

Abbie Garrington, *Haptic Modernism: Touch and the Tactile in Modernist Writing* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), pp.256. ISBN: 978 0 7486 4174 1

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The ‘haptic’, Abbie Garrington writes, is an ‘umbrella term’ which refers to one or more of a ‘quartet of somatic experiences’: touch, kinaesthesia, proprioception, and ‘the vestibular sense’ (16). *Haptic Modernism* is, then, not just concerned with ‘touch and the tactile’, but with the body’s sense of itself as body: the sense it has of its own movements and its own physical location; its balance, sitedness, embodiment. It addresses the self/world dichotomy and the ‘flicker between physical reality and psychical reflection’ (17). It is not only concerned with the sense of touch (that ‘base’ sense which has been so overlooked in histories of sensory modernisms), but with modernist conceptions of selfhood and physicality.

Garrington’s ‘haptic’ modernist literature is a literature informed by technology. The ‘tactile’ cinema, the motorcar, and the typewriter all contribute to new notions of the body’s relation to the world, and the private self’s points of contact with the public, as does the writing hand. The haptic-umbrella is a large one, and Garrington’s book is a necessarily broad study. The four authors Garrington introduces as key to the work – those ‘four prominent members of the modernist canon: James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Dorothy Richardson and D.H. Lawrence’ (49) – are joined by others. The book begins with a consideration of Sinclair Lewis’s *Babbitt*, and takes in Rebecca West, H.G. Wells, Aldous Huxley, George Bernard Shaw, Wilkie Collins, and Maurice Renard, among others: an inclusiveness which has the effect, as Garrington rightly says, of allowing her productively to ‘widen [her] canon of haptic modernists’ (50).

Garrington’s love of rhyming chiming words, alliteration, and her frequent and fruitful recourse to etymological links gives a joyfulness to this book. It also precipitates interesting theoretical connections. We are led sideways into the haptic: from the hands

(manual, manicure, manipulation, manoeuvres) through an examination of the active and passive touch through the Pygmalion story (the crucial kiss as the ‘touching-touched’ (53)), through to gesture and empathy. Joyce’s *Ulysses* is read as both masturbatory and myopic modernism: the ‘shift toward the haptic and toward smell, brought about by the loss of sight’ (100). Virginia Woolf’s ambivalent relationship with motor cars is held up as an example of the inward-gazing modernist’s reaction to the concrete and material manifestations of modernity. D. H. Lawrence’s physicality is a ‘counterpoint or, more properly, a corrective to what the author views as a specious valorisation of the visual sense’ (156).

Dorothy Richardson’s ‘haptic modernism’, however, is profoundly visual. Through a convincing reading of the *Close Up* columns, Garrington presents a version of Richardson’s belief in the importance of a ‘creative collaboration’ between film and spectator, or book and reader, that is embodied and tactile. The film that allows a landscape ‘to walk through us’, and the genius of a writer like Ibsen, whose writing can ‘take you into Norway in an ABC’ (149) are both products of the ‘epidermic’ eye – the eye that grasps. The act of writing, too, is figured by Garrington as a haptic experience, as ‘Miriam Henderson finds that her much-needed writing room functions as a kind of ramification of her own epidermic border, a second skin’ (147). The ‘room of one’s own’, so important to Miriam, is protective, but is also, as Garrington argues of skin, ‘a setting within which a life is enclosed, a horizon, and a stage on which one’s remembered life is viewed again’ (151). The haptic then provides an original and useful perspective on the familiar and frequently discussed subject of Miriam’s spaces, and Miriam’s dwelling.

Garrington also comments on the physicality of Miriam’s ‘tactile pilgrimage’, in which ‘it is the process of travelling, rather than the destination, which is crucial’ (151). She brings in the walking figures in the 1938 ‘Foreword’ and highlights the nature of a pilgrimage as ‘a process of walking’ (152). This, however, is where the analysis of Richardson ends – with a discussion of pilgrimages and spiritual quests in literature and culture more generally. There

is no analysis of the many walkings, and tactile (or touching) moments in *Pilgrimage* itself; or of the ‘flicker between physical reality and psychical reflection’ (17) that Miriam experiences so frequently (whilst walking, whilst reading, or the kind of close-up seeing that evokes the tactile: ‘the sudden sight of a sun-faded garment’ (IV, 368)). However, the aim of the book is not a comprehensive analysis of each of the four authors Garrington devotes sections to (or their cameo-companions). The aim is rather to demonstrate ‘a new way of grasping modernist literature’ and ‘to show why this book might sensibly be only the beginning of such explorations’ (48). In this respect, *Haptic Modernism* achieves what it sets out to achieve. That the sadly too short section on Richardson raises so many possibilities for new readings of the haptic in *Pilgrimage* testifies to this monograph’s strength as a trail-blazer.