


“Exscribed on the skin”

The tactile imagination of Charlotte and Emily

Brontë and the New Woman writers



YOUR GAZE TOUCHES UPON THE SAME CHARACTER TRACINGS THAT
MINE ARE TOUCHING NOW, AND YOU ARE READING ME, AND I AM
WRITING YOU. NANCY, *CORPUS*

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Introduction

“[W]here is the speaker? Is it only a voice? Oh! I *cannot* see, but I must feel, or my heart will stop and my brain burst. Whatever—whoever you are—be perceptible to the touch or I cannot live!” ~ Mr. Rochester
in *Jane Eyre* (Charlotte Brontë 653)

Throughout history, we have used narratives to make sense of our world and ourselves (Abbott xiii). After all, only through narrative can we get to “know ourselves as active entities that operate through time” (Abbott 130). What drives us? What makes you react in a certain way, and why? Who are we, and according to whom? These questions often play an important role in the development of stories, keeping the characters busy. We need to answer them if, to give you a few examples, we want to understand Nancy, a thief, a drunk and prostitute in *Oliver Twist* who sacrifices her life in order to keep Oliver safe, or if we want to figure out how Elizabeth Bennet’s first impressions of Mr. Darcy change so drastically throughout the narrative in *Pride and Prejudice*. Arthur Dimmesdale, the father of Hester Prynne’s child in *The Scarlet Letter*, also struggles with these themes when he confesses to Hester: “I have laughed, in bitterness and agony of heart, at the contrast between what I seem and what I am!” (Hawthorne 167).

This emphasis on identity is present in most narratives, but particularly so in literature from the Victorian era and the *fin-de-siècle*. After all, 19th-century English literature followed the rise of the novel as Ian Watt later defined the genre, with its focus on realism, individual experience and identity (Moran 80-81). Following the philosophical influences of John Stuart Mill, who argued that society was best reformed through individual self-development and self-management, individualism became a central Victorian value (Moran 33). Thus, many

Victorian novels center on the tension between self and society, “between autonomy and dutiful submission to authority” (Moran 5).

Because autonomy became so important in Victorian society, many researchers after the nineteenth century have looked at and written about the Victorian sense of identity, specifically as it was expressed through novels. Often, these researchers have followed a dualistic line of thinking, placing human identity in the mind, ‘soul’ or even ‘spirit’, without discussing its relationship to the body. The shape, bodily experience, and senses of Victorian characters rarely played a role in the discourse about Victorian identity. That is, not until recent. Works like *The Book of Touch* (2005) and *The Deepest Sense: A Cultural History of Touch* (2012) by Constance Classen have highlighted the historical and cultural importance of touch and show us that touch has always been very much present, also in Victorian times, and thus in its products.

Another work that shows the importance of our bodily senses is *Embodied: Victorian Literature and the Senses* (2009) by William Cohen. In *Embodied* Cohen discusses several works by Victorian writers and illustrates how mind and body, spirit and senses, were interconnected in the Victorian understanding of selfhood. His main argument is that many Victorian writers did not adhere to Enlightened ideas about a transcendable human soul, but grounded “human essence” in the body (xi), emphasizing a material interior (3) which made a “subject of the body” and an “object of the self” (9). The material body is open to its surroundings through its senses, and the Victorian writers present this openness as a type of permeability, or penetrability (Cohen 134). Cohen seems to suggest that through our senses, we can confirm the other, since we interact with another’s materiality, while at the same time defeating their coherence/possibility, since this same materiality disintegrates their subjectivity. After all, your body is confirmed when someone else’s interacts with it, but this

interaction also defeats any sense of coherence you might have of your own subjectivity, because their materiality permeates the boundaries of your subjectivity.

A great example that illustrates this view on subjectivity is the way Jane Eyre and Mr. Rochester interact with each other in Charlotte Brontë's novel *Jane Eyre*. Throughout the narrative, Jane struggles against Mr. Rochester's attempts to claim her as his own. When she leaves him, and his own independence is shattered, he realizes he truly needs her, as can be seen in the quote at the beginning of this introduction: "Whatever—whoever you are—be perceptible to the touch or I cannot live!" (Brontë, *Jane* 653). Mr. Rochester thinks Jane has returned to him, and needs his senses, his body to confirm that. Without that confirmation, he is convinced he cannot live. Jane has in fact returned, and the happy ending of the novel starts with her approaching him so that he can touch her. And when they finally do get married, it is their conjoined materiality that confirms Jane's subjectivity: "I know what it is to live entirely for and with what I love best on earth. [...] I am my husband's life as fully as he is mine. No woman was ever nearer to her mate than I am: ever more absolutely bone of his bone, and flesh of his flesh" (Brontë, *Jane* 679).

One sense seems to play a particular role in this reunion of Jane and Mr. Rochester: he asks her specifically to be perceptible to *touch*. Hearing her voice is not enough – he needs to confirm Jane's identity by touching her. This is exactly what Cohen also argues about Victorian subjectivity: the senses shape subjectivity by bringing bodies into contact with each other. Touch does so in particular, because every instance is reciprocal: the touch Mr. Rochester desires is only possible when Jane also touches him. We can only touch something or someone if we let them touch us back. And in this reciprocity lies the possibility of dynamic selves: if we touch someone, we acknowledge their materiality, while at the same time influencing that materiality and *being* influenced ourselves by their touch. By touching,

we acknowledge the other as other, but in that same process have to admit that we are their ‘other’.

