Malleable Sculptures in Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room* and Early Travel Diaries

Imola Nagy-Seres
University of Exeter

The body in Virginia Woolf's works has often been regarded as absent, a void filled with the flickering impressions of the psyche. Woolf's representations of flesh in Jacob's Room *(1922) and her 1906 travel diaries in Greece demand an adjusted perspective: the body comes into existence at the intersections of hard matter and soft malleability. Instead of representing a hole, the flesh becomes a "hollow," defined by phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty as the mutually created meeting space between subject and other. Woolf's preoccupation with the semi-soft bodies of sculptures in her early journals and first experimental novel throws fresh light on her literary aesthetics. Distancing herself from a male tradition based on hardness and painstaking physical descriptions, Woolf proposes a more empathetic way of knowing others: the vulnerable and incomplete body acquires shape under its creator's fingers, whose touch gently redraws its boundaries without annihilating its individuality.*

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In a 2016 article entitled "The Trouble with Feeling Now," Sophie Ratcliffe reads Thomas Woolner's sculpture *Constance and Arthur* (1857–62) in parallel with Robert Browning's poem about the sculpture, "Deaf and Dumb" (1868). What makes Ratcliffe's article a groundbreaking study is not only her subject matter but her unusual methodology. While she investigates the statue's creation and reception in its historical context, she also draws attention to the Browning

Imola Nagy-Seres (in225@exeter.ac.uk) is a PhD candidate at the University of Exeter. She is currently completing her thesis on embodied fellow feeling in the modernist novel. Her fields of research and teaching include modernism, contemporary literature, phenomenology, and the history and theory of the novel. She regularly reviews articles for the postgraduate journal *Exclamat!on* published at the University of Exeter. Her article "The Phenomenological Body in Elizabeth Bowen's Interwar Novels" has been published in the *Elizabeth Bowen Review*.

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poem's limitations by arguing how a purely historical approach might obscure our emotional-tangible response to art objects (3). Ratcliffe proposes a different aesthetic approach: one based on sensuous tactility, "[t]hat moment of time taken, and time taking, of making physical contact with the statue" (24), rather than only a rational comprehension of the historical circumstances of its creation. Following up on Ratcliffe's call to address "the trouble with feeling now," I argue that certain modernist authors were already aware of the significance of affective touch in artistic experience. Virginia Woolf's *Jacob's Room*, read in conjunction with her early travel diaries and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenologist philosophy, suggests that genuine aesthetic pleasure and interpersonal intimacy arise from tangible contact between bodies.[1]

My study can be situated in the new field of modernist affects. The turn to affect, according to Julie Taylor, has come relatively late in modernist studies due to the widespread interpretation of early twentieth-century literature as cold and cerebral, devoid of the sentimental superfluity of the past (2). This view, however, has been recently challenged by several modernist scholars, who have redefined the term "modern" as "an affective orientation towards history" (Taylor 2).[2] While Benjamin Kohlmann has viewed the literature of the 1930s ("the temporal and formal periphery of high modernism") as the most fruitful terrain for the recuperation of affect in modernist criticism, my work will primarily focus on the early phase of high modernism (350). This article sets out to offer an affective reading of Woolf's selected texts through a critical approach positioned at the intersection of historicism and tactile encounter, the latter meaning a whole-body sensation, experienced in the present moment.

After the publication of *Jacob's Room,* Woolf was often accused of having failed to create plausible, flesh-and-blood characters. One of the first commentators on the novel, Leonard Woolf called the book a "work of genius" but drew attention to the "strange" ephemerality of characters that he describes as "ghosts [. . .] puppets moved hither & thither by fate" (*Diary II* 186). As Woolf records in the same diary entry, her husband "doesn't agree that fate works in this way" (186). However, while Leonard considered the novel Woolf's "best work" so far, other reviewers were not unequivocally convinced by her literary innovations. W.L. Courtney, a reviewer for the *Daily Telegraph*, for example, employs the same puppet-metaphor as Leonard Woolf, but in an undoubtedly pejorative sense: "Mrs Woolf confidently chatters as though she were seated in an armchair playing with her puppets" (Majumdar 104). Later critics also observed the elusive nature of Jacob's character. Kathleen Wall identifies as one of the defining characteristics of the novel the narrator's limited perspective, which can be noticed in the protagonist's continuous absence, or what she calls the "Jacob-shaped hole" of the narrative (306). All these metaphors—ghost, puppet, hole—underline Jacob's elusive character, which continuously escapes the reader's touch by retreating into immateriality. Nevertheless, I will provide an alternative reading of the possibilities and limits of touching others by showing how Woolf's ideas of intimacy can be understood through what I call the firm softness of bodies, which do not

dissolve under the toucher's hands but gently yield to the caressing fingers without losing their corporeal boundaries.

I will primarily focus on the affective touch of women in *Jacob's Room*, who, through their wish to keep Jacob's memory alive, transform into the unknown female artists of the interwar period. Though Jacob remains uncatchable in the sense that female characters fail to possess him definitively, his association with a ghost—as Leonard Woolf suggests—means missing out on important aspects of bodily intimacy in Woolf's novel. Woolf did not view her protagonists as untouchable phantoms that flicker through the minds and fingers of other characters (and readers). The embodied nature of characters represents a crucial issue for Woolf, but her interpretation of the body differs from that of her predecessors and contemporaries. She rejected the Edwardians' obsession with material details, such as the minute description of attire, and she equally distanced herself from the literary aesthetics of some male modernists, who expressed their preference for clarity and hardness. In *Jacob's Room*, Woolf often places her protagonists literally in the limelight in order to show the shortcomings of Edwardian literary techniques: "You could see the pattern on [Jacob's] trousers; the old thorns on his stick; his shoe laces; bare hands; and face. This was in his face. Whether we know what was in his mind is another question" (81). At the same time, she rejected the "hard" modernism of her contemporaries, such as Ezra Pound, who proposed in his famous Imagist Manifesto that modernist poetry should be "hard and clear, never blurred nor indefinite" (269).

