist agenda tended to join those groups that campaigned primarily for the suffrage, while the social purity organisations began to express anxiety over the degeneration of the English 'race' and suggest eugenics as an appropriate solution. However, within the feminist movement, the language of bodily integrity, of illness and cure, of knowledge and ignorance continued to be used to express the possibilities and anxieties around personal and political change in the discourses of sex reform and social hygiene. The intensity of this debate can be seen in the articles and correspondence pages of *The Freewoman*, an individualist feminist weekly begun at the end of 1911. The explicit agenda of the journal was given in the first editorial. Publication, it said,

marks the point at which Feminism in England ceases to be impulsive and unaware of its own features, and becomes definitely self-conscious and introspective. For the first time, feminists themselves make the attempt to reflect the feminist movement in the mirror of thought....

Our interest is in the Freewoman herself, her Psychology, philosophy, morality, and achievements, and only in a secondary degree with her politics and economics.⁴⁷

Their interest, then, is in the 'mind' of women, that is that interior space whose boundary is marked by skin. What is 'outside' is only of interest as far as any interaction with it originates within 'the Freewoman'. The reaction to this on the correspondence pages of subsequent issues shows a battle for the meanings of sex,

⁴⁷ *The Freewoman*, London, 23 November 1911, p. 3.

knowledge, health and gender. One correspondent to the second issue writes that her impression of the journal

is that the editors and most of the contributors picture the average woman as an individual wallowing in sex-consciousness. This may be their unfortunate experience. As a medical woman, I am thankful to say it has not been mine.⁴⁸

Here the relationship between sex and knowledge is made safe by distinguishing between 'sex-consciousness' as knowledge, something that comes from within the individual body, that is carnal, as 'wallowing' suggests, and 'the medical' as knowledge, an external knowledge, essentially mental and abstract. 'The medical' for this writer makes knowledge clean and acceptable. The editors give a response. They believe her words show that she is

not yet free from the dark theory which holds that sex in itself is something degrading.... We are not surprised that our correspondent's experience as a doctor is not the same as ours. Of necessity her experience must have been among the sick and not among the strongly alive.⁴⁹

In retaliation, the editors reassign 'the medical', away from the clean, abstract and intellectual: first, to the bodies of the sick, and second, by implication, by using the phrase 'strongly alive' rather than the expected 'healthy', to the dead. An advert for 'A Book for Married Women - by Dr. Allison' that appears a couple of weeks later, and makes an almost weekly appearance during the run of the journal, states

⁴⁸ Ibid., 30 November 1911, p. 56.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

that 'The information contained in this book ought to be known by every married woman, and it will not harm the unmarried to read.'⁵⁰ This struggle around the appropriate sexual knowledge for women and its connection to health/illness is particularly explicit in the articles and correspondence on syphilis, *the* illness that was seen to link morality, relations between men and women, and mental and physical health. An article in January 1912 called 'The Unspeakable' struggles between seeing women's knowledge of venereal diseases and their effect as the beginning of cure, and being unable itself to articulate fully this knowledge. Throughout the piece the writer refers to the diseases and their consequences only as 'the unspeakable' and yet concludes that

for though men may blind themselves amongst themselves, not even self-dishonour can quite destroy their sense of honour towards the women they wish to marry when they know that women know.⁵¹

A letter a couple of weeks later again takes up this relation between women, knowledge and health, to rather different effect. Commenting on the frequency with which 'Uranians', syphilis and prostitution are discussed in the journal, topics the writer sees as the 'shady side' of sex, they go on:

If these are the subjects that attract Freewomen, then it must be admitted by sane observers that man in the past was exercising a sure instinct in keeping his spouse and girl children within the sheltered walls of ignorance....

[However] women will, whenever healthy, shrink from dwelling upon the

⁵⁰ Ibid., 28 December 1911, p. 119.

⁵¹ 'The Unspeakable', *The Freewoman*, 18 January 1912, p. 176.

abnormal facts of sex as they would shrink from the sight of wanton murder, or the kiss from a leper's lips.⁵²

What becomes clear, especially through the correspondence pages, is that the journal claims its right to frankness using this very rhetoric. It sees itself as providing for the first time 'the opportunity of studying sex, scientifically, cleanly, and "openly"'.⁵³ Although, through its concentration on the 'inside', its frankness, its acknowledgement of female pleasure, *The Freewoman* certainly occupies a very different position from the earlier social purity feminists, and indeed from the contemporary suffrage movement, the interaction between the individual woman and all that is not her was still a cause of anxiety. 'Human intimacy can only be psychic otherwise we are intimate with a chance individual crushed against us in a crowd'⁵⁴ - and yet another rhetoric of purity becomes necessary. What links both *The Freewoman* and the position of someone like Wolstenholme Elmy is a movement inwards, towards the psychological. Although they differ in their assessment of the dangers of the corporeal (and of the bodies of others in particular), for both the interior marks a safer place. For both, the language of mysticism is used to create the possibility of cure, purity, wholeness away from the problem of the body.

The place of women in the cluster knowledge/sex was deeply contested at the time. Does knowledge of sex make women healthy or ill? Does knowledge of

⁵² Ibid., 1 February 1912, p. 211.

⁵³ Ibid., Editorial note, 14 March 1912, p. 331.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 'A Plea for Psychology', 25 January 1912, p. 182.

paramount. Within this model, it is the link between two states, two bodies, two temporal moments, that is important. How can we be sure that 'in betweenness' will be the origin of cure rather than illness? In her study of contagion, *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas suggests that the unclean, the dirty and the diseased are those things upon whose rejection order depends. The creation of systems demands certain things be expelled.

In short, our pollution behaviour is the reaction which condemns any object or idea likely to confuse or contradict cherished classifications....

...if uncleanness is matter out of place, we must approach it through order. Uncleanness or dirt is that which must not be included if a pattern is to be maintained.⁵⁶

Secure boundaries between things are needed to banish the ambiguous and the anomalous: 'Pollution dangers strike when form has been attacked.'⁵⁷ Within the evolutionary model, it is in the places between that change, improvement and 'cure', or degeneration and pathology, takes place: between one generation and another, between one moment in time and another. So, for example, regarding the particular 'in betweenness' of sex, the two terms could be seen as the individual's healthy body and the possible pathologies that could inhabit it. In between these two, 'causing' the movement from one to the other, is either the presence or absence of sex. First, from the point of view of a feminist writer involved in the attempt to 'liberate' sex via the discoveries of, among others, Havelock Ellis and

⁵⁶ Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (1966), London: Routledge, 1996, pp. 37, 41.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

(experience of/desire for) sex make women nymphomaniacs, hysterics or 'the best wives and mothers'?⁵⁵ What possibilities are there for women to know, to have knowledge? For while they are on the side of sex, this does not mean women have knowledge of it; rather they *are* it. The contestation in *The Freewoman* seems to have been provoked by an attempt to fuse these things together, an attempt to allow women a knowledge of sex and a sex that includes knowledge.

Common to the New Woman novelist, to the social purity movement at the end of the nineteenth century, feminist or otherwise, and to the various strands of the women's movement at the beginning of the twentieth century, is the question of how to understand, investigate and control forces of causality and change. How does one thing lead to another, how can one make sure that change is advantageous and not regressive? How can change be controlled? The link between the possibilities of political and social change and the physiologically and psychologically normal or pathological took the particular form in the second half of the nineteenth century of Darwinism. The dynamic of change within evolutionary theory, the movement from one thing to the next thing that is slightly better, is at its most fundamental level based on the single organism. Evolutionary change takes a long time; but in order to happen at all, it must consist of tiny changes between one member of a species and its offspring in the next generation. When translated to the social sphere, and in particular once the possibility of regressive evolution, of degeneration, became an issue, then the link between the 'health' of the individual and the possibilities for a 'healthy' society became

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 181.

Edward Carpenter:

To healthy young adults, a certain amount of sexual intercourse is necessary in order to keep their bodies and minds in the best possible condition. The evil results of abstinence are especially noticeable in women, probably because abstinence is considerably less frequent among men. Undoubtedly it is unsatisfied sexual longing that is responsible for the greater part of the hysteria, chlorosis, and menstrual disorders which are common among young unmarried women.⁵⁸

'Undoubtedly', also, it is sex that inhabits the link between the individual body and pathology.

Revolted was the shock to the writer, coming, some years ago, with unprejudiced and ingenuous mind, to the study of the so-called 'Diseases of Woman', on finding that nearly the whole of these special 'diseases', including menstruation, were due, directly or collaterally, to one form or other of *masculine* excess or abuse.⁵⁹

The notion of 'in betweenness' is significant in each of the discourses of cure that I will use in my readings of Sinclair. Her writing challenges orthodox structures, those of literary form, gender, age, psychology and spirituality. It is very aware that 'all margins are dangerous',⁶⁰ and struggles with them as places of both potential improvement and potential collapse. At the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth, this marginal place is referred to in a number of rhetorical structures as the 'borderland'. In each discourse, metaphor, analogy and

⁵⁸ Lucy Steward, 'Free thought and free love', *The Adult*, September 1897, p. 41.

⁵⁹ Ellis Ethelmer [Mary Wolstenholme Elmy], *Woman Free*, 1897, quoted in Jeffreys, *The Spinster and Her Enemies*, p. 34; emphasis in original.

⁶⁰ Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, p. 122.

allusion, the leakage of terms from one place to another created a notional place between the 'healthy' body (and of course body politic) and the 'ill' one. Because the causal relation between the two was up for grabs, because the dynamic of change within that linking place was uncertain, it was a place that, as seen in the examples above, contained the origin of both illness and cure.

The first discourse is the medical, the focus of concern within which during the period was increasingly expressed through the idea of an in between.

In the twentieth century the diagram is rearranged. The medical gaze, which for over a century analysed the microscopic detail of the individual body, began to move to the undifferentiated space between bodies and there proceeded to forge a new political economy.... The new gaze...identified disease in the spaces between people, in the interstices of relationships, in the social body itself.... At the beginning of the twentieth century the 'social' was born as an autonomous realm.⁶¹

One aspect of this was the enormous increase in what could justifiably interest and call for the authority of the 'medical man'. All spaces became his appropriate domain; so while in one way this model saw in-betweenness as a place of pathology, its potential as a place of cure justified medical intervention. No area, it seems, was too remote to require the medical discourse inserting itself into the spaces between to effect cure. The *British Medical Journal*, in an editorial in 1922, commented on a report just published on the teaching of English. 'All medical men', the editorial insists, will agree that the teaching of English is of

⁶¹ David Armstrong, *Political Anatomy of the Body: Medical Knowledge in Britain in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, pp. 6, 8, 10.

primary importance. It goes on to state some reasons why, bringing out the most important with a flourish at the end. 'Pure English' can yield something richer than the practical gains the editorial has already outlined.

English has a literature which may be made a source of that mental health which is itself both the origin and the end of health of body. Happy indeed are those boys and girls who grow up in homes where that heritage is cherished, where the levity and perversity of the bastard jargon that has arisen in our great cities is avoided as something unclean and corrupting.⁶²

Language itself, that potentially unsettling betweenness, needed to be brought within the remit of the medical so that it can be designated cure rather than corruption. Of course, there was another side to this interventionary self-confidence. If the medical inserts itself into the places between in order to keep it healthy or effect cure, is it not possible that it could rather itself be infected, made uncertain, unstable, corrupt?

The notion of the in-between is useful in investigating the relationship between medicine and the next discourse which will be important in my reading of Sinclair - psychology. The relationship itself is a margin inducing anxiety, and so too is the whole realm of the psychic. Sufferers of neurasthenia in the late nineteenth century were seen by psychiatrists 'as borderers, denizens of Driftland and Mazeland'.⁶³

Using the image in a slightly different way, Freud's repeated explanation of the dynamic of psychoanalysis is that 'gaps unfilled, and riddles unanswered' need

⁶² 'The Mother Tongue', *The British Medical Journal*, 7 January 1922, p. 23.

⁶³ Elaine Showalter, *The Female Malady: Women, Madness and English Culture, 1830-1980*, London: Penguin, 1987, p. 136.

'clearing up', need to be 'cleared away'.⁶⁴ In the first decades of the twentieth century, psychoanalysis made possible a radical rethinking of the spaces between. Both Freud and Jung theorised the gap between origins and ends - trauma and symptom, symptom and cure, the infantile and the adult - and rethought the function of the analyst 'in between'. While Freud remained, not unproblematically, within the discourse of the medical, however, Jung's search for the secured in-between led to his rethinking of spirituality and mysticism. Chapters 2 and 3 read a number of works by Sinclair, fiction and non-fiction, through the knot of the medical, the psychological and the mystical.

The experience and consequences of the First World War traverse this thesis. The war shifted many systems and borders, metaphorical and otherwise. Issues of brokenness and cure are unsurprisingly central in contemporary attempts to understand the experiences of those four years. In particular, the image of the mentally or physically damaged male shifted expectations and securities associated with sexual difference. I argue in Chapter 4 that this forced a rethinking of particular narratives of cure and at the same time allowed an appropriation of images and tropes for the representation of femininity.

The ambiguous potential of intervention in the margins can be seen too in the pre-war work of the psychical researchers and in the revival of interest in Spiritualism during the First World War. This third structure of knowing and language, associated with Spiritualism and its successor/avenging angel, psychical research,

⁶⁴ Sigmund Freud, 'Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria' (1905), *Case Histories I*, Penguin Freud Library, vol. 8, London: Penguin, 1990, pp. 45, 73.

had at its centre the notion of an in-between known as the 'borderland'. A Spiritualist journal, called *Borderland*, was published between 1893-7. The phrase passed into less arcane usage - Virginia Woolf's 1918 review of *The Supernatural in English Fiction* was entitled 'Across the border'.⁶⁵ The spirit world, consisting as it did of a state somewhere between the living and the dead, was also described in other words and phrases of transition or liminality - 'crossing over' and 'medium'. Again, how did the tussle over the effect of the in-between - place of cure or place of pathology - work itself out in the rhetoric of immortality? Chapter 5, partly continuing to investigate the cultural implications of the war in Sinclair's work, sees in her work the narrative implications of death as cure.

In James' story 'The Beast in the Jungle', the possibility of a sexual relationship between Marcher and May is dismissed early on through an odd mixture of a nostalgic longing for outdated romantic tropes, acknowledging at the same time that they are outmoded, and the metaphorical use of a chivalric code - 'a man of feeling didn't cause himself to be accompanied by a lady on a tiger-hunt' - that could certainly be read as tendentious. The remainder of the story could be seen as an attempt to find something else with which to fill this space. Many of Sinclair's novels, from the first published onwards, have at their centre the same question. In 'A Friendly Critic', the idea of women as domestic medicine, as avatars of instinctive sympathy is wittily reworked within the contexts of the relation between men and women, art and life, knowledge and love. Brownrigg, an aspiring poet

⁶⁵ Virginia Woolf, 'Across the border', in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf Vol. 2 1912-1918*, ed. Andrew McNeillie, London: Hogarth Press, 1987. Original review in the *Times Literary Supplement*, 31 January 1918.

who is engaged to the cousin of his editor, falls in love with Leonora Campbell, a beautiful and cultivated woman. In her attempt to deflate his passion, she criticises his volume of poetry, which he has dedicated to her, in such a way as to make him believe she is no more than 'the average light reader'.⁶⁶ Brownrigg returns to his fiancée, Janie Morris, and her 'healing love and sympathy'.⁶⁷ The story ends with two marriages, between Brownrigg and Janie and between Miss Campbell and the editor. However, this is no conventional narrative resolution. The prospects for Brownrigg's happiness are debated with arch ambiguity. He has confused Fate with his own egotism, love with his desire for admiration, his poetry with his relationships with others. The story raises an eyebrow at the consequences of such mismanagement of the spaces between, and in particular works around a questioning of the relationship between knowledge and love for women. At the end of the story, the deep irony of the first lines becomes clear:

Leonora Campbell was not what you would call a clever woman; nevertheless in the temporary insanity of Ormond Brownrigg, it was she who brought the poor afflicted gentleman to reason.⁶⁸

In Sinclair's writing, then, these spaces, rather than having their emptiness, their disturbing potential veiled and screened, are offered up for investigation, analysis and explanation; they are opened up to be cured.

⁶⁶ May Sinclair (originally published anonymously), 'A Friendly Critic', *Macmillan's Magazine*, October 1896, p. 442.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 443.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 435.

Sinclair's first novel, *Audrey Craven* (1897), is a study of a young, wealthy, 'modern' woman as she looks for a narrative within which to live her life, a narrative which of course very soon resolves itself, Isabel Archer-like, into a question of whom she will marry. Near the beginning of the novel, Sinclair locates in her heroine a longing very similar to James' rhetoric of desire in 'The Beast in the Jungle':

Miss Audrey Craven was not in search of a religion, but she had passed all her life looking for a revelation. She had no idea of the precise form it was to take but had never wavered in her belief that it was there, waiting for her, as it were, round a dark corner.⁶⁹

While that 'as it were' screams James' influence, unlike 'The Beast in the Jungle', Sinclair's text makes the nature of this revelation clear. What Audrey longs for is the construction of an 'authentic personality', that is, a solid one, with secure boundaries and the necessary depth, through desire. When Ted Haviland, an artist to whom Audrey is engaged for a while, tells her that he loves her, we are told that 'The revelation had come.'⁷⁰ Of Audrey's three main suitors, it is Ted and Langley Wyndham, a writer, with whom she believes herself to be in love. Vincent Hardy, the would-be Tory squire, does not inspire love in his beloved until he is safely dead. Audrey interests the artist and the writer because, for them, she is every inch Swinnerton's 'eccentric woman' who is 'incalculable, material for endless...fascinating speculation': 'Whether Audrey did or did not understand

⁶⁹ May Sinclair, *Audrey Craven*, London and Edinburgh: William Blackwood & Sons, 1897, p. 8.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

herself, she was a mystery to all about her.⁷¹ While Audrey may be a mystery to those around her, she is not to the narrator and is not, therefore, to the reader. Indeed, she cannot possibly be a mystery because she is utterly without depth. It is made very clear that there is nothing to her but surface. Audrey is attracted to both Ted and Wyndham because they both have the ability to create her, to secure her 'personality', a word that Sinclair uses over and over in this novel. During her aesthetic period Audrey asks Ted to rearrange her drawing room as she wants to be 'surrounded by beautiful things'. 'I want my room to express my character, to be a bit of myself. So give me some ideas.'⁷² While it is Ted's role to create an appropriate surface, Audrey attaches herself to Wyndham so that she can be sure of her interior life. As she walks over Westminster Bridge with him:

She was saying to herself that Langley Wyndham had read her, and - well, she hardly thought he would take the trouble to read anything that was not interesting.⁷³

Sinclair's narrative, then, uncovers the spaces between the characters, it opens them up for scrutiny rather than cultivating their mystery. At this point, however, the discourses of cure discussed above seem not to be available to her. The spaces are opened up, but the method of cure has not yet been found. The narrator tells us that 'In our modern mythology, Custom, Circumstance, and Heredity are the three

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 25.

⁷² Ibid., p. 61.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 148.

Fates that weave the web of human life'.⁷⁴ Yet none of these 'fates' are used to account for Audrey. This statement comes in the context of a fairly standard analysis of decadence and degeneration put into the mouth of Vincent Hardy, a character for whom, at this point in the narrative, readerly sympathy has not yet been called. Vincent does not wholly agree with the 'modern mythology' as he 'had too profound a respect for his own pedigree to lay his sins at his great-grandfather's door'.⁷⁵ What he does believe, however, is that English 'civilisation' is 'top-heavy' and eventually 'its fall will sweep us all back into barbarism again. Then, when we are forced back into natural conditions, the new race will be born'.⁷⁶ Although these theories of Vincent's are not explicitly criticised in the novel, the dramatic focus of the plot suggests that Sinclair locates the possibilities of change, of cure, elsewhere: 'The Individual is not his heritage. His heritage is his.'⁷⁷ For Sinclair, the process of individuation has to be made central, and implicit in this is a negotiation of the individual's boundaries.⁷⁸

When Audrey first meets Ted Haviland and his sister, Katherine, she inspects one of Ted's paintings. It is a picture of two people exchanging souls in the presence of Eros. Ted has called the painting *Metempsychosis*. Audrey's response, amusing as

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 12.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 13.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 11.

⁷⁷ May Sinclair, *A Defence of Idealism*, London: Macmillan, 1917, p. 41.

⁷⁸ See Susanne Stark, 'Overcoming Butlerian Obstacles: May Sinclair and the Problem of Biological Determinism', *Women's Studies*, 21 (3), 1992, pp. 265-83.

it is supposed to be, reveals a complex of issues that structure both this novel and Sinclair's future work.

'It makes me feel quite creepy. But I'm sure I never *could* lose my sense of personal identity. My individuality is too strong - or something. And then, what *has* Love got to do with it? What does it all mean?'⁷⁹

Within the model of cure outlined above, entering the spaces between with love as the only method of cure means the danger of contagion. Love demands a dialogue, it demands the breaking down of boundaries that delineate the individual. While it can cure and resolve (character, plot and text), it is difficult to control. For it to work properly, the subject must rather give herself up to its control. Tension around this, I would argue, accounts for the tone of the novel and its peculiar ruptures. The novel is a comedy, and Audrey's superficiality, ignorance and selfishness are material for the narrator's wry humour which maintains a safe distance between reader and character. However, the part of the plot that involves Langley Wyndham rather undermines this safety and reveals the dangerous dynamics of proximity, contagion and cure.

Audrey's friendship with Wyndham is part of the reason for her breaking off her relationship with Ted. Katherine, Ted's sister, is soon aware of the change in Audrey: 'Her mind was swayed by a fresh current of ideas; it had suffered the invasion of a foreign personality.'⁸⁰ For his part, we are told that Wyndham has

⁷⁹ Sinclair, *Audrey Craven*, p. 41.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 158.

been interested in Audrey from his first sighting of her at the party that opens the novel. He is fascinated by her, not as an example of an eccentric woman, but as the possible object of an experiment. After he has broken off his friendship with Audrey by marrying his previous fiancée, Wyndham brings out a novel, judged to be his masterpiece, using Audrey as his material. This thread of the plot is central in understanding the rest of the novel. The opening line of the novel, temporally of the same moment as the end of the novel, giving the reader knowledge of its dramatic climax before we go back to see the order of events which led up to it, tells us: 'Everybody knew that Miss Audrey Craven was the original of "Laura", the heroine of Langley Wyndham's masterpiece.'⁸¹ What is suggested by this line at this point in the narrative is, I think, a dynamic much more in keeping with Swinnerton's pre-Freudian 'romantic' explanations. Romantic in the sense of adhering to specific generic conventions - suggested by 'heroine' - and romantic too, I think, in a more vernacular way. Langley Wyndham has called his heroine 'Laura', the original idealised beloved to be represented in writing. What the first line of *Audrey Craven* suggests is the reconstruction of a woman through writing motivated by love. Once Wyndham comes back into Audrey's life, following the opening party, what is set up is an opposition between the methods of love and those with which Wyndham chooses to construct his characters.

His literary conscience allowed nothing to take the place of the experimental method, the careful observation, and arranging of minute facts, intimate analytical study from the life. No action was too small, no emotion too insignificant, for his uncompromising realism.... What he really

⁸¹ Ibid., p. 1.

prided himself on was his knowledge of other people, especially women.⁸²

On Wyndham Sinclair focuses the complex of interactions around proximity, love, relations between men and women, illness, knowledge, creation and cure. When Audrey has eventually fallen in love with him, he tells her he cannot possibly marry her, but suggests, in extremely veiled terms, that she be his mistress. He leaves her to think about it for a few weeks. Wyndham wishes to see how Audrey, his material for the type 'flirtatious woman', will respond to this challenge to her respectability. The chapter ends with Wyndham's self-justification, salving a conscience slightly troubled by his commitment 'to experimentalise in cold blood'.⁸³

What matter, then, if he now and then looked into some girl's expressive face, and found out the secret she thought she was hiding so cleverly from everybody, - if he knew the sources of So-and-so's mysterious illness, which had puzzled the doctors so long? And what if he had obtained something more than a passing glimpse into the nature of the woman who had trusted him? It would have been base, impossible, in any other man, of course: the impersonal point of view, you see, made all the difference.⁸⁴

The suggestion is that the lack of sympathy and desire, the lack of love, makes safe Wyndham's penetration beyond the boundaries of someone else. And indeed the mutual exclusivity of love and knowledge as motivations for crossing the spaces between is iterated in the account of the novelist's broken engagement. During his

⁸² Ibid., p. 135.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 140.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 264-5.

engagement,

he found that love made understanding impossible. He never wanted to understand her.... To have pulled her to pieces, even with a view to reconstruction, would have been a profanation of her and of his love.⁸⁵

Wyndham cannot love and understand a woman at the same moment. As a novelist his gaze can be more penetrating than that of medical men, can pick out and isolate symptoms, causes, motivations, can bring them back together again in the curative wholeness that is the 'masterly' novel. The impulse to understand is impossible as a lover; for the lover to continue loving, the figure of the beloved must be kept intact. The integrity of the body of the beloved (its being sealed off to all but the lover) is a precondition for love. Alison Fraser, Wyndham's fiancée, breaks off the engagement when 'a detail of Wyndham's past life had come to [her] knowledge'.⁸⁶ The question of whether a lover's previous sexual experience must destroy any current love is asked again and again in Sinclair's novels. The issue does not become central to a narrative until *The Helpmate* (1907);⁸⁷ in *Audrey Craven* it is one of a number of markers of the dynamics of the spaces between, of the construction of the individual identity.

Neither Audrey nor Wyndham is 'punished' by the narrative. Each ends the novel ultimately resolved - married to other people. The narrator's irony keeps plot and

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 136.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 137.

⁸⁷ May Sinclair, *The Helpmate*, New York: Henry Holt, 1907; London: Hutchinson, 1912.

characters at a distance. The fate of each character is a consequence of their own character and actions, not of narrative intervention. Proximity is dangerous. Wyndham's privileging of impersonal knowledge loses him the respect of the only critic whose opinion matters to him; Vincent Hardy dies because he is in love with Audrey. However, without proximity of some kind there can be no cure. The instability generated by this is revealed several times in the text. At the end of the chapter which tells of Wyndham's history and his methods as a novelist, the narrative voice sums up the fictional novelist's attitude to Audrey Craven.

Her whole person, which at first sight had impressed him with its emphatic individuality, now struck him as characterless and conventional. And yet - what was she like?... She was a looking-glass for other people's personalities (he hated the horrid word, and apologised to himself for using it), formless and colourless, reflecting form and colour.... [M]aking a mental note of several of the above phrases for future use, Wyndham knocked the ashes out of his pipe and went to bed, where he dreamed that the Devil, in evening dress, was presenting him with Audrey's soul - done up in a brown paper wrapper marked 'MS. only' - for dissection.⁸⁸

In this passage the boundaries between character, novelist, narrative voice and reader become dangerously thin. If Audrey is 'characterless and conventional', whose fault is that? To whom do those 'above phrases', none of which are made safe by quotation marks, really belong? Who is the devil who can do as they like with Audrey's soul? And, the most tempting for 'fascinating speculation', for what does 'MS' stand? Manuscript? May Sinclair? If Audrey is given to Wyndham by the devil to be 'read', what does that mean for us, engaged at that moment as we are in reading *Audrey Craven*? This moment of anxiety around the dangerousness

⁸⁸ Ibid., pp. 139-40.

of writing is quickly passed, and for the most part all kinds of safe distances are kept by the cool and controlling narrative voice. This precludes readerly sympathy for the characters - we understand but do not love them. However, again at the very end of the novel, it is as though the moment of final resolution, the moment of final (textual) cure, the text again becomes uncertain. In speculating on Audrey's future, the narrative voice returns to the question of her 'revelation', and to the opposition between knowledge and love. At this end point, however, the narrator's, and therefore the reader's, knowledge is deferred, is allowed no more than 'perhaps' and 'maybe'.

More likely than not her revelation came when she was least looking for it, stumbling by the merest accident on one of the 'great things of life,' the eternal, the incomprehensible; for of these some say that the greatest is love. It is certainly the most incomprehensible. She may have loved Mr. Jackson. If she did not, she has never let him know it.⁸⁹

Audrey Craven is unable to resolve the tensions between understanding and love.

Audrey Craven does, however, contain one suggestion of a possible resolution. Katherine Haviland is a minor character in terms of the central who-will-Audrey-marry plot. She is Ted's sister and, like him, is an artist. Before the novel opens she has sacrificed her own artistic integrity, her own sense of what her work should be, to her belief in her brother's genius. She takes on 'pot-boilers', dreary work that will earn them money, so that he can concentrate on his vocation. Katherine is dedicated to her work, and dedicated to maintaining her household. She is a foil to

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 312.

Audrey's superficial 'feminine' beauty. However, near the end of the novel, Katherine falls in love with Vincent Hardy, Audrey's first suitor, while nursing him.

Katherine was hardly aware how far her strength had lain in the absence of temptation to any feminine weakness. Hitherto she had seen her object always in a clear untroubled air, and her work had gained something of her life's austere and passionless serenity. Now that was all different...⁹⁰

As she paints Vincent's portrait - the best work, we are told, that she has ever done - Katherine realises 'that for her what women call love had meant knowledge'.⁹¹ Sinclair suggests that, despite that fact that her love is unrequited, and that she has to watch Vincent fade and die because of Audrey, the dilemma of how to be artist and woman is solved, of how to experience both love and knowledge, is cured, for Katherine through her love. Of course, this small moment of resolution is possible not despite but because of Katherine's loss of Vincent. Katherine ends the novel a more resolved person for having loved, a better artist, and with her independence and integrity intact; cured by love but not hampered by the beloved.

⁹⁰ Ibid., pp. 308-9.

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 312.

Chapter 2

'Very nearly medical'

Contagion, distance and writing

Audrey Craven is about the different relations possible between knowledge and love. Her representation of this not only differentiates Sinclair's work from that of her 'master', James, but the questions she asks through it remain at the centre of her work for the rest of her career. This chapter will use one set of knowledges, tropes and models, the medical, in order to understand the importance of this in Sinclair's work. I will look at its contemporary assumptions and tensions, and use these to read Sinclair's use of the medical world and as a way of understanding her more general narrative concerns and practices.

In his critical round up of 1935, *The Georgian Literary Scene: 1910-1935*,¹ Frank Swinnerton's final comments on May Sinclair's *Life and Death of Harriett Freaan* (1922) are the following:

It skimmed the cream, as it were, of a life; there were no redundancies, no comments, only such selected details as contributed to our calm knowledge of the way things happened to one ordinary woman. For that reason, its brief simplicity, 'The Life and Death of Harriett Freaan' is worthy of remembrance. It is very nearly medical.²

¹ Frank Swinnerton, *The Georgian Literary Scene: 1910-1935, A Panorama*, London: Hutchinson, 1935.

² *Ibid.*, p. 307.

What does it mean when a piece of writing belonging to one discourse is described in terms of another? Clearly it means enough to make it unnecessary for Swinnerton to explain his epithet. It sits at the end of this paragraph, closing it off as a clear conclusion - a sort of 'enough said'. And like any tight-lipped 'enough said', it suggests that there is very much more which could be said. It is, therefore, a deeply ambiguous summation. Swinnerton's descriptions of *Harriett Frean* in the preceding paragraph are all positive: 'genuine advance', 'significant', 'no redundancies'. The 'medical' for most people suggests a place that is powerful but distasteful, a skill and practice to be admired from a distance, where proximity to one's self generates fear. Is Swinnerton suggesting that Sinclair's novel is something that should be admired from a distance to avoid catching anything nasty, as hospitals and doctors should be avoided if you want to avoid getting ill.³

Swinnerton's 'very nearly medical' suggests another description which marks a slippage from one genre to another. Particularly explicit pornography is 'almost gynaecological'. That this phrase is used to mark a slippage suggests both an excess and a loss. It should not be possible for something - in this case the female genitals - to be an object both of scientific interest and of desire. As an image slips from the erotic/pornographic to the medical it seems that what is lost through repression is

³ See Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic* (1963), trans. A.M. Sheridan, London: Routledge, 1986, p. 17 on hospitals as the places where 'pure' diseases mutate into complex and 'impure'.

the affect of desire. Gynaecology was the first surgical speciality,⁴ and much energy was expended initially in keeping it clean, clear of any taint of sexual desire. In particular the idea of touching a woman was deeply problematic and contested, as seen by the fierce debates surrounding those surgical instruments which penetrated the vagina - the forceps and the speculum. By using these tools, the space between the doctor and the patient, or that very particular part of the patient, is filled up and made safe by something which is not the doctor, which can be sterilised. The possession of these instruments defines the self at the controlling end of them as *doctor* rather than *man*. Further, what fills and makes safe the space between doctor and patient is (the doctor's) increase in knowledge at the very moment of examination. This increase, and its aid to correct diagnosis, was the main advantage put forward for the use of the speculum.⁵ The danger of proximity, and the affects that may be caused by it, are nullified by cold, sterilised not-flesh, by the efficacy of the gaze rather than the danger of touch. The medical is strenuous in its attempts to rid itself of the charge of desire. Yet these attempts draw attention to the very thing that is being disavowed.

While affect is lost in the slip from the erotic to the gynaecological, what is gained, what is in excess, is knowledge. The epithet 'almost gynaecological' is given to

⁴ Phillip Rhodes, *An Outline History of Medicine*, London: Butterworths, 1985, p. 106.

⁵ See Ornella Moscucci, *The Science of Woman: Gynaecology and Gender in England 1800-1929*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, pp. 112-27.

pornographic images of women's genitals that are especially explicit; images that, literally, 'leave nothing to the imagination'. But what they do leave is the possibility of empirical knowledge, a gaze that is surgical in its precision and revelation. The very relentless nature of scientific knowledge, however, tips gynaecology back again into the realm of the erotic. Ludmilla Jordanova suggests that medicine is allied with privacy, 'a quality which is accentuated when we come to those parts of it that deal with sexual difference, especially when pictures are involved'.⁶ So the circulation of images of and information on gynaecological practice goes underground, slips out of the public domain, is passed between those few men 'in the know'. In the dangerous area of proximity to other bodies, and specifically women's bodies, the spaces between one thing and another (science and desire, doctor and patient, voyeur and object) and the boundaries which differentiate them must be strenuously defined and maintained. And yet, nevertheless, this very definition can send us sliding back to the other place.

This diversion into pornography and gynaecology is useful in a further reading of Swinnerton's reading of May Sinclair. In the comparison made between James and the 'post-Freudian' novelists discussed in Chapter 1, Swinnerton distinguishes between their approaches in terms of an engagement with the romantic, with mystery, or with the medical. And discussed above, both lack and excess mark

⁶ Ludmilla Jordanova, *Sexual Visions: Images of Gender in Science and Medicine Between the Eighteenth and Twentieth Centuries*, London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989, p. 136.

places of anxiety. The affects associated with 'fascinating speculation', an uneasy bewitching through the act of looking, Swinnerton is anxious to make clear, are acceptable only for James the novelist. He removes the fascination from the eyes of James the man, and places it instead in the words of the novel. Conversely, the lack of romance, of mystery, the excess of knowledge contained in the 'professional vocabulary' leads to the language of disease. In order to stem anxiety, there are only two choices for the 'eccentric' woman - to be incalculable, hidden by desire, or exposed through the tools of medicine and therefore pathologised.

I want to suggest that, not only is James' method not quite as 'romantic' as Swinnerton would like us to believe, but that the practice he labels 'medical' is not quite so sure and certain, so clean and up front as he imagines. What these labels attempt to cover and disavow, and at the same time reveal, is an anxiety over the spaces between - Douglas' 'dangerous margins' discussed in Chapter 1. If a space is neither one thing nor another, neither properly literature nor properly medicine, if it is not sufficiently contained and controlled, it becomes a place of danger and contagion. If proximity is dangerous and the spaces between are potential sources of contagion, how do we keep safe, well defined, healthy? How do we maintain the boundaries of our self, the intact surfaces of the body? I want to suggest three ways, which are clearly linked: the rigid distinction between self and not self; the reinforcement of surfaces; the projection of danger onto an identifiable and controllable other. This work of maintenance is never ending, it is contradictory

and, as we have seen, constantly slips into the spaces in between and takes on, becomes, the identity of the other. One of the things that creates the incessant need for this maintenance is love. Because it is a fundamental identification with another, love breaks down barriers and traverses surfaces. It is profoundly desired by the individual, yet it threatens infection, slippage and dissolution. Gaps and spaces are frightening. We want to fill them with love, with affect, with the touch of another. In so doing we expose ourselves to contagion, to disease. These desires and fears follow each other around and around, impossible to pick apart.

In this chapter I want to trace these anxieties around health and disease, the body and its affects, and their importance in Sinclair's writing. From considering Swinnerton's consideration of a novel as medical, I will go on to look at medical writing which tries strenuously to keep itself within its own body, its own genre. The novel and the case history have a similar origin at the end of the eighteenth century in the creation of the individual body as the object of and reason for technologies of detailed study.⁷ For both, the genre itself is defined by the limits of the individual identity or body, and each is therefore interesting in its negotiation of spaces and boundaries. The case studies I want to examine seem concerned in particular with the filling up of spaces. However, as suggested above, this filling up is at once a denial of these very spaces and an acknowledgement and maintenance

⁷ David Armstrong, *Political Anatomy of the Body: Medical Knowledge in Britain in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, p. 4. See also Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic*, especially Chapter 1.

of them - a space can only be filled in once its existence is granted. What these case studies seem to be doing is denying the possibility of something else, of alternatives, of others.

In a kind of loop, I will move from a literature that is slipping towards the medical, to a medical which is rigid with the effort to maintain its shape, and then on to a medical which cannot help itself in its slip toward the literary. In *Studies on Hysteria* Freud and Breuer are embarrassed by the tendency of their case histories to turn into short stories. It is a dis-ease that stayed with Freud,⁸ and no wonder; the lack of distinction between one thing and another, the substitution of one thing for another, becomes fundamental to the definition of hysteria. So the doctor pushes responsibility back on to the object, the body of the hysterical woman:

it still strikes me myself as strange that the case histories I write should read like short stories and that, as one might say, they lack the serious stamp of science. I must console myself with the reflection that the nature of the subject is evidently responsible for this, rather than any preference of my own.⁹

In this narrative of the birth of psychoanalysis, as it emerges shaky and unable as yet

⁸ See his disavowal of the possibility of reading 'Dora' as a roman à clef, 'Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria' (1905), *Case Histories I*, Penguin Freud Library, vol. 8, London: Penguin, 1990, p. 37.

⁹ Sigmund Freud and Joseph Breuer, 'Fräulein Elisabeth von R. (Freud)' (1895), *Studies on Hysteria*, Pelican Freud Library, vol. 3, Harmondsworth: Pelican Books, 1974, p. 231.

to cut the umbilical cord linking it with medicine, it is interesting to see how it negotiates spaces and boundaries, and in particular to look at how it deals with the crossing of boundaries in its definitions of both illness and cure, and the relative roles played by language and touch.

The division of language from the curative properties of touch worried May Sinclair throughout her account of three weeks with an ambulance corps in Belgium at the end of 1914. In her *A Journal of Impressions in Belgium*,¹⁰ she sets up a tension between writing and nursing and, in the places and spaces of war and illness, where the order of things breaks down and nothing is as it should be (the hospital where she works is in fact a hotel), she explores the possibility of a resolution.

And so back to *Harriett Frean*. Swinnerton suggests that the reader gains a 'calm knowledge' from the novel, and I want to end with an exploration of the idea of 'calm knowledge' via a reading of the spaces in and around *Harriett Frean*; the spaces between the characters, between the narrator and the novel, and between the reader and the novel.

David Armstrong has suggested that medical discourse at the beginning of the twentieth century was primarily concerned with policing the spaces between bodies; not only in terms of their environment, but also the spaces between constituted by

¹⁰ May Sinclair, *A Journal of Impressions in Belgium*, London: Hutchinson, 1915.

heredity.¹¹ Armstrong's argument, based closely on Foucauldian theorisation and methodology, is that, while late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century medical technologies created the individual body and proceeded to locate and localise disease within it through developments in surgery and anatomy, by the twentieth century the power which exists through the detailed accumulation of knowledge had expanded to take in those who were only 'potentially ill'. And this was made possible through a pathologising of the spaces between - if these are infected then, however 'clean' an individual body is, it needs as much care and attention to keep it safe as does a body already ill. Armstrong goes on to suggest that one of the main tools of this power was the surge of preventative medicine, much of which was focused on infants and children. In 1910 it became law that only qualified midwives could attend at births; in 1915 it became compulsory to notify the state of all births: 'the child, from its very moment of entry into the world, became an object of medical interest, for the first time a visible body with its own individual record.'¹²

However, in reading the main case study below, published in the *British Medical Journal* in 1922, I want to suggest that Armstrong's thesis is limited by lack of gender specificity. Medical interest did turn from the individual (male) body, but one of the spaces where disease lurked, and which needed filling with medical

¹¹ Armstrong, *Political Anatomy of the Body*, pp. 6, 8; see also Frank Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities: Medico-moral Politics in England Since 1830*, 2nd edn, London: Routledge, 2000, p. 129.

¹² Armstrong, *Political Anatomy of the Body*, p. 15.

knowledge while at the same time being kept at a safe distance, was the female body. A focus on the discomfort generated by sexual difference in this case study will open up the concerns and manoeuvres of Sinclair's works later on in the chapter.

The case studies published in the *BMJ* at this time tend to be very short, and indeed present themselves as spaces which need filling with medical knowledge. The criterion for publication seems to be the unique, the baffling, indeed the 'incalculable' which invites 'fascinating speculation'. While, as published, the spaces implicit in the studies have yet to be filled by knowledge in this genre, the very act of writing fixes and contains the danger. The style of the studies limits very definitely the scope of what is worth knowing, and writing takes the place of more prolonged intervention in the places of contagion. So, in one case study on 'Duodenal ulcer in a newborn infant' the doctor ends:

I was fortunately able to get the consent of the father for a post-mortem examination... I unfortunately did not preserve the specimen, as at the time of the post-mortem examination I did not think of publishing the case.¹³

The fortunately/unfortunately construction suggests an analogy between the intervention of a doctor aimed at diagnosis (post-mortem, admittedly) and that of the writer. The two actions (carrying out a post-mortem and writing up the case

¹³ 'Duodenal ulcer in a newborn infant', *British Medical Journal*, 18 February 1922, p. 311.

study) are made analogous through the rhetorical construction.

In order to look at a case study in some depth, I reproduce it here in full:

At 3 a.m. on January 26th, 1922, I was called to see F.T, a man aged 38, and found him propped up in bed, unconscious. The history was that he had never had any serious illness, but that for the last three days he had suffered from a cold, for which he did not go to bed or give up at all as his wife was expecting to be confined. He had gone to sleep as usual the previous evening; on waking at 2 a.m. his wife found his face and chest wet with cold sweat, and he did not answer when she spoke to him. He seemed to be choking; with the help of friends he was raised to a sitting position in bed, which eased the breathing. When I saw him his limbs were rigid, the arms were flexed at the elbow, and the fingers bent into the palms of the hands. The pupils were equal and slightly dilated, the eyeballs rolling upwards on raising the upper eyelid. There was slight gritting of the teeth, but the tongue was not bitten; respirations were slow but not stertorous, and the face was cyanosed; the temperature was normal. He remained in this condition for four hours, when the rigidity gradually passed off and consciousness returned. At 10 a.m. the only sign of meningeal irritation - supposing that to be the pathological factor - was a certain amount of slowness in speech and perception. There was no paralysis, and recovery was rapid and complete.

Incidentally the shock caused his wife to be so deaf for a time that she did not hear unless spoken to very loudly, but this condition passed off in six hours. After the shock she received at 2 a.m. she found no more signs of life in the foetus *in utero* and on January 29th was delivered of a full-grown child which had every appearance of having been dead for a few days.¹⁴

The case study reproduced above sits uneasily within the genre, and its strangeness reveals some of the genre's tensions, some of the anxieties around medical practice at the time. Its uneasiness increases as it moves into the area where the body's

¹⁴ 'Influenza (?) accompanied by convulsion', *BMJ*, 11 February 1922, p. 226.

surfaces and boundaries are made insecure by the workings of the mind. In the 1920s psychology was included in general medical training for the first time, and the blurring between madness and sanity was gradually accepted by the profession. So, in 1928, a *BMJ* editorial could state that 'It is now universally admitted that a large part of every doctor's practice consists of minor conditions of a "functional" nature.'¹⁵

In the genre of the case study, the focus is on a single body. Indeed, the word 'case', used in a variety of combinations to suggest a particular way of gaining knowledge (case study, case history, case work), resonates with notions of singleness, the unique, the contained and bounded. Dictionary definitions speak of: 'a single instance, occurrence, or example of something'; 'a specific condition or state of affairs'; 'a container, such as a box or chest'; 'a receptacle and its contents'.¹⁶ Given this, a useful way into exploring the issues thrown up by this case study is to ask: Who is its subject? Of course nominally it is the man with the unspecified illness. However, the majority of case studies in the *BMJ* end with death. And if death is going to be the denouement, it is usually very clear who will die. In our case study, of course, someone does die, but it is not the nominal subject. The death comes in the final paragraph, as is usual, but the final paragraph in this study is an unexpected extra, an add on, and its inclusion shifts and makes slippery the boundaries of the

¹⁵ Quoted in Armstrong, *Political Anatomy of the Body*, p. 23.