Surprisingly, even though tactility seems to play at least some role in Victorian embodiment, it has for a long time been overlooked in academic discussions about Victorian subjectivity. Cohen points out how visibility and sight have been given preference in critical accounts of sensory experience for quite some time, with Nancy Armstrong’s work on photographic realism in Victorian literature, and Jonathan Crary’s “separation of the senses” as prime examples. Cohen signals that in the nineteenth century, ideas about human subjectivity changed radically, and both Armstrong’s and Crary’s texts place visual imagination at the heart of this change (Cohen 23). However, recent studies have started to acknowledge the role of the other senses in literary imagination and Victorian formulations of human embodiment, Cohen’s *Embodied* being one of them. Following this development, this research is based on the question whether touch influences the individuality of characters in Victorian literature.

If we look at Charlotte Brontë’s novel, the answer to this question seems to be ‘yes’. And *Jane Eyre* is not the only Victorian literary text where tactility seems to play a role in the subjectivity of the characters. In her doctoral thesis on the ethics of touch in Victorian literature, titled “Touching Bodies/Bodies Touching” (2011), Ann Gagné argues that in many Victorian texts, specifically those written in the second half of the nineteenth century, “touch functions as a discourse of embodied subjectivity, a way to communicate how bodies interact with themselves and their environment” (1). She claims that earlier preoccupations with visibility caused the emergence of a dismembered, disassociated female body in Victorian literature and culture, broken up in constituent parts (3). She presents touch as a counter voice, allowing the different parts of dismembered female bodies in literature to be brought together, creating “a cohesive whole” (3).

Thus, throughout her argument, Gagné seems to say that touch/embodiment is complete, or at least that touch can create a much more complete sense of embodiment than the other senses. However, as many critical feminist researchers have shown us, we should be wary of terms like ‘embodied whole’ when talking about bodies:

The body, like all other things, cannot be thought, as such. I take the extreme ecological view that the body as such has no possible outline. As a text, the inside of the body (imbricated with the outside) is mysterious and unreadable except by way of thinking of the systematicity of the body, value coding of the body. (Spivak 22)

The problem with Gagné’s approach is that neither touch nor embodiment can be considered complete: with every touch, there remains something untouchable. Whenever I touch you, I only touch a small part of you, while you, who you are, always remains beyond my reach. I can never approach your body as such. Ever-changing, touching always involves untouching, the untouchable is inherent in touch, and thus can never be considered complete.

Someone who has written extensively about this idea is Jacques Derrida in *On Touching: Jean-Luc Nancy* (2005): “To touch is to touch a limit, a surface, a border, an outline” (103). To touch is only to touch ‘skin’, which, as Derrida makes clear, is in fact impossible. Derrida’s original aim with his discussion of touch was to give homage to Jean-Luc Nancy, in the process giving his readers a short history of ‘touch’ as discussed from Aristotle to Merleau-Ponty and beyond (Naas 258). Through the discussion of this history, Derrida wants to make clear that Nancy ‘sees’ touch in a completely different way than his predecessors, and Derrida follows him in, and elaborates on, this exceptional understanding of touch.

What becomes clear is that according to Derrida (and his reading of Nancy), there is something untouchable at the heart of touch, a limit we cannot cross since we only ever touch a surface, a threshold, “the skin or thin peel of a limit” (Derrida 6). Thus, touching is always

only touching skin, never whatever lies beyond. If this would not be the case, and we could actually move beyond the skin—get a more complete sense of someone else’s embodiment—there would not be any room left for his/her otherness. In order to let the other be just that, ‘other’, they have to be beyond our reach. We can never touch at the heart of them, because if we do, we appropriate their self.

In this thesis, I’ll argue that it is often the sense of touch that takes center stage in the Victorian struggle between autonomy and the submission to authority. Whenever we touch someone, we come into contact with their otherness. It shatters the illusion that our own self is complete, thus rendering the possibility that in both of us, there is something untouchable, something inherently other to our self. If we do not acknowledge the untouchable in every touch, we run the risk of appropriating the differences between/in others, thus effacing identity and making autonomy impossible. It is the otherness in our selves and in those around us that constitutes our identity and fuels our strive for autonomy. This research will aim to answer the question whether, in order to become autonomous, it is essential for women to apply the effects of touching and being touched to the self.

The differences between ‘you’ and ‘I’, between man and woman, and between the ‘Woman’ and ‘woman’, are one of the main themes in texts by Victorian writers, especially in the works by New Woman writers. The Victorian ‘New Woman’ was a cultural construct that came up at the end of the nineteenth century and has been attributed to the novelist Sarah Grand. Both in literature and in real life, the New Woman was a figure who stood for personal empowerment through economic and sexual independence, often dismissing marriage as the only ‘natural’ fulfilment of a woman’s life (Moran 124-125). Elaine Showalter explains what New Woman fiction was all about:

Women writers needed to rescue female sexuality from the decadents’ images of romantically doomed prostitutes or devouring Venus flytraps, and represent female

desire as a creative force in artistic imagination as well as in biological reproduction.

(xi)

Thus, the personal, the ‘self,’ is a very prominent topic in the literary works of New Woman writers.