The body, for Woolf, both in its sense of human flesh and art object, represents an incomplete, vulnerable, and semi-soft entity that invites the other's inquiring, gentle touch in order to come into existence. Woolf's understanding of corporeal intimacy can be illuminated by Merleau-Ponty's phenomenologist philosophy, in which he differentiates between the "physical" and "lived" body, to appropriate Cathryn Vasseleu's terms. While the "physical" body is reduced to mere biological functions, the "lived" body exists in a system of interactions, which together constitute "a perceptual field" (Vasseleu 28).[3] By choosing the sculpted body as the main focus, I will explore the ways in which the firmly soft "lived" flesh is shaped by affective touch in Woolf's works.

Statues have most often been associated with fixity and hardness. After the artist's finishing touch, sculptures remain immobile on their pedestals, closed in the coldness of marble or other materials. However, as Kenneth Gross has explored in *The Dream of the Moving Statue* (1992), humans have not always viewed sculptures as frozen art objects. The ancient Greeks believed that statues, far from being permanently tied to a pedestal, possess freedom of movement: the wings of the victories, for example, were often chopped off so that they could not escape and leave the town unprotected (Gross xiii). Ovid records one of the most well-known myths of a living statue in *Metamorphoses*, where he tells the story of Pygmalion, a sculptor who carves a woman out of ivory, which then comes to life under the artist's caressing fingers. The myth of Pygmalion and Galatea testifies to humans' preoccupation with the possibilities of the sculptor's creative touch. By interrogating

statues' association with absolute stillness, Ovid's tale can be situated in the long tradition of sculptures enticing, at times even yielding to human touch. As Gross put it: "The idea of a living statue might suggest a parable about our responsibility to humanly created objects, a sense that there is a life in them that demands our care, which includes the responsibility to other human beings (. . .)" (9).

Woolf showed a deep interest in "our responsibility" to "living statues" not only on an aesthetic level, but also in real-life interpersonal encounters. In *Jacob's Room* and her early travel journals, she explored the possibilities of her feeling for an art object that is not frozen in death but responds to the caressing hand, just like human beings who let themselves be shaped by the affective touch of their fellow-beings. What makes Woolf's works truly exciting is the way they oscillate between the aesthetic and real-life realms, without definitively settling in either. Her musings on sculptures suggest that caring for an art object is not simply a question of form but also a matter of life.

Several critics have remarked on Woolf's fascination with statues in *Jacob's Room*. Kathleen Wall associates Greek art with Jacob's death (317), which chimes with Theodore Koulouris's reading that links Greek culture (predominantly literature) with Woolf's "poetics of loss" (10). Vara Neverow elaborates on the erotic dimension of sculptures, arguing that references to statues in *Jacob's Room* "are infused with complex nuances of desire" (27), while Kirsty Martin reads sculpted surfaces as suggestions of superficial knowledge (83). I build on the above-mentioned scholarly works going further by focusing on specific features such as malleability and incompleteness, which help us to better grasp Woolf's ideas of embodied fellow feeling. Besides offering a new interpretation of statuary in *Jacob's Room*, I also provide a comparative analysis of statues in Woolf's first experimental novel and her early journals, two works that have not yet been read together in Woolf studies.

Woolf undoubtedly relied on her travel diaries written during her 1906 trip to Greece when working on *Jacob's Room*. Besides the similarities in the description of statues in the two works, the novel, as many critics observe, can be read as an elegy for Virginia's younger brother, Thoby Stephen, who died from typhoid shortly after their visit to Greece (Roe xvii). Although my aim is not to reveal links between *Jacob's Room* and Woolf's biography, I consider Jacob's resemblance to Thoby important insofar as it sheds fresh light on Woolf's ideas of memory preservation: the possibilities and limits of getting in touch with an absent beloved. Furthermore, there are striking linguistic similarities between the novel and the journal: when Jacob arrives in Athens, he contemplates the beauty of the Acropolis at sunset, "when the ships in the Piraeus fire their guns" (130). An almost identical phrase appears in Woolf's travel account, where she describes her delight in "the streets at evening, when the sun has just sunk & the boats in the Piraeus have fired their guns" (Woolf, *A Passionate Apprentice* 325).[4] Reading *Jacob's Room* in parallel with Woolf's journals and Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of interrelatedness opens a window onto Woolf's ideas of tactile encounters with sculptures, and by extension, with literary characters.