¹⁶ Definitions taken from *Collins English Dictionary*, London and Glasgow: Collins, 1979.

The cause of the later, more serious illness, which is the nominal subject of the study, is projected onto the body of the woman, and more specifically onto her pregnant body, which is, of course, the sign of a mingling of the two bodies of the parents. According to this logic, a breakdown of the barriers between self and other is the root of the illnesses in the study. Indeed, if this analogy is followed through, the reproductive organs of a woman, and their produce in the form of a child, is pathologised per se. The place of contagion, of pathology, is indeed a space, a gap - that 'space' embedded in the middle of a woman. A huge number of the case studies in the *BMJ* of 1922 concern themselves with pregnancy and childbirth. The position of the narrator in these pieces is indeed the same as that of the viewer of those 'almost gynaecological' pornographic images. It is as though it is only safe to admit the genitals of women into medical discourse when they are filled with something else - a multiple birth, a deformed foetus, a malignant growth, and baby *and* a malignant growth.¹⁷

Consideration of these issues is at heart of the genre's tension. It does not have the space for more than one subject because it cannot deal with affective relations, except as causes for disease. An article in a later issue of the *BMJ* in the same year on 'Pernicious vomiting of pregnancy' offers the following advice:

The patient is admitted to a hospital or nursing home and put on an

¹⁷ See 'Labour complicated by malignant growth', *BMJ*, 14 January 1922, p. 57.

genre. The subject(s) of the final paragraph are introduced as 'incidental', but this undermining of their importance is cut across by what is narrated. Not only does the death occur here, the death that is in some ways demanded by the genre, but a multiplication of pathology is described. The illness of the man is somehow passed on to two others, to his wife and in turn on to their child. The possibility of an uncontrollable spawning of illness (to the child and its children?) is contained by death, and at the same time by the end of the piece of writing. If we look at the case study from its end rather than its beginning, and the woman and child become its subjects, we can see how dangerously close the writer comes to a complete collapse of the structural order of the genre. Multiple subjects force their way in, one of whom is placed outside the ordering narrative of the medical discourse (she cannot hear any possible story of her husband's illness), and the other is born after its own death.

There is another sense, too, in which the admission of the final paragraph threatens the normality of the preceding ones. The study attempts little speculation on the cause or origin of the various illnesses, but embedded in its middle we find the following:

The history was that he had never had any serious illness, but that for the last three days he had suffered from a cold, for which he did not go to bed or give up at all as his wife was expecting to be confined.

ordinary diet at once.... Hospital and other cases do much better when they are in a ward than in a separate room.

It may seem strange to you, but the patients are sometimes reluctant to go to a hospital or nursing home.¹⁸

Along with the other advice contained in the article (for example, that the patient, once in hospital, should not be given anything to be sick into on the assumption that she will then be too ashamed to be sick at all), implicit in the above is the notion that close proximity to those with whom the patient has affective relations has a pathological rather than a curative effect.

As well as the triadic affective relationship of the man, woman and unborn child, the case study contains the possibility of other sites for/of contagion - the doctor and the reader. Again the 'incidental' paragraph at the end of the study sets in motion slippages around the supposedly secure identities of each. What interests me here is how easily a lay reading of the study can shift its centre of meaning, how tightly the 'medical man' had to keep his knowledge confined to other medical men in order to secure its status as 'calm knowledge'. This attempt at keeping possession of knowledge seems to be double-edged; on the one hand, as Armstrong suggests, an expansion in what is deemed appropriate 'medical knowledge', and on the other, once these areas are defined, a jealous guarding against interlopers. An issue of the *BMJ* from February 1922 contains an editorial on the last volume of *The*

¹⁸ 'Pernicious vomiting of pregnancy', *BMJ*, 20 May 1922, p. 789.

To the medical man the concluding volume, like all its predecessors, offers many articles of interest.... There is something...of medicine in the articles on suggestion, suicide, sun, moon, and stars, Swedenborg, tabu, the Tati bushman, tatuing, teeth, temperament, temperance, the Tlingit, the Tongans, Tonking, transmigration, the Tungus, unction, vampire, Vancouver Island Indians, water, will, the Yakut, yawning, and the Yogis (and their hypnotic devices). *Wherever the volume is opened something of interest is to be found.*¹⁹

Lay books can be claimed in toto as the province of the doctor, whereas medical books written for lay people are scrutinised for any hint of coming too close to the territory of the 'medical man'. So, from a review in *The Lancet* of a book entitled *Mother and Baby*, in 1913:

The wording is simple and clear, and should be easily understood, even by mother. *It is very rare to find a book of this kind which does not trespass more or less upon the prerogatives of the physician.*²⁰

The purest condemnation is reserved, however, for illegal readers of medical knowledge itself. At one point in his infamous letter to *The Times* in 1912 on the pathology of the militant suffragettes, Sir Almroth Wright turns his attention to that oxymoron, the medical woman.²¹

¹⁹ 'Editorial', *BMJ*, 11 February 1922, p. 240; emphasis mine.

²⁰ Book reviews of 'Miscellaneous volumes', *The Lancet*, 11 January 1913, p. 108; emphasis mine.

²¹ For a more detailed discussion of this letter, see Chapter 4.

And I may add in connection with my own profession that when a medical man asks that he should not be the yoke-fellow of a medical woman he does so because he would wish to keep up as between men and women - even when they are doctors - some of the modesties and reticences upon which our civilization has been built up. Now the medical woman is, of course, never on the side of modesty, or in favour of any reticences. Her desire for knowledge does not allow of these.²²

Clearly the expected readers of the case study above are themselves medical men, and the genre is intended as a place of reciprocal exchange of legitimate knowledge between writer and reader. Until the final paragraph, the language of the study is indeed a fine example of calm knowledge. The narrative is structured around dates, times and very specific hourly durations, all precise and quantifiable. The first paragraph does not mention the emotions of any of the characters. Then that attempt at containment, at understatement, the 'incidentally'. But what we actually read is the effect of deep emotion and as a lay reader, our minds not concerned with explanation or diagnosis; what we feel, along with the woman, is shock. Far from mitigating affect, the writer's 'incidentally' magnifies the blow. What we expect is something casual or minor, after all the subject's recovery was 'rapid and complete'; what we read is of a deaf woman and a dead baby.

The genre's attempts to secure its status as 'scientific' as opposed to emotional disallows a space for the affective, for places where relations of desire between

²² Quoted in *The Freewoman*, 4 April 1912, p. 392.

bodies are brought into medical discourse. Where these force their way in, as in the case study above, they are pathologised and marginalised. As I have shown, however, this fixing is incomplete, and reading the study from outside the medical discourse in particular shows up the fissures.

It is not surprising, then, that the authors of *Studies on Hysteria* were so worried about the seemingly unavoidable leakage from one genre to another. Of course, at this point Freud and Breuer were keen for approbation from their colleagues in the scientific community, and any forays into storytelling, into imagination and fantasy, would weaken their claim to scientific validity. So, when Breuer apologises for the length of the case study on Anna O., he excuses himself with a simile on origins securely planted within the scientific research.

In just the same way, the eggs of the echinoderm are important in embryology, not because the sea-urchin is a particularly interesting animal but because the protoplasm of its eggs is transparent and because what we observe in them thus throws light on the probable course of events in eggs whose protoplasm is opaque.²³

And Freud, discussing the case of Fräulein Elisabeth von R., after consoling himself that it is the subject's fault if his writing resembles a short story, goes on secure himself within an already valid tradition and, lacking Breuer's timidity, then claims an advantage.

²³ Freud, *Studies on Hysteria*, p. 96

Case histories of this kind are intended to be judged like psychiatric ones; they have, however, one advantage over the latter, namely an intimate connection between the story of the patient's sufferings and the symptoms of his illness - a connection for which we still search in vain in the biographies of other psychoses.²⁴

However, I would like to read *Studies on Hysteria* through the idea that Breuer and Freud were anxious, not only about a slippage of genre, but more than that, about a slippage of identity. Their writing, the writing of their practice, contains the possibility that the doctors may be placed on the same side as their patients, that they may be(come) hysterical. In dealing with an illness based on substitution, of an affect by a somatic symptom, of the symptom of one person by that of another, what Freud and Breuer are defending themselves against is a meshing of their identity with that of their patients. Any hint of a slide towards the fictive, the made-up, would therefore suggest a dangerous over-identification between author and character. But it is as though, as fast as they stopped some leakages and shored up particular boundaries, others sprang open or began to crumble. What I want to do is show, not that the fault lies particularly with psychoanalytic practice, or the personal idiosyncrasies of either Freud or Breuer, but rather again what happens, what anxieties appear and how they are expressed, when medical discourse, writing and the (sick) bodies of women come together.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 231.

At the heart of the method being developed by Breuer and Freud in *Studies on Hysteria* is the need for the patients to tell their stories in order to be cured. The subject of the case history of Anna O., Bertha Pappenheim, has been seen as a co-founder of psychoanalysis because she intuitively forced her stories onto her doctor during the state she termed 'clouds'.

The regular order of things was: the somnolent state in the afternoon, followed after sunset by the deep hypnosis for which she invented the technical name 'clouds'. If during this she was able to narrate the hallucinations she had had in the course of the day, she would wake up clear in mind, calm and cheerful.²⁵

The method of the talking cure, by moving memories from containment within the body of the patient into a narrative structure that necessitated a listener, an other, liberated her from her symptoms. So, then, the body of the doctor is fundamentally implicated in the cure. Breuer suggests this throughout his case history of Bertha Pappenheim. He tells us that, at one stage during her illness, he 'was the only person whom she always recognized when [he] came in' and that 'she refused nourishment altogether. However she allowed [Breuer] to feed her';²⁶ and, most importantly in terms of psychoanalytic methods of cure, 'she would never begin to talk until she had satisfied herself of [his] identity by carefully feeling [his] hands'.²⁷

²⁵ Ibid., p. 80.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 79.

However, as James Strachey comments in his introduction to the *Studies*, what we read in the work 'is not simply the story of the overcoming of a succession of obstacles; it is the story of the *discovery* of a succession of obstacles that have to be overcome'.²⁸ After he has accepted the method discovered by Breuer and Pappenheim, what concerns Freud is how to get his patients to speak out the memories in need of abreaction which are causing their symptoms, how to break down their resistance. It is strange that in the account of Anna O., aside from external occurrences which stopped Pappenheim from entering the clouds state (Breuer's absence because of a holiday, Krafft-Ebing blowing smoke in her face), it does not seem to be difficult for Breuer to get the patient to talk. The 'gaps unfilled, and riddles unanswered' which Freud later saw as endemic to the hysterical patient's narrative,²⁹ and which the analyst must fill in, seem to be more characteristic of Breuer's narrative, despite his apologies for its 'bulkiness'. Not only does Breuer leave out some of the details of the end of his treatment of Bertha Pappenheim, in the first few paragraphs of the case history he denies any sexual content to Bertha's illness.

The element of sexuality was astonishingly undeveloped in her. The patient, whose life became known to me to an extent to which one person's life is seldom known to another, had never been in love; and in all the enormous number of hallucinations which occurred during her illness that element of

²⁷ Ibid., p. 83.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 35; emphasis in original.

²⁹ Freud, 'Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria', p. 45.

mental life never emerged.³⁰

The unfilled gaps around the termination of his treatment of Pappenheim became almost *the* unanswered riddle of the origins of psychoanalysis, for Freud's account of it differed widely from that published by Breuer. Almost fifty years later, Freud gave his account in a letter to Stefan Zweig.

On the evening of the day when all her symptoms had been disposed of, he was summoned to the patient again, found her confused and writhing in abdominal cramps. Asked what was wrong with her, she replied: 'Now Dr B.'s child is coming!'.... Seized by conventional horror he took flight and abandoned the patient to a colleague.³¹

Even if Freud's memory of the event as told to him by Breuer does not exactly tally with the event itself, there is other evidence for a sexual content in the relationship between doctor and patient: Breuer's instruction that Freud must not pass on the story to Martha Bernays until she and Freud were married,³² and Martha's own response to the story:

It has often been on the tip of my tongue to ask you why Breuer gave up Bertha. I could well imagine that those somewhat removed from it were wrong to say that he had withdrawn because he realised that he was unable to do anything for her. It is curious that no other man other than her

³⁰ Freud and Breuer, *Studies on Hysteria*, pp. 73-4.

³¹ Quoted in Lisa Appignanesi and John Forrester, *Freud's Women*, London: Virago, 1993, p. 81.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 80.

physician of the moment got close to poor Bertha, that is when she was healthy she already [had the power] to turn the head of the most sensible of men.... You will laugh at me, dearest, I so vividly put myself in the place of the silent Frau Mathilde [Breuer] that I could scarcely sleep last night.³³

The jump between the second and third sentences suggests that Martha Bernays did not really need to ask her fiancé the question - she knew that in it was implicated something sexual between doctor and patient. As we fill out those gaps and riddles that seem to be missing from the patient's storytelling, it is possible to see Breuer's behaviour as itself hysterical. Five years later Freud was very clear in his definition of an hysterical person.

I should without question consider a person hysterical in whom an occasion for sexual excitement elicited feelings that were preponderantly or exclusively unpleasurable; and I should do so whether or no the person were capable of producing somatic symptoms.³⁴

Breuer's flight from this particular occasion for sexual excitement, Bertha's transference of affect onto him, however it exhibited itself, can be seen as itself hysterical. And I would suggest that the somatic symptoms are evident, not on Breuer's body, but in the body of his writing. In Breuer's silence over the sexual content of his treatment of Bertha Pappenheim can be seen, along with a protection of his patient and an attempt at scientific objectivity, both an hysterical defence against his own affect and a defence against an admission of substitution between

³³ From a letter to Freud in 1883, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 82.

doctor and patient. In his attempt to keep within the genre of the medical case study, to contain particular affects (his or the patient's) below the surface of the body of writing, to keep separate roles and identities, Breuer produced a study that can be seen as displaying 'hysteria'.

In his theoretical chapter which closes *Studies*, Freud does begin to deal with the sexual aetiology of hysteria, acknowledging that because the case history of Anna O. 'was not considered at all by its observer from the point of view of a sexual neurosis, [it] is quite useless for this purpose'.³⁵ His treatment of the sexual aetiology in this chapter is rudimentary, however, compared with later developments. It was a year or two before Freud was to begin his self-analysis and study of dreams that lead to the theory of the Oedipus complex. In later work, of course, this theory was to be the bedrock of his work on neuroses; in *Studies*, although not given a formal aetiological function by Freud, it is possible to see something else that stands in as an originary cause - the role of the nurse.³⁶ In each of the three longer case histories in *Studies*, the patient had nursed a member

³⁴ Freud, 'Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria', p. 59.

³⁵ Freud and Breuer, *Studies on Hysteria*, p. 342.

³⁶ Elisabeth Bronfen suggests death as the origin of the hysterias in *Studies*. Freud, she argues, 'either overlooks the connection between hysterical trauma and mortality or translates it into issues of sexually encoded loss', because of his focus on sexual difference; see Bronfen, *The Knotted Subject: Hysteria and Its Discontents*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1998, p. 16. My focus on nursing, both here and in Chapter 4, does not go beyond sexual difference but suggests alternative readings of it.

of her family immediately before falling ill: Anna O. her father, Frau Emmy von N. her husband, brother and daughter, Fräulein Elisabeth von R. her father. In his discussion of the latter's case Freud writes

There are good reasons for the fact that sick-nursing plays such a significant part in the prehistory of cases of hysteria. A number of the factors at work in this are obvious; the disturbance of one's physical health arising from interrupted sleep, the neglect of one's own person, the effect of constant worry on one's vegetative functions. But, in my view, the most important determinant is to be looked for elsewhere. Anyone whose mind is taken up by the hundred and one tasks of sick-nursing which follow one another in endless succession over a period of weeks and months will, on the one hand, adopt a habit of suppressing every sign of his own emotion, and on the other, will soon divert his attention away from his own impressions, since he has neither time nor strength to do justice to them.³⁷

As I have suggested above, this hypothesis is more than borne out in the case histories, but I would suggest that it is possible to ask of this passage, why is this not true for doctors too? From the evidence of the case histories themselves it is clear that both Freud and Breuer were subject to all the conditions detailed in the passage above. I would argue that in emphasising nursing in this way Freud is relying on various conventions to distance himself as doctor from the pathology of identification, from contagion, and as part of this simplifying the effects and affects of nursing that are clear from the evidence of his patients' stories.

Before the professionalisation of nursing, most patients relied on care from the

³⁷ Freud and Breuer, *Studies on Hysteria*, p. 232.

female members of their own family. The doctor would visit to diagnose and prescribe, the 'nurse' would follow out his orders. Obviously the nurse/doctor split is based on an uneven possession of power and, unsurprisingly, is highly gendered. Because of a nurse's usual affective position with regard to the patient, the dangers of 'affective contagion' were warned against in the medical literature of the time. Further, this danger was seen, not as an effect of position, but of gender, and was used as an argument for barring women from the study of medicine.³⁸ However, it was acknowledged that male doctors may be susceptible to what Vrettos has termed 'neuromimesis'.³⁹ For doctors treating neurotic illnesses in the late nineteenth century there existed a paradox which bred anxiety. The majority of the mainstream techniques propounded suggestion and persuasion as curative methods - but these necessitated a more than medical interaction with the patient and, given the 'wily' nature of hysterical patients in particular, this might have threatened to close up the distance between doctor and patient and hence threaten the identity of the doctor himself. The American neurologist Silas Weir Mitchell preached the importance of the iron-willed doctor if there were to be any hope of a cure.

According to Mitchell, a battle of wills lay at the heart of the doctor-patient relationship in all cases of nervous disease. Mitchell argued that the power of suggestion, which was central to mimetic diseases, should be

³⁸ Athena Vrettos, *Somatic Fictions: Imagining Illness in Victorian Culture*, Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1995, pp. 91-6.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 16 and *passim*.

appropriated by the physician in the pursuit of a cure.⁴⁰

However, as Vrettos goes on to say, Mitchell's fiction shows the other side of this - the anxiety that the battle of wills may go the other way, that the doctor's appropriation may lead, not to the patient's cure, but to his illness.

In his semi-autobiographical novel *Characteristics*, published in 1891, Mitchell recounts his hero Owen North's observations on human nature during his practice as a physician and his recovery from paralysis after the Civil War. We can see North's anxiety about the physician's viewing relationship to his patients when he recounts a morphine-induced dream that enacts the drama of neuromimesis on the doctor's body and reveals the implicit threat to medical and masculine authority that this neurosis conveyed.⁴¹

This is the medical context in which *Studies on Hysteria* was written. Neither Breuer nor, more particularly, Freud shared the general view of hysterical women as dangerous, degenerate malingerers. Freud made it clear that sympathy and respect for his patients was vital.

The procedure is laborious and time-consuming for the physician. It presupposes great interest in psychological happenings, but personal concern for the patient as well. I cannot imagine bringing myself to delve into the psychical mechanism of a hysteria in anyone who struck me as low-minded and repellent, and who, on closer acquaintance, would not be capable of arousing human sympathy.⁴²

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 87.

⁴¹ Ibid., pp. 88-9.

⁴² Freud and Breuer, *Studies on Hysteria*, p. 348.

However, I would suggest that some of the anxieties around the split between doctor/nurse and healthy/ill remain. As shown above, while Freud clearly identifies his patients not only as nurses, but as having become sick through nursing, his metaphorical language concerning his own project hedges by both stressing the least affective areas of medicine and then assuring his reader that all doctors do what he does to some extent. As with Breuer, this both defends Freud from the possibility of being ill himself (if he were more like a nurse he would almost inevitably be hysterical) and yet allows him the space to express sympathy and respect for his patients. In his theoretical chapter at the end of *Studies*, Freud's similes are revealing.

I am justified in leaving these unsuccessful cases out of account in arriving at a judgement, just as a surgeon disregards cases of death which occur under anaesthesia, owing to post-operational haemorrhage, accidental sepsis, etc., in making a decision about a new technique.

...I have often in my own mind compared cathartic psychotherapy with surgical intervention. I have described my treatments as psychotherapeutic operations; and I have brought out their analogy with the opening up of a cavity filled with pus, the scraping out of a carious region, etc. An analogy of this kind finds its justification not so much in the removal of what is pathological as in the establishment of conditions that are more likely to lead the course of the process in the direction of recovery.⁴³

The analogy with surgery is highly suggestive of tensions around identification and contagion. In many ways, surgical practice has the least to do with the affective life

⁴³ Ibid., pp. 345, 392.

of the patient. In the first passage Freud uses the sense that a surgeon's first loyalty is to the practice itself, to refining and perfecting it, rather than worrying about failures, even though for a surgeon, more often than not, a failure means a dead person. Surgery was a relatively new medical practice, still highly experimental and therefore dangerous. Practitioners could not afford many scruples over the fate of their patients. Any identification with the patient during an operation that would be painful or life-threatening would make them unfit for the purpose. Physical as well as psychical contact with a patient contained dangers, particularly before much was known about the processes of infection. All these aspects of the various meanings of surgery rush in as soon as Freud uses the analogy, whether he intended them or not. In the second passage above, however, I would suggest that Freud senses that the analogy has become uncontrollable, and backs away.

The first two sentences set up the comparison. Freud's image of 'the opening up of a cavity filled with pus, the scraping out of a carious region' draws on many of the aspects of surgery discussed above, but it goes further. Surgery fought hard for legitimacy, not least against the taboo around breaking the surface of the human body. Yet a certain horror remains, made commonplace as squeamishness. The crossing of boundaries always produces anxiety, and the surface of the body is perhaps the most sensitive boundary. Surgery, sex and reproduction are the only places where one body is taken into another. My reading of the case study from the *BMJ* highlighted the tensions provoked by a coming together of a seemingly

inexplicable multiplication of illnesses across the surfaces of two or possibly three bodies, and the gaps, absences, and crossed boundaries marked by a woman's pregnant body. This coming together of the sexual and the pathological is fundamental to many of the places of anxiety I have looked at, and this sense of danger, of the threat of illness when crossing boundaries, is contained within Freud's rather too evocative image; for the last sentence draws back and in some ways makes the use of the image a nonsense. For if the image is being used to reveal something about the practice of cathartic psychotherapy, and the strongest element of the image is of the removal of the pathological, what do we make of it when Freud then tells us that this is not what he means at all? At the end of the passage we are left no clearer as to what are the 'conditions that are more likely to lead the course of the process in the direction of recovery'. It is as though Freud has caught the horror and anxiety contained with the image, the breaking of taboos, the possibility of contagion, yet cannot do without the other side of the surgical analogy, its attempt at clinical cleanliness in a place of mess, its objectivity, the barriers it sets up between patient and doctor, and is forced to hedge his bets.

Of course, surgery is a practice concerned entirely with the body, and some of Freud's impulse towards comparison must be an attempt, however ambiguous, to make the treatment of the mind contiguous with the treatment of the body, to establish himself as the 'surgeon of the soul'.⁴⁴ By the time of *Studies on Hysteria*,

⁴⁴ Peter Gay, *Freud: A Life for Our Time*, London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1988, p. 580.

Freud already saw hysteria as essentially psychogenic. But for someone with a medical training, attempting to gain credibility in the medical community, this view, however persuasive, was not without problems. Throughout three of his four case studies, and again in his theoretical chapter, Freud spends a good deal of time writing about something which sits uneasily with both his concerns for legitimacy at the time and his later development of psychoanalytic practice - his use of touch. In the case history of Miss Lucy R., Freud explains that he began to use this technical tool when he realised that not all patients were susceptible to hypnosis. Temporarily floored by this, he remembered seeing Bernheim, with whom Freud improved his hypnotic techniques, after failing to get a woman patient to remember what had happened to her under hypnosis, lay 'his hand on her forehead to help her recall it. And lo and behold! she ended by describing everything.... This astonishing and instructive experiment served as my model'.⁴⁵ Freud goes on to say that the technique 'has scarcely ever left me in the lurch since then'.⁴⁶ He is clearly impressed by his discovery - that 'lo and behold' suggests surprise and delight. In the theoretical chapter, Freud says of his technique, 'Today I can no longer do without it'.⁴⁷ He goes on to theorise on the efficacy of the technique. He suggests that it works because, if the forgotten pathogenic idea is to be brought to consciousness, the obstacle which has to be eliminated is the patient's ego, keen as it

⁴⁵ Freud and Breuer, *Studies on Hysteria*, p. 173.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 174.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 354.

is to keep the difficult material unconscious, and pressure on the head dissociates 'the patient's attention from his conscious searching and reflecting - from everything, in short, on which he can employ his will'.⁴⁸ In other words, the technique is effective because it establishes a relationship between doctor and patient where the will of the former subdues the will of the latter, and resistance is inevitably overcome. However, it was not that long before the technique, for all its efficacy, was abandoned by Freud. It is not mentioned at all in the 'Dora' case history, and by 1904 Freud is writing that he 'avoids touching his patients in any way'.⁴⁹ Why should such a useful tool be abandoned, especially as there is no reason to believe its replacement, the admonition to 'say everything', is any more effective? I would like to suggest why this may be by reading Freud through one of his patients, by reversing the doctor/patient, writer/subject relationship set up by the genre of case histories.

In the case history on Fräulein Elisabeth von R., Freud suggests somewhat ambiguously that she was the first patient on which he used the pressure method.⁵⁰ However, this is not the only place in Elisabeth von R.'s story where the coming together of the skin of one person with the skin of another has effected psychic change. In his discussion at the end of her case history, Freud maps the

⁴⁸ Freud and Breuer, *Studies on Hysteria*, p. 355.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 174, footnote 1.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 213 and see footnote on p. 173.

overdetermined aetiology of the pains in Elisabeth's thighs, her most significant hysterical symptom.

The pain, indeed, may actually have been a consequence, though only a remote one, of the period of nursing - of the lack of exercise and reduced diet that her duties as a sick-nurse entailed. But the girl had no clear knowledge of this. More importance should probably be attached to the fact that she must have felt the pain during that time at significant moments, for instance, when she sprang out of bed in the cold of winter in response to a call from her father. But what must have had a positively decisive influence on the direction taken by the conversion was another line of associative connection; the fact that on a long succession of days one of her painful legs came into contact with her father's swollen leg while his bandages were being changed. The area on her right leg which was marked out by this contact remained thereafter the focus of her pains and the point from which they radiated.⁵¹

At the very beginning of the case history, as Freud is trying to establish Elisabeth's illness as hysteria, he writes that:

if one pressed or pinched the hyperalgesic skin and muscles of her legs, her face assumed a peculiar expression, which was one of pleasure rather than pain. She cried out - and I could not help thinking that it was as though she was having a voluptuous tickling sensation - her face flushed, she threw back her head and shut her eyes and her body bent backwards.⁵²

And this pleasure he sees as an indication that her symptoms are hysterical. If nursing can be seen as parallel to the Oedipus complex within the narrative structure of *Studies on Hysteria*, if the origin of Elisabeth's illness is not a fantasy

⁵¹ Ibid., p. 247-8.

but an actual experience of her father's body, the knot of sexuality, pathology, resistance and desire which lies at the heart of the condition called hysteria is effected, is given form, a signifier, through the medium of touch. Each of the passages above describes a lapping back and forth between individuals of affect, pain and desire; they cross the usual boundaries of identity when one body touches another. And Freud is not outside this. His pressure technique, he believed, was effective because the power of suggestion moved one way, from doctor to patient. Earlier in the case history Freud has described how Elisabeth's 'painful legs began to "join in the conversation" during our analyses' by remaining painful until a particular memory, important to the aetiology of her hysteria, had been remembered and abreacted.⁵³ The loop of contagion seems to stop as he forces her memories out and the somatic symptoms disappear. However, here, as he touches Elisabeth's legs, and watches her react with pleasure rather than pain, he 'could not help thinking'. His reaction is out of his control, as is Elisabeth's as her body enacts the movements of orgasm. He is forced to break away from description and enter into the affective life of his patient.

Towards the end of his life, Freud's reaction to the technical innovations of his friend and disciple, Sándor Ferenczi, is revealing of the dis-ease he felt around the notion of touch. Ferenczi had begun to develop what he called 'mutual analysis'; he

⁵² Ibid., p. 204.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 217.

allowed his patients to kiss him, and during analysis would reveal his own unconscious. He wrote that he would express 'intense empathy' with his patients, which could lead to moments when 'experiencing the sufferings of others, and my own, presses a tear from my eye'. Revealing his own sufferings would 'grant patients the pleasure of being able to help us, of becoming, as it were, our analyst for a moment, which rightly raises their self-esteem'.⁵⁴ Freud's criticism of this is predicated on the assumption that the technique reveals Ferenczi's own pathology, and Freud's articulation of this is intensely gendered. In a letter to another colleague, Freud explains a lack of news from Ferenczi: 'He is insulted because we are not charmed by his playing mother and child with his female pupils.'⁵⁵ He sees Ferenczi's technical experiments as regression, and is gratified when Ferenczi's wife 'had it conveyed to me that I should think of him as of a sick child'.⁵⁶ The practice of psychoanalysis, dealing as it does with that place where the boundary between the mind and the body crumbles, where psychically the desire for the other loosens the limits of identity, threatens to pull all participants in to the mess of contagion. Freud's strategies of defence in *Studies on Hysteria* and his subsequent rejection of touch as a technical tool mark out these places of anxiety.

For the nurses-become-patients in *Studies on Hysteria* pathology followed on from

⁵⁴ Quoted in Gay, *Freud: A Life for Our Time*, pp. 579-80.

⁵⁵ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 582.

⁵⁶ Quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 584-5.

- was in a sense caused by - the loss of self involved in caring for some one else. I have argued above that Breuer and Freud resisted contagion in part through writing, through a narrative that covered over difficult issues, through similes. Indeed, occupying the place of the writer is itself protection. Although Freud did acknowledge that the material sometimes slipped out of his control - it would keep turning itself into a short story - writing the material as case history for a medical audience replaces it within a controllable framework. The case histories of *Studies on Hysteria* function as markers of Freud's development of a theory and method that would establish his authority and resolve once and for all the enigma of hysteria. The slipping boundaries between doctor/nurse, doctor/patient, healthy/ill are made stable by the fundamental dichotomy of writer/subject. However, the effort needed to maintain these separations is obvious when we come to look at a text where the place of writer and nurse are occupied by the same individual.

In the September of 1914 May Sinclair travelled to Belgium as part of a group collected together by Dr Hector Munro, a specialist in psychotherapy who was on the board of management of the Medico-Psychological Clinic.⁵⁷ The group was to

⁵⁷ This Clinic had been set up in 1913 by Dr Jessie Murray, with funding from Sinclair. It used an eclectic range of therapies to treat a wide variety of illness, organic and psychological. The Clinic was the first in Britain to use psychoanalysis, although its place in the history of psychoanalysis in this country has been rather forgotten, perhaps because of a combination of its eclectic approach, Murray's early death, the subsequent movement of many of her staff to the Tavistock. For a history of the clinic see Theophilus E.M. Boll, 'May Sinclair and the Medico-Psychological Clinic of London', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 26 (4), 22 August 1962, pp. 310-26.

form an ambulance corps supported by the Belgian Red Cross. Sinclair travelled with the group as secretary, treasurer and reporter. She remained in Belgium for three weeks, during which time she kept a day book, and published her *Journal of Impressions in Belgium* from it at the beginning of 1915. In the preface to the *Journal*, Sinclair is careful to stress that it is a record 'as faithful as I could make it in every detail, and as direct as circumstances allowed'.⁵⁸ In it she describes their journey to Belgium, the personalities and idiosyncrasies of the other members of the group (each of whom are given pseudonyms), the frustrations they experienced on their arrival in Ghent and the minutiae of war. But what is striking about the *Journal*, what gives it its rhythm and tension, is Sinclair's see-saw attitude to her status as writer.⁵⁹ From the beginning she recognises the separation endemic to the writer's place, and the moral impossibility of non-involvement during a war. She explains her reaction when first asked by Munro to accompany the group as a reporter:

if I could nurse the wounded I would face any bombardment you please to name; but to go and look on and make copy out of the sufferings I cannot help - I couldn't and I wouldn't.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Sinclair, *A Journal of Impressions in Belgium*, p. ix.

⁵⁹ Suzanne Raitt's interesting and sensitive chapter on the *Journal* does not, however, really deal with its implications for Sinclair as a *writer*; see Raitt, 'Contagious ecstasy': May Sinclair's war journals', in Suzanne Raitt and Trudi Tate (eds) *Women's Fiction and the Great War*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1997, pp. 65-6; see my discussion of this in the Preface.

It is the specific location of war that, at this point, makes writing impossible for Sinclair. It is a place of 'fantastic dislocation',⁶¹ where the assumptions and practices which shape normal life are not appropriate. Sinclair clearly overcame her initial refusal to 'make copy' while others suffered. During a dinner at Sinclair's house, she is piqued into saying she will go by Munro's words: 'it is as if he said, "Of course, if you're *afraid*" - (haven't I told him that I *am* afraid?)'.⁶² This sentence is strange, it does something odd with the narrative. Sinclair has told Munro she is afraid but is offended because *it is as if* he said she was. Our narrator's reading of someone else's words is suddenly perverse - exactly whose words are contained in inverted commas? If the reader of Sinclair-as-reader cannot follow here, then the reader is forced to re-narrate the scene, the reader is forced to shift her position. The construction 'It was as if...' is repeatedly used by Sinclair in her novels, short stories and non-fiction. The sudden uncertainty generated by the phrase around the mimetic status of the text foregrounds the practice of both writing and reading. It reveals the gap between incident and writing, between the two characters, between Sinclair as character and Sinclair as narrator, and forces us to refill the gaps as we read.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 17.

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 106.

⁶² Ibid., p. 17; for a discussion of the links between writing and fear which make more explicit reference to sexual difference, see the discussion of *Tasker Jevons: The Real Story* (1916) in Chapter 4.

However, the tension between writing and experience remains throughout her account of her time in Belgium. Indeed, once there, in the face of the tension generated by the sense of having to make a once and for all choice, the boundaries and barriers which keep order crumble completely. In the preface to the *Journal* Sinclair describes her practice of writing once in Belgium. She would keep brief notes in her day book, and then write them up into the journal; but she found herself 'a week behind with the first day of the seventeen, four months behind with the last.'⁶³ It is as if, once in the place of war, even the usual marker of time slips away. Intruding between the present and the inscription of it in her journal is something which grows until it measures 'four months' - and this thing is Sinclair's sense that the only appropriate response to war is the loss of self through the nursing of the wounded. Everything about the war is somehow skewed, unreal - 'For here in Belgium the really incredible things are the things that existed and happened before the war'⁶⁴ - and Sinclair vacillates between her need to write and her need to be involved, to touch, to heal.

When they arrive in Ghent, the ambulance corps are put up in hotel-turned-military hospital, the Flandria Palace Hotel. For what seems an interminable time, they are given nothing to do, and when the ambulance does make trips to the lines, Sinclair is not included in the party. 'There isn't anything to do,' she writes, 'There are not

⁶³ Ibid., p. 10.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 133.

enough wounded to go round.⁶⁵ Sinclair goes to search out news among the war correspondents and reporters, and compares the atmosphere there to that of the hotel where she is staying.

It is full of live, exultant fighters, and of men who have their business not with the wounded and the dying but with live men and live things, and they have live words to tell about them... It is as if you had been taken from your prison and had been let loose into the world again.⁶⁶

She decides to leave the hospital for a week and move to the Hôtel de la Poste, where the war correspondents are billeted. Here, she feels, she will 'cut the obsession of responsibility' and recognise 'the peace of God'.⁶⁷ At this point Sinclair falls on the side of separation and writing. However, at each point in her narrative, the fragile nature of the oppositions discussed above is made very clear. Sinclair is forced back and forward between each opposing side of the pair. Both before and after throwing in her lot with the war correspondents Sinclair writes about the effect of location on the sense of self:

I realize with something like a thrill that we are in a military hospital under military orders; and that my irrelevant former self, with all that it has desired or done, must henceforth cease (perhaps irrevocably) to exist. I contemplate its extinction with equanimity.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 54.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 106.

⁶⁷ Ibid., pp. 111, 112.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 27.

Once she begins to view herself as the new war correspondent, the danger sharpens her sense of self.

It is as if my soul had never really belonged to me until now, as if it had been either drugged or drunk and had never known what it was to be sober until now. The sensation is distinctly agreeable.⁶⁹

Sinclair constructs vacillation also around the Commandant, the name she gives Munro in the journal. The split is between power through the separation necessitated and effected by words and the power of involvement.

[The Commandant] is drawn to these War Correspondents who appear to know more than he does. On the other hand, an ambulance that can get into the firing-line has an irresistible attraction for a War Correspondent.⁷⁰

For Sinclair, the possibility of choosing between positions of power and gratification continually winks on and off before her. In a very revealing passage, she makes it clear that she locates this constriction of choice very firmly in the differentials of gender.

It is with the game of war as it was with the game of football I used to play with my big brothers in the garden. The women may play it if they're fit enough, up to a certain point, very much as I played football in the

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 124.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 122.

garden... And if those big brothers over there only know what I was after they would have made arrangements for my immediate removal from the seat of war.⁷¹

The idea of a desire which may be thwarted by others is also very clear in another image. Sinclair moves from the Hôtel de la Poste to the Hôtel Cecil to enable her to write more easily. However, the landlord there is tardy in providing a writing table for her room, and she is left at a loose end. An emergency occurs, and as the other members of the corps are away, Sinclair has to go out with the ambulance for the first time. At this moment of involvement, Sinclair's commitment to her position as new war correspondent slips away.

When I think how easily I might have missed it... If the landlord of the Hôtel Cecil had kept his word and given me a table, then I should, to a dead certainty, have been writing this wretched Journal at the ineffable moment when the chauffeurs arrived.⁷²

Sinclair's choice again is between words and the unutterable. However, as she goes on, in her desire for the unutterable, to explain how she feels, it is as if language, far from falling away, is forced to say more than it should. Sinclair wants to go out with the ambulance so much, her heart is beating so quickly, she fears she might 'die before we started (I believe people feel like this sometimes before their

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 122.

⁷² Ibid., p. 212.

wedding night)'.⁷³ The revelation of desire that this image releases is quite shocking and stands out in the narrative, despite the containing parentheses. But, of course, it is also deeply ambiguous, for each partner on their 'wedding night' is forced to fit themselves into already existing, oppositional positions structured around sexual difference - desire and fear, possession and submission. Sinclair's attempt to give words to her longing makes clear both the ambiguity of her feelings on the writing/involvement split, and her sense of her position within that choice as gendered.

Sinclair experiences the tension of these oppositions through and in her own body. In particular, on two occasions in the *Journal* the tension is projected very specifically onto her arms. On one trip out into a battlefield her body enacts vacillation.

I remember thinking that I particularly didn't want to be wounded in my right arm, and that as I sat with my right arm resting on the ledge of the car it was somewhat exposed to the German batteries, so I wriggled low down in my seat and tucked my arm well under cover for quite five minutes. But you couldn't see anything that way, so I popped up again and presently forgot all about my valuable arm in the sheer excitement of the rush through the danger zone.⁷⁴

Towards the end of her time in Ghent, Sinclair sits up all night with a dying British

⁷³ Ibid., p. 213.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 175.

soldier. Her account of this night is the most powerful part of the *Journal*, and here we find the climax of her desire for involvement over words, the very specific involvement of nursing.

As a matter of fact it was the most terrible night I have ever spent in my life; and I have lived through a good many terrible nights in sickrooms. But no amount of amateur nursing can take the place of training or of the self-confidence of knowing that you are trained.... That night I would have given everything I possess, and everything I have ever done, to have been a trained nurse.⁷⁵

What has provoked this intense declaration on the side of nursing is her experience with this soldier who, during the course of the night, has told her 'things that I have no right to put down here'.⁷⁶ After moving the patient in bed at some point during the night, a pillow is needed for the small of his back to keep him in the position on which his life depends. The nurse goes in search of one, and in the meantime Sinclair holds the soldier up.

For a quarter of an hour I had to kneel by his bed with my two arms thrust together under the hollow of his back, supporting it. I had nothing at hand that was small enough or firm enough but my arms.⁷⁷

Her arms go dead and shake with effort of keeping him up. As with the painful

⁷⁵ Ibid., pp. 251, 253.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 254.

⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 253.

thighs of Elisabeth von R., experiencing the flesh of an ill other against her own, feeling his own pain transferred into her shaking arms, changes Sinclair's sense of herself. Above, Sinclair's arm vacillated between the car ledge and cover - here the possible death is not her own but another's, and her arms have no choice. Her body boundaries shift and relax, her self is lost in the body of her patient in a way that she has desired throughout the narrative.

It is by this rhythm that I can tell whether he is asleep or awake. This rhythm of his breathing, and the rhythm of his sleeping and his waking measure out the night for me. It goes like one hour. And yet I have spent months of nights watching in this room.... All my life I have known and cared only for the wounded man on the bed.... And I have known these things so long that each one of them is already like a separate wound in my memory.⁷⁸

The spaces between which are fixed by narrative and writing collapse, Sinclair's life, her sense of time, her memory, are enmeshed with the body of the soldier. She has caught his wounds.

This episode is the *Journal's* climax, and it seems that Sinclair has fallen on the side of the involvement which incurs loss of self. However, of course, we see her make this choice by reading a narrative that she has created. Her loss of self is embodied by her act of writing. For writers engage with language - it is the very thing that establishes the separation demanded by selfhood, that positions each self in terms of

⁷⁸ Ibid., pp. 255, 256, 257.

its relation to the Law of the Father. However, they also play with that language, push at its limits, its gaps and paradoxes. And in a place where the solidity of all meanings is dissolving, in that 'fantastic dislocation of war', the writing both acts as a container for and marks the places where all the slippages around identity and self that are set off by the seeping together of writer/nurse, healthy/ill and so on.

On a trip to a village which is just about to be taken by the German army, Sinclair finds a wounded Belgian soldier and writes of her immediate affective reaction.

I do not think it is possible to love, to adore any creature more than I loved and adored that clumsy, ugly Flamand.

He was my first wounded man.⁷⁹

She helps the soldier to a safe house, and there the Commandant treats his injuries.

I had always supposed that the dressing of a wound was a cautious and delicate process. But it isn't. There is a certain casual audacity about it. The Commandant's hands worked rapidly as he rammed cyanide gauze into the red pit. It looked as if he were stuffing an old crate with straw. And it was all over in a moment. There seemed something indecent in the haste with which my Flamand was disposed of.

When the Commandant observed that my Flamand's wound looked much worse than it was, I felt hurt, as if this beloved person had been slighted; also as if there was some subtle disparagement to my 'find'.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 196.

As she watches the Commandant dress the wound, Sinclair is offended by his 'casual audacity', the 'indecent' haste, and the Commandant's cool observation that the wound 'looked much worse than it was'. In this choice between affect and knowledge, it is clear which side Sinclair is on. Critics of *Harriett Frean*, however, invariably use adjectives of distance and objectivity - Swinnerton's 'calm knowledge', Jean Radford's 'chilling case-history',⁸¹ Boll's 'cool luminousness'⁸² - to describe both the reader's reaction and the novel itself. I want to suggest that, when it comes to the treatment of places of potential pathology, the novel positions itself with the Commandant. Further, what is at issue in this switch in position between the *Journal* and the novel is the danger of a particular genre. The necessity for 'calm knowledge' is provoked by the coming together of 'romance' in the sense of narrative structure and the resistance of interpretative closure implied in psychological pathologies. Instead of transforming the wounds of the other through love - which runs the risk of 'catching' the wounds oneself, as with Sinclair's dying British soldier - the novel sees only the pathological contagion of love, and must remain cool and distanced in order to stop the spread. Indeed, it must be 'very nearly medical'. In my reading of *Harriett Frean* I want to explore these places between - between the characters in the novel, between the narrative position and

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 198.

⁸¹ Jean Radford, 'Introduction' to *The Life and Death of Harriett Frean*, London: Virago, 1980, n.p.

⁸² T.E.M. Boll, *Miss May Sinclair: Novelist: A Biographical and Critical Introduction*, New Jersey: Associated University Presses, 1973, p. 274.

the characters, and between the reader and the novel.

The core relationships in the novel are those between Harriett Frean, her mother and her father.