However, glimpses of this struggle for female autonomy can already be found in canonical works that were written many years before the New Woman trope came into being. In this research, we will take *Jane Eyre* (Charlotte Brontë, 1848) and *Wuthering Heights* (Emily Brontë, 1847) as early examples. In *Jane Eyre*, a young governess struggles to belong to and connect with those around her, but refuses to compromise her own values and identity in that process. In *Wuthering Heights*, characters crush, put down, and desperately hold on to each other, all out of fear, undying desire (Lutz 389), and/or revenge. In both works, the female body and her touch play an important role in these conflicts.

I will illustrate how these novels foreshadow New Woman writings such as “The Yellow Wallpaper” (Charlotte Perkins Gilman, 1892), “A Cross Line” (George Egerton, 1893), “Theodora: A Fragment” (Victoria Cross, 1895), *Six Chapters of a Man’s Life* (Victoria Cross, 1903), and “The Undefinable: A Fantasia” (Sarah Grand, 1908). In “The Yellow Wallpaper”, a mother rebels against the ‘rest cure’ prescribed to her through the tactile acts of writing and ripping off the yellow wallpaper in her room. In “A Cross Line,” male and female characters try to communicate with each other, but cannot help speaking to each other “in crossed lines because their psyches are so dissimilar” (Showalter xiii). In “Theodora” and *Six Chapters of a Man’s Life*, we follow Cecil Ray, a young man who becomes completely entranced by Theodora, who, in turn, loves him, but is unsure whether this love is reciprocal. And “The Undefinable” reimagines the role of the male artist and the female muse. A female model reinspires a painter whose inspiration has dried up, but when she realizes he does not fully understand her, she leaves him with the painting unfinished and

a lifelong devotion to find her again. As we can see, each of these nineteenth century texts feature prominent female characters who struggle with their sense of identity in their relationships with other characters.

We will focus specifically on women writers, because there seems to be more at stake for them, especially in the Victorian era. These Victorian women writers found themselves in an interesting position, because they wrote about their personal identity, feelings and experiences, even though they were not granted what we would consider basic personal rights. Even though a majority of the women in the lower classes of Victorian society performed a paid job (Hudson), until 1882 a married woman had no rights over her own money and property, even if she had acquired them prior to marriage (Moran 36). Even in 1878, with a divorce, a woman would only gain custody over her children under the age of ten if she could prove her husband had severely abused her (Moran 36). It was thought that women naturally belonged in the private sphere, taking care of home and family, while men were better equipped for public life, such as in business, government and science. That is why women's work in Victorian novels often consists of domestic services, needlework, teaching positions (in school or as governess), or volunteer work to help those in need. Often, women's work involved their tactile faculties more than anything.

Women's bodies were constantly policed, both in the private sphere of their own home, and in public life. Only certain identities and ways in which to express them were tolerated in the nineteenth century. Gagné points out that there existed a duality in the Victorian views on tactility: according to official Victorian etiquette, touch was inappropriate in most social situations, and if it could not be avoided, you had to follow certain rules so as not to infringe upon the other's body and mind (12). At the same time, touch was seen as a way of obtaining knowledge, and as such, it was also considered to be necessary. This duality became especially clear with the implementation of the Contagious Disease Prevention Act, in

the period between 1864 and 1886 (Gagné 4, 6). This Act sanctioned police officers to arrest any female who was suspected of practicing prostitution, after which the suspect had to undergo physical examination to make sure she was not carrying any sexually transmitted disease. Gagné explains: “The Acts were set out as a preventative measure against the spread of the disease by sexual touch, but were upheld with a medical examination by means of touching the female genitals with a speculum or the medical attendant’s fingers” (9).

As Gagné illustrates in her thesis, Victorian women had a very ambiguous relationship with tactility, since it was clearly part of their identity, but could also quite brutally be used against them. Jane Eyre puts this troubled relationship between female tactility and female identity into words when she explains to her readers:

Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a constraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. (Brontë, *Jane* 161)

Jane pleads that women are given the same possibilities to develop themselves, their identity, as their ‘brothers’. Just like she leaves room for the development of identity in those around her, she asks that they extend her the same courtesy.

This is autonomy. Autonomy leaves room for the otherness of those around us, and within ourselves, room to touch that otherness. Female women writers focused on autonomy, “not ‘power over’ but ‘power to,’ empowerment” (Gagnier 105). In this thesis, I will research whether touch is imperative to the empowerment of Victorian female characters. If it does, it makes sense: otherness, or something that we can never touch upon, comes with every touch. Is it this gap that makes female autonomy possible, at least as portrayed in nineteenth century

literature written by women who had empowerment on their mind? If we leave out touch, might we if fact rule out autonomy?

1 Touch: Speaking In Tongues to the Skin

“... we are always going to be at a loss for a metalanguage with which to say anything whatever about touch, touching, or the touchable that is not in advance accommodated by the skin, exscribed right on the skin.” ~ Jacques Derrida

On Touching (303)

Skin. Our “external covering” (“skin, n.”), that which protects the inside of our body, and gives us an outline. We love it, care for it, break it, decorate it, cover it, scratch it. It is considered to be our most important sensory system: “A human being can spend his life blind and deaf and completely lacking the senses of smell and taste, but he cannot survive at all without the functions performed by the skin” (Montagu 7-8). But as much as it seems something separable, tangible—something that covers or encloses, and can also be removed from the body (“skin, n.”)—it is difficult to point out where our skin ends. It passes into/disappears in our bodily orifices, and has different layers: outer, middle, and inner; punctured with hairs and incorporating sweat glands, blood vessels, muscles, sensory nerves, etc. (Silverthorn 78). Skin is transferable, from one place of our body to another, or even to another’s body, and sometimes can be shed, or flake, or bleed, or peel. In fact, if we take the viewpoint of microbiology, it is impossible to completely differentiate between an individual and its surroundings: bodies, including skins, are vehicles whereby microbes travel and interact, making them literally contiguous with their surroundings (Cohen 132).