ENCOUNTERS IN "FLESH": MERLEAU-PONTY AND *JACOB'S ROOM*

Merleau-Ponty illustrates our sympathetic communion with the world (including human and non-human agents) through the image of self-touch, two hands clasping each other. Genuine togetherness, however, does not occur in the exact overlapping of palms and fingers, but in that space of imperfection or "hollow"[5] where the two hands unite without merging into an undistinguishable wholeness. In his last, unfinished work, *The Visible and the Invisible* (1964), Merleau-Ponty elaborates on this topic:

> But this hiatus between my right hand touched and my right hand touching, between my voice heard and my voice uttered, between one moment of my tactile life and the following one, is not an ontological void, a non-being: it is spanned by the total being of my body, and by that of the world; it is the zero of pressure between two solids that makes them adhere to one another. My flesh and that of the world therefore involve clear zones, clearings, about which pivot their opaque zones (…). (148)

The zone of "zero pressure" is not a hole but a space devoid of violent coercion and desire for domination, where knowledge gained about the other will always remain incomplete. Yet for Merleau-Ponty, this imperfect understanding is the most complex form of fellow feeling a human being can achieve. Moreover, following on from his contention that the tactile and the visible are often inseparable, Merleau-Ponty argues that our contact with the world does not take place in pure transparency but "clear zones" are always enveloped in mistiness. Since the human subject itself is not a translucent object, its relation with other objects of the world is inherently ambiguous and characterized by an amalgamation of clarity and obscurity, as Merleau-Ponty points out in his late essay "Eye and Mind" (1960). The individual thus is not a clear glass panel, but a semi-opaque entity on the surface of which misty patches and dark shades merge with rays of light.[6] Yet Merleau-Ponty does not fail to emphasize the importance of the subject's own corporeal limits. While being made of the same "flesh"[7] as the world, the self's bodily boundaries should not be completely erased: "having a front and a back, a past and a future" represents ultimately one of the basic preconditions of harmonious coexistence with the universe, which contains the capacity to be touched while remaining separate (Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind" 124).

Merleau-Ponty's and Woolf's ideas about intimate coexistence elucidate each other on several levels. During a visit at the home of his friend, Timmy Durrant, Jacob meets his sister Clara, whose attraction is hard to resist. Jacob offers to help Clara pick grapes in the greenhouse, where, while holding the ladder for her, he is mesmerized by her ineffable beauty:

> "There's another bunch higher up," murmured Clara Durrant, mounting another step of the ladder. Jacob held the ladder as she stretched out to reach the grapes high up on the vine.

> "There!" she said, cutting through the stalk. She looked semi-transparent, pale, wonderfully beautiful up there among the vine leaves and the yellow and purple bunches, the lights swimming over her in coloured islands. Geraniums and begonias stood in pots along planks; tomatoes climbed the walls.
>
> "The leaves really want thinning," she considered, and one green one, spread like the palm of a hand, circled down past Jacob's head. (*JR* 51)

As he admires Clara among the ripe bunches of grapes, Jacob observes how she gradually becomes half-transparent, at once pale and inundated with the colors of nature. Her paleness acquires an almost ghostlike quality, an idea further corroborated by her actions, her mounting of the step, which places her out of Jacob's yearning reach. But Woolf, notoriously preoccupied with every single word written on the pages of her novels, is careful enough not to portray her female protagonist as a mere bodiless phantom.[8] Instead, the narrator emphasizes the *semi*-transparency of Clara, who is not clearly seeable and easily graspable nor completely obscure and untouchable. Indeed, she is partly hidden by the hanging vine leaves and grapes but simultaneously becomes a prism, absorbing sunlight and emanating the colors of the rainbow that correspond to the hues present in her natural environment: yellow and purple (grapes) and green (leaves).

Clara, whose body becomes a magnified image of harmonizing colors and shapes, is described as an organic extension of her immediate surroundings, an idea also underlined by the association of her hand with a vine leaf. The falling leaf, a "green one, [that] spread like the palm of a hand," draws an invisible circle around Jacob's head, before it drops to the ground. The palm-shaped leaf, as the extension of Clara's hand, gently and lovingly caresses Jacob's head without definitively settling on or claiming possession of it. Read in conjunction with Merleau-Ponty's concept of "flesh," this scene illustrates the principles of tender togetherness:

> For the first time, the body no longer couples itself up with the world, it clasps another body, applying [itself to it] carefully with its whole extension, forming tirelessly with its hands the strange statue which in its turn gives everything it receives; the body is lost outside of the world and its goals, fascinated by the unique occupation of floating in Being with another life (. . .). (*Visible* 144)

"Applying" her flesh "with its whole extension" to Jacob's body, Clara's gesture creates a fragile yet enduring moment of physical intimacy: the leaf eventually flies past the man's head but the plant's brief contact with his body opens up the possibility for mythological interpretations. The vine leaf crown transforms Jacob into the Greek god Dionysus, and as Neverow has observed, Jacob is repeatedly associated with the sculpture of Dionysus in the novel (30). The parallel between Woolf's protagonist and the god of wine and carnal joys can partly explain Jacob's state of unconscious intoxication in Clara's presence: he "is lost outside of the world and its goals" (Merleau-Ponty, *Visible* 144). Yet, while drawing a link to Greek mythology, the narrative simultaneously withdraws from unambiguous

interpretations: Jacob's head, after all, is not decorated with vine leaves, but only fleetingly touched by them. Hence, his longing for Clara, though undoubtedly containing elements of Dionysian eroticism, is more complex and nuanced. If Jacob turns into a statue under the woman's modeling hands, he is not a fixed and perfectly polished object of art, but one that "in its turn gives everything it receives" (*Visible* 144).

Clara's description as a sculptor and her superior position on the top of the ladder subvert cultural stereotypes about the active male artist looking (down) on and capturing the passive female model. At the same time, the grape-picking scene can be read as a double inversion of the Greek myth: rather than Pygmalion touching Galatea imploring her to come to life, in Woolf's novel the female artist transforms the male into a statue, albeit not a fixed and lifeless one. Clara does not restrict Jacob within a rigid and definitive shape, but allows him to remain responsive to her shaping hands. Clara's artistic technique based on the idea of gentle touch, which does not confine its object but contributes to the opening of its boundaries, is analogous with Woolf's own principles of character making as opposed to the literary methods employed by her male peers.