Sometimes they would sit like that, not exchanging ideas, exchanging only the sense of each other's presence, a secure, profound satisfaction that belonged as much to their bodies as their minds...⁸³

While at first it is made clear that the places between them are mediated by love, we begin to see that the aim of this love is a strict control and maintenance of the surface of the body. Paradoxically, in the place of intense love that exists between herself and her parents, where the possibilities of her developing an identity of her own are swallowed up, what is shored up and made firm is her sense of the inviolate surface of her body. Her parents' moral teaching, their injunction to 'behave beautifully', lead them and Harriett to represses those things which break the surface of the body - desire, sexual knowledge, appetite, the admission of illness. At a tea-party Harriett goes without food because an expression of desire would have been 'ugly'. And afterwards, when her mother commends her for her restraint, it is 'Sitting up there and being good' which is 'delicious'.⁸⁴ The satisfaction of desire is transferred from a sensual experience to moral restraint.

⁸³ May Sinclair, *Life and Death of Harriett Frean* (1922), London: Virago, 1980, p. 39.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

When Connie Hancock transfers her sexual knowledge to Harriett, 'standing by the apple tree', Harriett 'shut her eyes, squeezing the lids down', closing down the very organs through which we first experience ourselves and others as sexed beings.⁸⁵

When Mrs Frean can no longer hide her illness from Harriett, she explains her antipathy to the idea of an operation, even one that could save her life:

'It would be no good, Hatty. I know it wouldn't. They just love to try experiments, those doctors. They're dying to get their knives into me. Don't *let* them.'⁸⁶

And this sense of violation is experienced by Harriett too during her post-operative hallucinatory state at the end of the novel. Just before she fantasises a dead baby in her hospital bed, she fixes on the person of the doctor.

She cried out, 'Take him away. Don't let him touch me'; but nobody took any notice.

'It isn't right,' she said. 'He oughtn't to do it. Not to *any* woman. If it was known he would be punished.'⁸⁷

Throughout the novel, Harriett and her parents are described in ways that stress the firm, straight lines of their body surfaces. Mr Frean is 'straight and slender', his arm as Harriett leans on it has a 'strong, tight feel', and even after his financial ruin he is

⁸⁵ Ibid., pp. 24, 25.

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 102; emphasis in original.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 182; emphasis in original.

'upright and alert', his body 'straight and calm'.⁸⁸ Her mother is 'wonderful in her pure, high serenity',⁸⁹ and Harriett suggests that her father's disembodiment through death, that final shutting off of the body, makes him superior to Mr Hancock, whose money has been lost through Mr Frean's financial speculations. 'If it had happened the other way about', she says to Connie, 'your father wouldn't have died.'⁹⁰ And at the end Harriett sees the control of the surfaces of her body as a sign of her superiority. Afraid that under anaesthetic she would say 'Shocking, indecent things', she refuses to open her mouth for an hour before the operation. On her way to the theatre, she is

very upright in her white flannel dressing-gown, with her chin held high and a look of exaltation on her face.... Harriett made her lips tighter.....

She had not said one word.⁹¹

This disavowal of interiority, of the spaces inside, infects the spaces in between. So, after their deaths, Harriett learns that her parents had secrets which, once revealed, shifts her sense of them all having 'behaved beautifully'. However, where the pathology of spaces really becomes clear is in the Freans' relations with those outside of the family. In their repression of desire, and all the conflict and mess it

⁸⁸ Ibid., pp. 37, 46, 85, 87.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 93.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 155.

⁹¹ Ibid., pp. 180-1.

entails, in order to retain the sense of the body as inviolate, the disease created by this repression has its symptoms in their effect on others. It is as if the other characters 'catch' the Freans' illness, but they cannot keep it contained within the surfaces of their bodies because they, unlike the Freans, express desire. So in Harriett's friendship with Prissie, although both move towards a place of communion, Harriett retains the essential parts of herself. The desire which breaks the surface of the body - through exclamation and tears - is all Prissie's.

They slept in the same room, in two white beds drawn close together; a white dimity curtain hung between; they drew it back so that they could see each other lying there in the summer dusk and in the clear mornings when they waked....

[Prissie] cried when term ended and she had to go home....

When the last midsummer holidays came she spent them with Harriett.

'Oh-h-h!' Prissie drew in her breath when she heard they were to sleep together in the big bed in the spare room.⁹²

Harriett's rejection of Robin Lethbridge can be seen as an attempt to keep her body secure. She rejoices in the 'spiritual love'⁹³ made possible by her renunciation. However, this act causes an epidemic of symptoms on the bodies of those whose desire is subsequently thwarted by it - Prissie, Robin, and Beatrice. As these infected people try to come together, to fill the spaces between with their bodies,

⁹² Ibid., pp. 30-1.

⁹³ Ibid., p. 76.

what 'comes between' them is illness and contagion. Harriett, motivated as she is by the maintenance of body surfaces, both her own and others', is thankful for this capacity of illness to separate, but does not realise in time the possibility of contagion.

She saw the paralysis coming between them [Prissie and Robin], separating them, and inside her secret pain was soothed. She need not think of [Robin] married any more.⁹⁴

The relations between all the characters in *Harriett Frean* produce pathology and death. There are four dead babies in the novel, real, symbolic or fantasised - Prissie's stillborn child, Maggie's baby who wastes away, Harriett's doll, Ida, 'lying in the pasteboard coffin and buried in the wardrobe cemetery',⁹⁵ and her hallucination of the dead baby in her hospital bed just before death. The multiple deaths of that most obvious product of relations between bodies makes clear how diseased these relations have become. There are no alternatives presented in the main narrative of the novel, there are no healthy relationships. An examination of the narrative position as it creates the story shows that, as it reveals the places of potential pathology, it must itself construct a distance and fix the narrative in order to resist contagion. The one moment where the narrative tries to move out of this, to present an alternative, in the character of Mona Floyd, is a failure.

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 69.

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 8.

All critics comment on the economy of the novel, its lack of any redundant material. I want to suggest that the novel is indeed structured around gaps and lacks - and the absence marked by those places of lack is that of the hope of cure. The novel is given its rhythm by an alternate series of ellipses and moments of experience, particularly at the beginning. At the beginning of Chapter 3, the rhythm becomes less staccato, but the narrative continues as vignettes separated off from each other by double line spaces. Very often these double line spaces enact on the page a lack, a gap which we have just read in the narrative. So, for example, in the first chapter, the sections end with the Baby Harriett's laughter stopping suddenly, with her repeated question to her mother about the Pussycat rhyme, Harriett's sense of frustration that she can never stay awake to see her parents come into her room during the night, her desire for the blue egg, and her repression of her love for Ida because she cannot share the doll with Connie. Each section ends with the thwarting of an impulse to go beyond herself through desire or curiosity. The spaces on the page swallow this up; their emptiness contains, encloses, the absence of the fulfilment of these impulses. The narrative position is within these moments of silence and absence. Despite the fact that the novel is written almost entirely through Harriett's consciousness, the reader is able to occupy a place outside of this, beyond Harriett's knowledge, through a narrative device structured around silence and absence.

Towards the end of the novel, however, Sinclair introduces the character of Mona Floyd, Robin's niece, to whom Robin's wife has asked Harriett 'to be kind'.⁹⁶ Jean Radford suggests that this is the 'only redundant moment in the whole book' because it is 'didactic'.⁹⁷ However, this episode is experienced as intrusive not just because it preaches, but because it opens up the seamless enclosure and containment through which we read the rest of the novel. As Mona is introduced we are told that she has been visiting Harriett for the last three years, yet Harriett's acceptance of this relationship is at odds with her statement to Robin that she doesn't make new friends,⁹⁸ and with her awkward attempts at friendship with her neighbours later on. Not only does the episode undo expectations concerning the characters which have been set up for the reader, it attempts to fill up the gaps and absences which have previously structured the narrative position, creating a place where both narrator and reader can keep a safe distance. The reader too is pulled into the content of the novel. Up to this point, our pleasure in the novel, in perceiving the 'truth' of it, has been based on our 'reading' of the gaps and absences in relation to the content. In this scene, when Mona tells the older woman of her engagement, Harriett is shocked because the young man had been engaged to Mona's friend. The two women go on to have a conversation about their opposing views of love, duty and self-sacrifice. When Mona says to Harriett, 'You don't *mind*

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 143.

⁹⁷ 'Introduction' to *ibid.*, n.p.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 73.

my telling you the truth, do you?',⁹⁹ the previously 'silent', distanced position of the narrator is transgressed and placed within the speaking content of the novel. Communication is a place of ambiguity, containing as it does the place of cure and the place of contagion. For Freud and Breuer, at the beginning of the development of the talking cure, the potential dangers made necessary their reiteration of difference and separation - doctor/patient, doctor/nurse, writer/subject. *Harriett Frean's* contagious content and infected characters are kept at bay through a narrative voice which precludes either talking or cure. As a novel it is as tight-lipped as Harriett on her way to the operating table. Mona's story, repeating as it does Harriett's own, but with a substituted happy ending, shakes the narrative position, the integrity of the characters and the reader's sense of pleasure. It makes visible the structure of the rest of the novel - it is 'very nearly medical' in its reliance on safe distance, clean breaks, its resistance to the 'incidental' which may creep in and undermine.

Life and Death of Harriett Frean has been remembered and written about far more than any other work by Sinclair. Its view of the nineteenth-century family and its innovative form impressed contemporary readers and reviewers. Recent work has concentrated on it as evidence of Sinclair's place as an important modernist woman writer, and has provided genealogies of influence among her and the canonical high

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 147; emphasis in original.

modernists.¹⁰⁰ However, this remembering of Sinclair forces a reading of *Harriett Frean* as climax and her subsequent work as a falling away. The next seven novels, while Sinclair maintains the condensation of action and view, are far more conventional. She does return to the form in her final novel, *History of Anthony Waring* (1927), which seems to mirror *Harriett Frean* in much the same way that *Arnold Waterlow: A Life* (1924) mirrors *Mary Olivier: A Life* (1919). Again we follow the central character from early infancy to death in late middle age through a terse, elliptical narrative, the time period covered is similar, from the middle of the nineteenth century to the second decade of the twentieth, and the title revives the original of the earlier novel, *History of Harriett Frean*.¹⁰¹ However, *Anthony Waring's* differences and difficulties reveal the problematics of this form for Sinclair.

Tony Waring loses his mother when he is 4, and the rest of his life, and of course the novel, is given its rhythm and shape by his attempts to replace the lost mother through a number of love affairs. The first two end in betrayal on his lover's part. He then marries a woman, Ellen, who has nursed him through an illness, only to be made miserable by her persecution, her irritability and frustration whenever she is

¹⁰⁰ See Rebecca Kinnamon Neff, "'New Mysticism' in the Writings of May Sinclair and T.S. Eliot", *Twentieth Century Literature*, 26, 1980, pp. 82-108; Gillian Hanscombe and Virginia L. Smyers, *Writing for their Lives: The Modernist Women, 1910-1940*, London: The Women's Press, 1987; Bonnie Kime Scott (ed.), *The Gender of Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990.

¹⁰¹ See the manuscript of *Life and Death of Harriett Frean*, May Sinclair Collection, Department of Special Collections, University of Pennsylvania.

not actually nursing someone. Tony falls in love with the wife of a friend, the intelligent and sympathetic Jenny, but they give up their chance of happiness out of loyalty to their spouses. Near the end of the book, about eight years before Tony's death, his life is summarised.

The years passed and passed, with ever-shortening span. And as they passed each took from Tony something of that youth that had persisted in him. Under Mabel's betrayal, under Louise's unfaithfulness, under his father's death, under the loss of Jenny, under Ellen's incessant persecution, it had persisted. It had flamed up in his passion for Jenny and had been frustrated and thrust back. Now with every year it died a little. Five years, ten years. Sad, swift monotony of years.¹⁰²

What this summary suggests is a possibility, despite its thwarting through the circumstances of Tony's life. Tony's 'possibility' becomes an integrity of character which allows him a kind of resolution with his wife, a successful career that brings him pleasure, and, at the end, a desire for the peacefulness of death. In *Harriett Frean* the only cure is preventative - the reader must be kept away from the contagion of the novel. The impossibility of Harriett's position consists of the complete impossibility that she will admit need for 'cure'. She is not able to admit any kind of lack as it may give the lie to her denial of desire. Her refusal of language at the end of the novel is a sealing up broken only by her final words - 'Mamma'¹⁰³ - an expression of the most impossible desire, a return to the body of the mother.

¹⁰² May Sinclair, *History of Anthony Waring*, London: Hutchinson, 1927, p. 173.

¹⁰³ Sinclair, *Life and Death of Harriett Frean*, p. 184.

Anthony Waring is a 'weaker' novel in terms of modernist aesthetics because it suggests an elsewhere, a cure beyond the formal distancing of the text. Tony's death, despite his rejection of conventional religion, suggests a going beyond the disappointments of his life because he has knowledge and awareness. Although modernism has been defined as a search for a realm beyond 'the reach of culture',¹⁰⁴ in the central modernist texts this is both yearned for and constantly undermined. In modernist aesthetics, ultimately only writing itself offers this possibility. For Sinclair, however, the modernist experimentation of *Harriett Frean* is not enough. In the next chapter, the novels which chronologically surround *Harriett Frean* are read to explore the makeup of Sinclair's 'beyond' and to suggest why the critical privileging of the questions of modernism ignores some of the central concerns of her work.

¹⁰⁴ Lionel Trilling quoted in Perry Meisel, *The Myth of the Modern: A Study in British Literature and Criticism After 1850*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1987, p. 1.

Chapter 3

'On the side of the angels'?

Mysticism, psychoanalysis and evolution

Care of the spaces between came to be the privileged image of medicine's function in the first half of the twentieth century. The models of heredity, eugenics and social hygiene all depended on an ability to control that which is passed from one body to another, whether that be individual bodies, or classes, sexes, nations. As suggested in the previous chapter, this move involved an expansion of territory for the 'medical man', an increase in the knowledge that was deemed 'medical'. At the same time, models other than the medical began to suggest alternative ways of thinking about the individual, about what constitutes the individual and about what the achievements of the individual life could be. During the second half of the nineteenth century, the biological sciences became increasingly at odds with the discoveries of modern physics, and in turn non-scientific discourses struggled to choose between often contradictory scientific 'truths'.

In 1913 May Sinclair donated a considerable amount of money to the funding of a clinic in London, the Medico-Psychological Clinic, committed to the treatment of nervous disorders through an eclectic range of therapies. Its founder, Dr Jessie Murray, whom Sinclair had met through suffrage work, had studied under Janet in Paris and, at the time of the Clinic's foundation, was consulting physician at the Quinton Polyclinic for Treatment by Isotonised Sea Water in London.¹ The Report

¹ All information regarding the clinic comes from T.E.M. Boll, 'May Sinclair and the Medico-Psychological Clinic of London', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, 26 (4), 22 August 1962.

of the Clinic for 1918-1919, which seems to have been written by Sinclair,² suggests also the curative effects of the expansion of the medical.

The number of people suffering from functional nervous diseases in this age of 'nerves' was already sufficiently alarming, before the strain of the War period increased it to an extent, which only those working behind the scenes can grasp. The symptoms complained of are often of the sort which the lay mind is accustomed to regard as outside the province of medical aid....

Many persons whose lives are burdened by such symptoms suffer in silence rather than reveal them to their most intimate friends, or even to their physicians; either because they are afraid of being laughed at, or because they do not realise that there exists a department of medical science which has devoted years of research to the investigation and treatment of these distressing complaints.³

For Sinclair, lack of knowledge, silence, hiddenness are here clearly the causes of illness in the sense that secrecy continues it and openness leads to cure. As the reading of *Life and Death of Harriett Frean* in the previous chapter showed, illness and its contagiousness, actual or metaphorical, are caused by lack of knowledge, by Harriett's inability to see or resistance to seeing all facets of relationships, situations and motivations. In other novels, such as *Arnold Waterlow: A Life*, *The Allinghams* and *The Romantic*, it is explanation and revelation provided by a character, often a doctor, which resolves, which cures, at least partly, both the central character's dilemma and the novel itself. Of course, it is this insistence on revelation, on the clean, bare and stripped that impressed itself upon readers of novels influenced by the 'new psychology', both apologists and

² Ibid., p. 318.

³ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 319.

critics. Swinnerton's assessment, discussed above, suggests that what has been lost between James, and Sinclair and the other 'psychological' writers is mystery, 'explanations of personal vagary have ceased to be romantic and have become medical'.⁴ Harsher critics of the 'Freudian novel' also decry its lack of mystery - that it 'simplifies rather than complicates, detracts rather than enriches'.⁵ Katherine Mansfield, in a review of *Mary Olivier*, criticises its form - which aims to 'represent things and persons as separate, as distinct, as apart as possible' - for lacking that which made great writers in the past.

The great writers of the past have not been 'entertainment.' They have been seekers, explorers, thinkers. It has been their aim to reveal a little of the mystery of life. Can one think for one moment of the mystery of life when one is at the mercy of surface impressions?⁶

However, as my readings of the *Journal* and of *Harriett Frean* suggest, Sinclair's fictional texts display a far more complex engagement with the place of medicine, of methods and possibilities of cure and, indeed, of the nature of illness. Certainly early twentieth century medicine and more particularly psychoanalysis are central models for Sinclair as she illuminates the lives of characters struggling against their late nineteenth-century heritage. What I want to argue in this chapter is that,

⁴ Frank Swinnerton, *The Georgian Literary Scene: 1910-1935, A Panorama*, London: Hutchinson, 1935, p. 303.

⁵ Virginia Woolf, 'Freudian Fiction', in *A Woman's Essays*, edited by Rachel Bowlby, London: Penguin, 1992, p. 23; first published in *The Times Literary Supplement*, 25 March 1920.

⁶ Katherine Mansfield, *Novels and Novelists*, ed. by J. Middleton Murry, London: Constable, 1930, p.42; originally published in *The Athenaeum*, 20 June 1919.

despite this, mystery continues to be an important element in the make up of Sinclair's fictional worlds. In particular, Sinclair's novelistic use of mysticism goes beyond the analytical tools provided by psychoanalysis. So, it would seem, cure resides both in psychoanalysis's pulling into the light of the previously hidden, and the ultimate uncertainty and mystery propounded by early twentieth-century understandings of the mystical. This seeming contradiction and the tensions more generally between mysticism and psychoanalysis, I want to argue, are some of the reasons for the experience of difficulty when coming to her novels now.

Sinclair's *The Cure of Souls* (1924) is a comedy, the main butt of which is Canon Chamberlain, a man of God with a rural parish and a weakness for sensual pleasure. When his curate, Jackman, confesses creeping religious doubt because of the war, the Canon's advice that he stay in orders is really to protect himself from a heavier workload.⁷ Near the end of the novel a parishioner, Mrs Rivers, confesses an affair while her husband was away during the war. The Canon, distracted by the smell of his dinner wafting in from the kitchen, gives her disastrous advice which leads to his final realisation that 'he would have no peace or comfort until he had given up his cure of souls'.⁸ The Canon's pastoral and spiritual failings are clear. What is not so clear is what would constitute success, that is, where then does healing lie? Throughout the novel, Canon Chamberlain is compared with three characters, his sister, Charlotte Roper, the shrewd and agnostic local medic, Dr Lawson, and Agnes Lambert, single, ageing, and desperately attempting to

⁷ May Sinclair, *The Cure of Souls*, London: Hutchinson, 1924, p. 57.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 287.

sublimate her passion for the Canon into spiritual enthusiasm and strenuous parish work. Charlotte, we are told in the voice of the Canon, 'had an unholy insight into all intimate, fugitive, and secret things; other people's motives, for example', whereas he 'objected to poking his nose into places where he wasn't wanted, especially when the places didn't smell nice, and they seldom did'.⁹ Dr Lawson too is characterised by his 'pitiless diagnosis',¹⁰ and the Canon's understanding of Miss Lambert's spiritual zeal is set against Dr Lawson's diagnosis of anorexia and nervous breakdown.¹¹ The knot of things that make the Canon's nose wrinkle is made explicit through his reaction to reading Julian of Norwich: 'like all emotion, all passion, all mystery, like the spectacle of sickness and dying, it made him feel profoundly uncomfortable.'¹² That this radically undermines the Canon is clear - in *A Defence of Idealism* (1917), Sinclair calls Julian of Norwich 'that most exquisite and lovable of all mystics'.¹³ If what the Canon lacks is the ability to fulfil his role as healer, it is his discomfort provoked by the things listed in the quotation above that reveal this lack and, by implication, it is those things that are in some way related to healing. What is interesting about the list, however, is the ambiguous status of emotion, passion, mystery, sickness and dying. Are these markers of the pathology that the Canon should be curing or are they conversely themselves curatives? Indeed, this question preoccupied Sinclair, and it is a reading of her

⁹ Ibid., p. 12-13.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 22.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 202-3.

¹² Ibid., p. 193.

¹³ May Sinclair, *A Defence of Idealism*, London: Macmillan, 1917, p. 285.

attempts to answer it that concerns this chapter. In particular, these issues are at the heart of Sinclair's writing on the relationship between mysticism and psychoanalysis, a relationship that engrossed her but at the same time often made both her and her writing 'profoundly uncomfortable'.

Early twentieth-century interest in mysticism was shaped by and understood through the work of William James, that is, it was seen as experiential and psychological. The association of the mystical with the private and with interiority was unchallenged in James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1901-2): 'For James, "organized" or institutional religion was "second-hand" religion. True religion was to be found in the private, religious and mystical experiences of individuals.'¹⁴ In the preface to the first edition of her *Mysticism* (1911), Evelyn Underhill, a close friend of Sinclair, explains the structure of the first half of her work as an 'introduction to the general subject of mysticism. Exhibiting it by turns from the point of view of metaphysics, psychology and symbolism'.¹⁵ The mystical is seen as an individual experience which reveals something timeless, an unchanging truth, at the same time as pointing towards an improved future, as being a vehicle of progress.

mysticism avowedly deals with the individual not as he stands in relation to the civilization of his time, but as he stands in relation to truths that are timeless....

The second part of the book...is an attempt to set out and justify a definite

¹⁴ Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion*, London: Routledge, 1999, p. 21-2.

¹⁵ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism: A Study of the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness*, London: Methuen, 1911, p. vii.

theory of the nature of man's mystical consciousness: the necessary stages of organic growth through which the typical mystic passes, the state of equilibrium towards which he tends....

I understand [mysticism] to be the expression of the innate tendency of the human spirit towards complete harmony with the transcendental order...¹⁶

Underhill's understanding of mysticism here is clearly imbued with contemporary ideas of temporality and change, and an investigation of this is useful in understanding the role of mysticism at this time, and Sinclair's use of it in particular. For Underhill, while mystical truths are timeless, the experience of the individual mystic is progress through time towards stasis and harmony. Many scientific debates in the second half of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth concerned themselves with these issues of time and change - the age of the earth, gradualists vs catastrophists - and moved from the consideration of origins to speculations, hopeful or fearful, about the future. From the middle of the nineteenth century, evolution dominated both the public debates about science and non-scientific uses of scientific models. Darwin's evidence and conclusions were read as optimistic and ameliorative.

we may feel certain that the ordinary succession by generation has never once been broken, and that no cataclysm has desolated the whole world. Hence we may look with some confidence to a secure future of equally inappreciable length. And as natural selection works solely by and for the good of each being, all corporeal and mental endowments will tend to progress towards perfection.¹⁷

¹⁶ Ibid., p. ix.

¹⁷ Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species* [1859], Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 395.

For writers as different as Herbert Spencer and T.E. Huxley, what this gave certainty to was the exclusion of chance in nature, a faith in the 'cosmic process' as rational.¹⁸ If rationality is the order of the universe, then a falling away, ends that are less than origins, cannot be the overall pattern of nature. Ends, unless they are more than or are beyond their origins, become pathological. The certainty of an always existing beyond was, however, challenged by thinking in other scientific disciplines. Maxwell's theories on molecules rejected Darwinian change as an explanation for all natural laws.

No theory of evolution can be formed to account for the similarity of molecules, for evolution necessarily implies continuous change, and the molecule is incapable of growth or decay, of generation or destruction.¹⁹

At the core of the debates provoked by William Thomson's experiments with heat, and in particular of the anxiety caused by the second law of thermodynamics, is again this attempt to resolve the tension between origins and ends. Whether the theory of entropy contradicted the theories of evolution, what the possible end of the universe suggested about its beginning and about any kind of purposiveness, the implications of a universe of 'pure chance', what the debates suggested about scientific knowledge generally, these questions gripped scientists and the lay public well into the first half of the twentieth century. In *God and the Astronomers* (1933), an attempt to sum up for the lay person recent and current debates and

¹⁸ See T.E. Huxley, 'An Apologetic Irenicon', *Fortnightly Review*, 1 November 1892 (n.s.), 52: 527-71; Herbert Spencer, *First Principles*, London: Williams and Norgate, 1862.

¹⁹ James Clerk Maxwell, Address to British Association for the Advancement of Science, 1873, printed in *Nature*, 1873, VIII: 437-41.

their philosophical implications, W.R. Inge sees at their core the issues of time and causality. Modern science was undoing the assumption that there are such things as general laws by demonstrating their localised validity; Inge attempts resolution through the co-existence of biology and physics, entropy and evolution, reversible processes and irreversible, the mathematical universe and 'real Time'.²⁰ What remains problematic for many writers, however, is how much these macro models can be used to understand and explain the individual. What do origins imply about ends? Is it possible for effects to go beyond the limits of causes? What kind of 'telos' is possible for the individual life, and how much free will is available on the way there?

Anxiety around the scope of scientific knowledge and the attempt to understand the relationship between the physical and any kind of 'beyond' are particularly evident in the early history of psychoanalysis.²¹ The tensions then in trying to use psychoanalysis to understand mysticism, and further to understand 'timeless truths' are clear. But as I have argued above, the impulse to do so at this point is equally plain. A 'scientific' language through which to explain the mystical would rescue the 'beyond' from both degradation and charges of 'mentalism'. From the other side, the impulse to see the individual and spiritual life as having an existence beyond the material and organic is something that gripped Sinclair from her earliest

²⁰ W.R. Inge, *God and the Astronomers*, London: Longmans, 1933, especially Chapter 2.

²¹ According to Jung, the 'sexual theory' was for Freud a 'bulwark' against 'the black tide of mud...of occultism', C.G. Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, ed. Aniela Jaffé, trans. Richard and Clara Winston, New York: Pantheon Books, 1963, p. 150.

writings.²² In two articles in *The Medical Press* in 1916, Sinclair uses a review of Jung's *Psychology of the Unconscious* to write more generally about psychoanalysis, about the differences between Freud and Jung, to point out the limits of the 'New Psychology' while at the same time defending it from its critics. What is interesting is the way Sinclair negotiates between these via a notion of time, and in particular through an understanding of the way that healing intersects with time. The article concentrates on the process of sublimation, which Sinclair sees as a transcendence of libido. She makes it very clear that she understands the latter in the Jungian sense, and her explanation of this, given in an endnote, is a good place to start in understanding quite what psychoanalysis means for Sinclair.

I use this word (so repulsive to the idealist) in Jung's sense of creative energy, in which it is equivalent to the 'will to live' of Schopenhauer and von Hartmann, the 'need' or 'want' of Samuel Butler, the 'life-force' or 'élan vital' of Bergson, and, even to the Puritan, void of all offence.²³

'The Way of Sublimation', an unpublished manuscript, is the source of the material and argument of the *Medical Press* articles and repeats some of the sections on mysticism in *A Defence of Idealism*, but also develops and widens them towards the sublimative possibilities of religion, art, work and science.²⁴ In the unpublished

²² See May Sinclair, 'Margery', *Essays in Verse*, London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co., 1891.

²³ May Sinclair, 'Clinical Lecture on Symbolism and Sublimation, I', *The Medical Press*, 9 August 1916, p. 122.

²⁴ In a letter to her publishers in January 1916, Sinclair informs them that she has almost finished 'Some Questions and Conclusions', which was published as *A Defence of Idealism*, but needs another six months on 'the Way of Sublimation'. The second work she describes as a 'critical review of psychoanalysis (very critical, very anti-Freudian)'; emphasis in original. See letter from

work, Sinclair remembers her youthful passion for the philosophies of Schopenhauer and von Hartmann, in particular for the latter and his 'rather fine scheme of redemption on the lines of evolution'.²⁵ She sees the 'New Psychology' as confirming von Hartmann's theories, and indeed as both challenging philosophy's privileged status over psychology and reinvigorating philosophical debate. Idealist philosophy, psychoanalysis and evolution become for Sinclair a mutually supportive trinity, each confirming the other two.

Yet in all this, nowhere can you get away from the eternal, indestructible Libido. Sublimation itself is the striving of the Libido towards manifestation in higher and higher forms. The history of evolution is its history. You might almost say off-hand that the higher organism is the sublimation of the lower, the animal of the plant, the vertebrate of the invertebrate, the placental mammal of the reptile, the ape-man of the anthropoid ape, palaeolithic man of the Neanderthal and Heidelberg connecting link, civilised man of the primitive savage; and, when we come to the individual, the adult is the sublimation of the child.²⁶

Although Sinclair acknowledges immediately that it is 'not quite so beautifully simple as all that', and goes on to give exceptions to this neat picture, the rhetorical impact of this passage is far stronger than her subsequent qualifications. What is crucial for Sinclair is that the 'foundations' of both the species and the individual are inevitably transcended, that flesh becomes spirit, that desire is lifted into 'aesthetic appreciation' via religion, art, literature, science, that indeed '[t]he whole

May Sinclair to Macmillan, 4 January 1916, Macmillan Archive, University of Reading Library.

²⁵ May Sinclair, 'The Way of Sublimation', unpublished manuscript, Department of Special Collections, Annenberg Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Pennsylvania, f. 4.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 119.

evolution of man as a moral and social being has been a lifting of the libido out of the Unconscious into the Conscious and its direction by intelligence'.²⁷ Where then, we may wonder, is the need for psychoanalysis? Sinclair seems to suggest that the difficulty lies in the fact that the way of repression can be taken instead of sublimation. While the symbolic rituals of earlier societies fulfilled the functions of psychoanalysis in a 'rude' way - 'It is as if long ago man had said to himself: "Let me only *see* what it is I have to combat. I can face an honest enemy in the open, but I cannot fight this Beast in the Jungle, this secret thing that hunts me and destroys me in the dark"²⁸ - Victorian Puritanism failed to realise that you 'cannot attempt the destruction of the indestructible without some sinister result'.²⁹ It is the job of the analyst, Sinclair argues, to make sure this hidden material is sublimated rather than repressed, that it is transformed: 'what he has to get at is the "complex," the hidden thing, the beast that worries the psyche in its dark jungle, and is the source of all the trouble.'³⁰ The suggestion that it is hiddenness that needs to be cured, that the causes of illness are secret and buried things, seems to be played out in *Arnold Waterlow* also in relation to images of 'beastliness' and the question of where sex finds its 'proper place'. After Arnold's wife, Rosalind, leaves him for the 'genius' musician, Max Schoonhoven, he begins a friendship with

²⁷ Ibid., p. 120.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 120. For the associations of the 'Beast' terminology in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, see Lucy Bland, *Banishing the Beast: Sexuality and the Early Feminists*, New York: The New York Press, 1995, especially the introduction, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, 'The Beast in the Closet: James and the Writing of Homosexual Panic', *The Epistemology of the Closet*, Berkeley/Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 121.

Effie.³¹ They talk about books together, he finds her a job in his office, they disagree about metaphysics. After some time it becomes clear to Arnold that Effie is in love with him, and that he is beginning to love her. He wishes to remain faithful to his wife and, despite her unfaithfulness, has promised never to divorce her. Arnold stops going to see Effie. After several months, his employer and friend, Mr Godden, lets him know that Effie is ill. Arnold visits Effie that evening, and they begin a sexual relationship. As Arnold justifies this to himself, and later to others, Effie's health and happiness become his primary concern.

The thought of Effie's illness frightened him; all his resolutions went down before it. It was all very well to say 'Keep out of it.' He couldn't keep out of it if he tried. And he no longer wanted to keep out of it. He wanted to go into it, deeper and deeper in, to have happiness in having Effie. More than anything he wanted Effie to have happiness. He wanted to undo what he had done to her, to hold her in his arms and make her well.³²

When he goes to visit Effie, his ability to make her 'well' is made clear in the way she explains her illness. She has been ill, she says, because 'my heart does funny things...all the beats going together at once, and then stopping'.³³ Arnold asks her if she has seen a doctor, and the exchange that follows makes sense only if we understand this slipping use of both 'illness' and 'cure'.

³¹ In an early 'supernatural' story, 'The Intercessor', Sinclair uses the name 'Effy' for a ghostly child who died soon after witnessing her father's illicit sexual relations with a servant. As with Effie in *Arnold Waterlow*, this Effy's death ultimately allows union, love and resolution beyond the sexual. 'The Intercessor', *The Intercessor and Other Stories*, London: Hutchinson, 1931. The story was first published in the *English Review* in 1911.

³² May Sinclair, *Arnold Waterlow: A Life*, London: Hutchinson, 1924, pp. 244-5.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 246.

'What did he say?'

'Oh, I don't know. Nothing much. Don't look so unhappy, Arnold. I shan't die of it.'

'No,' he said fiercely, 'you shan't die. I won't let you.'³⁴

As this relationship develops, Arnold's mother, with whom he lives, and who is in many ways a reincarnation of Mrs Olivier, becomes suspicious. She begs Arnold to stop spending so much time with Effie. When she eventually realises that Arnold and Effie are already lovers, her criticism and Arnold's response continue to articulate the relationship through notions of illness and health, hiddenness and revelation. Arnold first accuses his mother of having a 'bestly view of it', explaining that it is his mother's orthodox religious morality that brings in notions of uncleanness and shame, not Arnold and Effie's behaviour.

'You take a thing that's absolutely clean and beautiful and sacred to me, and you expect me to be ashamed of it as if I'd been caught in some filthiness.'³⁵

When he talks about his mother's response with Effie, it is clear that what saves them is love, that is lack of self-interest; each is giving of themselves out of concern for the other. Specifically, their focus is not, as is Mrs Waterlow's, on the satisfaction of sexual desire: 'And she hasn't any idea how we love each other.'

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., p. 259.

She's forgotten what it feels like. She just thinks we're beasts.'³⁶ When Arnold is forced to discuss this with his sister, the prim and self-righteous Charlotte, the argument is again focused around the nature of the 'beastly'. For Arnold, it is those things that Charlotte holds to be proper and sacred, in particular the marriage tie, that seems sordid and debasing.

'You'll admit that Effie and I were not beasts before this happened. You'll admit that we wouldn't have been beasts if we had got married. Do you mean to say that the mere fact that we weren't able to get married turns us into beasts.... I think that feeling matters more than the bare act. In marriage or out of it, it's the quality of the love felt that matters.... If everybody felt as Effie and I feel there'd be no adultery and no divorce. And no need for marriage to protect people.'³⁷

It has been suggested by a number of critics that the formal innovations of much modernist writing in general, and a number of Sinclair's novels in particular, originate in a social critique of marriage and, therefore, the conventional marriage narrative.³⁸ As is clear from Jude's final analysis, what is at stake is the possibility of an experience, a relationship, beyond the cultural. It is 'the artificial system of things, under which the normal sex-impulses are turned into devilish domestic gins and springes to noose and hold back those who want to progress.'³⁹ Dead social

³⁶ Ibid., p. 264.

³⁷ Ibid., pp. 266-7.

³⁸ See Jane Eldridge Miller, *Rebel Women: Feminism, Modernism and the Edwardian Novel*, London: Virago, 1994 and Janice H. Harris, 'Challenging the Script of the Heterosexual Couple: Three Marriage novels by May Sinclair', *Papers on Language and Literature: A Journal For Scholars and Critics of Language and Literature*, 29 (4), Fall, 1993.

³⁹ Thomas Hardy, *Jude the Obscure* (1895), London: Penguin, 1978.

institutions retard progress because they do not take account of the maturing of humanity. The mature individual and the mature society will live according to the dictates of a well-regulated interiority. In *The Dark Night*, Sinclair's novel in verse published in the same year as *Arnold Waterlow*, the marriage of the heroine, Elizabeth, survives her husband's infidelity because at its core is something that exists in a beyond - beyond the present, beyond the couple's contradictory views of marriage, beyond the sexual, beyond the body. Before she meets Victor, Elizabeth establishes their connection through reading his poetry, seeing in it a reflection of her own mystical experiences.

How should I not know him?
We have gone a long way together, he and I,
Beyond space, beyond time;
He has been with me in the still, mysterious places....⁴⁰

In the second part of the article on Freud and Jung, published in the next issue of *The Medical Press*, Sinclair reveals the dangers in the psychoanalytic project and, as her imagery above shows, the vexed question of where the sexual instincts are located in all this becomes clear. Sinclair begins by making clear, via a discussion of Adler, the distinctions between Freud and Jung. She quotes Jung from the introduction to *Analytical Psychology*:

The method of the Zürich school is therefore not only analytic and causal, but also synthetic and prospective, in recognition that the human mind is characterised by *causae* and also by *fines*.⁴¹

⁴⁰ May Sinclair, *The Dark Night*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1924, p. 16.

⁴¹ Jung quoted in May Sinclair, 'Symbolism and Sublimation - II', *The Medical*

Jung, then, does not remain in the place of causes, but sees analytical psychology as ameliorative beyond the cure of the individual.

We moderns are faced with the necessity of rediscovering the life of the spirit; we must experience it anew for ourselves. It is the only way in which to break the spell that binds us to the cycle of biological events.⁴²

Cause and effect, the mechanism of evolutionary time, can be made progressive rather than regressive by the intervention of psychoanalysis as long as it is ends-directed, as long as its aim is not just analysis but primarily cure. Where Freud is lacking, Sinclair argues, is that he 'made no solid bridge between his psycho-analysis and his psycho-therapy'.⁴³ Conversely,

It is clear...that Professor Jung is on the side of the angels, battling for those delicate hopes and aspirations of humanity he is supposed to have trampled under foot....

The conclusion is that only the creative, the enlightened and progressive will is holy. All transgression is regression. Even the creative will, if directed out of the path of social well-being and of progress, is, so far, unholy....

Psycho-analysis would seem to be the best, if it is not the only method of conversion - the turning round for the ascent towards the sun and the other stars.⁴⁴

Press, 16 August 1916, p. 142.

⁴² C.G. Jung, 'Freud and Jung: Contrasts', 1929, *Collected Works*, vol. 4, edited by Sir Herbert Read, Michael Fordham and Gerhard Adler, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966, p. 339.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 144.

By now, I think, it is clear how many problems Sinclair has had to negotiate in order to produce her defence of psychoanalysis. In the quotes above from *The Cure of Souls*, there is an implicit link between the 'unholy' and odour. In making these two synonymous, Sinclair is following very deeply ingrained western hierarchies and spatial models. In the hierarchies of sense of Plato, Aristotle, Thomas Aquinas and Hegel, for example, the sense of smell is either near the bottom, privileged only over touch and, sometimes, taste, or actually at the bottom.⁴⁵ If the senses are what negotiate the interaction between self and what we believe to be not-self, the crossing of barriers, the incorporation of the other, involved in smelling is the most difficult to police. Taking the link between hierarchy and spatiality further, in *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), Freud suggests that the change from all-fours to an upright position for humanity involved a switch from smell to sight as the privileged sense, and this he links with his idea of 'organic repression' paving the way for civilisation. Vision becomes 'higher' morally and literally. Further, in his attempt to draw parallels between ontogenetic and phylogenetic processes,⁴⁶ Freud suggests that the 'necessary' repression of the infant's valuation of excreta has its species analogue in experiencing the smell of menstrual blood as sexually exciting.

The organic periodicity of the sexual process has persisted, it is true, but its

⁴⁵ Anthony Synnott, *The Body Social*, London: Routledge, 1993, pp. 128-45.

⁴⁶ These terms originated with Haeckel, the German biologist, from whom Freud took them. Mary Olivier reads Haeckel (see below), as does Dr Rowcliffe in *The Three Sisters*. For a discussion of his inclusion in the latter, see the Afterword.

effect on psychical sexual excitation has rather been reversed. This change seems most likely to be connected with the diminution of the olfactory stimuli by means of which the menstrual process produced an effect on the male psyche. Their role was taken over by visual excitations, which, in contrast to the intermittent olfactory stimuli, were able to maintain a permanent effect.... The diminution of the olfactory stimuli seems itself to be a consequence of man's raising himself from the ground, of his assumption of an upright gait; this made his genitals, which were previously concealed, visible and in need of protection, and so provoked feelings of shame in him.⁴⁷

The processes of evolution, of progress, effect the repression, not just of the body, but of sex, and of women as *the* sex. If the 'holy' is that which, beginning in the 'lower', has been transfigured into the 'higher' - 'the piece of instinctual satisfaction which each person had renounced was offered to the Deity as a sacrifice, and the communal property thus acquired was declared "holy"⁴⁸ - then the 'holy', the transfigured, must in some sense depend on the 'unholy', the untransfigured. If the whole process, for Freud, for Jung, for Sinclair, is one of gradual progressive change, there must be a point where the unholy changes into the holy. What changes it, at what point this occurs, what can help it along, if indeed anything does change, are, I think, questions at the heart of the theoretical disagreements between Freud and Jung, and are at the heart of understanding, of reading with respect and sensitivity, some of Sinclair's fictional texts. Jung's revisions of psychoanalytic theory in terms of the fundamental place of sexuality in the aetiology of illness, and his rejection of the Oedipus complex as causal, are

⁴⁷ Sigmund Freud, 'Civilization and its Discontents' (1930), *Civilization, Society and Religion*, Penguin Freud Library, vol. 12, London: Penguin, 1991, p. 288-9.

⁴⁸ Sigmund Freud, "'Civilized" Sexual Morality and Modern Nervousness' (1908), *Civilization, Society and Religion*, Penguin Freud Library, vol. 12, London: Penguin, 1991, p. 39.

well documented.⁴⁹ In a piece from 1929, Jung explains his differences from Freud in terms of his wider vision, and in particular in terms of his revisioning of the place of sexuality within the causal processes of the psyche.

I see in all that happens the play of opposites, and derive from this conception my idea of psychic energy.... Freud began by taking sexuality as the only psychic driving force, and only after my break with him did he take other factors into account. For my part, I have summed up the various psychic drives or forces - all constructed more or less *ad hoc* - under the concept of energy, in order to eliminate the almost unavoidable arbitrariness of a psychology that deals purely with power-drives.... By this I do not mean to deny the importance of sexuality in psychic life.... What I seek is to set bounds to the rampant terminology of sex which vitiates all discussion of the human psyche, and to put sexuality itself in its proper place.⁵⁰

Jung goes on to suggest that sexuality as described and analysed by Freud is a symptom, not an origin, it is that which 'shows itself whenever a patient has reached the point where he needs to be forced or tempted out of a wrong attitude or situation'.⁵¹ This 'over-emphasized sexuality' needs to be redirected, and the analyst needs a proper vision of it in order to effect this.

Generally it is being caught in the old resentments against parents and relations and in the boring emotional tangles of the 'family romance' that brings about the damming up of life's energies, and this stoppage unflinchingly manifests itself in the form of sexuality called 'infantile.' It is not

⁴⁹ See in particular the letters of May to July 1912, in Sigmund Freud and C.G. Jung, *The Freud/Jung Letters*, edited by William McGuire, translated by Ralph Manheim and R.F.C. Hull, abridged by Alan McGlashan, London: Penguin, 1991, pp. 267-75.

⁵⁰ C.G. Jung, 'Freud and Jung: Contrasts' (1929), *Collected Works*, Vol. 4, pp. 337-8.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 338.

sexuality proper, but an unnatural discharge of tensions that really belong to quite another province of life. That being so, what is the use of paddling about in this flooded country?⁵²

Without this sense of proportion, this sense of the position and relation of things, the analyst, rather than curing, causes illness.

For my part, I prefer to look at man in the light of what in him is healthy and sound, and to free the sick man from just that kind of psychology which colours every page Freud has written. I cannot see how Freud can ever get beyond his own psychology and relieve the patient of a suffering from which the doctor himself still suffers.⁵³

For Sinclair too there is an offensiveness in things not being in their proper place. In her article in *The Medical Press*, however, this sense of impropriety is directed against Jung, although the logic of her complaint echoes his.

And here in this region of art and religion I find my only ground of complaint against Professor Jung. As if he were still obsessed, in spite of himself, with what formulas of Freud he has not swallowed, he handles poetry and metaphysics as if they were nothing but primitive myths, and the Upanishads and the Psalms of David as if they were Miss Miller [Jung's case study]. I beg his pardon most humbly if I am mistaken, but he seems to me to do this. And it offends me.⁵⁴

What Sinclair is objecting to here is that, at this point, Jung does not seem to be acknowledging that, through sublimation, ends can be purified of the 'prurient

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 335.