Discussing the main aspects of Victorian literary embodiment—subjectivity *and* materiality—Cohen also *touches* upon the skin, mostly as a literary trope. He assumes that the skin forms the border between outside and inside, exterior and interior, and is, therefore, somehow, the link between the physical and the spiritual, that which keeps the external world

outside, and contains the self within (Cohen 65). However, this means that the skin is anything but a clear-cut boundary, a separate location where touch resides: Cohen calls it “tactile membrane” (965), which means he sees it as a “thin sheet of tissue or layer of cells, usually serving to cover or line an organ or part, or to separate or connect parts” (“membrane, *n.*”). Cohen does not claim it is something that either covers, *or* lines, *or* separates, *or* connects, but states that the skin does all of these things at once: it is “a permeable boundary that permits congress between inside and outside” (Cohen 65), which makes it something we can touch, but at the same time, has something untouchable in/behind it. As such, the skin is “the beginning and end of the body” (Cohen 66), both, at the same time; when touching it, we touch upon something untouchable, both beginning (tangible) and end (intangible, there is nothing left to touch upon after an ending).

1.1 Victorian embodiment and subjectivity

Important for Cohen is how, by focusing on embodiment, Victorian writers show the making of human subjects through their unmaking in materiality. Thinking about embodiment is not to fix selves and contain them inside their skin, but through the porousness of the skin, to make them dynamic, making and unmaking: “Yet to think of a human subject in terms of embodiment is not necessarily to fix or contain either self or body at the boundaries of the skin: permeable and pervious to the world through our senses, our bodies are, according to this model, dynamic selves” (Cohen 132). Thus, avoiding any ideas of bodily stability or uniformity, embodiment “is the principle of making and unmaking subjectivity without necessarily becoming the marker of a realized identity” (Cohen 135). Through its materiality, the subject in/of a body is constituted, but at the same time disintegrated (Cohen 134), since it makes the psychicism of the subject material and the materiality of the body psychic.

Embodiment gives a subject shape, materiality—it is its shape, its ‘skin’—while that same materiality is inherently pervious.

Cohen argues that the increasing interest in subjectivity and embodiment in the nineteenth century can be traced back to the repudiation of spiritual approaches to the human soul (Cohen 108). Because of this, the materialist sciences of the mind and self took center stage, requiring Victorian thinkers and writers to develop ideas about the materiality of subjectivity, this embodied subject. This rise of tactility is also the focus of Classen’s work. Her *Book of Touch* is a guide book, an anthology dealing with different areas of touch, while *The Deepest Sense* is a cultural history, a tracing of the development of the tactility and corporeal practices in specific cultural contexts (Classen, *Deepest* xiv) from the Middle Ages to the end of the nineteenth century. Both books illustrate the importance Classen places on ‘touch’: the reason why interest in tactility has been growing over the last couple of years is because it does not simply involve “a search for experience”, but one “for meaning” (Classen, *Deepest* xii). Through the skin and other senses, we gain knowledge of the world around us; but perhaps more importantly, we experience it, and thus also gain knowledge about ourselves, creating/finding meaning. As the trope of the skin has shown us, through touching, subject and its world are shaped and reshaped in a constant interaction, creating meaning, but at the same time always leaving a gap, something untouchable, unmaking.

1.2 Cohesive whole?

The rise of interest in tactility also fueled Gagné’s research. She identifies a “movement of tactility from being essentially socially absent (at least ideally) to being perpetually present” (6), taking place during the second half of the nineteenth century (216). Gagné argues in her thesis that touch can make a cohesive whole, a female body that is not broken into different parts. Her entry point is the supposed preoccupation with the visual in Victorian literature and culture, which presents us with a female body that is often interpreted as “dismembered” and

“disassociated” (Gagné 2). As Merleau-Ponty already pointed out in his *Phenomenology of Perception*, “visual experience pushes objectification further than [...] tactile experience [does]” (369). Following this line of argument, Gagné claims that “a *complete* sensory and bodily experience can be described through touch” (2; emphasis mine), since the sense of touch is not limited to a particular sensory place such as vision to eyes, sound to ears, taste to mouth, and smell to nose, but involves the entire body.¹

Following the Contagious Diseases Acts (CDAs),² the preoccupation of Victorian literature with tactility became “a way of creating an embodied whole, a cohesive understanding of the female body” (Gagné 3). Instead of presenting female bodies in literature as mainly consisting of parts, a more ‘complete’ image gained persistence, one which included the female body as a whole, with all its parts connected.³ Thus, a literary focus on

¹ In fact, we should never speak of ‘the’ sense of touch, because “one may be able to touch, but one cannot touch, touch (itself)” (Wortham 1061). In that sense, every touch is truly untouchable: we cannot touch the touch.