THE "UNBROKEN FILES" OF MALE TRADITION

In her Notes to *Jacob's Room*, Sue Roe remarks that ancient Greek civilization and culture are considered male domains in Woolf's novel (170). Colin Dickey supports this view by arguing that the figure of the French female photographer, trying to get a snapshot of Jacob while he is being absorbed in the statues of the Parthenon, "offer[s] a critique of the self-satisfied seriousness of men like Jacob (…) who judge[s] [his] mates according to classical statues" (379). Indeed, sculptures in *Jacob's Room* are repeatedly linked to patriarchal order and male superiority. At the beginning of the novel, the narrator urges us to look at the privileged men, dons and students, who solemnly proceed toward King's College Chapel in Cambridge: "Look, as they pass into service, how airily the gowns blow out, as though nothing dense and corporeal were within. What sculpted faces, what certainty, authority controlled by piety, although great boots march under the gowns. In what orderly procession they advance." (24) The sculpted surface of the body is associated with lack of inner essence, a form of artificial and shallow superficiality. Furthermore, what confers this kind of insubstantiality a genuinely threatening air is its implicit connectedness to military logic through the use of war vocabulary: "pass into service," "boots march," "orderly procession," and "advance." In this passage, Woolf offers a harsh critique not only of the male-dominated educational system but through analogy with the armed forces, of the First World War as well, which transformed young men into mere material containers devoid of life, individual thoughts and feelings.

The distinction between male and female intellectuals, and their different ways of making and interpreting art, becomes evident during Jacob's visit to the British Museum, where the works of male authors are described as being arranged

in an "unbroken file," excluding female writers, such as "an Eliot or a Brontë" (90, 91). The perfectly polished pieces of male tradition fit together so exquisitely that the creation of hollows, in which the accommodation of the other could take place, remains unimaginable. In "Modern Fiction" (1925) Woolf linked explicitly the concept of the hollow with the literary techniques employed by modernist writers (though not exclusively women), whose methods she contrasted to the literary aesthetics of Edwardian authors. In Woolf's opinion, the problem with the novels of Arnold Bennett and his contemporaries lies in the fact that their fiction is imbued with "falsity and pretence" and creates a picture that is unfaithful to life (*Essays IV* 164). Life does not reside in the perfect fitting of parts, she argues, but in the "crevice [where] decay can creep in," "the draught between the frames of the windows, or a crack in the boards" (*Essays IV* 158). In other words, "the stuff of fiction" for Woolf is born in the mutually created space between two intertwining elements (*Essays IV* 164). In Woolf's interpretation, life—which represents "the stuff of fiction"—is infused with vulnerability and senescence, and by extension a work of art should also accommodate "decay" between its imperfectly matching parts.

Woolf rejects the unsympathetic literary aesthetics of her male predecessors due to their lack of open-mindedness. In *Jacob's Room*, the narrator describes the British Museum as a solid, perfectly finished and closed male "mind" that refuses to open toward the other, or even to consider the possibility of softening its own rigid borders: "The British Museum stood in one solid immense mound, very pale, very sleek in the rain" (94). The "pots and statues, great bulls and little jewels" (94) and literary masterpieces created by famous male artists lie in undisturbed stillness and solemnity on the shelves, "in spite of" life taking place on the streets outside the walls of the building: "in spite of the woman (. . .) who has come home drunk and cries all night long, 'Let me in! Let me in!'" (94). Ignoring the woman's cries, Jacob reads on, because "in spite of" real-life events, "Plato and Shakespeare continue," and the woman's desperate pleas sound in Jacob's ears "as if a coal had dropped from the fire, or a fly, falling from the ceiling, had lain on its back, too weak to turn over" (94).

Woolf interrogates the "unbroken" and "imperturbable" (94) mastery of male artists, who despite having created a solid foundation of tradition, fail to show solidarity with the marginalized other. Similar to the description of Cambridge dons, Woolf draws a subtle link between male artistic superiority and militarism: the unsympathetic Jacob, whose mind is completely occupied with the difficulty of Plato's *Phaedrus*, "reads straight ahead, falling into step, *marching* on" (95, my emphasis). Hence Jacob, though undoubtedly a victim of the First World War, is also, albeit in a different context, a perpetrator of violence. However, Jacob's character and Woolf's ideas of statuary are far too complex to be simply interpreted in a patriarchal historical context. After all, as I will discuss in the next section, Jacob finds delight in unfinished statues, an idea that partly refutes the exclusive association of Greek sculptures with male dominance, as Roe and Dickey proposed.

During his trip to Greece, Jacob realizes that "he prefer[s] statues to pictures" (131). His love for statuary, nevertheless, is directed only toward a certain kind of sculpture: the unfinished pieces, which lack certain body parts or exhibit unusual features. As he admires "the slight irregularity in the line of steps," he reads in his guidebook that the "'artistic sense of the Greeks preferred [a certain kind of distortion] to mathematical accuracy'" (130). While earlier in the novel statues were associated with rigidity and masculine order, Jacob's travels in Greece throw fresh light on the artistic potential of Greek sculptures and consequently on Woolf's own ideas of character modeling.