⁵⁴ Sinclair, 'Symbolism and Sublimation - II', p. 143.

mire' of origins.⁵⁵ The future can be without the residue of the past. Of course, overall Sinclair's article is far more sympathetic to Jung than to Freud, but her conclusion does make a general defence of the 'New Psychology'. The images she uses in this section are similar to Jung's quoted above, and both of them unite associations of cleanliness as opposed to dirt with the upright human body as representing a moral hierarchy, and a repudiation of a sense of swamping.

We cannot expect the prudes and the hypocrites to welcome the New Psychology; nor those 'all-too-spiritual' people whose secret we have at last surprised. But at least we can ask them to refrain from vilifying its pioneers who have done spade work through unutterable filth in order that our feet and the feet of all who come after us may be clean.⁵⁶

The issues of health or illness, evolution or regression, flesh or spirit, time or infinity, form the core of another piece of writing by Sinclair, published the year after the articles in *The Medical Press*. In *A Defence of Idealism* (1917), Sinclair writes her apology for Absolute Idealism, making use of but going on to reveal the inadequacy of Samuel Butler's pan-psychism,⁵⁷ Henri Bergson's Vitalism, William James' pragmatism and Bertrand Russell's 'new realism'. As with the physical sciences, the metaphysical debates in the first decades of the twentieth century

⁵⁵ This phrase is used in an editorial in the issue that contained the second part of Sinclair's article. It argues that the article can help doctors to see the subject 'from a clean, wholesome and scientific point of view' as opposed to 'wallowing in prurient mire', Editorial, *The Medical Press*, 16 August 1916, p. 139.

⁵⁶ Sinclair, 'Symbolism and Sublimation - II', p. 145.

⁵⁷ For a detailed reading of Sinclair's use of Samuel Butler see Susanne Stark, 'Overcoming Butlerian Obstacles: May Sinclair and the Problem of Biological Determinism', *Women's Studies*, 21 (3), 1992, pp. 265-83.

concerned themselves with questions of change. Absolute Idealism, a branch of philosophy which developed after Kant, particularly in Hegel, was introduced into Britain in the main by F.H. Bradley, and was popular in Britain from about 1865 until the mid-1920s. While taking many forms, what remains constant in all versions is that there is only one ultimately real thing, which is spiritual in nature. In the introduction to her book, Sinclair defends Idealism against charges of soft-mindedness from the pragmatists. Compared to the 'phantasms' of modern physics, she argues, 'It looks as if the only things that stand firm in this universe are Ideas.'⁵⁸ Butler and James get the causal relationship between memory and the individual wrong way round; Bergson falls into contradictions because he assumes appearances - space and time - to be reality. The 'Realistic Pluralism' of Russell and others poses a more rigorous threat, but as a belief system it has no 'vision', makes no room for the truths of 'instincts and feelings'.⁵⁹ Her inclusion of a chapter on mysticism springs from these; for Sinclair, both logic and instinct lead to that which is unchanging, absolute, real.⁶⁰ Cause and effect, time and infinity, illness or wholeness - these are resolved through and in a beyond.

In the chapter on 'The New Mysticism', Sinclair attempts a renegotiation of these opposites, in order to save Absolute Idealism from the taint of 'magic', and mysticism from both the dismissal of materialism and what she sees as the sexual reductiveness of psychoanalysis. The chapter is the book's penultimate, placed

⁵⁸ May Sinclair, *A Defence of Idealism*, p. xiii.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. xiv.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. xvii-xviii.

there because, after discussing certainties and uncertainties in the preceding chapters and coming to some sort of resolution, there is 'beyond' not yet explored, a place 'outside these certainties, outside the rigour of the game'.⁶¹ Mysticism, she argues, is this beyond where different methodologies are needed for understanding. It is not so much that here 'two and two do not make four', rather that 'two and two do not exist, their behaviour is irrelevant'.⁶² Sinclair begins her investigation by paraphrasing the words of mysticism's critics - that mysticism is regressive, that it is too linked with 'our submerged and savage past'.⁶³ In answering this charge, she again knits together the materialism of evolutionary theory and the assumptions of a teleological metaphysics.

If Mysticism has had an ancient history, it must have been evolved. It must have become what it once was not. It cannot now be what it once was. All the same, the stages of its evolution must be linked together by one and the same thread.⁶⁴

In the remainder of the chapter, Sinclair attempts a rescue of the essential truth of the mystical experience while criticising and explaining mysticism's historical contingencies. The chapter is aiming for a synthesis between Underhill's 'timelessness', the mystic as the experiencer of the infinite within the finite, and a Freudianism for which all mystical experience is repressed and rechannelled sexuality. The mysticism of the West, then, is overall a failure because Christianity

⁶¹ Ibid., p. 272.

⁶² Ibid., p. 273.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 274.

is, in Sinclair's terms, not spiritual enough. Its obsession with dualism means that, paradoxically, its repudiation of the world and of the flesh knits it more tightly to the 'unclean' and the 'profane' - it represses rather than transforms. In its attempt to go beyond the material it lacks the one thing 'necessary to its own salvation - the simple, sacramental attitude to life'.⁶⁵

And it is precisely this atonement *manqué*, this failure of a spiritual religion to be spiritual enough, that is at the root of half the evil and the sickness and the suffering of the modern world.⁶⁶

This failure on the part of the dominant worldview of the West gives Sinclair some sympathy with 'the specialist in morbid psychology', with the view that mysticism is no more than 'hysterical neurosis' and that contemporary 'saints and mystics' are nowhere so plentiful as in the Salpêtrière.⁶⁷ The mystics of the western tradition are on the whole regressive, inward-looking and suffer from spiritual pride.

The mystic seeks God, for the most part, not in the outer world of art and science and action, but in the darkest and most secret recesses of his own soul. And it is precisely this darkness and secrecy that the psychoanalyst has the most reason to mistrust.⁶⁸

Within the evolutionary paradigm prevalent during this period, and employed by Sinclair in her discussions of psychoanalysis and mysticism, there seems to be some

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 280.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 284.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 289-90.

tension around what exactly is the fuel for the development of the soul. What constitutes 'progress'? If change is inevitable, what decides whether that change is an advance or a regression? Are mystical experiences evidence of humanity's transfiguration or of its pathology? While Evelyn Underhill, in *Mysticism*, attempts to explain 'mystical ill-health' as a kind of failure of the body to keep up with the reaching of the spirit towards 'a higher consciousness, towards which the race slowly tends',⁶⁹ Sinclair uses Pierre Janet's notions of 'dissociation' to synthesise these two seeming contraries. This she paraphrases as:

the break between one idea, or group of ideas, and its normal context and logical connections; the cutting of one psychic state, or groups of states, from the stream of consciousness itself.... all lapses and losses of a present memory or aptitude..., all perversions of instinct and desire, all suppressions, obsessions and possessions, all cases of double or multiple personality, are states primarily and essentially of dissociation. And that detachment, which is the one indispensable condition of mystical experience, is, primarily and essentially, a state of dissociation.⁷⁰

So then, for Sinclair, all mystical experience consists of a state that could be described as morbid or pathological. Janet's term was coined as a description of abnormal states. Here, however, Sinclair shifts the possibilities of the notion of abnormal consciousness. What has begun as seeming complicity in psychology's understanding of mystical experiences ends up as a reading, not of mysticism through psychology, but psychology through the metaphysical. The mystic's journey is dangerous, says Sinclair, but it is not the state of dissociation that is dangerous so much as what is done with it.

⁶⁹ Evelyn Underhill, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 290.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 290-1.

what happens to him [the mystic] will depend on whether this region beyond normal consciousness is only the too well-trodden territory of the past or also the 'untrodden country' of the future. In the one case his mystical experience will be a sinking downwards or a turning backwards: in the other it may be a rising upwards or a going on.....

I think that...we shall find that there are some grounds for supposing that the country of abnormal consciousness stretches forwards as well as backwards, and belongs every bit as much to our future as to our past.⁷¹

Abnormal consciousness becomes for Sinclair, rather than pathological, supernormal, a state where things can be experienced and revealed beyond the surface reality of everyday life. The experiences of abnormal consciousness are evidence of a beyond, a future life that is higher than both the present or the past. So for Sinclair, dreams are not only 'the conquered life of the childish soul' and 'a disguised fulfilment of a repressed wish', as she quotes Freud, but, as she suggests Freud 'might have said with equal truth',

Dreams are a piece of the yet unconquered life of the soul that is to be. Or: The dream is a fulfilment of the repressed desire to transcend our normal powers, seeing that in our dream-consciousness we *do* transcend them. In every dream adventure we make experiments with the soul that is to be.⁷²

Most importantly for Sinclair, it is in these dissociated states that 'for moments of most uncertain duration Ultimate Reality is discerned'.⁷³ Existing at the same time as Sinclair's repeated use of evolutionary paradigms, at the same time as the

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Ibid., p. 293; emphasis in original.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 301.

models of rising, of hierarchy, of ascending into the future, is the moment within the present which takes the subject outside time, beyond the linear progress of the individual biography, of history, and into a timelessness, into the eternal. This seeming paradox, a belief in progressive change through linear time and a concentration on privileged moments of timelessness, is clearly demonstrated in a number of Sinclair's interwar novels. *Mary Olivier: A Life* (1919) and *Arnold Waterlow: A Life* (1924) are, as the titles indicate, modernist bildungsroman following the protagonists through from early infancy to middle age. In each novel, the characters experience generational pressure through both an enforced adherence to the tenets of orthodox Christianity and, in particular in *Mary Olivier*, anxiety around the nature and effects of heredity. In both novels, the movement of the subject towards wholeness is expressed again and again in terms of illness and health, and in terms of threats to the coherence of the individual such that reviews of *Mary Olivier* described the novel as a 'symptom' and suggested that it read 'like a list for a clinic'⁷⁴ or 'a fictional transcription of...Defense of Idealism [sic]'.⁷⁵ Health and illness, progress or regression, engagement in the temporal or withdrawal into the eternal, human relations and self-determination - Sinclair's aim in *Mary Olivier* and *Arnold Waterlow* appears to be a balancing of these opposites through the moments of harmony, of ecstasy, of atemporality. In a review of Jung's *Psychological Types* in 1923, Sinclair paraphrases Jung's understanding of the function of the symbol.

⁷⁴ Discussion of *Mary Olivier: A Life*, Edna Kenton and 'jh', *Little Review*, 6 (8), December 1919, pp. 29, 31.

⁷⁵ Babette Deutsch, 'Freedom and the Grace of God', *The Dial*, 15 November 1919, p. 442.

The symbol stands in both worlds, it is the bridge between the conscious and the unconscious, between the dark primitive instincts and the enlightened intellect. It is thus the mediator and reconciler, the healer of psychic strife.⁷⁶

This definition could work just as well for Sinclair's 'moments of ecstasy', and a closer look at the symbol in Jung is revealing of the function of these moments in her narratives.⁷⁷ The notion of the symbol is a cornerstone for Jung's thinking on religious experience, and he summarises his definition of the term in *Psychological Types* (1921).⁷⁸ First, symbols are distinguished from signs - signs point towards something that is known, symbols towards something that is relatively unknown. Second, a symbol has to be a 'living thing'. Once its relevance is gone it will be replaced by another, more vital symbol. Third, whether something is a symbol or not depends upon the attitude of the person perceiving it. What is necessary is a 'symbolical attitude', that is an attitude that sees beyond the surface and the superficial to a deeper level of meaning. Further, in terms of the religious experience, the symbol acts as a 'bridge', not just between conscious and unconscious, but between the experiencing subject and the 'numen'. The experience as a whole is constituted by a double strand:

⁷⁶ May Sinclair, 'Psychological Types', *The English Review*, May 1923, p. 438.

⁷⁷ Indeed, elsewhere Sinclair is explicit about seeing literature as a privileged place for the symbolic as a bridge, for example in her discussion of William Blake in 'The Way of Sublimation', ff. 16-20.

⁷⁸ Quoted in Michael Palmer, *Freud and Jung on Religion*, London: Routledge, 1997, pp. 129-30.

This, then, is the first strand of Jung's analysis of religious experience: a religious experience is identified as a numinous experience, and a numinous experience is in turn connected to the psychic processes of the experiencing subject. In the second strand, however, Jung turns to consider religious experience as an effect produced by the experienced object, by the numen or archetype itself which impacts upon individuals through the medium of symbols.⁷⁹

Neither the subject nor the object cause the experience; rather, the symbol holds the two strands together in some kind of correspondence. Increasingly, Jung's researches made it necessary for him to posit the existence of acausal relations, leading eventually to his theory of synchronicity.⁸⁰ The desire for something beyond the rigid framework of cause and effect explains the paradoxical way in which Sinclair's 'moments' both represent a core of subjectivity for her two central characters, while at the same time being experienced as an other, a gift, in the way they both take place within narrative and resist the causal suppositions of narrative.

For the adolescent Mary Olivier,

She could never tell when it was coming, nor what it would come from. It had something to do with the trees standing up in the golden white light....

She would go back and back to the place where it had come, looking for it, thinking that any minute it might happen again. But it never came twice to the same place in the same way.⁸¹

At the beginning of the novel, Mary Olivier is a baby living with her parents and

⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 139.

⁸⁰ See Roderick Main, 'Introduction', in C.G. Jung, *Jung on Synchronicity and the Paranormal*, London: Routledge, 1997.

⁸¹ May Sinclair, *Mary Olivier: A Life* (1919), London: Virago, 1980, pp. 93-4.

three elder brothers in Essex. The dynamics of Mary's 'family romance' are made explicit in the first few pages. For the child Mary, the focus of her life is her mother. In the break between the first and second sections of the novel, Mary moves from being taken into her mother's bed when she has had a nightmare to being taken into the dining room where her family are having dinner. The dream-status of Mary's vision before she goes to her mother's bed is ambiguous. The description of it could well be of her father washing, and its detail and the fear it inspires in Mary set up the terms for the novel's exploration of sexuality, masculinity, femininity, the body, and revelation.

The man stood in the room by the washstand, scratching his long thigh. He was turned slant-wise from the nightlight on the washstand so that it showed his yellowish skin under the lifted shirt. The white half-face hung by itself in the darkness. When he left off scratching and moved towards the cot she screamed.⁸²

When compared to Mary's subsequent visions in the novel, this sight can be understood as their negative. Although on one level it could be seen as similar - something is revealed to Mary which was unknown to her before, while at the same time mystery remains - this vision provokes fear in Mary and abjection in the reader. What Mary sees, presumably, is her father, believing himself to be unobserved, scratching and washing his body unself-consciously because it is his body. Through Mary's eyes, because of her inability to place it within an ordinary context, the vision is structured around images of uncleanness, death and dismemberment. Although the man is washing, the colour of his skin, the distortion

⁸² Ibid., p. 4.

of his face and his scratching all connote repulsion. After Mary screams, she is taken into her mother's bed, where she has a very different experience of the parental body.

Mamma took her into the big bed. She curled up there under the shelter of the raised hip and shoulder. Mamma's face was dry and warm and smelt sweet like Jenny's powder-puff. Mamma's mouth moved over her wet cheeks, nipping her tears.

Her cry changed to a whimper and a soft, ebbing sob.

Mamma's breast: a smooth, cool, round thing that hung to your hands and slipped from them when they tried to hold it. You could feel the little ridges of the stiff nipple as your finger pushed it back into the breast.

Her sobs shook in her throat and ceased suddenly.⁸³

The change to the second person in the third paragraph increases the intimacy of the moment. The use of 'you' suggests the universality of the experience of the mother's body - we the reader are addressed. What also shifts in this passage as a whole are the senses used. Mary's experience of her father was indeed a vision; it is what she sees that provokes fear. In the passage above, smell and touch take over. Yet the privileging of these senses leads to a more rhythmic response from Mary, as opposed to the initial scream, and eventually to calm. The last line above is the end of the first section of the novel, and what immediately follows at the beginning of the second reiterates the place the mother's body has taken, its relationship with revelation and beauty.

The big white globes hung in a ring above the dinner table. At first, when

⁸³ Ibid.

she came into the room, carried high in Jenny's arms, she could see nothing but the hanging, shining globes. Each had a light inside it that made it shine.

Mamma was sitting at the far end of the table. Her face and neck shone white above the pile of oranges on the dark blue dish. She was dipping her fingers in a dark blue glass bowl.⁸⁴

Mary's vision of her mother's action of washing, repeating the previous vision of the father, is mediated by the experience of her mother's breasts and the transfiguration of that into an image of beauty, revelation and enlightenment in the description of the dining room lights. In the description of the second paragraph, the mother's face is literally transfigured between the light of the globes and the beautiful colours of the fruit and dishes. The rest of the scene makes quite clear Mary's rejection of her father. He offers Mary some of his wine, and the smell sickens her. She strains to get out of his arms.

She could feel her body swell and tighten under the bands and drawstrings of her clothes, as she struggled and choked, straining against the immense clamp of his arms. When his wet red lips pushed out between his beards to kiss her she kicked.⁸⁵

Contrasted with this is her devotion to, first, her mother and, second, the eldest boy, Mark. In the first few pages of her novel, Sinclair has created images that enmesh moments of ecstasy, the nature of transcendence, the place of beauty, and a psychoanalytic understanding of familial relations. However, what these first scenes imply is indeed a tension between the models that structure Sinclair's vision

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 6.

- between regression and progress, the higher and the lower, between revelation as sacred and the revelation of the profane. If Mary's vision of her father in front of the washstand is understood as an experience of the abject, the consequences of this make very clear the tensions and paradoxes that criss-cross the narrative. Mary's vision of her father is mixed with her dream of a man who 'had only half a face'.⁸⁶ What she sees by the washstand repulses her; it results in the expulsion from her body of both a scream and tears. It is clear that what Mary has actually seen is her father's penis - she has been forced into an awareness of sexual difference. However, of course, the abject, that threat to the subject's coherence and unity, is linked rather to the body of the mother.

The abject confronts us, on the other hand, and this time within our personal archeology, with our earliest attempts to release the hold of *maternal* entity even before ex-isting outside of her, thanks to the autonomy of language. It is a violent, clumsy breaking away, with the constant risk of falling back under the sway of a power as securing as it is stifling.⁸⁷

It is the recognition of sexual difference that propels the child into the Oedipal complex, which is in turn resolved through the repudiation of the mother and the imaginary and a turning toward the father and the symbolic. The acquisition of language is constitutive of subjecthood. As we saw above, however, it is the mother's body which calms and soothes Mary, and through which Mary experiences not abjection, but ecstasy. The revelation of the father's body provokes

⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 3.

⁸⁷ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1982, p. 13.

abjection, the revelation of the mother's prefigures the moments of ecstasy that are to be of such significance in the novel.⁸⁸ How is it that in *Mary Olivier* the experiencing of the father's body as abject makes sense?

In her article in *The Medical Press*, it is clear that Sinclair is well aware of the position of the mother in terms of the individual's psychic development.

A large portion of Professor Jung's book is given up to the myth of the return to the mother for rebirth, and to the conflict with the mother. That conflict begins in childhood and is waged most fiercely on the threshold of adolescence. It must be fought to a finish, and the child must win it or remain for ever immature. If the parent wins, ten to one the child becomes a neurotic.⁸⁹

What is not dealt with is the resultant turning toward the father. What is established by the Oedipal moment is *difference*; what is aimed at through Sinclair's understanding of ecstasy is an experience of unity, of *sameness*. The mystery that is revealed, that breaks through into the world of linear time, of separation and difference, is the 'Ultimate Reality' of 'Oneness'. Paradoxically, 'oneness' is both regressive (pre-Oedipal) and the goal (mystical revelation).⁹⁰ A

⁸⁸ See Terry Phillips, 'Battling with the Angel: May Sinclair's Powerful Mothers', in Sarah Sceats and Gail Cunningham (eds) *Image and Power: Women in Fiction in the Twentieth Century*, Harlow: Longman, 1996, p. 133.

⁸⁹ Sinclair, 'Symbolism and Sublimation - II', p. 144.

⁹⁰ The novelist Romain Rolland, in his critique of Freud's aetiology of the religious impulse in *The Future of an Illusion*, accuses Freud of ignoring as a motive for religion the sense of eternity. The individual can 'rightly call oneself religious on the ground of this oceanic feeling alone'. See Sigmund Freud, 'Civilization and Its Discontents' (1930), Penguin Freud Library, vol. 12, 1991, pp. 251-2.

number of repeated images in both *Mary Olivier* and *Arnold Waterlow* are evidence of the attempt to keep these things - revelation of the abject and revelation of ecstasy, sameness that negates the self and sameness that fulfils it - apart, while their explicit gendering threatens collapse. In both novels, the revelation of Ultimate Reality and the experiencing of it as ecstatic are figured through visions of nature, culturally gendered as feminine, and linked in the novels with maternity and nurturance. Death, on the other hand, and the corpse, that 'utmost of abjection',⁹¹ are continually linked with masculinity. In both novels, as the father of each character is dying, the description of the deathbed recalls Mary's vision from her cot.

At first Arnold saw nothing but the red light and the heaped white mound under the bed-clothes, and on the white pillow the red blur that was his father's face. The air of the room was thick and warm and foul.⁹²

* * *

He lay stretched out on the big yellow birchwood bed. The curtains were drawn back, holding the sour smell of sickness in their fluted folds.

Papa's body made an enormous mound under the green eiderdown. It didn't move....

Papa's head was thrown stiffly back on the high pillows; it sank in, weighted with the blood that flushed his face. Around it on the white linen there was a splatter and splash of mustard and water. His beard clung to his chin, soaked in the yellowish stain. He breathed with a loud, grating and groaning noise.⁹³

⁹¹ Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 4.

⁹² Sinclair, *Arnold Waterlow*, p. 105.

⁹³ Sinclair, *Mary Olivier*, p. 188.

Is sameness an origin that needs to be transcended, or the ultimate goal and achievement? The tensions generated by this can be seen in Mary's subsequent moments of ecstasy. Her second experience of a moment of beauty, of ecstasy, happens when she is 7 years old, during the walk home from an outing with her nurse, Jenny. On this occasion, along with the various elements mentioned above, at the centre of the moment is an experience of autonomy, an intimation of the possibilities of self-determination that begins to make explicit the tensions in Mary's relationship with her beloved mother. Mary walks quickly and leaves Jenny behind her in order to pretend 'that she had gone out by herself.'⁹⁴ She looks around her, and begins to see her surroundings with new eyes, including her parents' house, Five Elms.

A queer white light everywhere, like water thin and clear. Wide fields, flat and still, like water, flooded with the thin, clear light; grey earth, shot delicately with green blades, shimmering....

She saw the queer white light for the first time and drew in her breath with a sharp check. She knew that the fields were beautiful.⁹⁵

She reaches the house and sees it, its windows, walls and door, its gate, its front path, its garden, 'for the first time'.⁹⁶ Mary goes into the drawing-room, maintaining her vision, where her mother is sorting beads into trays. Mary kisses her mother and goes to look out of the window.

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 48.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 49.

Her happiness was sharp and still like the white light.

Mamma said, 'What did you see when you were out with Jenny to-day?'

'Nothing.'

'Nothing? And what are you looking at?'

'Nothing, Mamma.'

'Then go upstairs and take your things off. Quick!'

She went very slowly, holding herself with care, lest she should jar her happiness and spill it.⁹⁷

Mary does not communicate her experience, but the passage is ambiguous about whether she is unable or unwilling. The novel in general is spare with narrative comment. At the end of this section the links between Mary's utterances and actions must be inferred. Up in her room, Mary continues to look out of the window.

She looked and looked. Her happiness mixed itself up with the queer light and with the flat fields and the tall, bare trees.

She turned from the window and saw the vases that Mamma had given her standing on the chimney-piece. The black birds with red beaks and red legs looked at her. She threw herself on the bed and pressed her face into the pillow and cried 'Mamma, Mamma!'⁹⁸

Mary's happiness is finally 'spilled' through a remembering of the demands made upon her by affective relationships, significantly her most important, most difficult relationship, that with her mother. The moment of intensity, of revelation is just

⁹⁷ Ibid., pp. 49-50.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 50.

that, a moment, because it is impossible for Mary to seal herself off from the demands that others make. It becomes clear that Mark's advice to her early in the novel - 'Nothing matters...as long as you get what you want'⁹⁹ - is contingent. Mark, despite his intense relationship with his mother, goes against her wishes in order to join the army and go to India. For Mary, the experiences of adulthood, the increasing possibilities of autonomy and self-determination, are continually undermined, made tortuous, through her mother's influence.

The moments of ecstasy function as stages on the road to individuation, and in turn a relationship with the Absolute, as a stepping out of the chain or net that is family or biological heritage. In *The Dark Night*, when Elizabeth's husband leaves her for her young ward, she is desperate to achieve again the mysterious joy of being flooded by God. The state evades her, however, because of her experience of physical, sensual loss.

My heart knocks at my breast,
And struggles like a live soul shut in a dead body;
My body is weighted with death...
I cannot undo the clasp of the clinging flesh;
In the thick net of the senses I am bound...¹⁰⁰

When Elizabeth does enter again the mystic state, it is during the 'dark night', in a place of mystery, outside and beyond the tangible, sensual world, beyond her jealousy and grief.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 60.

¹⁰⁰ Sinclair, *The Dark Night*, p. 97.

In the stillness of the dark night
I am made one with him
Again;
The thin walls of thought,
And the webs of space and time
Are broken,
And there is nothing any more
That shall come between God and me.
I have only to strip my soul naked,
Only to loosen the clasp of the clinging flesh,
To slip from the shining net,
And I have him there at my will.¹⁰¹

In *Arnold Waterlow* too a mystical experience lifts him outside and beyond, begins the sealing of his identity. As a very young child, Arnold goes for a walk along the Esplanade with his nurse, Martha, and his brother and sister. The general meaning of his walks here, and a specific experience he has there, work around both an enmeshing of order, of linear progression with a sudden moment outside time, and an undermining of the former by the latter. Once through the wicker gate at the beginning of the Esplanade, 'you had to go on and on with the Esplanade till you came to the white wicket-gate at the end'. Along the way, '[s]ecret doors that opened and shut without door-knobs' are set at regular intervals along the wall.

Whichever end he started at he had to count every door up to seven, for the horror of their mystery increased, and culminated with the seventh door. Once he had passed the seventh door he was safe....

That is why he was always naughty at the wicket-gate and refused to speak when he was spoken to. For when they spoke to him it put him out in his calculation, and he had to run back and count the doors all over again to

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 112.

make sure.¹⁰²

Arnold's naughtiness and the 'mournful isolation of his sin'¹⁰³ are ostensibly caused by his child's game. However, there is the sense too that a desire for a secret life, to be an individual apart from the family, cause him to play a game that he knows will estrange him from the others. On a particular morning, on their way back along the esplanade, Arnold had lost count of the secret doors, but was in fact approaching the seventh, when 'it happened'. Arnold looks up at the sky, and sees something 'tremendous' where the river meets the sky. The 'sky-wall' Arnold sees begins to move, and as it does 'something in Arnold's head shifted and gave way'.¹⁰⁴

He couldn't have passed the seventh door yet; but he didn't care. He had forgotten all about the seventh door. He stood still, all by himself, in the middle of the causeway, looking up.

'Whatever is the matter with the child?' said Martha. 'What's he staring at now? What do you think you see?'

'God,' said Arnold.¹⁰⁵

Martha, his brother and sister and, when they get home, his mother all chastise Arnold for his presumption, his blasphemy and for sticking to his 'lie'. This incident, however, makes clear the double thread that is to run through his life - his

¹⁰² Sinclair, *Arnold Waterlow*, p. 19.

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 20.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid.

devotion to his selfish and manipulative mother and his desire for a spirituality beyond Christian orthodoxy - and the tension between them. What's revealed in particular is how secrecy is made a necessary part of Arnold's discoveries; but more than that, that mystery will, paradoxically, be part of those discoveries.

He saw him without any surprise. The thing was entirely natural and simple. He quivered with the excitement of it as he had sometimes quivered when he heard his mother's voice suddenly or saw her face.

In secret he was sure of it.....

They put him to bed. He had not asked or received forgiveness from Mamma, yet he lay there in perfect happiness, absolved from sin. He said to himself, 'I don't care. I know I saw God.'¹⁰⁶

As Mary Olivier grows up, however, an easy assessment of our response as readers to her mother-daughter struggles becomes harder. Near the end of Book 2, named 'Childhood', when Mary is 12, Jimmy Ponsonby, Mark's friend from the Military Academy at Woolwich, spends each weekend with the family. Mary knows she experiences a kind of approval from him, and wants to extract more. Seeing him outside from a top-storey window, she calls to him and climbs onto the ledge. As he looks up, Mary performs one of her tricks for him: 'she lowered herself, and hung for one ecstatic moment, and drew herself up again by her arms.'¹⁰⁷ Mary displays for Ponsonby one of her moments of happiness, of ecstasy. In response, he rushes up the stairs and tells her she is not to do it again. Following this, they go for a walk and he kisses her - 'Her heart thumped violently and she

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., pp. 20, 22.

¹⁰⁷ Sinclair, *Mary Olivier*, p. 86.

had a sudden happy feeling.'¹⁰⁸ At the end of this section she has established a special relationship with Jimmy - he is the only person apart from Mark who is allowed to call her Minky. In the next section, the final one before the opening of the next book, 'Adolescence', Mary's mother begins again to criticise Mary for her voracious reading. Mary's attempt to assert her right to read, her right to privacy and to follow paths of thought chosen by her, is destroyed by her mother's undermining of her nascent and fragile desire. Jimmy, her mother tells her, was frightened by the sight of Mary reading Locke.

'He wasn't. He was most awfully pleased and excited.'

'He was laughing at you.'

'He wasn't. He wasn't.'

'Of course he was laughing at you. What did you think he was doing?'

'I thought he was interested.'

'He wasn't, then. Men,' Mamma said, 'are *not* interested in little book-worms. He told me it was very bad for you.'

Shame again. Hot, burning and scalding shame. He was only laughing at her.¹⁰⁹

Mary's autonomy, her moments of ecstasy and revelation, the pleasure she finds in intellectual curiosity, is, then, made shaky, not just by her mother, or even her mother's use of Jimmy's affection and later on Mrs Olivier's opposition to any sexual possibility for Mary, but also those sexual possibilities themselves. At the

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 87.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 88; emphasis in original.

end of the previous section, Mary is deprived of another of her ecstatic moments when Jimmy makes her promise never to hang from the window-ledge again, 'Because I'm going to India when I've passed out, and I want to find you alive when I come back.'¹¹⁰ Mary's existence becomes the object of someone else's subjectivity. Indeed, throughout the novel, the separateness of Mary's existence, her moments of ecstasy and her thirst for knowledge, to know the truth, her devotion to her mother and her longing for sexual satisfaction, are enmeshed, are themselves increasingly difficult to separate out into easily understood, linear, progressive threads. The wholeness, the unity of Mary's experience, by the end, can be expressed only in the intensity of her 'secret happiness'.¹¹¹ So Mary comes across Spinoza through the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, and learning about Spinoza's god rather than the Christian god 'was like coming out of a small dark room into an immense open space filled with happy light'.¹¹² From the same source she learns about Pantheism and at the same time recognises the manoeuvres of the 'Encyclopaedia man' to put her off it, seeing it as indicative of 'attempts to transgress the fixed boundaries which One wiser than we has assigned for our intellectual operations.'¹¹³ Mary remains attracted to it, however, to its breaking down of the division between subject and object, inside and outside, yet paradoxically realises that it means estrangement as she cannot tell her mother about Pantheism.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 87.

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 93.

¹¹² Ibid., p. 100.

¹¹³ Ibid.

She could feel already the chill of an intolerable separation. She could give up Jesus, the lover of her soul, but she could not give up her mother. She couldn't live separated from Mamma, from the weak, plaintive voice that tore at her.

She couldn't do it.¹¹⁴

Eventually, as Mary struggles with her mother over whether or not to go through with Confirmation, Christianity becomes associated for her with images that elsewhere in the novel, and by other characters, stand in for the 'shame' of sexual desire.

This - this religion of theirs - was filthy; ugly, like the shiny black covers of their Bibles where their fingers left a grey, greasy smear. Filthy and frightful; like funerals. You might as well be buried alive, five coffins deep in a pit of yellow clay.¹¹⁵

So, too, when Mary breaks off her engagement with Maurice Jourdain, while realising that her relationship with him has begun something in her, desire, passion, a yearning for something more, her 'reveries' are presented to us entwined with her intellectual curiosity, her longing for moments of intensity, her privileging of the 'truth' over the temporal.

Somebody. If you lay very still and shut your eyes he would come to you....

They talked to each other. Her reverie ran first into long, fascinating

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 103.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 114; emphasis in original.

conversations about Space and Time and the Thing-in-itself and the Transcendental Ego. He could tell you whether you were right or wrong; whether Substance and the Thing-in-itself were the same thing or different....

He could understand your wanting to know what the Thing-in-itself was. If by dying to-morrow, to-night, this minute, you could know what it was, you would be glad to die. Wouldn't you?¹¹⁶

In any reading of the novel, to pick out one meaning, to pick out one thread, is a distortion, a misreading of the meanings of the novel. So, for example, another knot of these threads exists around the treatment of heredity in the novel, and the way it intersects with Mary's sexuality, her individuality more generally, her place within her family, and with her own knowledge. In an early scene, Mrs Olivier takes Mary and her brother Roddy to the City of London Cemetery to put flowers on the graves of their paternal grandparents. They take one aunt with them, but the other, Aunt Charlotte, who suffers from a kind of erotomania and is eventually sent away to an asylum, has been left behind as it 'excited her too much last time'.¹¹⁷ As the children walk through the cemetery, they see a funeral taking place. Mary is frightened by it, and her vision of it is expressed in images of disease and contagion, and indeed is reminiscent of scenes of sexual revelation both in *Mary Olivier* and other novels. What links them is the suggestion of a secret that is already known, knowledge that is somehow familiar, yet whose articulation is resisted in an effort to keep 'clean'.¹¹⁸ In a number of Sinclair's novels images and expressions revolve around an interchangeability of coffins and beds. Both Mrs

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 227.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 53.

¹¹⁸ See *Arnold Waterlow*, pp. 72-5, *Life and Death of Harriett Frean*, pp. 24-5.

Waterlow and Mrs Olivier tell their children that they would 'rather see you in your coffin' than marry a disapproved-of lover. This association of beds, coffins, death and sex too is about the relationship between beginnings and ends. In her discussion of Samuel Butler in *The Defence of Idealism*, Sinclair's sees his theory as an attempt at solving the problem of time and relation between past and present. Looking back, what 'causes' the individual is for Butler the accumulation of ancestors; looking forward, what keeps the individual from non-existence is their continuation in, their 'causing' of their own offspring. However, for Sinclair, individuality is an assertion against the past which makes clear the existence of a self over and above one's heritage. What has to be surmounted is both the nature of our origin in the reproduction of the species and our future non-existence - 'To be degenerate is to fail to add the priceless gift of individuality to the achievement of the race.'¹¹⁹ It is to remain a child, to go backwards. Mary's revulsion in the cemetery unites death, familial ties, heredity and the unclean as things to be transcended.

The land and the thorn bushes and the black door reminded Mary of something she had seen before somewhere. Something frightening....

In the middle of the ploughed-up plain she saw people in black walking slowly and crookedly behind a coffin that went staggering on black legs under a black pall. She tried not to look at them.

When she looked again they had stopped beside a heap that Roddy said was the second plague pit. Men in black crawled out from under the coffin as they put it down. She could see the bulk of it flattened out under the black pall. Against the raw, ochreish ground the figures of two mutes stood up, black and distinct in their high hats tied in the bunched out, streaming weepers. There was something filthy and frightful about the figures of the mutes. And when they dragged the pall from the coffin there was

¹¹⁹ Sinclair, *The Defence of Idealism*, p. 39.

something filthy and frightful about the action.¹²⁰

They reach their grandparents' grave and Mary realises that half of it is empty, has been set aside for her parents. This realisation, coming after her vision of death in the pauper funeral, and the sense of familial pressure made clear by the absence from the scene of Aunt Charlotte, because of madness, and her grandparents, because of death, climaxes in a feeling that is to be a feature of Mary's struggle toward individuation - 'An appalling curiosity and fear possessed her.'¹²¹ So her later intellectual journeys entwine these two strands - her individual will and desire for knowledge, and her anxiety about her place in a chain of being. Spinoza, Kant and Hegel provide guidance for her search for 'the Thing-in-itself', provide an explanation for her moments of 'Reality' more satisfactorily than does her reading of eastern mysticism, which she sees as 'like lying on a sofa and dropping laudanum, slowly, into a rotten, aching tooth'.¹²² Mary begins to fear that she has inherited her Aunt Charlotte's excessive 'dream of loving and being loved',¹²³ as her own fantasy life seems to be out of control. She reads Spencer, Haeckel, Maudsley and Ribot in order to understand the science of heredity, to know how much danger she is in. Even here, the threads of meaning knot further. It is partly her passion for Lindley Vickers, a friend of her brother Dan whom she discovers kissing a girl from the village, that has made her fear for her sanity, yet he is the

¹²⁰ Sinclair, *Mary Olivier*, p. 54.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, p. 56.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p. 277.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, p. 288.

one who has told about these writers. Her interest in the intensity of life shifts from Idealist philosophy to her reading of heredity.

If it hadn't been for Aunt Charlotte and Lindley Vickers she might have died without knowing anything about the exquisite movements and connections of the live world....

For the first time she saw the ugliest facts take on enchantment, a secret and terrible enchantment....

There was something in Heredity. But the sheer interest of it made you forget about Papa and Mamma and Aunt Charlotte; it kept you from thinking about yourself.¹²⁴

Although Mary's reading leads her to the conclusion that '[t]here were no independent, separate entities, no sacred, inviolable selves',¹²⁵ she is comforted by the realisation that this is as much true for others as it is for herself - 'Mamma and Papa were no more independent and separate than you were', everyone was 'caught in the net'.¹²⁶ However, reading of these authorities is in itself an assertion of autonomy over mother's orthodox Christianity, an assertion of something that distinguishes Mary from her mother.¹²⁷

¹²⁴ Ibid., p. 289.

¹²⁵ Ibid., p. 290.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ This is comparable to the short story 'Heaven' in *The Intercessor and Other Stories*. The main character, Mr Sessions, has been frustrated in life because of being 'willed' to do things by his powerful mother. After his death, he meets his mother in heaven. The story consists of Mr Sessions being led, eventually, from his mother's heaven into his own. These two heavens are distinguished mainly in the treatment of evolution vs creation. In his mother's heaven, Darwin, Spencer and Huxley are made to repeat the story of creation (p. 89). Mr Sessions, on the other hand, believes in recapitulation theories: 'First it's a unicellular organism, then it's like a tadpole, then it's like a lizard, then it's like a

As Mary gets older, in her early thirties, the object of her passion switches. From her moments of ecstasy, out of her control, coming and going as they please, to her desire for sexual satisfaction, enmeshed as it is with anxiety about Aunt Charlotte's fate, writing becomes central. The 'queer, sudden, uncertain ecstasy' has not appeared to her for some years, and her hereditary destiny is still uncertain, but she is happy still, her writing makes her 'unutterably happy'.¹²⁸

But that ecstasy and this happiness had one quality in common; they belonged to some part of you that was free. A you that had no hereditary destiny; that had got out of the net, or had never been caught in it.¹²⁹

In the final book of the novel, 'Middle age', these threads and strands are brought together through Mary's love affair with Richard Nicholson, and in particular in the relationship between her passion for him and her moments of ecstasy. At the beginning, before Mary realises she is in love with him, she selects a walk for them to go on, at first thinking that she rejects certain paths because of their associations with previous lovers, or with her now-dead brothers.

No. She was humbugging herself. Not up Karva because of her secret happiness. She didn't want to mix him up with *that* or with the self that had felt it. She wanted to keep him in the clear spaces of her mind, away from

fish, then it's like a series of gargoyles. Why, even when it's born it's like a monkey' (p. 88).

¹²⁸ Ibid., p. 299.

¹²⁹ Ibid., p. 312.

her memories, away from her emotions.¹³⁰

At this point, which she wants to keep pure, whether her secret happiness or Richard, is unclear. When he returns to London after his stay in the village, Mary vacillates between wanting him back and thinking that his 'perfection' might be spoiled by a return. She considers her other lovers, how often a return has involved disappointment, betrayal, rejection.

Perhaps those were the perfect things, the things that would never pass away; they would stay for ever, beautiful as you had seen them, fixed in their moment of perfection, wearing the very air and light of it for ever.

You would see them *sub specie aeternitatis*. Under the form of eternity....

She was not sure she wanted Richard Nicholson to come back.¹³¹

As it becomes clear what their relationship is, as Mary's resistance becomes less and less, the language used to describe the 'secret happiness' seeps into the descriptions of her time with Richard.

The silence made everything stand out with a supernatural clearness....

Sitting there so still he had the queer effect of creating for both of you a space of your own, more real than the space you had just stepped out of. There, there and not anywhere else, these supernaturally clear things had reality, a unique but impermanent reality. It would last as long as you sat there and would go when you went. You knew that whatever else you might forget you would remember this.¹³²

¹³⁰ Ibid., p. 335.

¹³¹ Ibid., pp. 340-1.

¹³² Ibid., p. 343.

Within the models of cure that psychoanalysis and mysticism provide for Sinclair, love plays a significant, if ambiguous part. As argued in the previous chapter, while Freud was clear about how his cure of hysteria differed from previous ones - 'Essentially, one might say, the cure is effected by love'¹³³ - letting 'love' into the analytic relationship involved a certain loss of control for the analyst. In her chapter on 'The New Mysticism', Sinclair includes then excludes sexual passion from her list of those things through which moments of ecstasy are experienced.

Not only all religious experience is full of it, but every poet, every painter, every musician knows the shock of contact with reality. The vision of absolute beauty while it lasts is actually a laying hold on eternal life. I would say that every lover knows, but that sexual passion is the source of our most profound illusion.¹³⁴

What does that 'but that' mean? Does the lover experience profound reality, along with the mystics and the artists, or do they experience profound illusion? Sinclair's ambiguity on this point here is an indication of the semantic wandering that 'love' performs in the worlds of her novels. In *Arnold Waterlow*, Arnold's central experience of a moment of ecstasy, of the Ultimate Reality of the beyond, is preceded by a moment of sexual desire. He and Effie are on holiday in Devon, intensely aware of their happiness and of the passing of time - "'Only just a little of the first day gone'.... 'Thirteen more whole days'".¹³⁵ They lie in the garden in the

¹³³ *The Freud/Jung Letters*, 6 December 1906, p. 50.

¹³⁴ Sinclair, *A Defence of Idealism*, p. 302.

¹³⁵ Sinclair, *Arnold Waterlow*, p. 269.

afternoon sun, and Arnold experiences the beginning of desire. Effie goes into the house, and for Arnold '[s]omething suddenly shifted in his brain...everything changed'. As he looks out over the hills and the river on the horizon, his sense of space and time changes.

At the same moment he had a sense, overpowering and irrefutable, of Reality, no longer hidden behind them, but apparent in them, the strange secret disclosed; Reality breaking through, shining through all the veils of sense; Reality present before him and in him, and stretching beyond him, out of time and out of space, as it was in eternity.

God was here, made visible in the hills and the green fields and the white shining river.... His desire of Effie passed into his desire of God, it was stilled and satisfied in the unearthly bliss. Then the whole vision went out like a light extinguished....¹³⁶

Arnold's moment of vision originates in a moment of sexual desire; as he tells Effie later, 'I can't separate it from you.'¹³⁷ As the days go by, however, Arnold begins to doubt the vision, to think that maybe if the vision originates in passion it is nothing more than physical desire. He compares his experience to his vision of God on the Esplanade years before.

Wasn't the one as childish and insignificant as the other? Wasn't all an illusion built up out of his desire for Effie? Was it anything more than the passion of the flesh, transfigured and glorified?¹³⁸

Here Arnold has to decide between two visions of causal linearity. Is there a

¹³⁶ Ibid., p. 272.

¹³⁷ Ibid., p. 273.

¹³⁸ Ibid.

difference in kind between cause and effect, or is the difference merely an effect of temporality? For Arnold, his experience is eventually understood not just as change through time, a metamorphosis in which the later state retains something of the former, but rather as a going beyond.

And his certainty rose up in him and answered: Transfigured and glorified by *what?* Why and whence that divine, supersensual quality, if it was not the passion of the flesh transcended - passed over, through its momentary suppression, into the passion for God?¹³⁹

However, the resolution of the novel breaks apart, indeed is dependent upon a shattering, of this neat fitting together of sexual desire and a mystical beyond. Arnold's wife, Linda, returns from Europe, having left her lover. Arnold has always promised that he would take her back and is forced to choose between Linda and Effie, whose love 'was the only perfect thing he had ever known'.¹⁴⁰ His decision, and in particular its spiritual consequences, are explained in terms of distance and separation that unpick the earlier relations between passion and mystical experience. Arnold experiences his decision as particularly agonising because his feeling for each woman is a mixture of desire and pity, and it is the latter that is most ensnaring - 'when desire was done with [pity] would still be there'.¹⁴¹ While desire breaks down clear boundaries between lover and beloved, passion is momentary, passing, whereas pity, which has 'the power of passion',¹⁴² is a

¹³⁹ Ibid., p. 274; emphasis in original.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 296.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., p. 300.