² Officially, the aim of the Contagious Diseases Acts was to stop the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, especially among military men in port towns (Gagné 4). The first Act was passed in 1864, and amendments were made in 1866 and 1869. Women who were identified as prostitutes were taken off the street and forced to undergo medical examination in order to determine whether they were contaminating the nation’s defences: “The Acts were set out as a preventive measure against the spread of the disease by sexual touch, but were upheld with a medical examination by means of touching the female genitals with a speculum or the medical attendant’s [always male] fingers” (Gagné 9). Naturally, this resulted in much criticism, especially from contemporary feminists such as Josephine Butler.

As Gagné points out, the CDAs had an interesting effect on the treatment of tactility in Victorian society: through the repression of touch (contamination and containment), tactility gained prominence in Victorian literature, and “the ethics of touch within Victorian England went from emphasizing that the nation could only be maintained if tactility was kept at a distance (an absence of touch), to a belief in the need to contain the nation through proximity (touch being necessary in order to inspect, to police)” (Gagné 5).

³ Gagné argues that in Victorian literary texts, an “intact corporeality” is often denied, because “the female form is often reduced to a parade of bodiless faces or arms” (3). That this observation is not without accuracy, becomes clear if we look for instance at Lucy Snowe’s reintroduction to Paulina Mary (Polly) in Charlotte Brontë’s *Villette*:

This girl was herself a small, delicate creature, but made like a model. As I folded back her plentiful yet fine hair, so shining and soft, and so exquisitely tended, I had under my observation a young, pale, weary, but high-bred face. The brow was smooth and clear; the eyebrows were distinct, but soft, and melting to a mere trace at the temples; the eyes were a rich gift of nature – fine and full, large, deep, seeming to hold dominion over the slighter subordinate features – capable, probably, of much significance at another hour and under other circumstances than the present, but now languid and suffering. Her skin was perfectly fair, the neck and hands veined finely like the petals of a flower; a thin glazing of the ice of pride, polished this delicate exterior, and her lip wore a curl [...]. (346)

However, while Lucy, the narrator, specifically notices Paulina’s face and hands, the girl does not become bodiless; in fact, this takes place while Lucy is undressing her and making her comfortable after she has been trampled on during a fire panic in a theatre: as the doctor reminds Lucy, Paulina “must be *touched* very tenderly” (Brontë, *Villette* 345; emphasis mine). Thus, there is close bodily interaction between the young women, which is overlooked when we only pay attention to the ‘parade of bodiless faces or arms’. Following Gagné’s

tactile experiences made it possible to reveal and address embodiment. Female characters became embodied, which means their spirits became invested or clothed with a body, their separate elements incorporated “in a [...] complex unity,” united into one body (“embody, v.”). According to Gagné, this embodiment was made possible by this literary focus on touch.

The idea behind Gagné’s claim, and what I think is the critical backbone of her argument, is that touch involves all senses, and as such, seems to avoid ‘breaking up’ bodies into constituent parts. So does Classen explain that “all of the senses can be, and have been, thought of as having tactile dimensions” (*Deepest* xiv), while Cohen emphasizes that through our senses, the body becomes an interface between the interior and the world (xiii) by letting the world touch upon subjectivity, and subjectivity on the world (17). All senses leave and/or depend on impressions (Cohen 4), and when we consider that mouth and tongue, ears, nose, and even eyes have dermal qualities, it seems that all sensory activity can be explained in terms of proximity and touching.⁴

However, as an extensive history of feminist theory has shown us, female embodiment is difficult to envision, and it is impossible to describe a *complete* bodily experience, or describe the embodied whole—whatever that may entail—of a human being.⁵ If we follow Gagné’s argument throughout her following chapters, we can see she acknowledges this difficulty. Just like skin, touch is not immediate and cannot give us the opportunity to fully connect with others, nor can we fully understand all processes of (female) embodiment. In fact, when discussing reciprocal touch and the ethics of care, Gagné illustrates very clearly that touch does not always make a cohesive whole, but can, in fact, be very destructive.

argument, if we would read this passage with the tactile experience of these women in mind, we perceive a more ‘cohesive whole’, a more complete sense of their embodiment, than seems to be presented in the visual description of Paulina’s features.

⁴ See Cohen (4) for a discussion of Victorian polymath Herbert Spencer’s idea that eye and skin are fundamentally contiguous, something Cohen (as well as Gagné) also sees in Victorian texts: seeing can have the same effects as tactile contact.

⁵ Think for instance of Elizabeth Grosz’ vision in *Volatile Bodies* (1994) of the female body as leaky, with fluid and pervious boundaries.

Probably, what Gagné means to say instead by claiming that touch can create an embodied whole is that—since it relates to all other senses—it can give us a fuller understanding of embodiment, female and/or male.

By emphasizing touch, Gagné suggests we can take the entire body into account, and not just faces. This only implies a more ‘fleshed out’ understanding of female embodiment, not one that is without its problems or difficulties. In fact, Gagné makes it quite clear that similar to the problematics of ‘skin’, she understands touch as being always in-between, difficult to locate, and leaving remainders or remnants. Since touch is always reciprocal, expressing a relationship between toucher and touched, it is difficult to establish what/who is touching and what/who is being touched. After all, when you touch someone, the other also touches you, which is why Elizabeth Grosz calls touch “the double sensation” (100).