At least two forms of statue-making can be distinguished in *Jacob's Room*: tradition building based on male prestige, as exemplified by the perfectly "sculpted faces" of Cambridge dons and the "solid" structure of the British Museum, and a mostly feminine interpretation of incomplete sculptures, associated with the safeguarding of personal memory, to which I will shortly turn. A statue "left in the rough" lets itself be palpated with the gaze as the viewer tries to understand and emotionally relate to the unique combination of lines, shapes and colors (*JR* 130). "Slight irregularit[ies]" are not to be considered artistic flaws but signs of the finest "artistic sense," which in contrast with scientific accuracy, leave open the way to multiple interpretations.

At the same time, Woolf's fascination with unfinished statues indicates her susceptibility to human vulnerability and death. Jacob is partly fond of irregular statues because they resemble flesh-and-blood human beings, exposed to destructive external forces. As such, it is probably not a mere coincidence that sculptures often appear as "battered" in *Jacob's Room*. A Greek goddess in the Erechtheum reminds Jacob of his lover, Sandra Wentworth Williams, which has a strong emotional impact on the young man who is "extraordinarily moved" by the statue's "battered Greek nose" (133). More importantly, the adjective "battered" is associated with Ulysses, and through implicit analogy, with Jacob himself. In the British Museum, Jacob's former lover Fanny Elmer spends long minutes in front of the "battered Ulysses" (150) in order to refresh her memory of Jacob. The asymmetrical statue of the Greek traveler represents a source of solace for the woman who secretly hopes that Jacob will eventually return to her. At the same time, the state of vulnerability is not only associated with Jacob but also with Fanny's "statuesque" "idea of Jacob" (149), which as her lover's homecoming becomes more and more improbable, starts to "wear thin," similarly to the woman's deteriorating body that appears old and lifeless (150).

Fanny's visit to the British Museum indicates the double nature of vulnerability: on the one hand, the narrator draws constant attention to Jacob's fragility and imminent death, but the novel is also deeply sympathetic to the women who do not cease to love and long for Jacob even after their relationship ended. These female characters—Clara, Florinda, Fanny, and Sandra—not only are passive models posing for artists, but also become the anonymous artists of the interwar period who consciously choose an alternative creative method. Similar to Clara's artistic activity in the grape-picking scene, the other women do not wish

to preserve the memory of dead soldiers by erecting grandiose monuments with "composed faces" (136) but promote a more personal way of remembering through the chiseling of incomplete and vulnerable figures.

WOOLF'S "BATTERED" STATUES

Suzanne Raitt argues that though centered around the death of soldiers in the First World War, *Jacob's Room* is also "about the survival of women in a world that has lost millions of its men" (42), and I would add, about the ways in which these women ensure the survival of the dead. Throughout her career, Woolf was deeply preoccupied with the malleability of human character. In January 1920, while working on *Jacob's Room*, she mused on the material construction of the writer's body that should be "pliant & rich enough to provide a wall for the book from oneself without its becoming, as in Joyce and [Dorothy] Richardson, narrowing & restricting" (*Diary II* 14). She considered Joyce and Richardson "damned egoistical" and set against their writing practice a more sympathetic creative method based on the principles of firm softness: while the writer is "pliant," (s)he has to simultaneously provide a solid wall that protectively surrounds and holds the book together. More importantly though, the wall has to be made of the novelist's own flesh, an image reminiscent of Woolf's often-used birth metaphor for literary creation.

In her feminist manifesto, *A Room of One's Own* (1929), Woolf described great works of art as "not single and solitary births [but] the outcome of many years of thinking in common, of thinking by the body of people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice" (66). Woolf's argument summarizes the basic prerequisites of creative writing: literary creation is not a radical rupture with the past but the living outcome of "thinking in common" and representing an organic part of the "body of people" while also allowing space for the "single voice." Woolf's use of the birth metaphor gains special weight in this context as it clearly indicates her belonging to a matrilineal ancestry, an idea repeatedly emphasized in *A Room of One's Own*, but which already preoccupied her at the time she was writing *Jacob's Room*. In a letter responding to Lytton Strachey—who had excessively praised *Jacob's Room* and mentioned how Jacob reminded him of Virginia's dead brother, Thoby—Woolf, somehow reluctantly, admitted the romantic nature of her novel. She attributed this unequivocally to her female predecessors: "How do I catch it [the romanticism]? Not from my father. I think it must have been my Great Aunts. But some of it, I think, comes from breaking with complete representation." (*Letters II* 568–9) Woolf's answer to Strachey summarizes her complex attitude toward the literary past: while she clearly distanced herself from a male-dominated tradition rooted in "complete representation," she also reinforced her strong bond with a female artistic line.

The fact that all of Jacob's female admirers are implicitly involved in sculpture-making acquires special significance in the novel and underlines Woolf's deep concern with the figure of the anonymous female artist who, as

Woolf poignantly muses in *A Room of One's Own*, is an absent ghost on the shelves of the British Museum, packed with massive amounts of works by male authors (27–42). In *Jacob's Room,* Woolf offers an implicit critique of an artistic tradition rooted exclusively in the patriarchal order and dominated by men: "schoolmasters" and "clergymen mounting their platforms and pulpits" (*A Room of One's Own* 29). Woolf envisages the act of paying homage to writers and artworks of the past as statue modeling: "In five years, I shall have flagged out a good book from [my readings], I hope; a rough, but vigorous statue testifying before I die to the great fun & pleasure my habit of reading has given me" (*Diary II* 259). The seemingly paradoxical phrase "rough, but vigorous" represents a concise synthesis of Woolf's aesthetics, suggesting her desire to create a work of art that is at once solid and imbued with life and movement.