¹⁴² Ibid., p. 298.

connection with the other that can last for ever. What becomes crucial in Arnold's decision is reaching a place of 'beyond', expressed in Sinclair's familiar language of separation.

Away from Rosalind and away from Effie he could think, calmly and clearly. He was alone with his real self, the calm, clear self, beyond passion, that would decide the matter for him without pity, without desire, without remorse.¹⁴³

As he considers the situation from this place, he realises he knows already what is to be done: 'His course had been determined for him long ago by that other self, in some high, spiritual place, beyond pity and beyond desire.'¹⁴⁴ Arnold tells Effie that he must leave her and take Linda back. They have a week left together, and again their relationship is structured around an intense awareness of time, of the passing of time. During this week, Effie catches a cold that, during their last night together, becomes much worse and turns into pleurisy. Effie will not make any effort to recover, and when Arnold tries to use his will to cure her he comes up against the 'blank impenetrable wall' of Effie's will.¹⁴⁵ Sinclair again uses a familiar construction to say and not say at the same time that Effie has chosen to die. As she lies in bed on the first day of her illness:

her white face had a look of composure and resignation, almost of

¹⁴³ Ibid., p. 301.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 302.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 310.

satisfaction, as if she said, 'After all, I haven't gone. I haven't left you.'¹⁴⁶

Although Arnold's exercise of will does not save Effie, what it does is begin to bring him toward the mystery he has been seeking throughout the novel.

He had not found it, the secret and mysterious thing; it had found him; suddenly it came down to him through the darkness, rushing; it mingled with him and possessed him. His innermost self went out to meet it, and closed with it and was at peace. Secret and mysterious, like a thing known long ago and forgotten, it came back to him and he received it with a shock of recognition.¹⁴⁷

Effie dies, but what is made clear in the year between her death and Arnold and Linda's reconciliation which ends the novel is that her death was in order to avoid being separated from Arnold, and that Arnold's grief takes him into the mystery for which he has been searching. Mary Unwin, a minor character who functions as a source of metaphysical wisdom, provides Arnold with a way of thinking about his lover's death.

'She was saved from the agony of separation, and she saved you and Linda.... And *you* were saved from a terrible struggle with yourself.'¹⁴⁸

More than this, Mary suggests that Effie's death was *the* way of attaining for both of them that 'something beyond happiness' that they had both seen as the meaning

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 305.

¹⁴⁷ Ibid., pp. 309-10.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 314; emphasis in original.

of their lives.

'All your life you've been trying to know God. That's been the end of all your thinking. You're so made that nothing but God will ever satisfy you. What if losing Effie were the only possible way for you to find him?'¹⁴⁹

Back at home, Arnold starts to sleep in a room that he had never shared with Effie.

Night after night, when he stripped his soul, he had put from him the thought of Effie. Her image had never gone with him into the darkness. Reality was beyond all passion but the immortal passion for Itself; it was beyond grief, beyond despair.¹⁵⁰

Gradually, 'It' comes to Arnold, and it is both the ultimate beyond and the end of Arnold's searching, and significantly his discoveries end in mystery.

The God he had found last night was more than the object of his metaphysical thinking, the Thought of thought; more than the Reality seen in the sudden flash of his mystic vision; closer than thought or seeing, he was the Self of self, the secret, mysterious Will within his will.¹⁵¹

In *Mary Olivier* also the going beyond separates Mary from the object of her physical passion. Indeed, eventually, her experience of the beyond relies on this separation. On the evening that Richard tells Mary he wants to marry her, she returns home after dinner to find her mother distressed at her absence. As her

¹⁴⁹ Ibid., pp. 314-15.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., pp. 315-16.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., p. 316.

mother bends down to pick up a dropped handkerchief, her face changes and Mary realises that she is having a stroke. As her mother is recovering, Mary worries that Richard, without knowing it, may be willing her mother's death: 'His mind and will might be getting at her all the time...'¹⁵² Mary decides to counteract this, to use her own will to keep her mother alive. Mary feels compelled to struggle against Richard's will, and this struggle produces a revelation and a sense of union that rely implicitly on a drawing away from Richard, on a communion elsewhere.

Going and coming back; gathered together; incredibly free; disentangled from the net of nerves and veins. It didn't move any more with the movement of the net. It was clear and still in the blackness; intensely real....

Willing was *this*. Waves and waves of will, coming on and on, making your will, driving it through empty time..... 'The time of time'; that was the Self.... Time where nothing happens except this. Where nothing happens except God's will. God's will in your will. Self of your self. Reality of reality....

Something was there.¹⁵³

This moment, during which Mary saves her mother, experiences her most real self and has an intimation of the reality of the beyond, of God, is dependent on transcending the body - 'disentangled from the net of nerves and veins'. Not only the body as a single biological organism, however. The image of a net is a repetition of the way Mary has thought of heredity, her realisation that all are trapped in a net of influence, of the past. For Mary, sexual love paradoxically has the same effect as her moments of ecstasy, an experience of a reality beyond the

¹⁵² Sinclair, *Mary Olivier*, p. 350.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, pp. 351-2.

surface, beyond 'other people's time',¹⁵⁴ and at the same time reinscribes her within an individual history, the heritage of her Aunt Charlotte, which threatens to rob her of all individuality. But again paradoxically, her assertion of her will, of herself, has the effect of aiding her mother's recovery, her mother who has constantly denied her individuality, and in particular her sexuality. This experience which results from trying to keep her mother 'safe' from Richard recommences Mary's experience of the infinite, and it is this that eventually resolves, indeed replaces, her love affair with Richard. Mary visits Richard in London for a break some time after her mother's stroke. During this visit they begin a sexual relationship, only for Mary to return home early after receiving a telegram saying her mother is ill again. Back at home with her mother, Richard visits Mary, and she tells him that she has achieved happiness through her experience of the infinite, that she can accept the impossibility of their relationship. Indeed, 'giving Richard up and still being happy'¹⁵⁵ is for Mary the final confirmation of the reality of her experiences. She wills this experience for Richard - and he too eventually recognises the peace that comes from the renunciation of sexual desire. Mary's year of being 45, which she had so feared as the year in which she was likely to become as mad as Aunt Charlotte, is rather a year of peace and happiness.

After her mother's death and a year of travel, Mary takes a new house. In the garden of her house, she finally experiences again the ecstasy that first came upon her when she was 7.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 371.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 367.

Just now, in the garden, when the light came through the thin green silk leaves of the lime tree, for a moment, while she sat looking at the like tree, time stood still....

She saw that the beauty of the tree was its real life, and that its real life was in her real self and that her real self was God. The leaves and the light had nothing to do with it; she had seen it before when the tree was a stem and bare branches on a grey sky; and that beauty too was the real life of the tree.¹⁵⁶

At the end of the novel, the misery, fear and boredom that have dominated Mary's life are escaped through her moments, through the ecstasy that exists elsewhere, which enables transcendence: 'There was always a point where she could get out of it and into this enduring happiness and peace.'¹⁵⁷ It is this experience that stands in for, unifies, takes the place of all the other aspects of Mary's story. She is aware of the fact that she would not wish her mother alive again as that would mean an end to living within this peace; it enables her to be happy and at peace despite giving up Richard; it provides the structure and rhythm for her life in middle age in a way she had always assumed insanity would.¹⁵⁸ Mary realises that she lost this awareness of Ultimate Reality, of her true Self, between adolescence and middle age because of a reliance on others for happiness, whereas lasting happiness had to come 'from somewhere inside yourself'.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 373.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 375.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 377.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 378.

The problematics of this resolution, the tension between temporal change and transcendence, are even starker in Sinclair's later work. In *Far End* (1926), a writer and his wife resolve their marriage after the estrangements of war and his adultery; the 'beyond' that resolves the novel is in fact a return. The Far End of the title is their original country home, and their return to it is figured as healing and resolution. Cure is effected through the effacement of time.

And they knew themselves again, they knew each other. No longer could they be hidden and secret, each from each....

They had gone back far, they were back in the time of their first marriage, before the War, before Maurice and Cecily died. For with their coming to Far End the gap of time was filled, their present was joined on to their past, and all between was as though it had never been.¹⁶⁰

At the resolution of both *Mary Olivier* and *Arnold Waterlow* is Sinclair's assertion, paradoxical and contradictory as it is, of a 'beyond' which heals, cures and makes safe the spaces between. In the next two chapters, her construction of this beyond through different discourses is examined: first, in the contradictory set of experiences provoked by the First World War; and second, through discourses of death popular both before and during the war.

¹⁶⁰ May Sinclair, *Far End*, London: Hutchinson, 1926, p. 252.

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Chapter 4

'She in her "armour" and he in his coat of nerves'

The re-writing of chivalry in Sinclair's war novels

One of the First World War's many paradoxes was that, at a moment of intense need for cures of many kinds, even the fantasy of the wholeness that cure implies seemed to be passing away. Paul Fussell, in his *The Great War and Modern Memory*, quotes a letter of Henry James written in August 1914.

The plunge of civilization into this abyss of blood and darkness...is a thing that so gives away the whole long age during which we have supposed the world to be, with whatever abatement, gradually bettering, that to have to take it all now for what the treacherous years were all the while really making for and *meaning* is too tragic for any words.¹

The rhetoric of social progress, seen in the social purity movements, early feminism, working-class political activity, health reforms and social hygiene, becomes just that - a rhetorical structure lacking substance. As it becomes clear that the relationship between signs and what they mean is the opposite to what had been assumed, words, unsurprisingly, fail. Fussell's argument, which has shaped subsequent analysis of war literature, is that the upheaval and pain caused by the war made irony the most appropriate literary response. What other tool could represent the shattered connections between things as they seem and things as they are, at the same time relying on the safety of coolness and distance? The modern awareness of the incongruity of things and the use of an ironic distance to both

¹ Henry James quoted in Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* [1975], Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 8; emphasis in original.

acknowledge this and survive its acknowledgement is, Fussell argues, one of the most important legacies of the 1914-18 war.² Subsequent analyses of women's writing during the war (completely absent from Fussell's work) have negotiated with and revised this thesis. For Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, irony and bitterness were a specifically masculine mode, antithetical to and often prompted by the liberation many women experienced through the war.³ While the war released and energised female eroticism and created many more all-women spaces,⁴ it 'virtually completed the Industrial Revolution's construction of anonymous dehumanised man, that impotent cypher who is frequently thought to be the twentieth century's most characteristic citizen'.⁵ The dead soldier, the image of despair and bitterness for male writers, became for women a new beginning:

There is...an emblematic good soldier buried (or sometimes drowned) at the heart of many modernist texts by male as well as female survivors of the Great War....for many of the literary women...the soldiers' sacrifice at times seemed to signal a cultural wound or fissure through which radically new social modes might enter and often made possible the envisioning of new (implicitly female) ways of approaching and understanding death.⁶

Wounds, then, far from suggesting the castrated Fisher King of *The Waste Land*, stand for women writers paradoxically as cure. However, Sharon Ouditt questions

² Ibid., p. 35.

³ Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, *No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, vol. II, Yale: Yale University Press, 1988, p. 260.

⁴ Ibid., p. 301.

⁵ Ibid., p. 295.

⁶ Ibid., p. 308-9.

this reading of the effect of the war on sexual politics. For her, Gilbert and Gubar 'elide specific historical details which might offer alternative means of understanding these women's confrontations with profound social change and ... present "woman" as a homogeneous category, totalised and glorified.'⁷ Even if some women had experienced the war as a time of shifting sexual boundaries, of greater possibilities for 'libidinal release' (as Ouditt paraphrases Gilbert and Gubar), the lack of historical specificity is in the fact that sexual possibility would have meant something very different from Gilbert and Gubar's notion of energised female eroticism for very many women. The debate around the link between women's emancipation and sex (see Chapter 1) was still going on, both generally and within the feminist movement, as the war began.

Moreover, as Ouditt points out, Gilbert and Gubar's category 'woman' covers over the very different reactions which constituted 'women's' reaction to the war, both within feminism and outside of it. Feminists split between those who supported war and those who were pacifists. May Sinclair was one of the few women writers to sign Charles F.G. Masterman's 'Authors' Manifesto' declaring support for the war. Masterman, the Liberal politician and writer, organised literary propaganda during war. In September 1914 an 'Authors' Declaration' appeared in *The Times*, signed by a number of writers, among them four women.⁸ These women were May Sinclair, Jane Ellen Harrison, Flora Annie Steel and Mrs Humphrey Ward. The fact that Sinclair was not a pacifist, and indeed believed that the war 'came to

⁷ Sharon Ouditt, *Fighting Forces, Writing Women: Identity and Ideology in the First World War*, London: Routledge, 1994, p. 8.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

us when we needed it most',⁹ has led a number of critics to see her writing during or about the war as little more than propaganda. Ouditt, in her analysis of *The Tree of Heaven*, sees the novel as finally conservative. It is resolved, she argues, through the language of religion and vague spiritual rhetoric. Dorothea, involved in the suffrage movement before the war, is finally seduced by the symbolic order. Women's sacrifice is glorified.¹⁰ Laura Stempel Mumford argues that the novel privileges war over any other experience because it gives access to a particular kind of ecstasy. Mumford summarises her reading of the novel:

At best, Sinclair hints that, by joining men in battle, women may hope to achieve an ecstasy similar to those her male characters experience. But by failing - in fact, refusing - to question the basic premise that war is the only real site of such ecstasy, she relegates the very movement she has championed, as well as the art she practices, to a position of triviality.¹¹

Nicola Beaman, writing about *The Romantic*, argues that 'May Sinclair's novels about war are among the very few propaganda books to have been written by a woman'.¹² As I argued in the Preface, Suzanne Raitt sees Sinclair's *Journal of Impressions in Belgium* as offering 'a unique opportunity to explore the perversity

⁹ May Sinclair, 'Women's Sacrifices for the War', *Woman at Home*, February 1915, p. 11.

¹⁰ Ouditt, *Fighting Forces, Writing Women*, pp. 107-8.

¹¹ Laura Stempel Mumford, 'May Sinclair's *The Tree of Heaven*: The Vortex of Feminism, the Community of War', in Helen M. Cooper, Adrienne Auslander Munich and Susan Merrill Squier (eds) *Arms and the Woman: War, Gender and Literary Representation*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989, p. 179.

¹² Nicola Beaman, *A Very Great Profession: The Woman's Novel 1914-39*, London: Virago, 1995 [1983], p. 22.

of her position, her refusal of political engagement in favour of an awkward and excessive immersion in what she saw as "real life".¹³ For Raitt, however, Sinclair's attitude to the war lends to her writing, not the thinness of propaganda, but rather an opaqueness, a density, the sense that it is 'so hard to read and even harder to interpret'.¹⁴ This difficulty characterises any attempt to understand Sinclair's position regarding the war, or to assess its impact on her writing. Jane Marcus' main criticism of *The Romantic* focuses on the treatment of the main male character. In the novel she argues that Sinclair 'mocks the unmanly man as viciously as scandalized old ladies wrote to the papers about "She-men" in uniforms'.¹⁵ In her letter to the *Medical Press* discussed below, however, Sinclair makes public her criticism of very similar scandalised attacks on women war-workers. Where is it possible to place Sinclair in the either/ors of war/pacifism, patriotism/feminism and death/life?

What a feminist reading of Sinclair's war writing should be, and indeed her own position regarding feminism at this time, are not the only difficulties. Sinclair's writing about the war is 'difficult to read' because it is particularly difficult to place in a retrospective reading that sees the tone and concerns of English modernism as

¹³ Suzanne Raitt, "'Contagious Ecstasy": May Sinclair's War Journals', in Suzanne Raitt and Trudi Tate (eds) *Women's Fiction and the Great War*, Oxford: Clarendon, 1997, pp. 65-6.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 79.

¹⁵ Jane Marcus, 'Corpus/Corps/Corpse: Writing the Body in/at War', in Helen M. Cooper, Adrienne Auslander Munich and Susan Merrill Squier (eds) *Arms and the Woman: War, Gender and Literary Representation*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989, p. 130.

the only appropriate response. Her commitment to wholeness and progress means that she uses a multiplicity of registers, only some of which chime with subsequent understandings of the experience of modernity. Sexual difference, work, desire, patriotism, mysticism and the psychological - Sinclair uses each of these in her attempt to write coherent narratives which include the possibility of cure and of a 'beyond'. In *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, Winter argues that to ignore the use made of the traditional in coming to terms with the experience of war, or to dismiss it as reactionary, is to misread it.

The strength of what may be termed 'traditional' forms in social and cultural life, in art, poetry, and ritual, lay in their power to mediate bereavement. The cutting edge of 'modern memory', its multi-faceted sense of dislocation, paradox, and the ironic, could express anger and despair, and did so in enduring ways; it was melancholic, but it could not heal.¹⁶

For Freud, melancholia and mourning are distinguished according to the state of the ego in each: 'In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself.'¹⁷ For Sinclair, the melancholic overwhelming of the self seen in so many modernist works is impossible; impossible because of her feminism, her Idealism and her commitment to cure. In both *Audrey Craven* and *Life and Death of Harriett Frean*, separated as they are by twenty-five years and as different as they are in tone and style, Sinclair is concerned with the role of passion, of desire, in the construction of the individual. In each novel, the violence

¹⁶ Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (1995), Cambridge: Canto, 1998, p. 5.

¹⁷ Sigmund Freud, 'Mourning and Melancholia' (1917), *On Metapsychology*, Penguin Freud Library, vol. 11, London: Penguin, 1991, p. 254.

done to the body by passion, either in engaging it or resisting it, is shown. Ted Havilland's painting of two people exchanging souls in the presence of Eros makes Audrey Craven 'feel quite creepy';¹⁸ in *Harriett Frean* repressed desire distorts the bodies of most of the characters, from Prissie's 'mysterious paralysis' to the 'dead baby' that is Harriett's cancer.¹⁹ If passion is a cure, it also does violence to the body by crossing boundaries, by mixing and making ambiguous. Sinclair's work is indeed made opaque in its attempts to secure positions that resist fixing, that are oppositional and contradictory. The instabilities that are set up by the importance of both the inviolate self and passion for the other, both the private, interior life, and an engagement with the corporate, the endless movement between places of proximity and places of distance do indeed make Sinclair's work 'hard to read'. The relationship between violence, passion and cure certainly dominates the novels Sinclair wrote about the war, but in them, and more generally during the period, the configuration of this relationship took very particular forms. In her use of the motifs of chivalry in her war writing, Sinclair uses traditional forms to achieve a wholeness and cure which was new. The figures she chooses both challenge reactionary uses of the chivalric, but also stand against the mock-heroic of canonical modernism.

In September 1916 a poem, 'A Song of Oxford', appeared in *The Spectator*. It was by Mildred Huxley and sections of it were later recommended as one of a number

¹⁸ May Sinclair, *Audrey Craven*, Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood and Sons, 1897, p. 41.

¹⁹ May Sinclair, *Life and Death of Harriett Frean* (1922), London: Virago, 1980, pp. 68, 183.

of verses suitable for inscription on war memorials. In particular:

They who had all, gave all. Their half-writ story
Lies in the empty halls they know so well,
But they, the Knights of God, shall see His glory
And find the Grail ev'n in the fire of hell.²⁰

Patriotic and pro-war journalism, poems and stories made frequent use of the images and language of chivalry. The rhetoric of chivalry brought together a sense of national heritage, honour, integrity and religious sanction. As Girouard argues, however, a revival of interest in the mythology of the Middle Ages had been a feature of British society since the first half of the nineteenth century.²¹ By the end of this century and the beginning of the twentieth, the language of chivalry was used to cohere, not just a generalised nationalism, but specifically an English masculinity. From the institutionalisation of sports in schools in the late nineteenth century to the re-writing of Scott's disastrous expedition in 1912 - 'the thrilling narratives of their exploits team with deeds of devotion unequalled in all the deeds of knight-errantry'²² - chivalry acted as strong ideological glue at moments of crisis of both nationality and gender. The stories of King Arthur and his Round Table, from Malory via Tennyson, seemed to offer secure models for the construction of 'manliness', and figures and conventions that keep things in their proper places. Indeed, the language of late nineteenth and early twentieth century chivalry

²⁰ Quoted in Mark Girouard, *Return to Camelot: Chivalry and the English Gentleman*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1981, p. 283.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 17-20.

²² Sir Clements Markham, Scott's first patron, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 4.

regularly appeared in opposition to the claims and arguments of feminism.²³ The stabilising structures of chivalry, that regulated the relations between the public and the private, between law and desire, between men and women, were seen as threatened by a movement that made claims for female subjectivity, so challenging this careful regulation. It is the articulation of this struggle just before and during the war, and its figuration in Sinclair's work, that I want to consider in the rest of this chapter. Her use of figures of chivalry in the novels written during or about the war challenge the 'proper places' of a number of things: pacifism and war, feminism and patriotism, modernism and traditionalism.

Sir Almroth Wright had become Professor of Experimental Pathology at St Mary's Hospital in London in 1902. Assisted by his student, Alexander Fleming, he worked during the war on a bactericide to fight gas gangrene and was, according to an American doctor who worked nearby, 'one of the most famous people in the world at this time'.²⁴ In March 1912, in a letter to *The Times*, Wright's medical eyes had rested for a moment on suffragettes. In it he begins by explaining why '[f]or men the physiology and psychology of women is full of difficulties'.²⁵ Having detailed the life of woman, dominated by the vicissitudes of her reproductive capacities, Wright moves on 'with such thoughts' to consider 'the militant

²³ See Lucy Bland, *Banishing the Beast: Sexuality and the Early Feminists*, New York: The New Press, 1995, p. 302, on the anti-women's suffrage support for the 1912 Criminal Law Amendment Bill, the so-called 'White Slave Traffic' Bill.

²⁴ Interview with doctor quoted in Lyn Macdonald, *The Roses of No Man's Land*, London: Penguin, 1993 [1980], p. 291.

²⁵ Sir Almroth Wright's letter was quoted in full in *The Freewoman*, 4 April 1912, p. 392-4.

suffragist', the 'types' that go to make up the suffrage movement, the reasons women should be excluded from the workplace and the damage intellectual women do to society, concluding:

It is not necessary in connection with a movement which proceeds on the lines set out above any further to labour the point that there is in it an element of mental disorder. It is plain that it is there.²⁶

In the middle section of the letter, where Wright moves on to consider women's claims for equal pay, physical force, and more specifically the potential for violence, become for him the supreme mark of and justification for a traditional understanding of sexual difference. Wright accuses the militant suffrage movement of immorality. Women, he argues, have a different code of ethics due to their different relation to physical force. The acts of violence carried out by suffragettes violate that code of ethics and are therefore immoral. Members of the Women's Social and Political Union had been using acts of 'unladylike' behaviour since its founding in 1903. In 1905, just before a general election, Christabel Pankhurst and Annie Kenny had been arrested for causing an obstruction during a Liberal Party Meeting in Manchester.²⁷ From 1906 onwards, frustrated at not being charged for their acts, the WSPU began to commit 'technical assaults' and a policy of stone-throwing was begun.²⁸ Once in prison they claimed the status of political prisoners and refused food. After their perceived betrayal by the Liberal government in

²⁶ Ibid., p. 393.

²⁷ Ray Strachey, *The Cause: A Short History of the Women's Movement in Great Britain*, London: G. Bell & Sons Ltd, 1928, pp. 293-5.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 313.

1910, the WSPU stepped up their campaign through 1911. The actions of the suffragettes threw out for debate the whole nexus of meanings around women's bodies, the law, citizenship and representation. Wright's statement of his position within this debate is worth stating in full for the both for the connections it makes between these and for the light it throws forward onto a possible sexual politics of war. The real 'law' against women committing physical violence, he says, is not statutory but

belongs to those unwritten and unassailable and irreversible commandments of religion...which we suddenly and mysteriously become aware of when we see them violated.... Up to the present, in the whole civilised world there has ruled a truce of God as between man and woman. That truce is based upon the solemn covenant that within the frontiers of civilization...the weapon of physical force may not be applied by man against woman, nor by woman against man. Under this covenant the reign of force which prevails in the world without comes to an end when a man enters his household. Under this covenant that half of the human race which most needs protection is raised up above the waves of violence.... And it is this solemn covenant, the covenant so faithfully kept by man, which has been violated by the militant suffragist in the interest of her morbid, stupid, ugly, and dishonest programmes.

Is it any wonder if men feel that they have had enough of the militant suffragist, and that the state would be well rid of her if she were crushed under the soldiers' shields like the traitor women at the Tarpeian rock?²⁹

What is interesting about Wright's letter is its attempts to maintain a coherent rhetoric through a classification of the distinctions and relations between violence and chivalry. In the final section of the letter, he seems to be saying that violence can only be honourable between equals - it then becomes chivalry. The 'covenant' mentioned in the extract above:

²⁹ Letter quoted in *The Freewoman*, 4 April 1912, p. 393.

forbade us even to think of employing our native Indian troops against the Boers,... brands it as an ignominy when a man leaves his fellow in the lurch and saves his own life, and ... makes it an outrage for a man to do violence to a woman.... We see acknowledgment of it in the fact that even the uneducated man in the street resents it as an outrage to civilisation when he sees a man strike a blow at a woman. But to the man who is committing the outrage it is a thing simply unaccountable that anyone should fly out at him. In just such a case is the militant suffragist. She cannot understand why anyone should think civilisation is outraged when she scuffles in the street mud with a policeman.³⁰

This passage only makes sense if it is assumed that violence is not a single concept, that it comes to mean something else entirely depending on who commits it. The less powerful - the colonial, the working-class male (unless paired against a woman) and women - only have a relation to violence in that they should be protected from it. The 'legitimate' act of violence is a marker of social and political power. Wright ends his letter with three reasons why women should not be given the vote: because they are incompetent to adjudicate on political issues; because they cannot back up their vote by force; because it would 'seriously embroil man and woman'.³¹ What Wright's grand rhetoric carries is, in fact, a very simple and deeply conventional message. Women, because of their bodies, must remain within the private sphere. The public sphere belongs to men. Because men have this natural connection with the state, violence, legitimated by the state, is acceptable only when perpetuated by men. Violence belongs to men. Women's relation to the world should be mediated by men and, by assenting to this, their bodies can be

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., p. 394.

protected, both from their own 'terrible physical havoc'³² and, presumably, from the potential violence of the very men who protect them. Women who break this covenant, like Tarpeia, a vestal virgin who betrayed Rome to the Sabines and was killed by them when she asked for a reward, can expect to be wished or indeed actually well rid of.

The response provoked by Sir Almroth Wright's letter included a letter to the *Daily Mail* on 2 April from Dr Agnes Savill, who was later to become a member of the Medico-Psychological Clinic, and, in May 1912, a pamphlet by May Sinclair, *Feminism*, published by the Women Writers' Suffrage League. Sinclair criticises Wright's methodology as an 'extraordinary descent from the serene heights of Science into this really horrid arena'.³³ She accuses him of not choosing representative cases from within the movement. Counteracting his comments on the dangers of men and women working together, she quotes from Agnes Savill's letter:

Men and women working together are not as the animals; the psychic factor is strong in humanity, and its importance has been overlooked by science until recent years.³⁴

Sinclair speaks about women's education, she carries out her own survey of female intellectuals and members of the movement. In the rest of the pamphlet, Sinclair

³² Ibid., p. 392.

³³ May Sinclair, *Feminism*, London: Women Writers' Suffrage League, 1912, p. 4.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 11.

attempts to recover female sexuality, what she calls 'the Life-Force', from Wright's 'physiological emergencies'. Throughout this section, the language of mysticism is used to explain sexual energy in women outside of either maternity or extra-marital sexual behaviour that was still conventionally lumped together with prostitution.³⁵

The physiologist will tell you further that there is voluptuousness in a man's chivalry and in a woman's tenderness, in her very rapture of self-immolation for her lover, her husband, her child. He will show you, hidden deep-down in the sexual life, the roots of the mystic Rose of Love itself.

It is little wonder, therefore, and little shame, if he tells us that the sublime enthusiasm and self-devotion and self-sacrifice of the suffragists spring from the same root. They will join with the lovers, the musicians and the saints...in praising God for the wonderful root, deep-hidden that bears the mystic flower.³⁶

Wright uses the language of mysticism and romanticism for his discussion of violence, whereas his anxieties about sex are expressed in far more down to earth figures. In Sinclair's response, this is reversed.

It was the nursery rule when I was a child that you were not to hit your big brother because he could not hit you back. But I remember that, if your big brother broke the pact and hit *you*, retaliation on your part was invariably condoned by the authorities.³⁷

³⁵ See Lucy Bland, "'Guardians of the Race", or "Vampires upon the Nation's Health"?: Female Sexuality and its Regulation in Early Twentieth-century Britain', in Elizabeth Whitelegg et al. (eds) *The Changing Experience of Women*, Oxford: Martin Robertson in association with the Open University, 1982.

³⁶ May Sinclair, *Feminism*, p. 32.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 44; emphasis in original.

It is in the effects of this reversal that Sinclair's most radical challenge resides. For Wright, sex and chivalry *are* sexual difference. Women threaten dragging men down to the sexual; men can be trusted to distinguish between the need for chivalry and the need for violence because of their more 'spiritual' nature, because of their distance from the body. Sinclair's pamphlet enacts a repudiation of this in the language she uses to write about both sex and violence. As Catherine Belsey argues, the chivalric worlds of Chrétien and Malory are far less stable than late Victorian and Edwardian revivalists assumed. In both, 'love conflicts with chivalry'.³⁸ In Malory, protection of and courtesy towards women are compatible with what really matters in the world of chivalry - '[w]hat is at stake in the fellowship of the Round Table is a relationship between men'.³⁹ Passion and desire outside of the homosocial, however, are not. The Round Table is destroyed by a passion in excess of it - more particularly, the chivalric world is destroyed by the activity of a woman. When Launcelot and Guenevere are finally exposed, it is because the Queen has requested that he come to her chamber. Her demands have made Launcelot's courtly treatment of her and loyalty to the King mutually exclusive. Arthur's agony at the end is motivated not by sexual jealousy but pain at being estranged from his best knight.

and much more I am sorrier for my good knights' loss than for the loss of my fair queen; for queens I might have enow, but such a fellowship of good knights shall never be together in no company...and alas that ever Sir

³⁸ Catherine Belsey, *Desire: Love Stories in Western Culture*, Oxford: Blackwells, 1994, p. 117.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

Launcelot and I should be at debate.⁴⁰

As a rhetorical figure, chivalry was already resonant for the part it played in the construction of contemporary English masculinity, and for the material it seemed to supply for the anti-feminist argument. In the context of the war in particular, however, Sinclair's reworking of the relation between passion and violence provided a framework for claims for female subjectivity in general and, more radically, for female desire.

Through the first years of the First World War, much anxiety at home about women's changing roles was focused on a perceived explosion in female promiscuity and its threat in terms of sexually transmitted diseases.⁴¹ The authority of the medical man to fix relations within the configuration of women, passion, violence and disease was again displayed in August 1917 in an article in *The Medical Press*. Under the heading 'Women War-workers and the Sexual Element',⁴² Dr James Burnet, a lecturer at Edinburgh University, alerts his readers to the dangers inherent in women's increased involvement in public life through war work. While he admits that sexual attraction is a 'universal law of Nature', the war has 'slackened our moral tone'. As evidence of this he cites shorter skirts and the increased number of women who smoke and drink in public. For many women,

⁴⁰ Sir Thomas Malory, *Le Morte D'Arthur*, vol. 2, London: Everyman's Library, 1978, pp. 353-4.

⁴¹ Lucy Bland, '"Guardians of the Race", or "Vampires upon the Nation's Health"?: Female Sexuality and its Regulation in Early Twentieth-century Britain'.

⁴² James Burnet, 'Women War-workers and the Sexual Element', *The Medical*

he argues, this laxity is not an unforeseen result of war work, but its purpose.

That the object many of these war-workers have in undertaking such work as they are now engaged in has a sexual basis must be recognised. I grant that many of these women are unaware of the fact, but a fact it remains nevertheless. There is undoubtedly a certain glamour, if nothing more, in the wearing of male attire; and these women war-workers seem to thoroughly enjoy what to them is obviously a source of genuine satisfaction.⁴³

Amateur nurses, although denied the pleasures of cross-dressing, provoke equal alarm.⁴⁴

what a golden opportunity is opened out to the amateur nurse in this direction. She is brought readily in contact with officers and soldiers at a time when the latter have leisure, and who find in the attentions of their nurses a pleasant relaxation from the grim terrors of the battlefield.

Finally, Burnet sees two consequences of the war 'in this connection' - a lowered standard of morality and 'a great increase in the amount of venereal disease'. Women in public life, in trousers, women expressing any kind of desire make inevitable chaos and disease. The intense reaction to a perceived liberation of women through the war is well documented and seems to be evidence for Gilbert and Gubar's thesis mentioned above. Almost without fail male writing about the war castigates women, either for glorying in the war or for their distance from it.

Press, 22 August 1917, p. 140.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Burnet's phrase 'amateur nurse' resonates with the much discussed 'amateur prostitute'.

As Fussell comments, in Sassoon's trilogy, *The Memoirs of George Sherston*, 'only two young women of George's age are noticed in the trilogy. Each is made the strident mouthpiece of political fatuity. Both are despised by Sherston.'⁴⁵ Sassoon's 'Glory of Women' (1917) charges that 'You love us when we're heroes, home on leave,/Or wounded in a mentionable place', but

You can't believe that British troops 'retired'
When hell's last horror breaks them, and they run,
Trampling the terrible corpses - blind with blood.⁴⁶

And, even less restrained, in Richard Aldington's black and bitter *Death of a Hero*, the mother of the 'hero', George Winterbourne, hears of his death:

But the effect of George's death on her temperament was, strangely enough, almost wholly erotic. The war did that to lots of women. All the dying and wounds and mud and bloodiness - at a safe distance - gave them a great kick, and excited them to an almost unbearable pitch of amorousness. Of course, in that eternity of 1914-18 they must have come to feel that men alone were mortal, and they immortals; wherefore they tried to behave like houris with all available sheiks - hence the lure of 'war work' with its unbounded opportunities. And then there was the deep primitive physiological instinct - men to kill and be killed; women to produce more men to continue the process. (This, however, was often frustrated by the march of Science, viz. anti-conceptives; for which, much thanks.)⁴⁷

When Winterbourne leaves for trenches he seen off at the station by both wife and

⁴⁵ Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, p. 102.

⁴⁶ In Jon Silkin (ed.), *Penguin Book of First World War Poetry*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1979, p. 132.

⁴⁷ Richard Aldington, *Death of a Hero* (1929), London: The Hogarth Press, 1984, pp. 18-19.

mistress. The alienation he feels from them is expressed mainly in his attitude to what they are wearing - they are both smartly dressed. In terms of both class and gender, Winterbourne, who joined the ranks, implicitly charges the women with emasculation through frivolity. Elizabeth, his wife, giggles when he has to salute an officer; he feels 'dull and uneasy, tongue-tied'. As a man unable to take control of the situation, the spectre of sexual impropriety is almost inevitably called up. Noticing their new hats and short skirts 'he was slightly intimidated by the presence of these two well-dressed ladies. What on earth were they doing at two o'clock in the morning, talking to a Tommy?'⁴⁸ For these men, experience of the trenches was the war. Aldington places the phrase war work in inverted commas, suggesting that the real war work had nothing to do with women. The world is divided into those who had fought and those who hadn't. Women come to mean absence from the real war, unreality, hypocrisy, betrayal. As with Burnet, threat and danger are displaced from a muddy and agonising death to women who smoke and show their ankles.

Two weeks after the appearance of Burnet's article, *The Medical Press* published a letter in response written by May Sinclair. She has read Burnet 'with amusement',⁴⁹ she says, and her counterargument is straightforward. Smoking, drinking and shorter skirts all existed before the war, war work prohibits rather provokes passion and Burnet's argument has no empirical or even anecdotal basis. Sinclair, on the other hand, allows voices of women workers themselves into her argument.

⁴⁸ Ibid., p. 248.

⁴⁹ May Sinclair, 'Women War-workers and the Sexual Element', *The Medical Press*, 5 September 1917, p. 179.

Let him ask the conductress of the first motor 'bus he gets into how she feels at the end of the day's work. She will probably say, as one girl said to me: 'Well, we don't want anybody to sing us to sleep at night.'⁵⁰

What seems to be most obviously missing from Sinclair's argument, especially given the tenor of pre-war feminist campaigns and debates, is any idea that promiscuity is the responsibility of men as well as women, or indeed of men and not women, or that sexual freedom (even in terms of increased knowledge) is a positive outcome of the war. Five years after Sinclair's *Feminism*, a mystical recuperation of female sexuality does not seem to be appropriate. During the war, in the arena of public debate within a medical context, the central point of the letter is that the physical expenditure of women in war work prohibits passion. The emphasis is indeed on women's *work*, whereas in Burnet's article it is on men's. He stresses the role of the doctor in bringing reason and order to the subject, and opposes it to the attempts of 'clerics and grandmotherly or hysterical women'. If military hospitals are forcing grounds of immorality, he argues, it is partly because soldiers have leisure there, ignoring the fact that it is a nurse's place of work. Sinclair's letter shifts the focus from female sexual desire and men's work and concentrates on the realities of women's work. Burnet stresses the sexual element as the most important. He finishes his article:

The woman war-worker in male attire is a subject deserving the very careful and close attention of the medical profession; so, too, is that

⁵⁰ Ibid.

amateur war-nurse. I feel certain that the careful study of these women war-workers will reveal much that the average student of sex problems has scarcely dreamt of, much less, perhaps, seriously considered.⁵¹

What both writers acknowledge is the difference war had made. But for Burnet war and women means sex, dangerous sex which is activated by female desire and signals destruction and collapse, while for Sinclair war and women means work. At the beginning of 'Women's Sacrifices for the War', Sinclair is keen to establish that the title of the article is not her own but was forced on her. Throughout, the article distinguishes between a traditional idea of women's 'sacrifice' and her preferred conception of women's 'service'. The distinction seems to be that 'sacrifice' implies both loss and a claim to a special moral status, but that 'service' is no more nor less than would be expected given women's equal relationship to the fullest citizenship: 'For the British woman at her best is very like the British soldier.'⁵² Crucially, it is women's relationship to work that established this equality. In many of Sinclair's novels, however, the need to separate work and passion, rationality and love, is criticised. Langley Wyndham in *Audrey Craven* (1897), George Tanqueray in *The Creators* (1910), Ranny Ransome in *The Combined Maze* (1913) all hurt the central female character through their inability or unwillingness to combine the sexual, the emotional and the intellectual in their choice of marriage partner. Sinclair's letter to *The Medical Press* suggests that women's entry into the public sphere through war work can only be made safe

⁵¹ Burnet, 'Women War-workers and the Sexual Element', p. 140.

⁵² May Sinclair, 'Women's Sacrifices for the War', p. 7.

through a displacement from passion to work. And in the context of war there is an inevitable link between work and violence. How do Sinclair's war novels resolve this relation between desire, work and violence? Is women's work participating in violence or healing it, is passion the unwanted end product of women's war work or cure of the fissures created by war?

Before the First World War, the debate over women and what they mean, over their corporeality, their abilities, their knowledge, over what they were *for*, was configured in a number of ways. As argued in Chapter 1, pre-war feminism, in all its various guises, was formed around a rhetoric of cure. The links between individual chastity and social purity, the possibilities for the prevention of diseases and the effects of women's access to knowledges - the credibility of each of these relied upon the notion that women's bodies, whether because of innate characteristics or through an evolutionary process, could contribute to social and political progress. Of course, late Victorian and Edwardian feminists shared the idea of the curative possibilities of femininity with their enemies. What was disputed was what that femininity was made of. Which meanings that could be attached to the female body meant harmony and coherence, which meant destruction and immorality? In particular within the contemporary debate about sexual politics, if the chivalric world and its values of loyalty, integrity and honour were a model of harmony, could female claims for these virtues only be destructive? For the suffrage movement before the war, one image of woman in particular served to display the possible harmonious union of strength, passion and bodily integrity. Joan of Arc was beatified in 1909 and canonised in 1920, and the

campaigns preceding these had brought her into public debate. Rosemary Betterton, looking at the visual imagery of the suffrage campaign, acknowledges that Joan of Arc became 'a favourite embodiment of female heroism'.⁵³ Betterton goes on to argue that the figure of Joan of Arc allowed the suffragettes to represent idealised woman without straying into the fraught relation between contemporary women, fashion and femininity.⁵⁴ More than this, a woman's body, self-possessed and almost completely covered with armour, represented the claims for a woman's ownership of her own body and her full subjectivity. Indeed, it seemed to solve the problem of representation for the suffragettes. Femininity could be disentangled from its associations with contagion, dirt, disease and excess, its synonymy with loss of order and boundaries. Marina Warner argues that, in order to symbolise positive concepts at all, the female body must be adorned by something that reverses the meaning of its matter:

The body of a woman, when used to represent generalized concepts that strain at absolute definition...must have its surfaces reinforced, so that the poor, leaky vulnerable bag of skin and bone and flesh...can become transformed into a form strong enough to hold within its ambitious contents. Some allegorical figures are strengthened by literal reinforcement. They are fully armed.... Sometimes a mere hint - a helmet, a buckler - suffices to suggest the female body's unlikely hardness.⁵⁵

Although her loyalty to her male attire was one of the two things of which Joan

⁵³ Rosemary Betterton, "'A Perfect Woman': The Political Body of Suffrage', *An Intimate Distance: Women, Artists and the Body*, London: Routledge, 1996, p. 48.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁵⁵ Marina Warner, *Monuments and Maidens: The Allegory of the Female Form* (1985), London: Picador, 1987, pp. 258-9.

was found guilty during her trial, Warner's argument elsewhere suggests an interesting dynamic to her 'guilt'.

Nothing could have been more conventional than Joan's stance during the years of her public mission - except that she was the wrong person to embody those conventions: she was not a man of the church,...she was not a nobleman of the world, who could legitimately claim to fight as a knight for a suzerain.⁵⁶

Joan's radicalness, her danger, was constituted not by her clothes, her actions or her beliefs as such, but rather by her body in relation to them. More than this, despite the claim for Joan as patron saint of the militant suffrage campaign, what the figure and its strange contradictions represent are semantic slippage and fluidity of meaning.⁵⁷

The war stopped the militant suffrage campaign. The relationship between bodies, 'armour' and possession shifted. Joan of Arc's armour symbolised self-ownership; the uniformed body denoted a duty to something else, the state, the nation, the 'race'. The martyred yet inviolate body was subsumed beneath the sacrificed, wounded and broken. Yet in three of Sinclair's four war novels, the figure of Joan of Arc is used to explore the tensions between these different corporealities, and linking them specifically with notions of sexual difference. Sinclair seemed to be willing to drop her feminist commitments in order to write 'propaganda' for the

⁵⁶ Marina Warner, 'Introduction', *The Trial of Joan of Arc*, Evesham: Arthur James, 1996, pp. 25-6.

⁵⁷ See Lisa Tickner, *The Spectacle of Women: Imagery of the Suffrage Campaign 1907-1914* (1987), London: Chatto & Windus, 1989, pp. 210-11.

state. She has been criticised (by recent critics as well as her contemporaries) for her idealising and trivialising use of the war.⁵⁸ I have argued above, however, that Sinclair's non-fiction reworks relations between passion, work and violence, between chivalry and sexual difference. A rereading of the struggle in these novels between the individual and the corporate, integrity and passion, fear and love through the figure of Joan of Arc and chivalry in general too suggests otherwise.

Sinclair wrote four novels which concerned themselves to varying degrees with the war, two during the war and two after it. *Tasker Jevons: The Real Story* was published in 1916. Unlike any other of Sinclair's novels, the anonymous but knowing narrator is swapped for one who is a character in the story, a writer and journalist named Walter Furnival. The story Furnival has to tell is that of his friend, James Tasker Jevons, also a writer and journalist, but one who has the misfortune to possess, in a return of the narrative of *The Divine Fire* (1904), an undesirable class background. Furnival helps Jevons early on in his career, only to be outstripped by Jevons' enormous success. He introduces Jevons to the upper-class Viola⁵⁹ Thesiger, with whom Furnival is in love, only to watch Viola and Jevons fall in love and marry. Jevons plans his career in great detail; all his aims are realised, except approval from Viola's refined and very proper family. Even this is achieved at the end of the novel. Jevons, working as a stretcher bearer in Flanders, rescues Viola's brother from a shelled building, in the process losing his right hand,

⁵⁸ See 'May Sinclair's Idealised Vision of the Great War', *Current Opinion*, 64, April 1918, pp. 279-80.