This reciprocal understanding of tactility makes it difficult to assess where the active and passive boundaries lie (Gagné 17). Touch is chiasmic, creating a tension between subject/object, and touch resides somewhere between these two (Gagné 18). Gagné rightly points out that, therefore, it is “important to realize that there is always a liminal space, a remainder to every touch that belongs to neither subject nor object but rather to the touch itself” (18). This remainder is what unmakes our sense of a cohesive whole, because touch moves from me to you and from you to me while lingering in between: “the body has the capacity to *unmake* the human, rather than to secure its coherence and integrity” (Cohen xvi). In this strange manner, tactility both seems to reinforce the idea of a cohesive whole by invoking borders (which would contain our entire body), while at the same time making clear these borders are permeated by the reciprocal, liminal nature of the touch.

As Gagné shows us, the difficult to define locality of touch specifically springs to the fore in two manifestations of tactility: that of self-touch and of telepathic touch. The remainder of touch makes it difficult to ascertain when a touch is still given and when it is

being received, especially when we think about touch within a single body—when we touch ourselves (Gagné 130). In fact, all touching is in some way a touching of the self: “To touch is always to touch oneself, of course, since one cannot touch the other without experiencing the contact—one’s own contact—oneself” (Wortham 1062). Thus, self-touch—in all senses of the word—blurs the borders between touched and toucher completely, and, according to Gagné, seemingly dissolves the skin as a liminal space, a boundary where touch is located (168).

Telepathic touch displaces the sense of touch even more, but, as explained by Gagné, it also illustrates that touch is a very direct form of contact. Telepathic touch is “a type of touch at a distance,” one that requires “visual confirmation or textual witnessing to acknowledge that the character has been touched” (Gagné 16). This acknowledgment is possible because (telepathic) touch is transitive, passing “through the body, leaving visual, psychological, and unethical marks” (Gagné 181).⁶ Gagné’s argument that touch makes direct contact between bodies possible is supported by her reading of Merleau-Ponty, who argues for the tactile ability of moving through bodies. Moving beyond boundaries, the toucher and the touched (if such a distinction can be made) overlap and pass into each other (Merleau-Ponty, *Visible* 123). However, as we will see later in this chapter, Derrida does not agree with Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of touch as a medium of direct contact between bodies (Naas 263).

Gagné stays closer to Derrida’s understanding of touch in her illustrations of telepathic touch leaving remnants or remainders. She argues that “[t]ouch can adhere to the surface of

⁶ Gagné specifically discusses Thomas Hardy’s “The Withered Arm” (1888) and Wilkie Collins’ “Mrs. Zant and the Ghost” (1879). In the first story, Rhoda dreams she grabs Mrs. Lodge’s left arm and whirls her body to the floor. Later, Rhoda realizes that Mrs. Lodge has in fact an imprint of this grasp on her left arm, the ‘withered arm’. Thus, the touch in her mind’s eye is visibly confirmed and its effect becomes a shared memory between the two women. In “Mrs. Zant and the Ghost”, a woman feels her late husband’s touch, without seeing or hearing his ghost. However, when his brother tries to hurt his widow, the touch of the ghost does become visible when the brother is stopped by something cold that holds his hands. This touch cause him to have a paralytic stroke, which leads to his death.

the skin but there is always a remainder or remnant to touch, even after the physical contact is gone” (Gagné 210). After all, no matter how soft and fleeting our touch might be, it always leaves impressions, both on our body and in our mind, even though sometimes they are barely perceptible. These impressions show us that touch does not stop at boundaries. The remainders make that toucher and touched come into contact, but make it impossible to ascertain where one stops and the other starts. As Gagné emphasizes, “in tactility the limit is never reached, the boundary between touched and toucher is never attained; the exact position of touch is indeterminable. Thus both subject/object, touched/toucher share in the touch and the memory of the encounter” (211).

It is this sharing in tactile memory that makes it seem like we come into direct contact with another human being. While lingering on the surface, leaving marks, touch becomes a shared memory, influencing the personalities and experiences of both parties. Sharing a memory means we have to acknowledge the other party as a human being too.⁷ The toucher is not simply the subject and the touched not only an object, since objects do not have memories, let alone share them with human beings. Toucher and touched have gone through an experience that invokes their bodies and minds, which means that if at least one of the parties is a female, she cannot be reduced to body parts anymore, but is experienced as an embodied whole. This is why Gagné argues that touch provides us with a more cohesive understanding of the female body.

⁷ This thesis will ultimately move towards the question of female autonomy. As will be discussed in chapter 4, autonomy for New Woman writers meant individual development through relationships, particularly between other women and/or between lovers, husband and wife, and other couples. Since I will ultimately try to answer the question whether in order to become autonomous, is it essential for women to apply the effects of touching and being touched to the self, the subject matter only deals with inter-human relations.

1.3 *The limits of touch*

Gagné combines the subject and object, touched and toucher, while keeping them separate by a forward slash, showing us how difficult it is to discuss ‘touch’. It involves limits and boundaries, even though the boundary between subject and object is never attained. However, when discussing tactility, we cannot help reverting to this terminology of ‘toucher and/or touched’. There seems to be an inherent deficiency in our language when we try to describe how touch pulls us together while at the same time bringing with it a gap, resulting in words like subject and object. It always deals with who we are in relation to others, who they are to us, when we touch them, they us. Gagné summarizes this by pointing out that “[i]t is this gap innate to tactility that is the most dangerous and the most difficult to theorize” (210).