Woolf's sympathy for "vigorous" statues started early in her life. It can be traced back to at least 1906, when in the company of her siblings, Vanessa, Thoby, and Adrian, and their friend Violet Dickinson, she traveled to Greece and spent some time in Athens, visiting the Acropolis. Although Woolf does not explicitly mention Thoby in her journal musings on Greek sculptures, his presence must have been significant for her, since Thoby was the person who earlier introduced her to the world of Greek culture and with whom she had lively discussions on Greek literature (Lee 144). As such, Woolf probably found delight in sharing her impressions about the Parthenon statues with her brother. Furthermore, in a letter to Violet, Woolf describes Thoby as "a Greek God but rather too massive for the drawing room" (*Letters I* 72).

Similar to Thoby, the "Greek God" who could not be fitted inside the walls of a room, Jacob evades any attempt to be fixed and restricted within a predetermined shape. Instead, Woolf offers a more sympathetic way of reading others in her novel and diary entries. During her long walks with her siblings and Violet in Athens, Woolf became mesmerized by the beauty of Greek marbles:

> We also visited the Acropolis at sunset. And when you speak of "colour" of the Parthenon you are simply conforming to the exigencies of language; a painter using his craft to speak by, confesses the same limitations. The Temple glows red; the whole west pediment seems kindled, as if for the first time, in the sunset opposite [. . .]. No place seems more lusty and alive than this platform of ancient dead stone. The fat Maidens who bear the weight of the Erechtheum on their heads, stand smiling tranquil ease, for their burden is just meet for their strength. They glory in it; one foot just advanced, their hands, one conceives, loosely curled at their sides. And the warm blue sky flows into all the crevices of the marble; yet they detach themselves, & spring in to the air, with crisp edges, unblunted, & still virile & young. (Woolf, *A Passionate Apprentice* 323)

Woolf's description of the caryatids[9] echoes Clara's portrayal in *Jacob's Room*. In both cases, the women's bodies do not merely reflect the colors of the environment but they become organic extensions of the natural surroundings. Color and form, as Merleau-Ponty observed in his writings on Paul Cézanne, should

not fulfill distinctive roles in art; rather color becomes the precondition of shape, the element that unites object and background while at the same time allowing for the emergence of individual contours. Similarly, the individual lines of the Erechtheum statues are not blurred by the colors of the setting sun, but on the contrary, they begin to take shape and come to life under nature's gentle touch. "The warm blue sky" flowing into "the crevices of the marble" is reminiscent of Cézanne's idea about "the landscape think[ing] itself" in the subject, cited by Merleau-Ponty in his 1945 essay "Cézanne's Doubt" (17) and *Phenomenology of Perception*: "I do not lay out in front of [the sky] an idea of blue that would give me its secret. Rather, I abandon myself to it, I plunge into this mystery, and it 'thinks itself in me'" (222). In Woolf's journal description of the caryatids, the blue hues slowly spread out in the white marble, redrawing the statues' borders without annihilating their unique hallmarks. Woolf's careful attention rests on the women's subtle gestures: the slightly advanced feet and "loosely curled" hands. The female figures preserve their individuality, they "detach themselves," and "with crisp edges" "spring in to the air" energetically.

Woolf's sensual and playful language in her journal entry allows one to read the scene as a seduction narrative. She depicts the Parthenon as a "lusty" place, where the "fat Maidens" "bear the weight" of the portico while the "blue sky flows" into their hollows. The scene might be interpreted as an erotic union between caryatids and nature, a fusion that carries the potential of future life but simultaneously subverts reproductive stereotypes. The female statues are not passive and immobile carriers of "their burden," but while solidly holding "the weight of the Erechtheum" on their heads, their energized bodies emanate a sense of freedom and "virile" power.

Yet the sculptures' lively description is imbued with a sense of vulnerability. The phrase "loosely curled hands" can be read as a euphemism for the actual absence of the caryatids' arms that were destroyed through the centuries (Warner, *Eternal Greece* 67–8). Furthermore, though Woolf did not mention it in her diary, she must have been aware of the statues' lack of not only upper limbs but also noses. The original caryatids, of which Woolf probably took a close view in the Acropolis Museum, are famous for their flat noses, or more precisely, for faces with a rubbed surface where noses originally were. In *Jacob's Room*, the goddess "holding the roof on her head" reminds Jacob of Sandra. Remembering her produces an unexpected effect on the young man: "He was extraordinarily moved, and with the battered Greek nose in his head, with Sandra in his head, with all sorts of things in his head, off he started to walk right up to the top of Mount Hymettus [. . .]" (133).

Jacob's association of the caryatids with Sandra allows for multiple interpretations. The fact that he remembers Sandra as "battered," indicates his perception of the woman as a vulnerable human being, in need of his (male) protection. This reading, however, might be at odds with how Sandra is portrayed throughout the novel. Jacob's last lover, after all, does not seem to be a very fragile woman: she exerts control over her husband and enjoys a great sense of liberty in her

marriage. Hence, the adjective "battered" might rather be attached to Jacob's persona, suggesting that he is projecting his own frailty and insecurity caused by his turbulent feelings for the woman. Reading Jacob's visit to the Acropolis alongside Woolf's diary entry, nevertheless, provides a more complex explanation for Sandra's depiction as a caryatid.