⁵⁹ Sinclair's choice of names for her characters is always interesting. Although she is not really at the centre of the novel, Viola's name is suggestive of violence, violate, musical harmony and cross-dressing.

which Viola has earlier described as 'the only part of himself that Jimmy ever thinks of.'⁶⁰ This feat of bravery also has the effect of exorcising Jevons' demon, one that has been hinted at throughout the novel - his fear. This fear has been his secret, dominating motivation throughout. Jevons describes it at the end of the novel: 'It wasn't any ordinary funk.... It was something much worse. It -- it was in my head -- in my brain. A sort of madness. And it never let me alone.'⁶¹ The revelation and cure of this fear at the end of the novel not only binds Jevons to his in-laws, it saves his and Viola's disintegrating marriage.

The dominant tone of the novel is ironic. A distance is created between Furnival the narrator's knowledge of the significance of each happening, because he knows of the defining moment that ends the novel, and the ignorance of Furnival the character, an ignorance that is shared, of course, by the reader. Boll cites this irony as evidence that Sinclair had been successful, through her unusual choice of narrator, in writing 'a man's book'.⁶² More interesting, however, are the clues we are given from the beginning that the subject of the novel is to be 'manliness', specifically within the context of war. Furnival first meets Jevons when they are both reporting on a game of rugby in 1905.

He was taking notes in shorthand with a sort of savagery, between his tense and concentrated glares at the scrimmage that was then massed in the

⁶⁰ May Sinclair, *Tasker Jevons: The Real Story*, London: Hutchinson, 1916, p. 308.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 334.

⁶² T.E.M. Boll, *Miss May Sinclair: Novelist: A Biographical and Critical Introduction*, New Jersey: Associated University Presses, 1973, p. 234.

centre of the field. Woolwich Arsenal and East Kent, locked in each other's bodies, now struggled and writhed and butted like two immense beasts welded together by the impact of their battle, now swayed and quivered and snorted as one beast torn by a solitary and mysterious rage.⁶³

At this point, Jevons' career plan is to make a living reporting 'big cricket and football matches'.⁶⁴ He wants to make his name in an arena devoted to struggle and physical bravery. The warlike imagery is not limited to the above quote. Furnival finds Jevons work on a literary magazine. He changes the subject of his writing, but the metaphors with which it is described remain the same.

What he sketched for me had no resemblance to the career of a peaceful man of letters. It was a hot race, a combat as bloody (his own word) as those contests of which he was the delighted eye-witness....

He laid before me very soon what I can only call his plan of campaign. Journalism with him was a purely defensive operation; but the novel and the short story were his attack.... He had dug himself in very securely that winter, and each paper that he had occupied and left behind him was a line of trenches that shifted nearer and nearer towards the desired territory.⁶⁵

The plan that is recounted to the reader was formed by Jevons some years before the war, in approximately 1906; the metaphors used in the description are therefore anachronistic. Of course, however, Furnival's moment of narration is after the war had started, after Jevons has lost his hand in his heroic act. He is reading Jevons' pre-war posturing through the experience of war. Throughout the novel, Furnival the character's attitude to his friend swings between admiration for

⁶³ May Sinclair, *Tasker Jevons*, p. 5-6.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 23, 34.

his genius, through embarrassment at his social solecisms, to shock at his manic need for some sort of status. Furnival the narrator, however, keeps these reactions in check, constantly hints, that, as readers, while we might be seeing Jevons one way, we will see him another way once the story has been told.

I saw him consumed and burned up by the fever of patriotism and war, and... beside his passion any emotion I may have felt hardly counted.

And every minute we expected to hear him say that he *liked* the war because it made him feel manly. Norah [his wife] and I pretended to each other that he would say it - it was our idea of a joke, God forgive us.⁶⁶

Given this double narration in the novel, what do the war metaphors before the fact mean? Furnival's narration sets up an ambiguity of responsibility which makes impossible any reading of the novel as straightforward propaganda, an ambiguity that is still in place some chapters later when the sexual politics of the novel come to the surface.

Furnival says that the word 'bloody' belongs to Jevons, ostensibly referring to the sports competitions he has watched. It resonates, however, with the rather more strategic language of the latter paragraph, language Furnival explicitly claims as his own - 'what I can only call'. Furnival's status in the novel is mediator, between the reader and the story that he is telling and, often, between Jevons and Viola, and between them and her family. However, though mediator, he is not neutral. Early on he tells Viola that Jevons is a 'little bounder'.⁶⁷ While we read, Furnival the

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 258; emphasis in original.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 38.

narrator is constantly undermined by Furnival the character's shock at Jevons' bellicosity and attempts at hyper-masculinity.

As Jevons' career progresses according to plan, he becomes very rich. With our later knowledge of his 'funk', his behaviour during this time becomes a kind of disavowal, a fetishisation of markers of success and masculinity. He furnishes his homes elaborately and becomes addicted to speed, obsessed with his car. When the war begins, his passion switches to it, so much so that he has his beloved car, which before the war he would not even take out in the rain, converted into a field ambulance. Jevons is barred from joining up because of a 'leaky valve' in his heart. He is offered a job as a war correspondent, which he turns down, exclaiming to the narrator: 'Damn my powerful pen, Furny! Damn my powerful pen!'⁶⁸ Jevons wants to be doing things, not writing about them. Writing becomes associated with a lack of manliness. It is the cultured and urbane Furnival who takes the job as war correspondent. Unsurprisingly, Jevons repudiates femininity in his attempts to prove himself. Once he does get to Belgium, he is followed there by his estranged wife and Furnival. The scenes around his going, and Viola and Furnival's journey there, become a discussion of the ownership of war and sexual difference. Before his departure, Jevons asks Furnival to make sure that Viola doesn't follow him across the Channel.

'You've got to stop her if she tries to get out. They're *all* trying. You should just see the bitches - tumbling, and wriggling and scrabbling with their claws and crawling on their stomachs to get to the front - tearing each other's eyes out to get there first. And there are fellows that'll take them.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 261.

They'll even take their wives....

It ought to be put a stop to.

The place I'm going to - the things I'm going to see - and to do - aren't fit for women - aren't fit for women to come within miles of.⁶⁹

Jevons' words begin to make shaky the line between chivalry and misogyny. Who is not fit for whom? What will be contaminated by the proximity of women and the trenches? An ambiguous link has already been made in the novel between sexual impropriety and journeys to Belgium. Before their marriage, Viola and Jevons disappear together. Furnival, as a favour to Viola's scandalised family, tracks them down in Bruges and travels there to bring Viola home. The impossibility of knowing whether Viola remained inviolate following her trip dominates the narrative for some time. As her father says to Furnival: 'That's it, my dear fellow. We can't prove it.'⁷⁰ What these two moments of anxiety around who should and should not go to Belgium have in common is questions around the propriety of a woman's body. Jevons' extraordinary outburst, which seems to find its nearest neighbour in the passage from Richard Aldington quoted earlier, can again only be made sense of through Furnival's ambiguous role as narrator. On the boat to Ostend, accompanied by Viola, Furnival too begins to create an antithesis between women and war, between the world of private feeling and the world of public death.

in the fields of France and of Flanders men were fighting, men were

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 270; emphasis in original.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 129.

slaughtering each other every day by thousands. I was a man and I should have been thinking of those men; and here I was, compelled against my conscience and my will to think of this woman.⁷¹

Here the tension is between his duty of chivalry to a woman and his duty to other men. War, the suggestion is, privileges the latter over the former. What the notion of chivalry rests on, however, is a certain relation between subject and object. While it ostensibly exists for the person being done to, active subjectivity remains with the doer. Furnival is too knowing to remain long in this position, or indeed to let us as readers relax within the conventional figures of chivalry.

I hadn't meant to take her with me, and she had made me take her.

And then my common sense told me that she hadn't; that I wasn't taking her, and that she had as much right to be on the Ostend boat as I had, I still resented her being there. I still raged as I realized the power she had over me. She had always had it.⁷²

When they meet up with Jevons in Belgium, one of the central discussions is about the appropriateness of Viola's presence. Though Furnival does not take part, the status of his narration, the ambiguities and realisations outlined above, suggest a very particular configuration of passion, war, work and sexual difference. Jevons tells Viola that her presence is off-putting to both the field ambulance workers and the wounded soldier. More than this, he says, 'there isn't a thing you've done yet that a man can't do better'.⁷³ Viola defends herself by talking about her work,

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 282.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 316.

about her duty to the wounded. Jevons recounts what one wounded Belgian had told him: 'he didn't mind his wounds and he didn't mind the Germans; what worried him was the lady being there when he wasn't able to defend her.'⁷⁴ Their argument itself turns in to a battle. I quote the remainder of it in full. When Viola says she doesn't want to be protected, Jevons replies:

'Men aren't made like that - if they *are* men. You can't have it both ways.' And he said something about chivalry that drove her back in sheer self-defence on a Feminist line.

She said that nowadays women had chivalry too.

'And *our* chivalry is to go down before yours?'

'Can't you have both?'

'Not in war-time. *Your* chivalry is to keep back and not make yourself a danger and a nuisance.'

'Come,' she said, 'what about Joan of Arc?' And that was too much for Jimmy. He jumped up off the bed and walked away from her and sat on the table as if it gave him some advantage.

'No, no,' he said. 'I can't stand that rot. When you're a saint - or I'm a saint - you can talk about Joan of Arc. If you want to be Joan of Arc go and be it with some man who isn't your husband - who isn't in love with you. Perhaps *he* won't mind.'⁷⁵

The figure of Joan of Arc, for the pre-war suffragettes 'not only a perfect patriot but a perfect woman',⁷⁶ is rejected as 'rot' by Jevons precisely because of the context of war. The entry of her figure into the conversation is 'too much' for him,

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 317.

⁷⁵ Ibid., pp. 317-18; emphases in original.

⁷⁶ From the *Suffragette*, 9 May 1913, quoted in Betterton, '"A Perfect Woman": The Political Body of Suffrage', p. 48.

and his impulse in response is to put more distance between Viola and himself. Jevons' rejection of his wife's argument suggests that what causes anxiety and repudiation is the presence of sex, of desire, on the battlefield. As in the Burnet article in *The Medical Press*, for Jevons passion and war work cannot co-exist without danger. But what the use of Joan of Arc at this point does is to make it clear, in a way that Sinclair's response to Burnet avoids, *whose* passion it is. Jevons refuses to admit that Viola can compare herself to Joan of Arc, inviolate, chaste, passionate only about her mission, because of *his* love, because he is in love with her. Sinclair's central character speaks out for the centrality of male subjectivity and male work, and projects onto women the responsibility for the chaos of passion. At this point the novel could indeed be seen as guilty of propaganda.

However, what is extraordinary about the novel, what finally shifts the way these passages can be read, is the novel's resolution. Rather conventionally, the final lines speak of the healing of the Jevons' marriage, but what allows this healing is the resolution of Tasker Jevons' fear. His enthusiasm for the war is an explicit claim of masculinity; but the climax of this comes through wounding and emasculation. When Furnival and Viola arrive in Belgium, they come across Jevons in a hotel, limping from a leg wound. He says, 'I like my wound. It -- it makes me feel manly.'⁷⁷ Jevons' final wound, his loss of his right hand, cures him of his fear, reunites him with Viola, and cancels out the effects of his class position with both his wife and her family. What does the novel suggest the male wound means?

⁷⁷ Sinclair, *Tasker Jevons: The Real Story*, p. 299.

In her study of masculinity and the male body during the First World War, Joanna Bourke makes clear the gap between private experience and public rhetoric around the loss of limbs. Caroline E. Playne, in *Britain Holds On, 1917, 1918*, published in 1933, remembers that:

the sight of hundreds of men on crutches going about in groups, many having lost one leg, many others both legs, caused sickness and horror. The maiming of masses of strong, young men thus brought home was appalling.⁷⁸

Rowland Luther, in his memoirs of his time in the trenches, recalled that:

I didn't mind dying, but the fear of mutilation played havoc with our minds. I had seen much of it, and wanted to die whole.⁷⁹

In propaganda films and patriotic writings, the mutilated soldier was lauded as hero and the sight of his wounds was used to encourage others to enlist. The mutilations were 'badges of their courage, the hall-mark of their glorious service, their proof of patriotism'.⁸⁰ In between these two reactions, the 'Blighty wound' (one which sent the soldier back to Britain) became desirable, sometimes enough to be self-inflicted, as an escape route from the horror of the trenches. Fussell quotes Wilfred Owen on the war's effect on the meaning of beauty:

⁷⁸ Quoted in Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War*, London: Reaktion Books, 1996, pp. 34-5.

⁷⁹ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 56.

⁸⁰ H.H. Thomas, *Help for Wounded Heroes*, London, 1920, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 56.

A shrapnel ball
Just where the wet skin glistened when he swam
Like a full-opened sea-anemone.
We both said 'What a beauty! What a beauty, lad!'⁸¹

The exposure of flesh and the penetration of the male body becomes 'a beauty'. Here though, of course, the ironically positive reading of the wound is enmeshed with a homoeroticism which again shifts any reading of it in terms of masculinity and femininity. The meaning of mutilation shifts between abjection (Playne's 'sickness and horror'), heroic integrity and desire. Within this context, does Jevons' wound mean wholeness or lack, is it a sign of masculinity or femininity? What the resolution of the marriage at the end covers over is the difficulty the text has in saying. Viola's use of the figure of Joan of Arc, inviolate and bounded, draws out in her husband's response that danger done by passion to male ability in the public space of war. The anxiety generated by the presence of women is only allayed for Jevons when his body, already possessor of 'leaky' heart, is literally lessened by amputation. However, of course Jevons' wound is also a marker of heroism - he suffers his wound while rescuing Viola's brother.

What further complicates any reading of the end of the novel is the implication Jevons' wound has in terms of telling a coherent story. Jevons loses his 'right' hand, with everything that implies in terms of propriety, but he also loses his writer's hand. The genius working-class writer loses his ability to tell his story, so that the very proper and middle-class Furnival has the responsibility of telling the

⁸¹ Quoted in Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, p. 304.

'real' story. Yet this loss is the very resolution of the story that is being told. It is the incredible slipperiness of masculinity and femininity, and their relations to class, work and war that the story leaves us with.

These questions of masculinity, fear, passion and integrity form the central dynamic of *The Romantic*, published in 1920. The resolution of this novel suggests, in contrast, that it can say. Its repudiation of hiddenness, mystery and forgetting is located in images of the surface of the body and, in consequence, sexual difference. The absence, lack and mystery associated with female genitalia, as opposed to the fullness of phallic presence, is reversed through the central relationship of the novel. It is within the context of the war, where the central characters serve in a field ambulance corps in Flanders, that this reversal is made possible.

The Romantic is the story of Charlotte Redhead and John Conway, both before and during the war. At the beginning of the novel, the figure of Charlotte is created through familiar tropes of the 'new woman'. She is a typist, has a room in Bloomsbury and bobbed hair, and is open in sexual matters. The first chapter tells of her relationship with her first lover, with whom she works. He persuades her to have a sexual relationship with him, but the difference between their justifications sets up the reversal of the meaning of masculinity and femininity. While her lover argues that '[y]ou might as well. If it isn't you, it'll be another woman.... If it isn't me, it'll be another man',⁸² for Charlotte sex stops substitution and fixes the identity

⁸² May Sinclair, *The Romantic*, London: W. Collins Sons & Co., 1920, p. 13.

of both herself and her lover. In it she wants to discover '[t]he clear reality of yourself.'⁸³ Knowledge and a strong singularity that may more usually be associated with the phallic are claimed by Charlotte. In the knot of relations between knowledge, desire and attractiveness, she explicitly rejects the usual markers of femininity - 'She didn't want to be secret and mysterious. Of all things she hated secrecy and mystery.'⁸⁴ The dynamic of the plot in *The Romantic* is, however, structured around a mystery, that of John Conway, his attitude to sex, to the war, and his cowardice when in the field, but the novel's resolution rests on Charlotte's acquisition of knowledge. The psychotherapist who heads the field ambulance corps, McClane, explains to Charlotte after Conway's death (he is shot in the back while running away) the truth about his illness specifically to stop her being ill too; a full knowledge will keep her healthy. He explains that Conway suffered 'from some physical disability. It went through everything. It made him so he couldn't live a man's life.'⁸⁵ So the 'truth' of John's mystery is his impotence. The war has acted as a chance for him to cover this, but ultimately is its method of revelation. If the issues and paradoxes around illness and cure, individuality and sexuality, proximity and distance are culturally understood through the markers of sexual difference, in *The Romantic* these are radically reversed. As in *Tasker Jevons* the dynamics of reversal are the figure of Joan of Arc and the use of wounds, both literal and figurative.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 12.

⁸⁴ Ibid., p. 21.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 244.

Charlotte first meets Conway while staying in the country following the break-up of her first relationship. They both decide to remain and learn to be farmers. The importance of farmwork at the beginning of the novel links it to *Anne Severn and the Fieldings*, in which Anne runs her own farm and, during the war, makes a success of the Fieldings' estate.⁸⁶ In both novels the female characters' ability to work successfully, and physical work at that, chimes with the Sinclair of *Woman at Home* and *The Medical Press*. However, in both these cases, the women's engagement with 'manly' work is intricately linked with their sexual relationships.

When Charlotte and Conway become 'lovers', he refuses to have a sexual relationship with her because, he says, at any hint of sexual desire in a woman, his love turns to hate. Early in their relationship John Conway tells Charlotte that she looks like Joan of Arc: 'Her sight was second sight; your sight is memory. You never forget things.... I shall call you Jeanne. You ought to wear armour and a helmet.'⁸⁷ In contrast to *Tasker Jevons*, in this novel the epithet takes the form of an ambivalent tenderness that allows it to slip between masculinity and femininity, between female sexual attractiveness and martial strength and physical integrity. It occurs early on, before the war, but structures our reading of the rest of the novel

⁸⁶ The theme of the land and women's work on it is common in a number of novels by women about the war. In Cicely Hamilton's *William - An Englishman*, the central character is rescued by an Englishwoman, Edith Haynes, following the death of his wife in France. Once back in England, Edith is responsible for running her family's estate following the death of one brother in the trenches, and the capture of the other by the enemy. Significantly, Edith is implicitly contrasted with William's wife, who is suburban, self-righteous and a fierce suffragette. See Cicely Hamilton, *William - An Englishman* [1918], London: Persephone Books, 1999.

⁸⁷ Sinclair, *The Romantic*, p. 29-30.

in terms of a challenge to the meanings of sexual difference. The figure is repeated a number of times when Conway calls Charlotte 'Jeanne', making it even clearer than the use of 'Joan' would that it is the feminine form of his own name. This relation of a kind of sameness between central male and female characters is repeated in Sinclair's other two 'war' novels, where it is expressed through brother/sister relations.⁸⁸ In *The Tree of Heaven* (1917), Veronica goes to live with the Harrisons when her mother leaves her father for a lover. Although Frances Harrison, the mother of the family, persuades herself that Veronica's proximity is the best way of keeping her sons 'safe' from any involvement with her, in fact as children she and the second son, Nicky, develop a bond. As a child she is afraid of ghosts, 'And nobody but Nicky knew what she was afraid of.'⁸⁹ The two eventually marry and, even though Nicky dies in the trenches near the end of the novel, the relationship is an emblematic one within the structure of the novel. While earlier on Frances Harrison finds Veronica perplexing, and in response to her wants 'some hard, tight theory that would reconcile these extremes of penetration and detachment'⁹⁰ she sees in her adopted daughter, it is Veronica's ability to destabilise difference that is eventually healing. She has grown up as a sister to Nicky and Michael (who also dies in the trenches) and yet has married the former and is loved by the latter. At the end of the novel, for Frances:

⁸⁸ See Judith Marie Meyers, "'Comrade-Twin': Brothers and Doubles in the World War One Prose of May Sinclair, Katherine Anne Porter, Rebecca West and Virginia Woolf", PhD Thesis, University of Washington, 1985.

⁸⁹ May Sinclair, *The Tree of Heaven*, London: Cassell, 1917, p. 60.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 230.

It was as if Veronica held the souls of Michael and Nicholas in her hands. She offered her the souls of her dead sons. She was the mediator between her and their souls.⁹¹

Although, during a suffragette march before the war, Dorothy, Michael and Nicholas' sister, sees Veronica as 'like some sacrificial virgin',⁹² it is Veronica who fills the role of protector. Her telepathic skills guard Dorothy, Michael and Nicholas at different points in the novel.

Anne Severn and the Fieldings (1922) is in many ways a rewriting of *The Tree of Heaven* with the Veronica character at its centre. Anne Severn is informally adopted by the Fieldings after her mother's death. They have three sons - the eldest is in love with her, she is in love with the second son, and cures the third of his shell-shock. Although at the end of the novel Anne and the second son, Jerrold, are together - their passion 'clear and hard, unbreakable as crystal'⁹³ - this resolution is possible because Anne functions as his alter ego. He is destabilised by his experience of the war; Anne becomes a farmer and makes the Fieldings' estate into a success. The interchangeability across gender roles suggested by the quasi-brother/sister relation, and in particular what it suggests about sameness and sexual passion, are taken further in *The Romantic* through the use of the imagery of wounds.

⁹¹ Ibid., p. 353.

⁹² Ibid., p. 198.

⁹³ May Sinclair, *Anne Severn and the Fieldings*, London: Hutchinson, 1922, p. 281.

Early on in the novel, when Charlotte and John are working on the farm, they have a conversation about their feelings toward the land. Conway tells Charlotte about his reasons for wanting to farm:

'It's not the peace of it I want, Charlotte - Jeanne, I mean. It's the fight. Fighting with things that would kill you if you didn't. Wounding the earth to sow in it and make it feed you. Ploughing, Charlotte-Jeanne. Feeling the thrust and the drive through, and the thing listing over on the slope. Seeing the steel blade shine; and the long wounds coming in rows; hundreds of wounds, wet and shining.'⁹⁴

Charlotte disagrees, she sees the earth as 'so kind, so beautiful'.⁹⁵ This passage functions in much the same way as Tasker Jevons' pre-war description of his plan of action discussed above. In *The Romantic* too, a reliance on conventional assumptions about sexual difference are set up only to be subverted within the context of the war. Implicit in the use of 'Jeanne' in this extract is a comparison between Conway's violence as opposed to Charlotte's 'feminised' chivalry, despite working around a common martial imagery. The couple's different responses to the wounded Belgian soldiers begin the process of revelation. Conway professes commitment to them, but is perfectly willing to abandon them if he feels himself threatened. Charlotte feels love for her wounded, but this is explicitly within a framework of integrity and strength. Seeing her at one point in an ambulance in the firing line in her uniform, John 'looked at her and smiled. "Jeanne," he said, "in her armour."⁹⁶ Eventually, as the 'truth' of John's 'secret, mysterious thing'⁹⁷ becomes

⁹⁴ Sinclair, *The Romantic*, p. 32.

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 108.

clear, wounds as figures come to shift from their meaning in the extract above. Beginning to realise what John's psychological state consists of, Charlotte figures him as wounded:

And who was she to judge him? She in her 'armour' and he in his coat of nerves. His knowledge and his memory of fear would be like a raw open wound in his mind; and her knowledge of it would be a perpetual irritant, rubbing against it and keeping up the sore.... And if she gave John up his wound would never heal. She owed a sort of duty to the wound.⁹⁸

From being wounded, John becomes a wound, and one, at this point, that she can heal. Charlotte is finally estranged from John when he takes her, unknowing, to the room where dead soldiers are laid out, in order to test the limits of her bravery. She is afraid, she had never wanted to see them. John's pleasure in this test is described in very particular terms. He looks at her as they enter the room:

She had seen that sideling, attentive look once before, when she was a little girl, in the eyes of a schoolboy who had taken her away and told her something horrid.⁹⁹

The revelation of death is analogous to the revelation of the sexual act and/or sexual difference. Both are a revelation of a wound that cannot be healed. Charlotte's horror at the sight of the dead bodies is a reaction to their status as beyond cure. At the end of the novel, though, Charlotte's increased understanding

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 161.

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 162.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 174.

of John through her conversation with McClane does cure. Even though John is dead, her breakdown can be halted through knowing 'the *truth* about Conway',¹⁰⁰ even though what this truth consists of is itself a wound, a lack that cannot be filled, Conway's impotence. Finally, in McClane's explanation, a most extraordinary reversal is effected. The doctor tells Charlotte: 'He [Conway] sucked manhood out of you. He sucked it out of everything - out of blood and wounds.'¹⁰¹ Conway is figured as a vampire, and on him are focused the dangers usually associated with women. This feminisation of Conway has been seen as part of the novel's propaganda, a rejection of the 'unmanly man' because of the damage he does to the war effort.¹⁰² But *The Romantic* was written after the war when the understanding of such figurations had shifted. What is more interesting is what this figuration of John in the context of the war allows in the reading of Charlotte. At the end of the novel, she contains 'manhood', that is bravery, a commitment to her work, a place in the public world. What she is allowed too, however, is sexual attractiveness and sexual desire. What the novel demonstrates, in particular through the figure of Joan of Arc, is the possibility of integration for a woman - of work and passion, of public and private, of being both protector and protected.

Both *The Romantic* and *Tasker Jevons* set against each other heroism and fear, the 'armour' against the 'coat of nerves'. What I have suggested through looking at the use of the figure of Joan of Arc is that both novels suggest a feminisation, a

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., p. 244; emphasis in original.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., p. 245.

¹⁰² Jane Marcus, 'Corpus/Corps/Corpse: Writing the Body in/at War', p. 130.

renewed femininity, as the cure for fear. In the next chapter, I want to look more closely at Sinclair's attempt to cure fear by reading her use of death as narrative resolution.

Chapter 5

The domestication of death

May Sinclair's *Uncanny Stories*

In *A Defence of Idealism* (1917) Sinclair wrote:

we have authentic evidence bearing on the existence of a fairly extensive borderland, lying between Magic and Mysticism - the region of the so-called 'psychic powers'... that there are 'powers', *some* powers, is, I think, no longer in dispute.¹

Sinclair had been proposed for membership of the Society for Psychical Research in 1914, and although nothing of hers appears in the Society's literature, certainly in the years that psychical research was a dynamic movement, her interest remained. However, in her review in *The Medical Press* of a critique of the spiritualist writings of Sir Oliver Lodge, the physicist, by Charles Mercier, a Darwinian psychiatrist, Sinclair aligns herself strongly with the latter. She makes it clear that her involvement in the SPR was on the grounds which were 'cautious, critical, sceptical and absolutely destitute of any bias', separating herself quite explicitly from that wing of the society which was 'reckless, uncritical, credulous, and biassed'.² Her primary criticism of Lodge, and the other scientists arguing for survival and communication beyond death, is that they use their authority and status as scientists as a cover for their unauthoritative and unscientific arguments for spiritualism. Sinclair concurs with Mercier - there is no evidence for

¹ May Sinclair, *A Defence of Idealism*, London: Macmillan, 1917, pp. 293, 298.

² May Sinclair, 'The Spirits, Some Simpletons, and Dr. Charles Mercier', *The Medical Press*, 25 July 1917, p. 60.

communication with the dead. However, Sinclair also criticises *Mercier's* inability to separate prejudice from science, as he lumps together spiritualism with 'telepathy, and thought-transference, and psycho-analysis'. In the end both men show the same inability 'to discriminate between what is telepathy and what is spooks'.³ What Sinclair's argument in the review rests on is a clear separation between logical, scientific thought and what she calls at the beginning 'the Will-to-believe'. The article ends with commendation for that in *Mercier's* book which conforms to this distinction: 'It is impossible to praise too highly the hardness of the thought and the clearness and vigour of the writing.'⁴ Two weeks later two letters appeared in *The Medical Press* - one from Lodge about Sinclair's review, the second her reply. Lodge undermines Sinclair's arguments by cataloguing factual errors contained in her review - confusing gravitation for the atomic theory of matter, confusing a book by him with one by Alfred Russel Wallace.⁵ In her letter Sinclair describes herself as in 'sackcloth and ashes' because of her mistakes, and ends with a curious admission. She suggests that she should have stressed the evidence for the existence of telepathy.

It would no doubt have been fairer to Sir Oliver Lodge to have laid more stress on it. It would also have been fairer to myself, seeing that here I agree with him and not with Dr. Mercier. But if I strained every nerve to be fair to Dr. Mercier, and to set his argument in the best possible light, it was *because* my desire inclines me strongly towards Sir Oliver Lodge's

³ Ibid., p. 61.

⁴ Ibid., p. 62.

⁵ Sir Oliver Lodge, 'Spiritualism, Sir Oliver Lodge, and Dr. Charles Mercier', Letter in *The Medical Press*, 8 August 1917, p. 106.

conclusions.⁶

What seems to have swung Sinclair around, to have muddied her clear position as stated in the original article, is desire set in motion by a confrontation with the meaning of death. The issues raised for Sinclair's writing in this exchange chime with much larger debates. The language Sinclair uses in praise of Mercier's book is used by her (and others) again and again in the defence of modernist aesthetics.⁷ Jay Winter, in his history of the cultural effects of mass bereavement during and after the First World War, links this experience of death with both modernist experimentation in various forms and with the resurgence of interest in spiritualism. In both cases he argues against 'modernist' historical assignations of progressiveness and reaction or, in his terms, of the 'traditional' and the 'modern'.⁸ This chapter will read Sinclair's *Uncanny Stories* as taking part in this tension between science and belief, between a commitment to 'hardness' in the representation of the real and the pull of the 'sheltered sanctuary of a great bereavement',⁹ between 'modernist austerity' and 'gothic flamboyance'.¹⁰

⁶ May Sinclair, 'Spiritualism, Sir Oliver Lodge, and Dr. Charles Mercier', Letter in *The Medical Press*, 8 August 1917, p. 107; emphasis in original.

⁷ See in particular May Sinclair, 'Prufrock: And Other Observations: A Criticism', *Little Review*, 4 (8), December 1917, pp. 8-14; and the Preface, this work.

⁸ Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (1995), Cambridge: Canto, 1998, pp. 2-5, 54-7.

⁹ Sinclair, 'The Spirits, Some Simpletons, and Dr. Charles Mercier', p. 60.

¹⁰ From J. Briggs, *Night Visitors: The Rise and Fall of the English Ghost Story*, London: Faber, 1977, quoted in Nickianne Moody, 'Visible Margins: Women Writers and the English Ghost Story', in Sarah Sceats and Gail Cunningham (eds), *Image and Power: Women in Fiction in the Twentieth Century*, Harlow:

The longest story in the collection, 'The Flaw in the Crystal', first appeared as a novella in 1912. Thanking a friend for praise of the story, Sinclair said that she would like to write more 'uncanny' tales because:

They fascinate me.... The queer thing about this tale is that it really happened - at least the uncanny part of it did. Only of course I let myself play about with the possibilities of the things and added the man Rodney Lanyon and his wife Bella to 'thicken' it.¹¹

Following a review of 'The Flaw in the Crystal' which appeared in the *New York Times* in September of that year, the editor of the book section invited Sinclair to contribute a letter of explanation, which was printed a couple of months later. On reading this letter, James H. Hyslop, an member of the American Society for Psychical Research, wrote to Sinclair requesting an account of the experience on which the story had been based: 'It is the cold naked facts we desire without color of imagination or fear of ridicule. I hope I may have a detailed record of the facts which gave rise to the book.'¹²

Although Hyslop's request for a factual account is wholly in keeping with the strenuous attempts by the SPR from its beginnings to situate itself in as firm a way as possible in the place of the objective, the serious, the scientific, at the same time

Longman, 1996, p. 80.

¹¹ Letter to Annie Fields quoted in T.E.M. Boll, *Miss May Sinclair: Novelist: A Biographical and Critical Introduction*, Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1973, p. 100.

¹² Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 101.

there was a strong sense of a relationship between psychical research and literature which had as its subject the 'ghostly'. In *The Supernatural in Modern English Fiction* (1917), Dorothy Scarborough iterates this relation. Henry James, she says, based *The Turn of the Screw*, that progenitor of the modern ghost story,¹³ 'on an incident reported to the Psychical Society'.¹⁴ More generally:

The activities of the Society for Psychical Research have had decided effect in stimulating ghostly stories. When so many intelligent persons turn their attention to finding and classifying supernatural phenomena the currents of thought thus set up will naturally influence fiction.¹⁵

A telepathy exists between 'scientific' research and its seeming opposite, literary writing. However, what Hyslop's request suggests is that influence the other way, from fiction to psychical research, needs to be severely controlled. It is the 'color of imagination' *and* the 'fear of ridicule' he wants to avoid; what Hyslop's request to Sinclair suggests is a causal link between the two. Contamination by any suggestion of the imaginative would undermine his project and subject him to that enemy of the serious - ridicule. What is implicit in Hyslop's request quoted above is, in fact, a disavowal of the sensual. The facts he desires are cold, naked and without colour; the banishing of fear as a possibility is predicated upon this sensory deprivation. However, the economy of affect implied by Hyslop's statement

¹³ So says Virginia Woolf in her *TLS* review of Scarborough's book; see Virginia Woolf, 'Across the Border', in *The Essays of Virginia Woolf Vol 2 1912-1918*, ed. Andrew McNeillie, London: Hogarth Press, 1987, p. 219.

¹⁴ Dorothy Scarborough, *The Supernatural in Modern English Fiction*, New York and London: G.P. Putnam's & Sons, 1917, p. 204.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

suggests that the threat of ridicule is not the only fear in circulation. If facts are to be of the right sort, then the imagination must go. It is the work of the imagination in the ghostly story which determines its success or failure; that is, whether it provokes fear of any kind. In the exchange between Sinclair and Hyslop, what seems to be happening is that, while the essential facts of the story remain the same, and are what 'fascinate' both of them, what is excessive for Hyslop is the likelihood that the imaginative work will result in fear. For Sinclair, on the other hand, the really 'queer', the 'uncanny' thing is the very factual nature of the story; it is not her part in the process, her 'play' which produces the uncanny effect. In other words, what seems to be necessary in any engagement with the supernatural, the uncanny, whether as 'scientific' researcher or 'imaginative' writer, is a denial of the responsibility for fear.

The possibility of a 'telepathy' and a 'correspondence' between the world of psychical research and that of fiction suggested by Scarborough's 'currents of thought', then, creates dis-ease and disavowal on both sides. What happens when a third member is brought into this relationship? What is the status of fear for the reader? On its publication in 1923, *Uncanny Stories* was reviewed anonymously in the *Times Literary Supplement*. It is a negative review, and the writer's disappointment is focused on a lack, the absence of that very excess that Hyslop rejected, the excess which provokes fear.

[I]n her anxiety to dissect the human mind with scientific nicety [Sinclair] seems to neglect the art of story-telling.... What can she mean by calling [the stories] uncanny? As they stand they are nothing of the sort; they are curiosities of pathology, they are queer instances of mental obsession, they are anecdotes from a casebook; there is scarcely a twinge or thrill of

luxurious fear in any of them. If they were stories literally true to fact they would gain in interest - a damaging reflection upon a work of art. They are, in short, the raw material that Miss Sinclair the story-teller might have taken in hand, the stuff that she might have transformed into stories genuinely uncanny; but to that end she would have had to care more for stories of men and women, and less for theories of mind and matter.¹⁶

For the *TLS* reviewer too it is imagination added to the 'raw material' of fact which creates the affect of fear, but for him or her this excess is 'luxurious', and therefore desirable. The argument that Sinclair's stories are places of lack is made cogent by using the opposition of the scientific as flat, two-dimensional, as surface and the imaginative as three-dimensional, embodied ('stories of men and women'), as the possibility of depth when the 'raw material' is transformed by the competent storyteller. Clearly this reader's expectations have not been fulfilled, a disappointment which the reviewer blames on a deficiency in the writing.

Whatever differences there may be between Hyslop and the *TLS* reviewer in terms of where they place the responsibility for fear, and whether its presence or absence is desirable, what they do seem to agree on is a certain topography of fear. Fear is an effect of depth, of excess, not surface or the untransformed original ('cold hard fact', 'the raw material'); fear is created by extra work on the original surface, in its transformation into something three-dimensional, into, in effect, a body. When the hard facts of the psychical story are worked on by the imagination of the writer, then the effect, desirable or otherwise, is indeed the relocation of them into the body of the reader, through the agency of fear. Sinclair's perception of the writerly

¹⁶ Review of *Uncanny Stories*, *Times Literary Supplement*, 6 September 1923, p. 586.

work as being a conduit rather than a transformer, of fear, the uncanny, already existing in the factual raw material, at the surface, does not change this model. Her activity still 'thickens', adds depth, despite locating fear in a place apart from her own work. For each of the three the model is the same - what changes, what is floating, is fear.

What has happened to fear at these moments of a resurgence of intense interest in the psychological? How is it that Sinclair, Hyslop and the *TLS* reviewer cannot agree, either on where fear is located, or on what creates it? Why is it that the only agreement is around a denial, in one way or another, of the presence of fear? In his 1919 essay, 'The "Uncanny"', Freud defines the uncanny as 'that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar'.¹⁷ Through his reading of dictionary definitions of the *Heimliche* and its 'opposite', the *Unheimliche*, Freud suggests that the crucial factor in the creation of the uncanny is a sliding of meaning between the two words. Central to this, and lost in the translation of the *Unheimliche* as 'the uncanny', is the place of the home. Freud's essay begins with a dictionary definition of the *Heimliche*; in the second of its two distinct senses, its meaning slips into the definition of the *Unheimliche*. *Heimlich* means both homely, familiar, the domestic, and the hidden, secret and strange. The two words are not, in fact, opposites, rather the *Unheimliche* is a 'subspecies' of the *Heimliche*.¹⁸ The 'known of old and long familiar', when either surmounted or

¹⁷ Sigmund Freud, 'The "Uncanny"' (1919), *Art and Literature*, Penguin Freud Library, vol. 14, London: Penguin, 1990, p. 340. The essay was first published in English in the *Collected Papers* (1925).

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 437.

repressed, returns, as 'something that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light',¹⁹ to haunt. So, what is necessary to an experience of the uncanny is, first, a repression of something familiar such that it becomes unfamiliar, and the return of that thing, bringing with it both familiarity and unfamiliarity - a destabilising ambiguity that provokes fear. For Freud too the topography of fear is one where depth (the hidden) is the locus of the frightening and the surface, before the return from 'below' of the repressed, is familiar. Again, fear exists in the excess (the hidden that returns) which disrupts the surface. So, indeed, 'What can she mean by calling them uncanny?' If Sinclair's *Uncanny Stories* are two-dimensional, are surface, are the bare bones of 'cases', it is no wonder the *TLS* reviewer was not gratified with even a twinge of fear. The repressed has no chance of a return in their clinical atmosphere - 'cold naked facts' will not be haunted. However, Hyslop's description of his request suggests another twist in the topography of fear. It is 'cold naked facts' that will guard Hyslop against the excesses of fear; but what do those words suggest except something that is dead? In order to understand the communication between Hyslop and Sinclair a distinction has to be made between death and dead. It is not the dead body (associated with fact, with science, with the knowable) that is feared here; it is death that is feared, represented as it can only be by the ambiguously dead/alive body - the body buried alive, the ghost, the vampire, the double. It is death that muddies, death that is uncertain, death that calls up the strenuous disavowal of both Hyslop and Sinclair.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 345.

Towards the end of his essay, Freud touches on the subject of death as the most 'striking' example of that which is uncanny. Our attitude to death, he begins, is one of the few things which has remained unchanged during our 'progress' from 'savage' to 'civilised'. We are still unable to grasp the fact of our own mortality. Freud goes on to map what he sees as examples of the fact that 'almost all of us still think as savages do on this topic'.²⁰ However, it is possible to read Freud's examples otherwise, and I quote them at length in order to do so:

Religions continue to dispute the importance of the undeniable fact of individual death and to postulate a life after death; civil governments still believe that they cannot maintain moral order among the living if they do not uphold the prospect of a better life hereafter as a recompense for mundane existence. In our great cities, placards announce lectures that undertake to tell us how to get into touch with the souls of the departed; and it cannot be denied that not a few of the most able and penetrating minds among our men of science have come to the conclusion, especially towards the close of their own lives, that a contact of this kind is not impossible.... Considering our unchanged attitude towards death, we might rather inquire what has become of repression, which is the necessary condition of a primitive feeling recurring in the shape of something uncanny. But repression is there, too. All supposedly educated people have ceased to believe officially that the dead can become visible as spirits, and have made any such appearances dependent on improbable and remote conditions; their emotional attitude towards their dead, moreover once a highly ambiguous and ambivalent one, has been toned down in the higher strata of the mind into an unambiguous feeling of piety.²¹

It seems to me that Freud is struggling here to make the visible markers of a relation to death, its unhidden surface, fit into his surface/depth topography of the uncanny. Are the activities of churches, governments and spiritualists at the beginning of the above quote examples of the return of the repressed or the

²⁰ Ibid., p. 365.

²¹ Ibid., p. 365.

surmounted, or are they markers of repression itself? The argument reaches a point where it threatens to undermine what has gone before; if the markers of death are everywhere, 'we might rather inquire', and death is something that 'many' people experience as uncanny 'in the highest degree',²² then it would seem as though it is not just the depths rising to the surface which are uncanny. In her reading of Freud's 'The "Uncanny"', Hélène Cixous argues that 'any analysis of the *Unheimliche* is in itself an *Un*, a mark of repression and the dangerous vibration of the *Heimliche*'.²³ Of course it is central to Freud's argument that it is in the very place of the familiar that the strange will appear and cause instability. It seems that this is true also when the 'man of science' attempts to master the subject through the familiar tools of intellectual inquiry. The place of the greatest threat of the 'dangerous vibration' Cixous locates as death. Death has this power because it

does not have any form in life. Our unconscious makes no place for the representation of our mortality. As an impossible representation, death is that which mimes, by this very impossibility, the reality of death. It goes even further. That which signifies without that which is signified. What is an absolute secret, something absolutely new and which should remain hidden, because it has shown itself to me, is the fact that I am dead; only the dead know the secret of death. Death will recognize us, but we shall not recognize it.²⁴

So in any analysis of the uncanny, it is not possible to smooth over, to fit neatly within any model, that which is uncanny 'in the highest degree'. And indeed, in the

²² Ibid., p. 364.

²³ Hélène Cixous, 'Fiction and its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's *Das Unheimliche* (The "Uncanny")', *New Literary History*, 7(3), 1976, pp. 545.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 543.

communication between Cixous' essay and Freud's there is a breakdown, a gap as the texts reflect back and forth around death. For Cixous, the long passage from Freud quoted above marks the following:

Before death's invasion...Freud invokes a screen of traditional defense: men's 'responses' to death are all tainted with the order of the Establishment, of ideological institutions (religion and politics). An evolution has taken place from primitive animism to the moral order.²⁵

Within the logic of Freud's argument, as I have argued, however, these things seem to be examples of how we all 'still think as savages do on this topic'. Death is not only the privileged marker of the uncanny, it is also, paradoxically, that which messes and muddies the uncanny, multiplying the slippage between the unfamiliar and the strange until we cannot tell one from the other.

Freud does attempt to stabilise his argument by locating the necessary repression more specifically in the tension between the visible and the invisible at the end of the passage quoted above. As long as death is absent, it is possible for the 'educated' to repress their belief and therefore to be comfortable with piety as an appropriate relation to the dead. Again, the problem with this within the rhetorical structure of Freud's argument is that its validity now rests on the absence of spirits as evidence of repression, and that the anodyne examples quoted in the long extract should themselves be places of the uncanny. The examples which threaten Freud's argument - the belief in a (better) life after death, interest in communication with the dead who have gone there from even the most 'able and

²⁵ Ibid., p. 544.

penetrating minds' - then become the things which return death, or the reality of mortality, rather than markers of repression. Of course, the problem with this is that the 'educated' of Freud's argument would either be many of those attending church or lectures on spiritualism, and presumably not experiencing any twinges of the uncanny, or would react to both with a large dose of ridicule. It would seem, in this reading of Freud's treatment of death - that privileged place of the uncanny - that the uncanny, and the fear it generates, has somehow disappeared.

What has happened to fear, in particular of death, at this historical moment of the most intense experience of death because of the First World War, and of a cultural familiarity with the ideas and methods of and developments in psychical research? What I want to suggest by looking first at one of the documents to come out of the meeting of these two phenomena, and second through a reading of Sinclair's *Uncanny Stories*, is that what is being struggled over is the status of the familiar, the domestic, what I have designated as surface within the topography of fear discussed above. As I have argued elsewhere, Sinclair is intensely interested in the beyond and the invisible,²⁶ and what we see in these stories, via a reading of the absence of fear, is an attempt to bring the depths to the surface, to make the invisible knowable, to domesticate death, to make death a cure.

In 1916, Oliver Lodge published *Raymond*, an account of his family's attempts to verify communication from his son, Raymond, who was killed in Flanders in September 1915. Lodge was well-known physicist, a recent winner of the Royal

²⁶ See Chapter 3.