Derrida also mentions this gap, but emphasizes, more than Gagné, that we speak of a gap or remainder because touch, instead of bringing us into direct contact with a complete human being, distances us. He claims that we can never truly touch one another, or even ourselves:

What is it to touch one’s own limit thus? It is also not to touch, not to touch oneself enough, to touch oneself too much: impossible sublimity of tact, the diabolical machination of love when it dictates infinite renunciation. It is to lose the proper at the moment of touching upon it, and it is this interruption, which constitutes the touch of the *self-touching*, that Nancy calls *syncope*. (111; emphasis in original)

This makes his attempt to touch upon Nancy’s writings that touch upon touch so complex: Derrida never truly touches upon the heart of it, never touches upon the heart of touch, but always has to account for limits, interruptions, syncopes.

This difficulty of theorizing about touch is inherent to the subject. Derrida points out that already in *Peri Psuchēs*, Aristotle made clear that the faculties of all the senses in general are potential instead of actual (Derrida 6). After all, we cannot smell our smelling, or hear our

hearing, or touch our touching. According to Aristotle, touch is even more elusive than the other senses, because it has no clear object, as vision needs color, hearing needs sound and taste needs flavor (Derrida 6). Derrida summarizes Aristotle's conclusion concerning touch in three points: "first, the 'organ' of touch is 'inward' or internal; second, flesh is but the 'medium' of touch; third, 'touch has for its object both what is tangible and what is intangible'" (6). Thus, the long-standing history of the philosophy of touch has been, from the very beginning, inscribed with questions concerning its 'unity,' its 'organ,' and its 'object' being both the tangible and the intangible (Naas 260).

However, until Nancy came around—according to Derrida—these questions have been interpreted and thought out "in terms of continuity, immediacy, synchrony, indivisibility, etc." (Naas 260), as Michael Naas summarizes so adequately in his review of Derrida's work. In the second part of *On Touching*, Derrida presents five 'tangents' of the philosophical tradition on touch, in which it becomes clear that touch (or figures of touch) has often been privileged as a means through which we can gain access to immediate presence (Naas 261), a way through which we can more directly connect with other bodies or objects than through the other senses. As Derrida summarizes:

From Plato to Henri Bergson, from Berkeley or Main de Biran to Husserl, and beyond them, the same ongoing formal constraint is carried out: certainly there is the well-known hegemony of eidetics, as *figure* or *aspect*, and therefore as visible form exposed to a disembodied, incorporeal look. But this supremacy itself does not obey the eye except to the extent that a haptical intuitionism comes to fulfill it, fill it, and still the intentional movement of desire, as a desire for presence. (Derrida 121)

Thus, in the Western philosophical tradition, optical impressions were privileged only insofar as they satisfied a desire for presence, a presence which was, according to most philosophers of touch, obtained through sharing a touch.⁸

So did Husserl make a clear distinction between sight and touch, arguing that sight is never immediate but must always cross a distance, while touching always occurs simultaneously with being touched, a sort of ‘double sensation’ that happens in the same location, at the same time, immediately and synchronously (Naas 262). Derrida explains that this illusion of immediacy comes from Husserl’s emphasis on “the visible hand touching a visible object” (179). When sharing a visible, human touch, the illusion of immediate presence which we have obtained through the tactile experience becomes ‘impressed’—remember Gagné’s ‘literal imprint’—on our mind’s eye.

Compared to the general Western philosophical focus on tactile immediacy and continuity, Nancy’s ideas of mediacy and expropriation are indeed quite different. For him, “contact and communion are never immediate and never without an irreducible spacing in difference” (Naas 262). Moving beyond the visible hand touching a visible object, Nancy argues that touching is always nonhuman, prosthetic. Instead of a touch being direct, it always comes with a gap. Not just a gap that occurs when we theorize about touch (as Gagné discusses it), but a distancing because we can never truly touch each other, an “irreducible *spacing*” that takes into account “plasticity and technicity ‘at the heart’ of the ‘body proper’” (Derrida 221). In fact, when attempting to touch the body proper, we never truly ‘reach’ it, since the “supplementarity of technical prosthetics originally spaces out, defers, or expropriates all originary properness: there is no ‘the’ sense of touch, there is no ‘originary’ or essentially originary touching before it” (Derrida 223).

⁸ It becomes clear that Gagné, with her emphasis on touch as a means to help us see/read an embodied whole, seems to continue to build on this philosophical tradition.

Thus, with touch, the prosthetic expropriates the proper, and all we can ever attempt to touch is a limit (or ‘skin’). Whenever we want to touch an inside, we would only touch the surface, the line that is exposed to the outside (Derrida 103). For instance, even when our interiority is touched by a surgeon’s hands and instruments,⁹ we are still not completely touched, without also being untouched (Naas 265). The proper heart, the heart of my heart, will, in fact, shrink away from this touch. Derrida makes it very clear that whenever we touch, we only touch “a limit *at the limit*” (297; emphasis in original), because a limit, by definition, appears to be without a body (Derrida 6). Thus, even the limit itself shrinks away from a touch: “Limit is not to be touched and does not touch itself; it does not let itself be touched, and steals away at a touch, which either never attains it or trespasses on it forever” (Derrida 6).