The link between Sandra and the caryatids operates at a yet deeper level than a common physical trait. The promiscuous "fat Maidens," bearing their "weight" with a "tranquil ease" foreshadow the secret erotic encounter between Jacob and Sandra, which importantly takes place on the Acropolis and results in Sandra's pregnancy. In order to protect him from being "shocked," Sandra decides not to tell Jacob that he has a son (*JR* 149). Yet, even though Jacob never finds out the truth, the little boy to whom Sandra gives birth becomes a flesh-and-blood monument, the live bond between past and future, death and life, ruin and regeneration. The child, emphatically waving his hands in the perambulator (149), embodies the "hard and durable" (141), which Jacob longs for as he wakes up in the morning after his clandestine liaison with Sandra. The memory of the couple's lovemaking is eternally stamped into the landscape, surrounded by the robust "columns and the Temple" that "remain," but at the same time imbued with the soft "emotion of the living" which "breaks fresh on them year after year" (141). Despite the ephemerality of the lovers' relationship, Sandra succeeds in preserving Jacob's memory by creating a monument out of her own flesh, which while simultaneously durable and doomed to decay, has the power to bring back that "moment in the dark on the road to the Acropolis which mattered for ever" (149).

Sandra's memory-preserving activity, nevertheless, can be traced back to an earlier point in the narrative. Prior to conceiving their son, Sandra and Jacob visit the museum at Olympia, where the woman tries to "get" Jacob's head "exactly on a level with the head of the Hermes of Praxiteles," but as the narrator emphasizes: "before she could say a single word he had gone out of the Museum and left her" (*JR* 127). Indeed, as Adam Parkes observes, Jacob "defeats Sandra Williams's attempt to fix him, as if he himself were a statue, with her museumgoer's stare" (169). While I agree with this point, I think that Woolf does more than simply criticize Sandra's "egoism," as Parkes suggests (169). Hermes of Praxiteles, the statue with which Sandra associates Jacob, is the figure of a god holding the baby Dionysus in his left arm. In her attempt to "get" Jacob's head, Sandra does not simply want to fix the man; she unconsciously wishes to capture a touching but non-existent future image: Jacob with their still unborn son in his arms. The baby Dionysus, a small version of Jacob thus encapsulates Sandra's effort to preserve her beloved's memory in the fragile, soft flesh of their child.

Gabrielle McIntire argues that in Woolf "continuity with anteriority manifests itself as a wish to touch the past through (re)discovering the history of physical and corporeal traces whose enigmatic imprints remain legible into the future" (212). In *Jacob's Room*, Sandra represents the embodiment of this "continuity with anteriority." The caryatids' ambiguous relationship with time has also been observed by Greek scholars such as Rex Warner, who notes in *Views of Attica*

and its Surroundings (1950) that the female statues on the Erechteum, instead of simply evoking historical events, reach "both forwards and backwards in time" (50). Sandra, the caryatid standing on the remnants of the past, becomes the guardian of memory, while her vigorous body stretches upward, opening into the endless sky and bearing the possibilities of the future.

When Woolf stated in her letter to Strachey that she wanted to break with "complete representation" and (partially) follow in the footsteps of her "Great Aunts," she articulated a simultaneous departure from and embracing of the literary past. While she rejected her Edwardian predecessors' exhaustively detailed portraits, she also gave voice to her commitment to a certain strain of female literary tradition, characterized by incompleteness and brokenness. Woolf showed a sensitivity toward unfinished statues well before she even started to think about *Jacob's Room*. During her visit to the Greek town Eleusis in September 1906 she was enchanted by the "delicate fragments" in the museum: "[t]here is for example a noble victory, headless, wingless & armless: still her draperies & her fair body are enough to stamp once more that supreme Greek image on ones [sic] mind" (*A Passionate Apprentice* 324). The "delicate fragments," where "delicate" means soft, fragile, and precious at the same time, offer a far more fulfilling artistic experience than a perfectly polished piece of art. In a letter to Gerald Brenan on Christmas Day 1922, Woolf articulates her disbelief in "wholeness" when describing human beings. She emphasizes the impossibility of seeing the human soul as a "whole"; instead all we can do is to "catch a glimpse of a nose, a shoulder, something turning away, always in movement" (*Letters II* 598). Yet, Woolf seems to prefer this state of fragmentariness: "Still, it seems better to me to catch this glimpse, than to sit down with Hugh Walpole, [H.G.] Wells, etc. etc. and make large oil paintings of fabulous fleshy monsters complete from top to toe" (598).

According to Woolf, a "battered" nose or a sensually lifted foot offers a more complex and durable insight into another's being than a minutely detailed close-up, which transforms humans into grotesque, monster-like figures, impenetrable by the viewer's sympathetic eyes. The truncated figure of the "victory" (identified as Nike, the Greek goddess of glory) represents for Woolf an "exquisite" aesthetic pleasure and creates a lasting impression, an indelible image on the mind.[10] Woolf describes her immersion in Greek statuary as a complex sensory entanglement, which involves not only sight but touch too. Her first encounter with the sculpture of Hermes is depicted as a form of visceral delight. She depicts the stone as "acquiescent to the sculptors [sic] hand: it is almost liquid, of the colours of alabaster, & of the solidity of marble. There is a beautiful polished foot which you may stroke with your own soft flesh." (*A Passionate Apprentice* 319) The sight of Hermes triggers a strong sense of excitement, experienced in the viewer's body yet transcending corporeal limits: the eyes almost become independent "creatures" that attach themselves to the statue, freely "springing" in the hollows of the marble. At the same time, "springing" echoes an earlier passage in the diary, in which Woolf describes Hermes as having "a spring in his step" (319).