Society's Rumford Medal, president of the Physical Society, had been Principal of the University of Birmingham since 1900 and was knighted in 1902. He had also been involved in psychical research from early in its life, and had been president of the SPR between 1901 and 1903. *Raymond* focused and directed much of the revival of interest in communication with the dead that the war had provoked - the book went into six editions in the first two months of publication - and was given credibility by its author's status as eminent scientist. The desire to resist a feeling of overwhelming loss was intense; so much so that usually recognised limits and places of belief became shaky. Arthur Machen's short story 'The Bowmen' was published in the *Evening News* in September 1914. The story tells of a group of English soldiers in the trenches engaged in what seems to be an unwinnable exchange with the enemy. The central character, during this exchange, has a kind of vision of figures dressed in chainmail, and when he again becomes conscious of his surroundings the advancing German soldiers are being killed in great numbers. They eventually retreat and the English position is saved. At the end, the narrator tells us that German generals, belonging as they do to a country ruled by 'scientific principles', had to conclude that their soldiers had been killed by an unknown poisonous gas contained with the shells, 'as no wounds were discernible on the bodies of the dead German soldiers'.²⁷ In the introduction to his collection published the next year, including 'The Bowmen' and three other stories, Machen recounts the events which followed the newspaper publication of his story. A few days after the publication, Machen received a letter from the editor of *The Occult*

²⁷ Arthur Machen, 'The Bowmen', *The Angels of Mons: The Bowmen and Other Legends of the War*, London: Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent and Co., 1915, p. 38.

Review, wanting to know if the story had any foundation in fact. Machen replied in the negative, but a few months later, after the story had been republished in parish magazines, Machen learned that people were reading his story as a description of and evidence for supernatural intervention in the war.

This happened, I should think, some time in April, and the snowball of rumour that was then set rolling has been rolling ever since, growing bigger and bigger, till it is now swollen to a monstrous size. It was about this period that variants of my tale began to be told as authentic histories.²⁸

Machen's ostensible purpose for republishing 'The Bowmen' and the other stories (all of which deal with supernatural happenings which in some way aid or confirm the moral superiority of the English army) in the collection of 1915 is to repudiate and stop the 'snowball of rumour'. This seems disingenuous on Machen's part. While his introduction reiterates the lack of 'hard' evidence for any of the reported supernatural happenings in Flanders and France, it seems that the stories cannot be read by the public as anything other than evidence for comfort in the face of fear, indeed a refusal of fear, and, specifically, a denial of the arbitrary nature of death.²⁹ So, two years later, Dorothy Scarborough talks about the stories as 'interesting

²⁸ Ibid., p. 15.

²⁹ The only English soldier who dies in the stories, in 'The Soldiers' Rest', wakes up in what he takes to be a rural English inn. He gradually realises that he has in fact died (in the act of saving his comrades) and gone to heaven as he is welcomed into the fraternity of heroic English soldiers by men in battle dress from various earlier periods. In an interesting link with the correspondence made in *Raymond* between letters from the front and messages from the dead, the dead soldier describes his calm and happy feelings as he wakes up in the inn: 'In its mildest form this set of emotions may be observed in passengers who have crossed the Channel on a windy day without being sick' ('The Soldiers' Rest', pp. 39-40).

psychical specimens',³⁰ and once again the distinctions between fiction and evidence disappear.

Lodge begins his account of communication with his dead son by cataloguing, in the form of written statements from his mother, siblings and colleagues and of letters written home from the front, accounts of Raymond, his personality and character. The attempt to recuperate Raymond as a person, as coherent and identifiable, begins in these statements. At this point in Lodge's account, persuasiveness comes, not from 'evidence', but from the force of affective relationships. Indeed, in his introduction, Lodge asserts that:

the methods of intercommunication across what has seemed to be a gulf exist and are effective in response to the urgent demand of affection - that in fact, as Diotima told Socrates...LOVE BRIDGES THE CHASM.³¹

The primary motive of attempts at communication with the dead is, then, to recomplete a notional whole, the family, to fill the undesirable gaps that have been opened up by death - 'scientific interest and missionary zeal' are, for Lodge, supplementary.³² The dedication page of *Raymond* reads: 'To his mother and family. With gratitude for permission to use private material for public uses.' The gap between the public and the private is acknowledged here; implicitly accepted is

³⁰ Scarborough, *The Supernatural in Modern English Fiction*, p. 204.

³¹ Oliver Lodge, *Raymond Revisited: A New and Abbreviated Edition of 'Raymond or Life and Death'*, London: Methuen, 1922, p. xiii. The first edition of the book was published in November 1916.

³² Ibid.

the idea that what may be appropriate in one sphere may not be in the other. However, the whole tone of Lodge's book is one of intense urgency, a sense that the importance of his task justifies, indeed demands, a collapsing of these distinctions. The pressing need for a gesture of retrieval is clear in the texture of Lodge's language later on. The sense of urgency, located here in the dead themselves, is clear.

broken ties of affection have the first claim; and early efforts at communication from the departed are nearly always directed towards assuring survivors of the fact of continued existence, helping them to realize that changed surroundings have in no way weakened love or destroyed memory, and urging with eager insistence that earthly happiness need not be irretrievably spoiled by bereavement.³³

The first messages were received by Lodge and his wife a week or two before Raymond's death, from Mrs Leonore Piper of New Hampshire, a medium who had already been the subject of SPR investigation. Mrs Piper had first visited England in 1889-90, and Lodge and F.H.S. Myers, a leading SPR researcher, were involved in a committee set up to investigate her. The committee published a report in 1890, and Lodge was convinced that she was not a fake. However, as Janet Oppenheim describes:

Perhaps, Lodge tentatively proposed, telepathy from distant persons might be involved, although he was not yet convinced that thought transference could operate between minds geographically separated. Only 'as a last resort' did he suggest 'telepathy from deceased persons'.³⁴

³³ Ibid., p. 44.

³⁴ Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research 1850-1914*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985, p. 375.

Myers had then investigated, and been persuaded by, Mrs Piper when visiting her in Cambridge, Massachusetts in 1893. By 1912 Lodge too was convinced of human survival and the persistence of personality beyond death. In many ways this movement was a compromise between the different impulses of spiritualism and psychical research. For those involved in the nascent psychical research movement, keen to distance themselves from spiritualism and establish their work as scientific, the move away from materialisation phenomena, where the medium purportedly produced a full- or part-form materialisation of their spirit control, and towards the mental was very welcome. Indeed, Myers persuaded the medium Rosina Thompson to move away from her physical endeavours, and William James, in his presidential address to the SPR in 1896, noted the relief for researchers 'as they abandoned "phenomena of the dark-sitting and rat-hole type" in favour of the "calm air of delightful studies"'.³⁵ Lodge's position had changed from one of investigation to one of belief, yet retained the attraction toward the disembodied, the rational.

From the turn of the century, the main focus of investigation and interest for the SPR had been what came to be called cross-correspondences. These began in 1901, and involved automatic writing from four or five women, located in different parts of the world. With hindsight, investigators read the early messages as attempts at communication with Arthur Balfour (Conservative prime minister,

³⁵ Both these examples are quoted in Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England*, London: Virago, 1989, p. 237.

1902-5, and foreign secretary during part of the war) from Mary Lyttleton, to whom he had been engaged as a young man, but who had died in 1875, before the engagement was made public. Although some of the women involved in transmitting the cross-correspondences knew the Balfour family (Eleanor Sidgwick, a leading figure in the SPR, was Balfour's sister), the romance had been a secret, and its history remained so till until 1911. The messages began to be gathered together and studied by investigators from the SPR (including Eleanor Sidgwick and another of her brothers, Gerald) in 1912 and were seen as an attempt on Mary's part to convince Arthur that she still loved him, as well as dealing with other less personal matters, such as the new world order. The cross-correspondences lasted thirty years, and over 3,000 scripts were produced. The job of the investigators was one of hermeneutics - to read the allusions in the writing produced by the women in such a way that a coherent message could be produced. It seemed to them that 'when sifted and studied in minute detail, [the messages] seem[ed] to develop in conjunction, using a similar and elaborate symbolism'.³⁶ The detailing of these cross-correspondences became a primary project for psychical researchers in the new century. The move from mid-Victorian spiritualism to late Victorian or Edwardian psychical research involved a replacement of the materialised form as a marker or sign of the dead by language, and in particular written language, text. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the first messages received regarding Raymond link up with these cross-correspondence, and demanded a similar method of interpretation. The message received by Lodge via Mrs Piper from her control is purportedly repeating a message from the by then

³⁶ Oppenheim, *The Other World*, p. 133.

dead Frederick Myers: 'Myers says you take the part of the poet, and he will act as Faunus. FAUNUS.... *Protect*. He will understand.... Ask Verrall, she will also understand.'³⁷ Mrs Verrall, who Lodge goes on to contact regarding the message, is one of the mediums involved in the cross-correspondences. In her reply to Lodge, she refers him to a part of Horace's *Odes* in order to understand the poet and faunus reference. Lodge takes it to mean that Myers will protect him and his family in some way, and we can see that the project of filling in the gaps in language with a stabilising meaning that concerned the interpreters of the cross-correspondences has surfaced in Lodge's text.

Following various verification procedures, where Lodge and members of his family visited mediums anonymously, asking Raymond for information on events that had happened in the family following his death, and so on, Lodge's narrative focuses on the messages themselves. Through the mediums and their controls, Raymond describes his new surroundings in much the same way as someone newly abroad would write home.

I live in a house (he says) - a house built of bricks - and there are trees and flowers, and the ground is solid. And if you kneel down in the mud, apparently you get your clothes soiled....

There is something always rising from the earth plane - something chemical in form. As it rises to ours, it goes through various changes and solidifies on our plane [and so makes the trees, flowers and so on]....

He says, my body's very similar to the one I had before.... I knew a man that had lost his arm, but he has got another one.... But I am told...that when anybody's blown to pieces, it takes some time for the spirit-body to

³⁷ Lodge, *Raymond*, pp. 55-6; emphasis in original.

complete itself, to gather itself all in, and to be complete.³⁸

The experiences recounted by Lodge in *Raymond* were familiar to thousands of families in the country. Raymond's letters home from the front, reprinted in the early part of the book, must have recalled, in tone and subject matter, letters that nearly every family received. The presence of letters home from the front is an insistent part of nearly every familial, that is domestically located, remembering, re-telling, re-creation of war experiences. The fairly long section of the book where Raymond's letters are reprinted is there ostensibly to establish his character - 'I shall now quote extracts from letters which Raymond wrote to members of his family during the time he was serving in Flanders, in order to make him better known to the reader.'³⁹ However, within the rhetorical structure of Lodge's book, that is, the attempt to convince the reader of the veracity of post-mortem communication, the letters from Raymond while still alive have a very similar function to his messages when dead. They tell the family about his surroundings, they recreate the particular attractions of his personality, they allow communication between members of the family who are separated by distance, they stand in for the absence of his body. The potentially uncanny is recast as the solidly familiar when, within the context of the surface rhetorical gestures of Lodge's text, the messages from beyond death are shown as no more unusual than, as in fact a continuation of, messages from beyond the English Channel. A familiar form of language, a letter from a loved one, slips into another form of language,

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 105, 106, 112.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 10.

messages from the dead, domesticating the latter and in turn domesticating that for which messages stand in, that is, death.

The mixture in the quotes from *Raymond* above of an attempt to negate the difference of death, to reclaim familiarity for the lost son, and tacit references to the actuality of his death (Raymond died in the trenches, after living in mud and seeing his men blown to pieces) is terribly poignant. In his conclusion, in an attempt to resecure his narrative against the shakiness of grief and loss, Lodge suggests that recoverable wholeness through communication with the dead is predicated on such loss.

Under the impact of their [the dead soldiers'] young energy, strengthened by the love which rises towards them like a blessing, the traditional barrier between the two states is suffering violence, is being taken by force.... The universe is one, not two...we exist in it continuously all the time; sometimes conscious in one way, sometimes conscious in another;... But the partition is a subjective one, *so long as the link of affection is not broken.*⁴⁰

Why doesn't Lodge read the evidences of his son's continued existence as haunting? And, more generally, how could the revival of spiritual occurrences during and after the war be seen as comforting, as desirable, given the de facto uncanniness of death? I want to suggest that seeing linguistic communication as an unbroken chain makes possible a certain comfort in a metaphorical retrieval of the bodies of the dead, especially when the actual bodies are irrecoverable.⁴¹ In the

⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 194, 200-1; emphasis mine.

⁴¹ On the debate both during and after the war on whether the state should return the bodies of soldiers to their families, or whether they should remain buried in battlefield cemeteries see Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, pp. 22-225

first few months of 1917, a rather negative review of *Raymond* appeared in *The Dublin Review*, a Catholic journal, written by one Father Martindale. What horrifies this reviewer, what seems to repel him, is the metaphorically suggested presence of the decaying body. Although he concedes that telepathy 'quite roughly speaking, is an established fact',⁴² he begins his piece by doubting the efficacy of spiritualist communication - from dead 'soul', to control, to medium, to sitter. 'How much authentic communication,' he asks, 'survives at the end of this process?'⁴³ Martindale further locates the unsatisfactory nature of communication in a different kind of indirection. Referring specifically to the first messages received by Lodge via Mrs Piper, he asks:

Are we indeed, at such a crisis in life, to be sent to absurd interpretations of pagan poets, and the cheap glitter of scholarly allusions? Please God, once we have passed out of this period of shadows and symbols, we shall be done with scholarship and allusion.⁴⁴

What Martindale is repelled by, it seems, is the sense of language removed from a direct relationship with its meaning; and the gap which has opened up between the two he sees filled with mediums and controls, shadows and symbols. The reviewer's final rejection of the world opened up in *Raymond* sets up a strange metaphorical relation between his sense of linguistic corruption and the decay

8, and Joanna Bourke, *Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain and the Great War*, London: Reaktion Books, 1996, Chapter 5.

⁴² Father C.C. Martindale, 'Some Impressions of a Reader of "Raymond"', *The Dublin Review*, January-April, 160 (320-1), 1917, p. 78.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 76.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 77.

associated with death. Whenever he reads spiritualist literature, he says,

I cannot rid my palate, so to say, of a subtle flavour of corruption. As in the writings of Christian Scientists, and still more of Theosophists, one gets the 'sense' of an intelligence gone rotten, so in all that relates to spiritualism I cannot cease for a moment to experience that savour of spiritual rot, worse even than that authentic touch of *communicative decay* which one often gets when in contact with the insane.⁴⁵

Father Martindale makes an implicit distinction here between a type of spiritual experience which is normative, healthy, and another which is diseased, which is a supernatural gone bad, which is, in fact, the gothic.⁴⁶ In her *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick suggests that in the gothic "correspondence" is distinguished from direct communication, which is seen as impossible; instead it moves by a relation of counterparts and doubles, and is subject to dangerous distortions and interferences'.⁴⁷ It is the presence of correspondences rather than communication that accounts for much of the effect

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 79; emphasis in original.

⁴⁶ The link between an increase in the possibility of communication and mental pathology occurs again and again in this period. Freud quotes the Swiss neurologist Otto Binswanger on

the close connections which exist between [nervous illness] and modern life, with its unbridled pursuit of money and possessions, and its immense advances in the field of technology which have rendered illusory every obstacle, whether temporal or spatial, to our means of intercommunication.

See Sigmund Freud, 'Civilized' Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness' (1908), *Civilization, Society and Religion*, Penguin Freud Library, vol. 12, London: Penguin, 1991, p. 36.

⁴⁷ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (1980), London and New York: Methuen, 2nd edn, 1986, p. 40.

of fear in the gothic spectacle. It seems to be something of this that the reviewer above is reacting to. His sense of disgust (revealed in the repetition of images of rot and decay) is provoked by the 'sense' of continuity as broken, of the possibility of meaning (for which, in the case of sittings with mediums, read identity) being muddied and distorted, doubled or more, as its point of origin and its articulation get further and further apart. However, where Martindale sees a break down in communication, and is repelled by it, Lodge is at pains to restore it. The same break down in communication is not split off and seen as originating outside the realm of the familiar (in the insane, for example), but is incorporated into the familiar, is domesticated.

Why is it that Martindale's contemplation of the return of the dead ends in a physical disgust (he can taste the rot) which suggests the domain of horror and the uncanny, whereas Lodge and his family welcome the return of their dead as bringing completion and wholeness? I would suggest that the difference between the reaction of the reviewer and that of Lodge is located in the place of affective relationships. The gesture of retrieval of the family as whole, without gaps, covers over the presence of correspondence as opposed to contiguity. So the messages received through table rapping, strings of letters without word breaks, nonsensical until someone deciphers them following the sitting, are for Lodge, not anxiety-producing markers of the arbitrariness of language, signs of 'communicative decay', but evidence of verification. Their initial lack of sense 'proves' that the sitters could not have sent the messages telepathically to the medium;⁴⁸ they make

⁴⁸ Lodge, *Raymond Revisited*, p. 89.

possible the making whole of the body of the family. Because this is Lodge's primary motive, the filling in of gaps in cross-correspondences recreates the body of his son, not as a ghost, with suggestions of the rottenness and decay of death, but as an embodied member of the family. It is interesting that Lodge remarks on sittings where no medium is present: 'For it is through these chiefly that Raymond remains as much a member of the family group as ever.'⁴⁹ Where the medium and her language of correspondence are absent, the sense of continuity is even stronger. The dead are reclaimed for the domestic; the domestic, in and through that reclamation, becomes unified, a 'force', a strength.

The threat to the coherence of the family imposed by the war was, however, not isolated from other social change. The strong Victorian sense of the place and function of the (of course class-specific) family was already beginning to feel the need to defend itself in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. After the turn of the century, changes in the divorce laws, the increasing availability of contraception and the changes in women's education begun in the previous two decades were 'seen by a great many Edwardians as specific threats to the stability of the family'.⁵⁰ And, of course, naturalised, fixed gender roles, based as they were on the sexual division of labour within the family, were being challenged in a more coherent way by the militant suffrage movement, whose activities reached a peak in the years immediately before the war. For their critics, the relation between the suffrage movement and the family worked both ways. Certainly, their demands

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 159.

⁵⁰ Jane Eldridge Miller, *Rebel Women: Feminism, Modernism and the Edwardian Novel*, London: Virago, 1994, p. 40.

threatened the traditional configuration of the family; but also their very existence could be seen as dependent on their non-incorporation in the family as active (that is, child-bearing) members.

The recruiting field for the militant suffragists is the half million of our excess female population - that half-million which had better long ago have gone out to mate with its complement of men beyond the sea.⁵¹

In very real ways the war, certainly initially, expelled the feminist threat. The various women's groups disbanded themselves and committed their energies to the war effort.

With the outbreak of the European War in August 1914, the Women's Movement ... vanished out of sight.... The suffrage societies at once suspended their political activities, and the Government... issued an amnesty to all the suffragette prisoners. Militancy faded away, and no more was ever heard of the Women's Social and Political Union.⁵²

However, as the war went on, and as discussed in more detail in the previous chapter, the shifting of gender relations grew more diffuse and, possibly, more difficult to resecure. After initial reluctance on the part of the establishment, it became clear that the employment of women's labour outside of the home was essential.

⁵¹ Sir Almroth Wright's letter to *The Times*, 27 March 1912, reprinted in *The Freewoman*, 4 April 1912, p. 392.

⁵² Ray Strachey, *The Cause: A Short History of the Women's Movement in Great Britain*, London: G. Bell & Sons Ltd, 1928, p. 337.

Women were taken into the banks and the business houses; they were used as window cleaners and as plumbers, as signalmen and as porters, as bus conductors, as van drivers, as shepherds and as electricians.⁵³

At the same time as a movement of substitution was going on in employment, the effect of 'shell-shock' on so many of those at the front was seen in terms of a substitution of the male, the proper, coherent soldier, by the female, the hysterical. In Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier* (1918), the soldier's loss of memory effects a withdrawal, on his return, from various positions that constitute him as upper class male - positions of duty, in business, in looking after his estate, in a marriage to the 'right' kind of wife - and a retreat to an idyllic time of first love. Because of his illness, if left uncured, 'He would not be quite a man.'⁵⁴ In *Anne Severn and the Fieldings*, one of Sinclair's two novels on the effects of the war on a family, Colin, one of the sons, returns from the war, his nerves 'shaken to bits'.⁵⁵ The portrayal of his illness, too, suggests a return to a time before adulthood. His fear on return is linked to his childhood fear of ghosts, 'only more abandoned to terror, more unresisting'.⁵⁶ In Sinclair's two novels this emasculation is specifically linked to a certain image of the modern woman. Two of the male characters who eventually go to war are married at one point to 'modern' women - independent, unmaternal and sexually predatory. In *The Tree of Heaven* (1917), Desmond, a

⁵³ Ibid., p. 344.

⁵⁴ Rebecca West, *The Return of the Soldier*, London: Nisbet & Co., 1918, p. 183.

⁵⁵ May Sinclair, *Anne Severn and the Fieldings*, London: Hutchinson, 1922, p. 109.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 107.

sexually liberated artist, traps Nicky into marriage and estranges him from his family. When Desmond commits adultery, Nicky returns to his father's house and is free to move towards the 'something ahead of him, something that he felt to be tremendous and holy'⁵⁷ which will complete him as a man - that is, his destiny as a soldier. In the slightly later novel, written when the effects of shell-shock on the returning soldiers were more widely known, even before his experience of shell-shock, Colin, in *Anne Severn and the Fieldings*, is left 'nervous and unfit' by, it is suggested, his wife Queenie's sexual demands. When he returns from the front ill, Queenie, who has gone to Belgium with an ambulance corps, refuses to return to nurse him. Although in Lodge's text the shift in gender relations is not specifically given as a threat to the coherence of the family, the text's recuperation of the young, fit male body and in turn the wholeness, the smooth surface, of the family suggests a resistance to destabilisation per se.

While it is true that Sinclair's subject matter in *Uncanny Stories* continues an interest in the supernatural that pre-dates the war, as does the writing of 'The Flaw in the Crystal', the collection can be read and understood through the frameworks set up in reading *Raymond*.⁵⁸ If Lodge's text dispels the fear and horror of the uncanny through a domestication of death, repairing the gaps in the family by making the affective an almost supernatural force, Sinclair's collection of *Uncanny Stories* reveals a similar attempt to repair gaps which points to a behind and beyond. However, I would suggest that the stories are situated differently in the

⁵⁷ May Sinclair, *The Tree of Heaven*, London: Cassel & Co., 1917, p. 182.

⁵⁸ This interest is obvious throughout Sinclair's career, particularly in short stories.

death/uncanny/love configuration. Lodge's text reconstitutes the specifically male body, repaired, inviolate, securely itself in its denial of the correspondence or doubling of death, or indeed of anything else ('There don't seem to be any children born here', says Raymond in one his messages),⁵⁹ and predicates the wholeness of the family (resecured against hopeless grief) on the continuing wholeness of their 'young energy'. In Sinclair's text, the surface of the narrative is kept in place by the presence of death in order that a particular 'beyond' of the narrative is repressed. While the stories in the collection work around the metaphysical 'beyond' of Sinclair's Idealism,⁶⁰ the 'beyond' that is occulted by her narratives is the possibility of a sympathy, a telepathy between reader and text. Lodge the scientist uses his work to place the reader too within the completed family circle in order that the reader should believe; Sinclair the creator of fictions sets up a distance between reader and text. In terms of narrative, what death in the stories contains or resolves is the threat of excess and a multiplication of contagion because of a dyadic relationship that has leaked through adultery. Containment is effected structurally because the death in the stories is known, is open, has meaning, is of the surface; and more than this, in the stories death acts as or gives rise to a communication impossible in life. Greater knowledge is an effect of death for the characters and for the reader. Eve Sedgwick suggests that, within the context of gothic conventions, fear and horror are evoked by barriers.

⁵⁹ Lodge, *Raymond Revisited*, p. 113.

⁶⁰ See Rebeccah Kinnamon Neff, 'May Sinclair's *Uncanny Stories* as Metaphysical Quest', *English Literature in Transition*, 26 (3), 1983, pp. 187-91; and Chapter 3.

The barrier between the self and what should belong to it can be caused by anything and nothing; but only violence or magic, and both of a singularly threatening kind, can ever succeed in joining them again.⁶¹

The barriers between the selves of Sinclair's stories and what should belong to them may need violence or magic in order to be broken down, but broken down they always are, and then formally the narrative closure of each story acts as a barrier, a sort of cure, a stop on the infinite regression of interpretation, the unknowableness and unrepresentability of death, that are the usual forms of the ghost story. In other words, at the end of each story, the only barrier left is that between the text and the reader. What that barrier blocks is precisely the 'luxurious fear', the bodily sensation found lacking by the *TLS* reviewer. The distance between the text and the reader is not traversable by any 'effects'. As with *Raymond*, precisely because of their place in a particular historical configuration, the texts of the stories both utilise telepathy and struggle against their own telepathic potential; they attempt cure and wholeness through telepathy, and they stop the continuation of effects through the domestication of death.

What is striking about the stories collected together as *Uncanny Stories* is the repetition of a certain dynamic, a certain relation, within the content of each. Again and again the plots are set up around a triangular relation - the ghost, the haunted, and a third person who comes between them, either as a block, a barrier, or as a communicative link. In each case, at least two of the three are involved in a sexual

⁶¹ Sedgwick, *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions*, p. 13.

relationship - marriage or, the flip side of it, adultery.⁶²

'The Flaw in the Crystal', the earliest written and longest of the stories in the collection, differs from the others in that none of the characters die, there is no ghost. It is based on the triangular relation mentioned above, but it is the most complex story of the collection, and the five characters move in and out of the triangle, making at least three different configurations. The main character of the story, Agatha Verrall,⁶³ has moved from London to the isolation of the Buckinghamshire countryside in order that she may be free to see Rodney Lanyon, a married man, when he is able to escape from London for the weekend. Although Agatha is not having a sexual relationship with him, she sees herself as responsible for his physical and mental well-being. His wife, Bella, is a 'mass of furious and malignant nerves'⁶⁴ because of her unspecified nervous disorders and, after ten years of marriage, Rodney's nerves have suffered too. Agatha has discovered,

⁶² Eve Sedgwick, making use of René Girard's work in *Deceit, Desire and the Novel* (1972), argues that within erotic triangles the relation between the rivals is at least as intense and as significant as that between either lover and the beloved. Further, in the European literary tradition, this relation of rivalry is a homosocial one. That this schema is disrupted in various ways by all of the stories in Sinclair's collection is evidence, not of its mistakenness, but of the way death is used structurally in them to go beyond previous possibilities. See Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (1985), New York: Columbia University Press, 1993. See also Janice H. Harris, who, sees this as specifically 'beyond' heterosexuality in 'Challenging the Script of the Heterosexual Couple: Three Marriage Novels by May Sinclair', *Papers on Language and Literature: A Journal for Scholars and Critics of Language and Literature*, 29 (4), Fall, 1993, pp. 436-58.

⁶³ The surname Sinclair has chosen for her central character is a nice cross-correspondence itself. Although when Sinclair wrote 'The Flaw in the Crystal' the work on the cross-correspondences was only just beginning, Mrs Verrall had been a well-known medium for some time before that.

⁶⁴ May Sinclair, *Uncanny Stories*, London: Hutchinson, 1923, p. 61.

however, by some 'divine accident' that she is able to cure through the application of her 'uncanny...unaccountable Gift', through being 'dissolved and...gathered together again, a flawless crystal'.⁶⁵ She tries the gift out on herself, finds that it works and is then able to tap into a power beyond herself and control telepathically the well-being of both Rodney and Bella. At the beginning of the story, Agatha is waiting one Friday to see if Rodney will come for the weekend or not. The arrangement is an open one, and Agatha never allows herself to hope he will come, although she is 'never not prepared'.⁶⁶ When he does arrive, she finds out that since she has been practising her gift, Bella has been 'a perfect angel' and Rodney in turn is feeling 'Tremendously fit'.⁶⁷ Agatha makes it clear to herself, however, that she will never use her gift in order to 'get at' Rodney, in order to make him do things. She sees her cure of Bella as insurance against this - as long as she is helping both then her motives remain pure. At this meeting Rodney tells Agatha that he has bumped into some friends of theirs at the station, the Powells, who have taken a house near Agatha's, the only other house in the vicinity. They have come in the hope that the environment will cure the husband, Harding Powell, as they believe it has Agatha. When she meets up with Milly Powell, his young wife, Agatha learns that Harding is going slowly mad, that he believes that something was trying to 'get at him' and has come to the countryside to hide. Agatha visits him with Milly, and is touched by his desperate state. She decides to try her cure on Harding also, and the next day he is miraculously better. This continues for

⁶⁵ Ibid., pp. 62, 87.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 62.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 68.

several weeks, during which time Agatha tells Milly about her power. Eventually, however, Milly tells Agatha that she, worried that Harding thinks that it is the environment that has cured him and will be afraid to leave, has told him that it is in fact Agatha. From this point on, Agatha's ability to 'hold' and cure Bella, Rodney and Harding and her peace in her gift are destroyed. She begins to feel that 'the walls of personality were wearing thin',⁶⁸ that Harding is overwhelming her, taking her sanity and replacing it with his fear and madness. Finally, believing that she will no longer be able to 'hold' Rodney in the cure, she lets go of Harding. He slips immediately back into madness. Agatha has discovered that the flaw in the crystal is her desire for Rodney. In order to maintain her purity and so continue to exercise the power, she renounces Rodney and he returns to the newly healthy and caring Bella.

Despite the absence of ghosts and its obvious place in the new 'modern supernaturalism more complex ... more psychological',⁶⁹ the story contains traces of the conventions identified as gothic by Sedgwick. The narrative iterates that the terror felt by the characters is linked to barriers to communication, to the 'unspeakable'. When we first see Agatha and Rodney together we are told: 'What had once touched and moved him unspeakably in Agatha's face was the capacity it had, latent in its tragic lines, for expressing terror.'⁷⁰ This potential for terror has been removed, it is implied, through Agatha's discovery of the gift. At the end of

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 115.

⁶⁹ Scarborough, *The Supernatural in Modern English Fiction*, p. 71.

⁷⁰ Sinclair, *Uncanny Stories*, p. 68.

story, after Agatha's struggle with the madness of Harding Powell which she sees materialised as 'a Thing, a nameless, unnameable, shapeless Thing',⁷¹ Rodney sees 'at last the expression that to his eyes had always been latent in it, the look of the tragic, hidden soul of terror that he had divined in her'.⁷² For Harding Powell, the madness which terrifies him can also only be expressed through covering words, it cannot be articulated itself. Denying that his inability to sleep is caused by being in a strange house, he says that 'No place will ever be strange when It's there.... The Thing that keeps me awake.'⁷³ Milly refers to Agatha's gift as 'the thing',⁷⁴ and Agatha refers to Rodney's sexual desire for her as a 'something'.⁷⁵ The reluctance to speak certain things, the sense of the characters as being pushed to the edges of language, is singled out by Sedgwick as a gothic convention.

the important privation is the privation exactly of language, as though language were a sort of safety valve between the inside and the outside which, being closed off, all knowledge, even when held in common, becomes solitary, furtive, and explosive.⁷⁶

Again following Sedgwick's mapping of the gothic, the image of the hidden and the subterranean is used in the story. Agatha has hidden herself in the countryside

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 120.

⁷² Ibid., p. 135.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 82.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 97.

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 74.

⁷⁶ Sedgwick, *The Coherence of Gothic Convention*, p. 17.

in her 'small, solitary house'⁷⁷ in order to hide both her gift and her relationship with and love for Rodney Lanyon, which she later sees as 'the hidden thing, unforeseen and unacknowledged, working its work in the darkness'.⁷⁸ Harding has come to escape the 'Thing' that pursues him. Milly says that he came to her, 'imploing her to hide him. And so she had hidden him here.'⁷⁹

This sense of the occulted is strong in the story. An economy of knowledge - what is known, what is secret, misunderstandings over who knows what, leakage of knowledge - is the basic dynamic of the story. Early on, in the first conversation between Rodney and Agatha, this confusion over knowledge, and indeed confusion over exactly what hidden knowledge consists of, is made clear. Agatha asks how Bella is, and Rodney reports her transformation into 'a perfect angel'. Agatha realises that 'the Gift' is responsible, and that in directing the curative effects of it at Rodney, it had somehow been passed on to Bella. Agatha's realisation of this is directly dependent on Rodney's lack of knowledge - 'His amazed, uncomprehending look gave her the clue to what had happened.'⁸⁰ Through the rest of the conversation, communication between the couple is awkward, made staccato through this continued knowledge differential. After Agatha's realisation that the Gift has cured Bella also, the text continues.

⁷⁷ Sinclair, *Uncanny Stories*, p. 65.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 76-7.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

His next utterance came to her with no irrelevance.

'You've been found out.'

For a moment she wondered, had he guessed it then, her secret?...

There was of, course, the other secret, the fact that he did see her....

'Found out?' she repeated.

'If you haven't been, you will be.'

'You mean,' she said, 'Sarratt End has been found out?'

'If you put it that way. I saw the Powells at the station.' (She breathed freely.)⁸¹

Agatha has been considering the fact that her gift has cured both Rodney and Bella, and when Rodney speaks believes that somehow this knowledge has been transferred to Rodney, that he has 'found out'. However, this is not the case, and the confusion that ensues sets up the question as to what exactly the hidden thing in this story is - the fact that Agatha and Rodney see each other, the possibility of a sexual relationship, Agatha's 'gift'? I quote at length to show the repeated pattern of this confusion.

'After all,' she said, 'why shouldn't they?'

'Well - I thought you weren't going to tell people.'

Her face mounted to a sudden flame, a signal of resentment. She had always resented the imputation of secrecy in their relations. And now it was as if he were dragging forward the thought that she perpetually put away from her.

'Tell about what?' she asked, coldly.

⁸¹ Ibid., pp. 68-70.

'About Sarratt End. I thought we'd agreed to keep it for ourselves.'

'I haven't told everybody. But I did tell Milly Powell.'

'My dear girl, that wasn't very clever of you.'

'I told her not to tell. She knows what I want to be alone for.'

'Good God.' As he stared in dismay at what he judged to be her unspeakable indiscretion, the thought rushed in on her straight from him, the naked, terrible thought, that there *should* be anything they had to hide, they had to be alone for. She saw at the same time how defenceless he was before it; he couldn't keep it back; he couldn't put it away from him. It was always with him, a danger watching on his threshold.

'Then' (he made her face it with him) 'we're done for.'

'No, no,' she cried; 'how could you think that? It was another thing. Something I'm trying to do.'

'You told her,' he insisted. 'What did you tell her?'

'That I'm doing it. That I'm here for my health. She understands it that way.'

He smiled as if he were satisfied, knowing her so well.⁸²

The last 'knowing her so well' is surely ironic - the impossibility of speaking even a shared knowledge (which is acknowledged telepathically) in this conversation sets up an uncertainty that remains until the end of the story, the cause of the characters' terror and fear. The slippage of origin or cause so evident here - later on in the conversation, Rodney asks of Milly "'Are you sure she understands?"... "Are you sure she doesn't understand?"⁸³ - is exactly that which makes Agatha's ability to cure through her gift impossible. The confusion between her desire to cure and her sexual desire for Rodney, hinted at the beginning of this conversation,

⁸² Ibid., p. 71.

⁸³ Ibid., p. 71-2.

finally makes impossible any cure for Harding Powell.

In Sinclair's story, her characters' brush with 'the uncanny, unaccountable Gift' leads to a breakdown in communicative language, the terror of lost identity, and madness. The possibility of fear, its 'lurking' quality, is referred to again and again throughout the story. However, as I have discussed above, contemporary readers complained about its lack of 'luxurious fear' - the absence of an experience of the 'refined and spiritualised essence of fear' which Virginia Woolf saw as the main attraction of ghost stories.⁸⁴ If the story contains the ingredients of fear, why does the reader not experience it? What the reader has to recognise, to understand, in order to read 'The Flaw in the Crystal' with any coherence is the absolute horror of the penetration of the self's boundaries by something outside of oneself, by a stranger. The workings of Agatha's gift and her desire for Rodney can occupy the same place rhetorically (as seen in the conversation quoted above) as that which constitutes hidden knowledge, the secret, because both entail a breaking down of identity - what Agatha sees as 'the walls of personality...wearing thin'. Agatha's gift is telepathic in that it crosses the distance between two individuals 'without the normal operation of the recognised sense organs'⁸⁵ - she makes others feel through the operation of her gift. In order for the gift to work properly, for her 'others', those who watch her, who try to understand her, to feel the *right* things, however,

⁸⁴ Virginia Woolf, 'Across the Border', *The Essays of Virginia Woolf, Vol. 2 1912-1918*, ed. Andrew McNeillie, London: Hogarth Press, 1987, p. 218; originally published as review in the *TLS*, 31 January 1918, of Dorothy Scarborough's *The Supernatural in Modern English Fiction*.

⁸⁵ Frederic Myers at a meeting of the SPR in London, December 1882, quoted in Nicholas Royle, *Telepathy and Literature: Essays on the Reading Mind*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1990, p. 2.

she must quash her own desires, close up, that is, any possibilities that her own self may be (sexually) violated, and finally make sure that the threatening desires that are outside of her are neutralised. At the very end of the story she explains the workings of the gift to Rodney, and why his visits must end. 'She smiled ... as if she foresaw how it would work, and that soon, very soon, he would cease to long for her.'⁸⁶ The seeming inability of Sinclair's story to transfer the fears of the characters to the reader may be explained if we use the relationship between Agatha and *her* 'readers', the other characters, as a model.

The narrative at the beginning of the story concerns Agatha's attempts to limit the power of her gift to curing Bella of her nervous disorders, and thereby curing Rodney Lanyon of his. She is anxious not to use the power to satisfy her own desires, to make Rodney do what she wants him to do, what she calls 'getting at' him. As the narrator describes Agatha's thinking about this, and about her gradual apprehension of the workings of the gift, the language begins to insist on a certain topography of influence and restraint. To begin with, the fact that Agatha's house has become a place of refuge for Rodney quickly slips over into seeing her as his refuge - the language used to describe the function of Agatha's home becomes appropriate to Agatha herself.⁸⁷ In between the two passages - one giving the

⁸⁶ *Uncanny Stories*, p. 142.

⁸⁷ In 'Visible Margins: Women Writers and the English Ghost Story', p. 79, Nickianne Moody suggests, following a discussion of the Unheimliche:

The home is highly significant: amongst the two hundred stories analysed for this survey a common narrative structure is the experience of a woman in her new home which makes her re-evaluate her marriage or family life.

house as Rodney's 'place of peace'⁸⁸ and the other having as its central image Agatha as a house - there is a sentence where this slip of meaning occurs.

It was as if by her preparedness, by the absence of preliminaries, of adjustments and arrangements, he was always there, lodged in the innermost chamber.⁸⁹

Where does this 'there' refer to? We have just been told that 'in Agatha's house [Rodney] would find his place ready for him', yet here the first part of the sentence is clearly focused on Agatha's state rather than that of her house. But the 'there' does not refer to anything specific in the sentence. And the sentence immediately following that quoted above is explicit in its figuring as Agatha as a house. The movement of the sentence quoted hides the join, establishes the naturalness of the imagery which follows. The paragraph goes on:

She had set herself apart; she had swept herself bare and scoured herself clean for him. Clean she had to be; clean from the desire that he should come; clean, above all, from the thought, the knowledge she now had, that she could make him come.⁹⁰

Figured as a house, what is necessary for Agatha is bare and clean surfaces. As a guard against the excessiveness of her gift, the extraneous must be stripped away, and dirt removed. What is being guarded against here are the effects and affects that may be set in motion by an uncontrolled working of the gift - what Agatha is

⁸⁸ Sinclair, *Uncanny Stories*, p. 62.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

frightened of is unstoppable contagion. As we saw earlier in the discussion of the correspondence between Sinclair and Hyslop, and in the *TLS* review, one effect of excess, of additions to the surface, the 'bare', is fear. Even at this point, while Agatha is still in control of the gift, she is 'a little afraid of it'.⁹¹ The rhythm of this section of the story is one of approaching the possibility of excess, of what the gift could do, an acknowledgement of 'a little' fear, but very quickly a drawing back from the edge of excess predicated on a stripping down to the minimum, a making empty and bare.

And if her thought could get at him and fasten on him, and shut him in there....

It could, she knew; but it need not. She was really all right. Restraint had been the essence and the secret of the charm she had. and it was also the secret and the essence of her gift. Why, she had brought it to so fine a point that she could shut out, and by shutting out destroy, any feeling, any thought that did violence to any other. She could shut them all out, if it came to that, and make the whole place empty.⁹²

However, as becomes clear later on in the story, it is not just excess per se that is dangerous. The possibility of excess is specifically located in Agatha's sexual desire. After she begins to exercise her gift for Harding Powell's cure also, she begins to worry both that she may not have as much energy left for Rodney, and that, in curing Rodney, she increases the possibility that he may no longer need to come and see her.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Ibid., p. 63.

Now she longed, with an unendurable longing, for his visible, bodily presence.... She had been disturbed by what she had called the 'lurking possibilities' in Rodney; they were nothing compared to the lurking possibilities in her.⁹³

However, even before this longing becomes explicit to Agatha, its 'lurking possibilities' are inserted into the text through a lengthy description of Agatha's house. The passage immediately follows that where Agatha presents her internal preparation as sweeping and cleaning a room, and the description of the house can be read synecdochically as continuing to speak about Agatha. Further, the description of the house can be read through the surface/excess model discussed above - there is again a paring down, a reduction, a lessening, in order to make safe. What is stressed is the denial of the sensory, an absence of connection. Agatha has moved to the house for the sole purpose of making more effective Rodney's 'cure', and this movement, we are told at the beginning of the passage, is seen by her friends as 'cutting herself completely off'.⁹⁴ The 'small, solitary house' is in a valley, with hills to the north and south, and the east and west blocked by curves in the route the valley takes between the hills. Agatha has 'shut herself up in a world half a mile long'.⁹⁵ This world consists of 'flat pasture', 'grey woods and sallow fields', 'pale' hillsides; Agatha's house has 'neither sight nor hearing of the high roads beyond'; the only other house nearby is 'flat-faced and flat-eyed'; the two houses share 'isolation' and 'immunity'; the two villages which serve the houses are a mile away, 'unseen' and 'unheard'; and finally, 'It was impossible to

⁹³ Ibid., p. 100.

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 64.

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 65.

be more sheltered, more protected and more utterly cut off.⁹⁶

Agatha's attempts to control her gift, to place very stringent limits and boundaries around herself both literally and psychologically, are an acknowledgement of and an attempt to control the potential limitlessness of telepathy. As an 'effect at a distance', telepathy goes beyond the usual limits of the body, beyond the senses, in fact beyond the surface of the other's skin as it penetrates the mind. Agatha's sense of the potential loss of control inherent in this is expressed in her horror at the idea of using her gift to 'get at' Rodney. Agatha has cut herself off ostensibly to enable her to concentrate fully on Rodney's cure - he is the only person she sees. However, when the Powells move into the area, and she begins a connection with them, they too quickly come within the workings of the gift. Agatha's isolation, this suggests, is also a protection against the spreading of the gift.

Of course, the destruction that follows Harding Powell's inclusion in the workings of the gift only come about once he knows that it is Agatha who has cured him. With this knowledge, the gift becomes a two-way process, and Harding begins to encroach on Agatha. This reversal of the telepathic impulse is figured as an unwanted penetration of the body.

In the morning she woke with a sense, which was almost a memory, of Harding having been in the room with her all night. She was tired, as if she had had some long and unrestrained communion with him.⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 113.

The circulation of knowledge in the story is also in need of control and, as we saw in the conversation between Agatha and Rodney discussed above, is intimately linked with both her telepathic gift and the possibility of sexual desire. It is the gradual loss of the control of all three that brings Agatha into contact with fear, 'she was afraid mysteriously, without knowing why or how'.⁹⁸ As she begins to understand that Harding Powell's mental condition, and more generally his vision of the world, are being transferred to her, Agatha's fear becomes almost visible, material.

she saw a Thing, a nameless, unnameable, shapeless Thing, proceeding from [Harding]. A brown, blurred Thing, transparent as dusk is, that drifted on the air. It was torn and tormented, a fragment parted and flung off from some immense and as yet invisible cloud of horror. It drifted from her; it dissolved like smoke on the hillside; and the Thing that had born and begotten it pursued her.⁹⁹

This 'horror' is formless, insubstantial, its creation has involved a tear in the surface of the whole, it is incoherent. If Agatha's attempts at control at the beginning of the story are figured by the empty, the bare, by surfaces that are clear and boundaries that are firm, the passage above suggests that what is being guarded against is that affect of excess, fear.

Sinclair's anonymous critic in the *TLS* complained that the stories, far from being

⁹⁸ Ibid., 102.