Furthermore, the stone, a combination of softness and hardness, transforms into living material, inviting the spectator's searching gaze and touch. Seeing proves to be insufficient in front of "such beauty," which can truly be grasped only via tactile perception: the caressing of the marble foot "with your own soft flesh." Employing the same words to depict both sculpture and viewer momentarily suspends the borders between the two, allowing one to see the contemplating subject as the extension of the art object. The marble statue comes to life while the living human subject is petrified by the sculpture's ineffable beauty. Woolf drew the figure of the art lover as someone who does not, to borrow Merleau-Ponty's words, "look at a thing, fixing it in its place" but lets his/her gaze "wander in the halos of Being" ("Eye and Mind" 126). After all, intimacy is born in hollows, in those breathing spaces where, returning to Ratcliffe's words, time stops in order to allow us to make "physical contact with the statue." In a similar vein, affective literary criticism happens at the intersection of historical approach and personal, bodily encounter with art objects. This methodology results in a form of firmly soft criticism that allows space and time for our subjective response to art, without questioning the importance of academic rigor.

"The trouble with feeling now," which Ratcliffe identified in our lack of bodily-affective contact with art objects, is perhaps not so much a contemporary problem but one dating back to earlier times. Writers of the early twentieth century show a deep concern with humans' alienation from the living and feeling body in interpersonal relationships as well as in artistic experiences. By portraying corporeality in its firmly soft materiality, Woolf offers an alternative interpretation of the body, which she viewed as malleable matter, yielding to the artist's fingers, without losing its own borders. Through her frequent references to statues in *Jacob's Room* and her Greece diaries, Woolf suggests that semi-soft and rough bodies might prove to become longer-lasting monuments than their exquisitely chiseled, "solid" counterparts. The female characters' effort to keep Jacob's memory live testifies to a strikingly different creative method than that employed by the unsympathetic male minds of the British Museum. Woolf's response to caryatids and other Greek statues encapsulates Ratcliffe's idea of the importance of emotional-bodily encounter with art objects. Only this kind of contact results in genuine intimate touch with other bodies, which do not represent mere blocks of stone from a bygone era but "are acquiescent" to the approaching hand, letting themselves be "stroke[d] [by] your own soft flesh." Woolf's literary aesthetics might be closer, after all, to the "soft flesh" than we have imagined.

Notes

1. When discussing Woolf's fiction in the light of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, critics usually look at the two writers' works from an ecophenomenological perspective. In her article "Virginia Woolf and the Flesh of the World" (1999), Louise Westling elaborates on the ways in which Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology illuminates Woolf's preoccupation with the forces of the universe. In *Ecocriticism in the Modernist Imagination* (2016), Kelly E. Sultzbach investigates how, in Woolf's works,

ideas of "wholeness" are shaped by the complex relationship between the human and non-human (82–144). Ariane Mildenberg slightly departs from a strictly ecophenomenological approach by reading Woolf's *The Waves* (1931) and Paul Cézanne's *The Large Bathers* (1906) through the lens of Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of interrelatedness (*Modernism and Phenomenology* 121–127).

2. Examples of recently published monographs in the field of modernism and emotion include: Julie Taylor's *Djuna Barnes and Affective Modernism* (2012), Kirsty Martin's *Modernism and the Rhythms of Sympathy* (2013), Rachel Greenwald Smith's *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism* (2015), Charlotta P. Einarsson's *A Theatre of Affect: The Corporeal Turn in Samuel Beckett's Drama* (2017), and Marta Figlerowicz's *Spaces of Feeling: Affect and Awareness in Modernist Literature* (2017).

3. The difference between the physical (Körper) and lived body (Leib), though often attributed to Merleau-Ponty, can be traced back to earlier sources, such as the works of Helmuth Plessner and Max Scheler. See Hans-Peter Krüger's "Persons and Their Bodies" (2010).

4. The similarity of the two phrases has also been noticed by Sue Roe; see *Jacob's Room*, note 16 in chapter XII.

5. In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty describes the subject's communion with the world as an act of mutual interaction: "I am, as a sensing subject, full of natural powers of which I am the first to be filled with wonder. Thus I am not, to recall Hegel's phrase, a 'hole in being,' but rather a hollow, or a fold that was made and that can be unmade" (223).

6. In her essay "On Being Ill" (1926), Woolf uses the image of glass to reject interpretations of the self as a purely immaterial entity: the body is not "a sheet of plain glass through which the soul looks straight and clear." Instead, the soul "can only gaze through the pane—smudged or rosy; it cannot separate off from the body like the sheath of a knife or the pod of a pea for a single instant" (*Essays IV* 317–8).

7. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty defines flesh (*chair*) as neither matter, nor mind or substance but an "'element' of Being": "To designate [the flesh], we should need the old term 'element,' in the sense it was used to speak of water, air, earth, and fire, that is, in the sense of a *general thing*, [. . .] a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being. [. . .The flesh is] [n]ot a fact or a sum of facts, and yet adherent to *location* and to the now" (139–140).

8. While working on *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf writes in her diary on 21 March 1927: "Dear me, how lovely some parts of *To the Lighthouse* are! Soft & pliable, & I think deep, & never a word wrong for a page at a time" (*Diary III* 132). Note how Woolf uses adjectives related to tangibility to describe her novel.

9. Caryatids are female statues used as pillars to support the roof of a Greek temple. For further information and images see Warner, *Eternal Greece* 54–68.

10. See footnote 22 in section "Greece 1906" in *A Passionate Apprentice*: "In the room with the colossal Roman caryatids from the lesser Prophylea is a headless Nike." (324)

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