⁹⁹ Ibid., p. 120.

uncanny, contained 'scarcely a twinge or thrill of luxurious fear in any of them'.¹⁰⁰ In particular, the reviewer goes on to criticise 'The Flaw in the Crystal'. It 'misses its mark as a story'¹⁰¹ because, while Sinclair carefully maps out for us the 'curious details' of the case, she does not pay enough attention to the impression these would have on Agatha and the other characters - 'The mystery is too little mysterious after all.' In other words, the story lacks that 'luxurious fear' because Sinclair does not dwell enough on, does not communicate well enough, the fear of the characters. However, as I have argued above, the story is structured around control being gradually replaced by fear as the 'walls' between things become 'thin'.¹⁰² If fear is missing from our experience of the story as readers, it is not because we do not see the characters (in particular Agatha) experiencing fear. It is rather that, with the *TLS* reviewer, the text is aware of the contagiousness of affect, but resists it. In the relationship between the reader and the text, Agatha's gesture of paring down, of the control of fear through the denial of excess, is repeated through the shiny surface of Sinclair's language.

In her *The Supernatural in Modern English Fiction*, in a chapter on 'Supernatural science' which plots a reciprocal influence between contemporary ghost stories and scientific developments, Dorothy Scarborough writes that 'It is from the laboratory that the ghostly stories are now evolved, rather than from the vault and

¹⁰⁰ *TLS*, 6 September 1923, p. 586.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² Sinclair, *Uncanny Stories*, p. 115.

chapel-room as in the past.¹⁰³ What this image sets up is a contrast based on surfaces. The laboratory, through its metonymic relationship with 'science', is conventionally seen as clean, light, with smooth hard surfaces, either metallic or white in colour. The emphasis is on clarity, on visibility. The laboratory is a place where things are revealed, made clearer, explained. The 'vault and chapel-room', on the other hand, are structures whose insides are invisible to most, the function of whose visible surface is to hide away and enclose. If, as suggested above, fear and the sense of the uncanny are produced respectively by an excess and a particular relationship between the hidden and the revealed, the unknown and the known, then the laboratory will produce 'little [that is] mysterious after all'. Indeed, the *TLS* reviewer's explanation of the *Uncanny Stories*' failure to frighten depends on images and models of the scientific for which the laboratory is the epitome. According to the reviewer, Sinclair is interested in dissection with 'scientific nicety', not story-telling. The stories seem, to him or her, to lack the extra something that would be produced by a concentration on aesthetic effect rather than on 'getting the curious details correctly stated' - and for the reviewer that something is exactly 'luxurious fear'. What the language of the review suggests is that the reader, presented with the bare and visible surfaces of Sinclair's text, cannot feel fear because they know too much. In fact, the reader of 'The Flaw in the Crystal' always knows everything. However, this knowledge is not a telepathic communication, such as Agatha's ability to influence the mental states of others; it is not a leaking of telepathic ability from the text to the reader. The possibility of leakage would imply a break in the surface of the text, a place

¹⁰³ Scarborough, *The Supernatural in Modern English Fiction*, p. 252.

through which the reader could enter and so experience sympathetic affects and out of which the affects described by the narrative voice could infect the reader. In his analysis of telepathy as a kind of model for the work of literature, Nicholas Royle suggests that "'Telepathy" may be the site of a certain fold, of a cutting or interruption'.¹⁰⁴ At the beginning of 'The Nature of the Evidence', however, the first person narrator is telling us the story in order to fill in any gaps of the unknown:

This is the story Marston told me. He didn't want to tell it. I had to tear it from him bit by bit. I've pieced the bits together in their time order, and explained things here and there, but the facts are the facts he gave me. There's nothing that I didn't get out of him somehow.¹⁰⁵

As we have seen, the text of 'A Flaw in the Crystal' too is experienced as an overly revealed and unbroken surface. As readers we know what we know because we are told it and not because we feel it. The surfaceness of language is a denial of affect - it contains and withholds the telepathic effects of the story.

As suggested above, it is not as if fear is absent from the story. In three sections of it, charting Harding Powell's increased dominance of Agatha's power and her sense that 'the walls of personality were wearing thin', the rhythm of the text insists on the overwhelming fact of Agatha's fear. So at the beginning of this section, 'She

¹⁰⁴ Nicholas Royle, *Telepathy and Literature: Essays on the Reading Mind*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1990, p. 7.

¹⁰⁵ Sinclair, *Uncanny Stories*, p. 145.

knew now what had happened to her. She was afraid of Harding Powell.¹⁰⁶ Although she has to keep away from the Powells, she is still more afraid of his mental image than his physical presence. For three or four days Agatha keeps away from the Powells - as his 'supreme innermost essence' floods her personality, Agatha can no longer bear his actual presence. During this time Agatha experiences 'an increasing struggle and fear' and 'her fear of him became pervading, nameless and shapeless'. Agatha feels that she is being pursued by this thing and, in an attempt to resist, goes for a walk to 'her hill-top' between sunset and twilight. While walking, Agatha sees Harding Powell: 'In the flesh, as in the spirit, he was pursuing her.' She runs from Harding and comes suddenly in sight of the valley. At this moment Agatha experiences a kind of dark epiphany. The sense of a cohesive and divine power behind the material of the world which her gift gives her at the start of the story is replaced through the invasion of Harding's sickness with a sense of degradation and death.

What she experienced now (if she could have given any account of it) was exaltation at the other end of the scale. It was horror and fear unspeakable. Horror and fear immanent in the life of things. She saw the world in a loathsome transparency; she saw it with the eye of a soul in which no sense of the divine had ever been, of a soul that denied the supernatural. It had been Harding Powell's soul, and it had become hers.

Agatha's experience here is clearly one of terror. Not only does she feel herself being taken over by somebody else's identity, but in being forced to see the world through his eyes, she sees a kind of nihilistic collapse. The material world, nature, which she has previously seen as the surface, and therefore both cover and

¹⁰⁶ For the sections dealt with in this reading, see *Uncanny Stories*, pp. 113-121.

expression of, a beneficent spiritual world, has become nothing but

the stirring of the corruption that Life was...the trees, as they stretched out their arms and threatened her, were frightful with the terror which was Life. Down there, in that gross green hot-bed, the earth teemed with the abomination; and the river, lived, white, a monstrous thing, crawled, dragging with it the very slime.

How is it that, in this section that charts in detail the growth of Agatha's horror and fear, the experience of reading is not one of fear? The answer, I would suggest, lies in the very charting of that fear - 'What she experienced now (if she could have given any account of it) was the exaltation at the other end of the scale.' The parenthetical phrase in effect brackets off Agatha's experience from ours as readers. It is the marker of the containment of fear, of the unbreakable surface of the text made visible.

In her *Rebel Women: Feminism, Modernism and the Edwardian Novel*, Jane Eldridge Miller suggests that modernism developed out of, rather than being a break from, Edwardian fiction. While the fiction of the Edwardians is generally seen as formally conservative, Eldridge argues that its concerns were such that the form became strained and ruptured, beginning a movement towards the formal experimentation of canonical modernism. In particular, in trying to come to terms in their novels with issues around the status of marriage and the position of women in general, Edwardian writers were 'forced to attend to and subsequently reshape narrative form'.¹⁰⁷ The modern content of their novels, challenging conventional

¹⁰⁷ Jane Eldridge Miller, *Rebel Women: Feminism, Modernism and the Edwardian Novel*, London: Virago, 1994, p. 7.

assumptions, could not be contained or shaped by traditional formal devices. In particular the use of marriage as narrative resolution, as an ending, as the basis for formal structure, became increasingly difficult as the women's movement asserted an identity for women beyond the limits of traditional marriage. For Edwardian writers wanting to assert their status as 'modern', then, to challenge received ideas both on social values and literary technique, a particular treatment of adultery became, albeit tentatively, the marker of a 'disruptive challenge to authority'.¹⁰⁸

What Eldridge Miller's argument suggests is that a different use of marriage as plot will inevitably involve a formal fracturing - an opening up of gaps and possibilities, of a lack of containment which can lead to uncontrollable excess, which I have previously suggested is textually the origin of the reader's disturbance and fear. Indeed, Sinclair's post-Edwardian fiction goes further formally and thematically. Moving away even more from the external (legal, conventional) facts of women's lives, Sinclair focuses 'increasingly on sexuality, psychology and the unconscious'¹⁰⁹ - and as Eldridge Miller goes on to suggest, this first emerges in 'The Flaw in the Crystal', originally published in 1912. Because of this, then, while Sinclair writes of a relationship that is based on adulterous desire and of a practice that opens up the identity, the inner life, to penetration and violation, her textual manoeuvres contain any danger of excess. Because the text seems to offer up knowledge and explanation to the reader, there is no need for the reader to penetrate actively any surfaces, thereby avoiding the destabilising and contagious affect of fear. In the other stories that make up the collection *Uncanny Stories*, the

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 63.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 194.

telepathic possibilities that threaten in 'The Flaw in the Crystal' are taken further. In each story, a triangular structure of relations is repeated, but continued beyond the death of one or more of the protagonists. In each triangular relation the faithlessness of one or more of the characters provides the dynamic for the plot. In particular, questions of faithfulness, or faithlessness, in love are worked out through the return of one or more of the protagonists after death. However, the return from the dead (or a meeting up again after death) in each story provides resolution rather than the destabilisation of the uncanny. Return in the stories is managed as the assertion of the familiar rather than uncontrollable excess. What is excessive in the stories, what causes the destabilisation that needs to be resolved by return, is a love that goes beyond an original dyad, usually marriage. What is 'uncanny' about these stories is adultery; in them, life beyond death is not fearful excess, rather it is another chance to domesticate forces that threaten to destabilise. In returning from death, Sinclair's characters reaffirm their 'marriages'¹¹⁰ and the possibility of a multiplication of affect is reined in.

In the first and last stories in the collection, 'Where Their Fire is Not Quenched' and 'The Finding of the Absolute', relations of adultery and their consequences are explored and followed through to the characters' experiences after death. However, rather than a return of the dead to the living, all the protagonists find themselves reunited after death. The denouement of the opening story takes place in 'hell', the last in 'heaven', suggesting that the stories progress from loss to some

¹¹⁰ Marriages in the sense of a fundamental dyad. In 'If The Dead Knew', the relationship which is reaffirmed through death is that between a mother and son, which has been disrupted by the mother's replacement with a wife.

notion of salvation or cure. Sandra Kemp uses 'Where Their Fire is Not Quenched' as an example of the importance of the trope of death in feminist modernist fiction, and indeed this opening story shows particularly clearly that the presence of death in *Uncanny Stories* is a marker of the *difficulty* of writing as both feminist *and* modernist.¹¹¹ The story opens with a recounting of the first love of Harriott Leigh, George Waring, who dies soon after they have declared their love for each other. Her second love, Stephen Philpotts, has arranged to meet her in the park, she believes, in order to propose. At this point, Harriott persuades herself that this new love in no way damages the old:

She told herself that George was nearer to her now than he could ever have been, living. If she married Stephen she would not be unfaithful, because she loved him with another part of herself. It was not as though Stephen were taking George's place. She loved Stephen with her soul, in an unearthly way.¹¹²

In Harriott's self-justification can be seen the questions that all of the stories in the collection explore. Of what does a relation between two people consist? What does it mean if it continues beyond the corporeal existence of one of the pair? What are the relative places of the body and the non-physical in human relations? Of what does faithfulness consist? While Harriott's belief in the 'unearthly' nature of her love for Stephen is undermined ('But her body quivered like a stretched wire when the door opened and the young man came towards her...'), her

¹¹¹ See Sandra Kemp, "'But How Describe a World Seen Without A Self?": Feminism, Fiction and Modernism', *Critical Quarterly*, 32 (1), 1990, pp. 99-118.

¹¹² Sinclair, *Uncanny Stories*, p. 12.

dishonesty makes clear that she does not feel able to experience desire for two men, even sequentially. When, earlier, Harriott has learned of the death of her first love, 'she didn't care how soon she died now. She was quite sure it would be soon, because she couldn't live without him'.¹¹³ What love sets in motion, it seems, is a metaphysical relation that enmeshes the beings of the lovers, creating a spiritual pair of Siamese twins. If this is forever, it is not surprising that Harriott has to create a different order of love in order to justify her subsequent desires.

Harriott's rendez-vous with Stephen Philpotts turns out, however, to be an opportunity for him to announce his engagement to another woman. The narrative then jumps - 'Ten years passed' - to Harriott, following her father's death, living alone in Maida Vale. She is waiting for a man, Oscar Wade, to call. The next section of the story tells of their relationship, how they are at first friends, how Harriott refuses to sleep with Oscar because of his wife, Muriel, how gradually she realises she cannot give him up, and finally how she begins with him 'the furtive, hidden adventure'.¹¹⁴ The struggle between excess and unbroken surfaces that we saw in 'The Flaw in the Crystal' is present in the language of this story also. While waiting for Oscar to call, Harriott remembers her resistance to his pressure to begin a sexual relationship the day before.

She could see herself, sitting very straight in her chair, uplifted by a passionate integrity, while he stood before her, hanging his head, ashamed

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 11.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 16.

and beaten...¹¹⁵

The oxymoronic effect of 'passionate integrity' - an overflowing of affect twinned with a wholeness, a containment, unbroken surfaces - suggests an attempt to maintain some kind of equilibrium or stasis. When Harriott's equilibrium is broken after her affair with Oscar begins, what disappoints her is that she has given up her integrity for something that turns out to be purely physical: 'Always she looked for something just beyond it, some mystic, heavenly rapture, always beginning to come, that never came.'¹¹⁶ When the affair ends Harriott tells Oscar that all she really wanted from it had been the 'clean, beautiful part of it',¹¹⁷ but that Oscar had destroyed it. Her sense of her own integrity returns eventually, but only after Oscar's death and her devotion to religious duty.

His death was an immense relief to Harriott. Perfect security had been impossible as long as he was alive. But now there wasn't a living soul who knew her secret.... For Harriott at fifty-two was the friend and helper of the Reverend Clement Farmer.... She worked as a deaconess in his parish, wearing the uniform of a deaconess, the semi-religious gown, the cloak, the bonnet and veil, the cross and rosary, the holy smile.¹¹⁸

Harriott's mistake, however, is to fail to see that the physical has consequences beyond the boundaries of itself. Her inability to acknowledge the physical in her own desire has resulted in a disavowal of the inseparable nature of the two. After

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 13.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 17.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., p. 20.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., pp. 21-2.

her death, she finds herself revisiting the scenes of her life, and constantly meets up with the figure of Oscar Wade. She tries to run away from him, to return to earlier memories that exclude him, but he appears in every place. Eventually, even her first memory of childhood ends up with her entering the Hotel Saint Pierre in Paris where they stayed together, and where 'Their passion weighed on them with the unbearable, unescapable boredom of immortality.'¹¹⁹ Towards the end of their relationship, while in Paris, they had discovered that 'At close quarters, day in and day out, each was revealed to the other as an incredible bore.... Marriage would be the Hotel Saint Pierre all over again, without any possibility of escape.'¹²⁰ In the boredom and banality of death Oscar and Harriott are forced to live out eternally the very condition they thought they had escaped on earth - marriage.

How should the substitutability of marriage for death be read in this story? Formally, it seems, if marriage does not offer a possibility of narrative closure because of the disruption caused by adultery (for example, through the adulterous relationship becoming the focus of narrative rather than the marital), death functions as closure instead. However, what closes the narrative is not the moment of death (as in *Life and Death of Harriett Frean* and *The History of Anthony Waring*), but an existence after death that caricatures the marriage relationship that the characters have misused and misunderstood in life. Thus the end (of life and of the narrative) is not terrifying or uncanny, does not reproduce the excess that is fear, despite its overflowing of the limits of corporeal life. The analogous

¹¹⁹ Ibid., p. 36.

¹²⁰ Ibid., pp. 18-19.

relationship of marriage and existence beyond death both questions the assumptions made about marriage by the characters and, crucially, reincorporates death into the familiar and the known. Death becomes as much a part of the domestic as the dull marriage. Oscar explains to Harriott what eternity has in store for them:

In the last death we shall be shut up in this room, behind that locked door, together. We shall lie here together, for ever and ever, joined so fast that even God can't put us asunder. We shall be one flesh and one spirit, one sin repeated for ever, and ever; spirit loathing flesh, flesh loathing spirit; you and I loathing each other.¹²¹

The final story in *Uncanny Stories* is 'The Finding of the Absolute'. Here, after his death, Mr Spalding meets up in heaven with his adulterous wife, Elizabeth, and her lover, Paul Jeffreson, an Imagist poet. Before death, Mr Spalding has been involved in a web of infidelities. Elizabeth left him for Paul Jeffreson, and her unfaithfulness precipitated Mr Spalding's infidelity to his precious system of metaphysics and his belief in 'the Absolute', and a realisation of his own acts of betrayal.

'If,' Mr Spalding said to himself, 'I had served my wife as faithfully as I have served my God, she would not now have deserted me for Paul Jeffreson.'¹²²

When they meet in heaven, Elizabeth and Paul explain to Mr Spalding why each of

¹²¹ Ibid., p. 37.

¹²² Ibid., p. 225.

them has got into heaven, how space and time work differently, how the relativity of perception has become visible. What connects the events in the story (such as they are), and motivates most of the dialogue, is how Mr Spalding will construct his own 'place' for himself in heaven, and what sort of place it will be. After Paul and Elizabeth have shown him around their landscape, Paul says:

'By the way, as you haven't got a house yet, let alone a landscape, you'd better share ours.'

'That's very good of you,' Mr Spalding said. He was thinking of Oxford. Oxford. Quiet rooms in Balliol.¹²³

To help his attempt to understand how he can create his own landscape and home, Elizabeth and Paul send him to visit Kant, who is pleased to have had his theories confirmed by his experience in heaven.

And Mr. Spalding found himself in a white-washed room, scantily furnished with three rows of bookshelves, a writing-table, a table set with mysterious instruments, and two chairs. A shaded lamp on the writing-table gave light.¹²⁴

The first task of death, it seems, is to recreate a place that can be home. If Mr Spalding's pre-death homelife has been shattered through the unfaithfulness of his wife, death is an opportunity to reconstruct the domestic beyond the confines of earth-bound morality. Mr Spalding has a vision, looking out of Kant's window, of the essence of the universe: 'In this vision Elizabeth's adultery, which had once

¹²³ Ibid., p. 236.

¹²⁴ Ibid., p. 237-8.

appeared so monstrous, so overpowering an event, was revealed as slender and insignificant.¹²⁵ Adultery is no longer characterised by an excess that engenders instability and fear, it is a 'slender' thing, suggesting controllable and definite boundaries. In death, it can be reincorporated into the domestic - so Mr Spalding can set up home with his wife and her lover until he has reconstructed his rooms in Balliol.

In the four remaining stories that make up *Uncanny Stories* these patterns are repeated. The stories explore the consequences of a dyadic relationship that has become a triangle. Various types of infidelity are resolved and reincorporated into the domestic through actions beyond death. In these stories, the return of one of the characters after death redomesticates love through the movement: marriage (of some kind) -> unfaithfulness -> death -> reassertion of a dyadic relationship. Not only can death not destroy the possibility of wholeness, but it is the very medium through which it is restored. So, in 'The Nature of the Evidence', Edward Marston, whose young, beautiful, pure wife, Rosamund, has died, remarries merely because of what he calls 'a physical necessity'.¹²⁶ His new wife, Pauline, is described as hard, carnal and 'lascivious'. He returns with her to the same house he has shared with Rosamund. As the story proceeds, every time Marston attempts to sleep with his new wife, the ghost of Rosamund appears and places herself between the bodies of Marston and Pauline. Marston's infidelity, it seems, has been to replace Rosamund with someone for whom he does not share the same feelings.

¹²⁵ Ibid., p. 247.

¹²⁶ Ibid., p. 147.

It is the feelings shared between him and his first wife that make a true marriage, such that the unstable and the excessive in the story are shifted from the dead to the living.

The door opened behind him and Pauline came in, moving without a sound, and stood before him. It gave him a shock; for he had been thinking of Rosamund, and when he heard the door knob turn it was the phantasm of Rosamund that he expected to see coming in. He said, for the first minute, it was this appearance of Pauline that struck him as the uncanny and unnatural thing.¹²⁷

The final communion between Marston and his first wife occurs behind the closed doors of the library, the room that previously had been the centre of their domestic life.

The library was the room Rosamund liked best, because it was his room. She had her place in the corner by the hearth, and they were always alone there together in the evenings when his work was done, and when it wasn't done she would still sit with him, keeping quiet in her corner with a book.¹²⁸

Here, after death, their relationship is made whole again, but in a way that transcends anything Marston had experienced while Rosamund was alive. The narrator tells us:

I don't think it was just faithfulness to a revived memory. I take it there had been, behind that shut door, some experience, some terrible and exquisite contact. More penetrating than sight or touch. More - more extensive:

¹²⁷ Ibid., p. 156.

¹²⁸ Ibid., p. 148.

passion at all points of being.¹²⁹

The hidden place, the crypt, is a library where formerly a husband and wife have enjoyed their most comfortable domestic moments. This is indeed the moment of the uncanny, yet the domestication in the narrative structure of the stories, their techniques of resolution and narrative closure, and the surfaceness of Sinclair's language defend us as readers against the uncontrollable and excessive potentialities of it; we are defended from fear.

¹²⁹ Ibid., p. 159.

Afterword

The Three Sisters and the perverse reader

This thesis began with a consideration of perversity in relation to Sinclair's work. Throughout, I have been concerned to approach her work in a way that attempts to account for her strangeness, to read her novels through the strangeness, without making the strangeness disappear. What underlies this is a desire to *read* Sinclair, an activity that both undoes and explains her lack of readers over the last seventy years or so. This attempt to 'read' is of course partly made up of an awareness of reading as exactly an activity. The method of my reading is intended to highlight the problematics of reading as an implicated activity, and of the relationship between critical position and text. At the same time, however, implicit in the chapters has been the experience of reading Sinclair's work as pleasurable. Sinclair is 'hard to read' (in getting hold of her novels as much as anything else), but any activity must produce a 'yield of pleasure' in order to be continued. Indeed, a 'yield of pleasure' can be seen as the end of any activity or movement in the sense that pleasure is the cessation of excitation due to the satisfaction of a desire.¹ At the same time, in Freud's terms, the problem arises that the excitation itself is experienced as pleasurable.² If this is so, then is it not true that the pleasures gained on the way to the final production of pleasure may come to predominate, to be lingered over, to become ends in themselves;³ to become, in fact, perverse?

¹ Sigmund Freud, 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' (1920), *On Metapsychology*, vol. 11, Penguin Freud Library, London: Penguin, 1991, p. 275.

² Sigmund Freud, 'Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality' (1905), *On Sexuality*, vol. 7, Penguin Freud Library, London: Penguin, 1991, p. 129.

³ See Freud's definition of the perverse in Sigmund Freud, 'Three Essays on the

How can, then, the pleasures and difficulties of reading Sinclair be apportioned and explained? In concluding, I want to suggest how this difficulty and this pleasure are linked in reading Sinclair, and indeed are linked around the activity of reading in the texts themselves.

In *The Pleasure of the Text* Barthes distinguishes between pleasure and jouissance in terms of the difference between cognitive and bodily pleasures. Pleasure is the term used to mark the experience that confirms or affirms knowledge, identity, culture, what is legitimate, morality, politics; jouissance is disruptive, undoes what we thought we knew, our sense of self. What Barthes is doing is looking less at the expected outcome of reading - knowledge - and concentrating instead on its repressed effect, an explosive, ego-shattering corporeality that is perverse. However, Barthes writes early on that this distinction is not total, 'there is always a vacillation...the distinction will not be the source of absolute classifications'.⁴ So neurosis plays its central part in writing, paradoxical, a compromise formed over an impossibility.⁵ Gallop explains the double meaning of the original French title thus:

the text is both object and subject of pleasure. The title means both the text's pleasure (the pleasure that is in the text) and our pleasure (the pleasure the text affords). It is, to be sure, difficult to imagine how we might separate the pleasure that is in the text from that which the text gives

Theory of Sexuality', *On Sexuality*, vol. 7, Penguin Freud Library, London: Penguin, p. 62.

⁴ Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text* (1973), trans. Richard Millar, Oxford: Blackwell, 1990, p. 4.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 5-6.

us.⁶

In Gallop's reading of Barthes' text and feminism in the light of each other, what is insistent is her claim that passion, the intrusion of the body, marks and twists the smooth, logical flow of writing. Writing that constantly repudiates this, then, which expels the body through its 'objectivity', its emphasis on the cognitive, is a kind of violence. This insight still informs feminist critical writing, and in particular the revelation that both logical, calm writing and the intrusion of the body are understood via notions of sexual difference, via, indeed, the female body as *the* difference.⁷

A problematic of pleasure is something that contemporary feminist criticism and Sinclair's work do have in common. In Chapter 1, I read Sinclair's concern with knowledge via the debates around sex and knowledge in feminism at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. These questions can be glossed with the question, what is perverse and what is straight? For feminists both now and then this question goes to the heart of their critique. As with any critical or political position which challenges the status quo, answering the question will involve possible mergings, reversals.⁸ My final reading of Sinclair will trace these relations

⁶ Jane Gallop, *Thinking Through the Body*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1988, p. 101.

⁷ See, for example, the excellent reading of Catherine MacKinnon's *Only Words*, in Parveen Adams, *The Emptiness of the Image: Psychoanalysis and Sexual Differences*, London: Routledge, 1996, Chapter 5.

⁸ Mandy Merck, 'Introduction', *Perversions: Deviant Readings*, London: Virago, 1993.

and contradictions through a focus on precisely reading. *The Three Sisters* (1914) comes at the mid-point of Sinclair's career, and is the first of her novels to show an explicit debt to psychoanalysis and her movement toward modernist techniques. The novel is in some ways a reworking of the themes and atmosphere of 'The Flaw in the Crystal'. Again, the central female character, Gwenda, focuses her energy on curing or 'saving' another character, this time her younger sister, Alice. As Eldridge Miller has suggested, in both of these Sinclair's work is beginning and consolidating its movement 'from the outside to the inside'.⁹ Agatha Verrall in 'The Flaw in the Crystal' maintains a certain interior life in order to accomplish her 'affects at a distance'. What figures constantly in the later novel, dispersed among the characters, is an activity that hovers between outside and inside - reading. Characters read both books and each other; they are defined by what they read and how they read it. I want to read *The Three Sisters* as a novel about reading; but also the novel forces the reader to read in a particular way. In both of these can be seen a confusion between difficulty and pleasure, the straight and the perverse. By plotting this, I want to suggest what the links are in Sinclair's work between reading, writing and cure.

The first half of the novel is dominated by the illness of the youngest sister, Alice, and the reactions of the other characters to it, what they know about it and how they think it will be cured. Alice is ill because there is no place for her desire in her world, controlled as it is by her father ('She hated the whole house. It was so built

⁹ Jane Eldridge Miller, *Rebel Women: Feminism, Modernism and the Edwardian Novel*, London: Virago, 1994, p. 194.

that there wasn't a corner in it where you could get away from Papa.'¹⁰), the village vicar who, because of his own unacknowledged sexual frustration, despises any sign of it in his daughters. In particular, the perverseness of the vicar is revealed in his uses of and attitude towards reading. The hiddenness of his sexual desires are revealed in the construction of his library.

The interior that contained him was no less deceptive. Its book-lined walls advertised him as the scholarly recluse he was not. He had had an eye to this effect. He had placed in prominent positions the books that he had inherited from his father, who had been a schoolmaster. You were caught at the very door by the thick red line of *The Tudor Classics*; by the eleven volumes of *The Bekker's Plato, with Notes*, bound in Russian leather, side by side with *Jowetts Translations* in cloth; by *Sophocles and Dean Plumptre, the Odyssey and Butcher and Lang*; by *Aeschylus and Robert Browning*. The Vicar had carried the illusion of scholarship so far as to hide his *Aristophanes* behind a little curtain, as if it contained for him an iniquitous temptation. Of his own accord and with a deliberate intention to deceive, he had added the *Early Fathers*, *Tillotsen's Sermons* and *Farrar's Life of Christ*.¹¹

The vicar's defining characteristic is deception: 'He had posed for more than thirty years to his parish, to his three wives, to his three children, and to himself.'¹² In particular what the vicar keeps hidden from all is the strength of his sexual desire; the ferocity of the vicar's desire, it is suggested, is the reason for the death or estrangement of each of his three wives. Less conspicuously displayed in his study are his copies of *Mrs Henry Wood*, *Marie Corelli* and popular journals. In the structure of the vicar's desire, it is books that are 'a little curtain', covering over

¹⁰ May Sinclair, *The Three Sisters* (1914), London: Virago, 1982, p. 12.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 21.

but also revealing the exact location of the places of 'temptation'. The hiding of the Aristophanes is the marker of the 'too far' of the vicar's 'illusion of scholarship'. This gesture is too far because, while it is supposed to complete the picture of him as a scholarly ascetic, in fact what it does is tip beyond this. The vicar attempts to counter the pagan excess with Christian works, but it is the 'little curtain' that gives him away.

Near the end of the novel, after the vicar has had a stroke, he is calmer, gentler with each of his daughters. Here, too, however, reading is a marker for the direction of his desire. One evening, he and Gwenda sit in the dining-room.

She had her sewing in her lap and her book, Bergson's *Évolution créatrice* propped open before her on the table. She sewed as she read. For the Vicar considered that sewing was an occupation and that reading was not. He was silent as long as his daughter sewed and when she read he talked. Toward ten his silence would be broken by a continual sighing and yearning. The Vicar longed for prayer time to come and end his day. But he had decreed that prayer time was ten o'clock and he would not have permitted it to come a minute sooner.

He nursed a book on his knees, but he made no pretence of reading it.¹³

Before his illness, prayer time has been the vicar's chance to exert his will over the women in his house, his three daughters and the servant, Essy. Now it marks rather the end of exertion. However, the end of the day is desired with a sensuousness that was previously hidden. The smokescreen of scholarship has gone - but what remains is the incompatibility for the vicar of reading and desire.

¹³ Ibid., p. 347.

While for the vicar, an absence of pleasure in reading marks a sensuous excess elsewhere, for another character, Rowcliffe, the village doctor, reading marks exactly the place of desire. At centre of novel, both literally and in terms of its treatment of reading, are two chapters. Gwenda, the middle sister, has learned from Dr Rowcliffe, the area's only eligible bachelor, with whom she has begun a tentative friendship, and who is already in love with her, that Alice's illness is serious. Gwenda visits the doctor and learns that Alice's illness will end in madness or death if she is not made 'happy' through marriage. Gwenda knows that her sister is in love with the doctor, that this is the only way he can 'cure' her, but that the doctor is in love with herself. She decides to leave the village so Alice can have a chance, her only chance, of marriage.

Rowcliffe is one of several of Sinclair's male characters who pride themselves on his ability to 'read' women. He is not as intentionally manipulative as Langley Wyndham in *Audrey Craven*, nor as narrow as Dr Henry Broderick in *The Creators*. Rowcliffe's knowledge as a doctor is more akin to that of the Dr Cautley, in 'The Superseded'; both feared and desired.

When he looked at her his eyes seemed to be taking her in, seeing nothing in all the world but her....

For this young man with the irritable nerves and blasphemous temper had after all a divine patience at the service of women, even the foolish and hysterical; because like their Maker he knew whereof they were made.¹⁴

¹⁴ May Sinclair, 'The Superseded', *Two Sides of the Question*, London: Constable, 1901, pp. 243, 274.

As with all Sinclair's 'readers', though, Rowcliffe's activities are plotted, are successes or failures, according to the relation between love and understanding. As Gwenda enters Rowcliffe's study, he is sitting by the fire reading Janet's *État mental des hystériques*, which he flings away 'as if it had offended him'¹⁵. In *A Defence of Idealism*, Sinclair paraphrases Janet's concept of dissociation.¹⁶

the break between one idea, or group of ideas, and its normal context and logical connections; the cutting of one psychic state, or groups of states, from the stream of consciousness itself.... all lapses and losses of a present memory or aptitude..., all perversions of instinct and desire, all suppressions, obsessions and possessions, all cases of double or multiple personality, are states primarily and essentially of dissociation.¹⁷

The impulse to separate, to put space between things to effect some sort of 'cure' is acted out by Rowcliffe as he flings the book away from him. What we see represented in this gesture is both his desire to cure Alice through his medical knowledge, and his desire for Gwenda which (he believes) demands a repudiation of that knowledge. As he is doing this, the narrative makes it clear that Gwenda 'reads' only him. The paragraph begins and ends with this assertion: 'As she obeyed him she kept her eyes on him.... With all his movements her head lifted and turned so that her eyes followed him.'¹⁸ The only explanation for Rowcliffe's violence toward the book is embarrassment at Gwenda seeing it, seeing him

¹⁵ Sinclair, *The Three Sisters*, p. 179.

¹⁶ For a more detailed discussion of this in terms of Sinclair's thinking, see Chapter 3.

¹⁷ May Sinclair, *A Defence of Idealism*, London: Macmillan, 1917, pp. 290-1.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

immersed in his professional knowledge, a knowledge which he cannot admit into his relations with her. However, as we are told, Gwenda looks only at him.

During an earlier visit to his study, Gwenda's 'reading' of the doctor has already set up the relation between desire, perversity and reading.

Rowcliffe's study said too much. It told her that he was a ferocious and solitary reader; for in the long rows of book shelves the books leaned slantwise across the gaps where his hands had rummaged and ransacked. It told her that his gods were masculine and many - Darwin and Spencer and Haeckel, Pasteur, Curie and Lord Lister, Thomas Hardy, Walt Whitman and Bernard Shaw.¹⁹

What this earlier description does is present the doctor's reading of the intellectual and scientific giants of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as symptomatic. To the interested observer, the study says 'too much'; 'If his lips are silent...betrayal oozes out of him at every pore.'²⁰ What is the 'too much' that the study tells to 'a young woman who had made up her mind that she didn't want to know anything about him'? The scientific figures listed are responsible for discoveries in evolution, recapitulation, germ theory, immunisation, modern physics and antisepsis in surgery. Spencer, Hardy and Bernard Shaw used these ideas in social theory, in the novel and in drama. Crucially, constituting the difficult knot at the heart of the work of each of them is the problem of sex. Although Gwenda, we are told, recognises his gods as 'masculine', what the works are

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 62.

²⁰ Sigmund Freud, 'Fragment of An Analysis of a Case of Hysteria ("Dora")', *Case Studies I*, vol. 8, Penguin Freud Library, London: Penguin, p. 114.

about, what Rowcliffe reads, is reproduction, childbirth, the inheritance of sexual characteristics, femininity, and the effects of contemporary sexual morality. And we also know that his professional interests are very particular.

Nothing would satisfy him but a big London practice and a name. He might - ultimately - specialise. If he did he rather thought it would be gynaecology. He was interested in women's cases. Or it might be nervous diseases.²¹

Again, Rowcliffe looks back to Dr Cautley. The ability of the latter to 'read' women is a consequence of his training in gynaecology.²² What Rowcliffe's reading helps him to know is women. The odd name out in this list, however, is Walt Whitman. Whitman's poetry asserts the consciousness of the individual as the centre from which the world is flung. More particularly, it has as its object a consciousness that is 'masculine' in that it is active, vigorous, virile. What is also asserted by Whitman's poetry, though, is the body, the body as sacred, as equal to the spirit or the soul.

If life and the soul are sacred the human body is sacred;
And the glory and the sweet of a man is the token of manhood untainted,
And in man or woman a clean strong firmfibred body is beautiful
as the most beautiful face....

Who degrades or defiles the living human body is cursed...²³

²¹ Ibid., p. 152.

²² Sinclair, 'The Superseded', p. 273.

²³ Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (1855), ed. and introduction by Malcolm Cowley, London: Penguin, 1976, pp. 122-3.

In Whitman, the body is associated with masculinity, and both are subject to the gaze of the poet. The differences between masculinity and femininity, therefore, become less well defined. The inclusion of Whitman in the list unsettles the bond between femininity and corporeality, challenges what is appropriate as the object of the 'I's' enquiry.

This is what causes Gwenda's discomfort, concerned, as she is, with attempting to maintain clear distinctions between Rowcliffe as doctor and Rowcliffe as man. What is more, the marks left on the books from their contact with his body indicate Rowcliffe's mode of reading. The descriptive language used is suggestive of an energy and passion when alone. Links between solitary reading and masturbation haunt this passage. His is certainly no 'calm knowledge'. His ferocity collapses another distinction - that between cognition and bodily pleasure. In the character of Rowcliffe, ferocity of reading stands in for the unsettling effects of (a perverse) desire. His study is a place of disruption (both of the order of the bookshelves and of the conventional doctor-patient relation) because his passion as such - for learning, for medicine, for Gwenda - will not be bounded.

What effects the movement in this scene is the ferocity of reading: Rowcliffe's of Alice, Gwenda and the books that we already know make up his library; Gwenda's reading of him. Such reading, here, ends in a possibility of perversity. Is Gwenda's decision to leave for London straight or perverse? Does she decide to leave the village instead of Alice because of a healthy sense of her own boundaries ("But I

want", she said, "to be alone."),²⁴ or because of an hysterical running from an erotic possibility, a neurotic closure of her body?²⁵

Later on in the novel, when Gwenda has left for London in order to give Alice her 'chance', it is in fact Mary, the eldest sister, who marries Rowcliffe. He is seduced and dulled by her manipulative sweetness. Years into his marriage, his passion and 'ferocity' for both his vocation and for reading leave him. Sitting in the study one evening with Mary:

Rowcliffe had taken up a book and was pretending to read it. Mary's hands were busy with her knitting. Her needles went with a rapid jerk, driven by the vibration of her irritated nerves. From time to time she glanced at Rowcliffe under her bent brows. She saw the same blocks of print, a deep block at the top, a short line under it, then a narrower block. She saw them as vague, meaningless blurs of gray stippled on white. She saw that Rowcliffe's eyes never moved from the deep top paragraph on the left-hand page. She noted the light pressure of his thumbs on the margin.

He wasn't reading at all; he was only pretending to read. He had set up his book as a barrier between them, and he was holding on to it for dear life.²⁶

The death of Rowcliffe's 'romantic youth'²⁷, of his desire, is figured through his changing status as a reader. Later on still, during one of his weekly visits to Gwenda, with whom he is still in love, books are marked, no longer with his desire, but with loss, with its repudiation.

²⁴ Sinclair, *The Three Sisters*, p. 185.

²⁵ '[N]eurosis is the negative of perversion', Freud, 'Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality', p. 163.

²⁶ Sinclair, *The Three Sisters*, p. 313.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 315.

They [his hands] picked up the book she had laid down and turned it. His eyes examined the title page. Their pathos lightened and softened; it became compassion; they smiled at her with a little pitiful smile, half tender, half ironic, as if they said, 'Poor Gwenda, is that what you're driven to?'

He opened the book and turned the pages, reading a little here and there.

He scowled. His look changed. It darkened. It was angry, resentful, inimical. The dying youth in it came a little nearer to death.

Rowcliffe had found that he could not understand what he had read.

'Huh! What do you addle your brains with that stuff for?' he said.

'It amuses me.'

'Oh - so long as you're amused.'

He pushed away the book that had offended him.²⁸

While Gwenda is away and the doctor is becoming engaged to Mary, Alice begins a love affair with a local farmer, Jim Greatorex. Gwenda returns briefly for Rowcliffe and Mary's wedding, and then three months later when Alice's affair becomes public, and she tells her family she is pregnant. After the subsequent scene, the vicar has a stroke, and Gwenda remains permanently to take care of him. During this period, as she and Rowcliffe become estranged and she realises that the narrative of her life is no longer in her control, it is to reading that Gwenda turns.

She had become a furious reader. She liked hard stuff that her brain could bite on. It fell on a book and gutted it, throwing away the trash. She read all the modern poets and novelists she cared about, English and foreign.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 353-4.

They left her stimulated but unsatisfied.... There were not enough good ones to keep her going. She worked through the Elizabethan dramatists and all the Vicar's Tudor Classics, and came on Jowett's Translations of the Platonic Dialogues by the way, and was lured on the quest of Ultimate Reality, and found that there was nothing like Thought to keep you from thinking. She took to metaphysics as you take to dram-drinking. She must have strong, heavy stuff that drugged her brain. And when she found that she could trust her intellect she set it deliberately to fight her passion.²⁹

Gwenda rejects the reading that leaves her 'stimulated but unsatisfied' (a description of Rowcliffe's effect on her too). Her own 'ferocious' and 'solitary' reading is explicitly about a repudiation of her desire. In this way it repeats the meaning of her move to London, and can similarly be charged with perversity.

Attention to their reading habits reveals all three characters - the vicar, the doctor and Gwenda - as perverse readers. However, I have argued from the beginning of this thesis that, in any reading of Sinclair, her commitment to cure, to wholeness, needs to be foregrounded. Gwenda, the central character of *The Three Sisters*, is forced into perversity by her social and familial context. A reading of how the text attempts to cure this brings into focus the strange relationship between Sinclair's work, perversity and cure.

Part of Gwenda's 'furious' reading consists of volumes from her father's library, those 'little curtains' he had used to cover his laziness and sensuality. However, of course, the aim of Gwenda's reading is not to divert attention from one thing to another, but rather to change her passion for Rowcliffe into something else. In her unpublished 'The Way of Sublimation', Sinclair asserts: 'It is not enough to

²⁹ Ibid., p. 351-2.

transfer; you must transform.³⁰ Despite the perversity of desire established in the novel, its ending asserts the power of sublimation. Gwenda's passion is transformed into an experience of ecstasy at the beauty of nature that foreshadows that of Mary Olivier and Arnold Waterlow discussed in Chapter 3.

Her passion found no outlet in creating violent and voluptuous sounds [as Alice's does]. It was passive, rather, and attentive. Cut off from all contacts of the flesh, it turned to the distant and the undreamed. Its very senses became infinitely subtle; they discerned the hidden soul of the land that had entranced her.

There were no words for this experience. She had no sense of self in it and needed none. It seemed to her that she *was* what she contemplated, as if all her senses were fused together in the sense of seeing and what her eyes saw they heard and touched and felt.³¹

However, what is difficult about this novel, and indeed about Sinclair's work as a whole, is that in trying to mark out a place for desire which is safe, which aspires beyond the problems of sex, proximity and contagion, the narrative tips us back towards perversity.

It is perhaps in connection precisely with the most repulsive perversions that the mental factor must be regarded as playing its largest part in the transformation of the sexual instinct. It is impossible to deny that in their case a piece of mental work has been performed which, in spite of its horrifying result, is the equivalent of an idealization of the instinct. The omnipotence of love is perhaps never more strongly proved than in such of its aberrations as these. The highest and the lowest are always closest to

³⁰ May Sinclair, 'The Way of Sublimation', unpublished manuscript, Department of Special Collections, Annenberg Rare Book and Manuscript Library, University of Pennsylvania, f. 41.

³¹ Sinclair, *The Three Sisters*, p. 340; emphasis in original.

each other in the sphere of sexuality...³²

Despite the strenuous attempts of Sinclair's work to distinguish between and fix the places of higher and lower, passion and understanding, proximity and distance, what her work actually acts out are contradictions inherent in her gender, position as a writer, intellectual commitments and cultural moment. Finally, the only comfort for Gwenda at the end of the novel is that these moments of sublimation are guaranteed through the experience of suffering. As her brother-in-law Jim says to her: "Ef yo soofer enoof mebbe it'll coon t' yo again. Ef yo're snoog and 'appy sure's death it'll goa."... "It 'assn't coom t'mae sence I married Ally".³³ The 'straight' way dulls and disappears the sensitivity to the sublime; its opposite is not unproblematically the sublime, but opens up also the possibility of the perverse (in the masochism of 'welcomed' suffering).

The narratives of cure that Sinclair uses in her work - medicine, evolution, psychoanalysis, the war, the psychical - are useful to her for the possibilities they open up for wholeness, for an achievement of a beyond that strains against the contingencies of history, sexual difference, illness, the boundaries of the self, and the formal demands of genre. The constant need in her work of challenging 'propriety' in one place while maintaining it in another marks the texts with the contradictory demands of proximity and distance. Readings of her work that pick out only those elements which are comfortable for current critical positions, or that

³² Sigmund Freud, 'Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality' (1905), *On Sexuality*, vol. 7, Penguin Freud Library, London: Penguin, 1991, p. 75.

³³ Sinclair, *The Three Sisters*, p. 369.

dismiss it as entirely reactionary because of those which are uncomfortable, fail to allow her texts their complex voice and vision. Her attitude to writing, the readers in her novels and the readers of her novels are linked in clear and revealing ways to these narratives of cure. In my reading of each of these, my desire has been to make clear the problematics of the relation between interpretation and text, to acknowledge that critical work is always constructed as an 'It was as if she had said....' At the same time, maintaining an awareness of this, it has been to suggest possible ways of reading Sinclair's texts that pay attention to their contexts: historical, their place in her work as a whole, their relation to other contemporary texts, the texture of their language. Close attention to Sinclair's work suggests the significant problems and possibilities in writing that challenges a number of status quos while at the same time asserting the existence of value, of wholeness, of cure.

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