This means that a limit is not an object or a thing, or even a specific place; but only a threshold, as Simon M. Wortham describes it in his discussion of Derrida’s other’s other(s) (1061). It is a threshold to the person or object we touch, but also to our selves. To clarify, this does not mean we can truly touch our or other selves: “The limit [...] is not in itself an appropriable ‘object’ or ‘thing’. A limit is not a ‘ground’ to be occupied, a ‘place’ in which one might dwell, or a domestic interior in which one might abide. It is rather—and precisely—their threshold” (Wortham 1061). On this threshold, this skin, we realize that the other lies beyond it, beyond our reach, but also that our *own* body proper lies beyond *their* reach. By touching, we acknowledge the other as other, but in that same process have to admit that we are their ‘other’.

Remember, Husserl saw this ‘double apprehension’—touching and being touched—as proof of touch’s immediacy. According to him, every touch is ‘auto-affected’: the self who affects/touches is the same self who is being affected/touched. But instead of agreeing with

⁹ Derrida links this to Nancy’s personal experience of receiving a heart transplant.

Husserl that the double apprehension of touch makes it a form of pure auto-affection, Derrida argues that auto-affection is always infected by hetero-affection, especially so when we deal with a touch. After all, as becomes clear through the image of the threshold, and as Derrida explains, the double apprehension always requires there to be exteriority, an irreducible spacing, in any experience of touch. Without the exteriority, the threshold, the apprehension would not be double: otherwise, there would only be some touching or only some touched, not both at the same time (Derrida 175). This is exactly what makes a touch never purely auto-affected: because we are always touched at the same time that we are touching, we become aware of something not us, something exterior, coming into contact with us.

This is especially the case when we touch ourselves. When you touch yourself, something that is not ‘you’—not-I—places itself between touching and touched, otherwise you would not be able to say: this is I (Derrida 175). This not-I is the spacing that occurs in every touch (between touching and touched), the threshold, skin or limit that we touch upon—with every (self-)touch, our own body is haunted by this idea of the surface. After all, touching is always feeling “*oneself feeling one’s self touch*, of course, and therefore feeling one’s [...] self touched” (Derrida 111; emphasis in original). When touching ourselves, we become aware of ourselves, of our body proper. In the self-touch, we become ourselves while at the same time losing contact with our self, because we experience it as other:

‘I’ (as soon as it touches itself) [addresses] itself, [speaks] to itself, [treats] itself (in a soliloquy interrupted in advance) *as an other*. No sooner does ‘I touch itself’ than it is itself—it contracts itself, it contracts with itself, but as if with another. (Derrida 34; emphasis in original).

Thus, the double apprehension in touch makes it always mediated and disrupted, because every touch exposes us to exteriority.

1.4 Tactile immediacy

It is exactly this disruption, the impossibility to reach a self, either our self or someone else's, that is snowed under in Gagné's account of tactile experiences, because of her emphasis on telepathic or spiritual touch. She claims that this type of touch is the actualization of the tactile memory, meaning that in these telepathic touches, characters come into direct contact with someone other than themselves, and this contact results in a shared memory, one belonging to touch. In the literary texts Gagné discusses, these tactile memories are often confirmed by means of their visible results: even though the act of touching only seems to happen in the mind's eye, the results are often visible on the physical body. Based on these stories, Gagné argues that, although touch is a mediated sense, spiritual or telepathic touch is "rightfully classified as immediate" (181).

Thus, although tactile contact always introduces a form of alterity, this alterity can come into direct contact with the literary characters through spiritual touching, according to Gagné. As Pirovolakis explains in his article on Husserl and Derrida, this tactile immediacy implies that touch can "provide valid phenomenological evidence by virtue of reducing distance, exteriority, difference and contingency" (109). This is why Gagné argues these literary texts underscore Victorian tactile fears (24): boundaries were crossed and differences between certain classes of people were effaced by "the ability of touch to pass through objects and bodies" (Gagné 181).

Gagné's emphasis on tactile immediacy and its ability to reduce distance is based on Merleau-Ponty's approach to touch. Contrary to Derrida's emphasis on distance, exteriority and the disruption that comes with it, Merleau-Ponty argued for a philosophy of touch based on proximity: touch overlaps or encroached, and in these overlappings, there is a liminal space where touch resides, a remainder or memory that belongs to touch itself (Gagné 174). This means there is an opening up even within one's own body, a dehiscence based on

closeness and visibility: “between my body looked at and my body looking, my body touched and my body touching, there is overlapping or encroachment, so that we may say that the things pass into us, as well as we into the things” (Merleau-Ponty, *Visible* 123).¹⁰

Returning to Gagné’s conclusion that a shared tactile memory creates a more cohesive understanding of female embodiment, we can trace how this proximity lies at the heart of Gagné’s overall view on touch. As mentioned before, she emphasizes how the boundaries between toucher and touched blur, and it is this reciprocal nature of touch that “suggests and incorporates a heightened sense of intimacy, for there needs to be *proximity* for one to touch another and vice versa” (20; emphasis mine). This proximity asks for an ethics of care, “a way of ethically negotiating space” (Gagné 209) and of organizing and embodying experience (118). Gagné concludes that this ethical responsibility lies in the remainder of touch, where toucher and touched overlap. Thus, the touch becomes a shared memory which, ultimately, reduces the distance between toucher and touched, so the responsibility is shared (Gagné 211).¹¹

As we have seen earlier in this chapter, this is not how Derrida approaches touch, although there are certain affinities between him and Merleau-Ponty. Derrida’s *On Touching* has shown us how every touch exposes us to exteriority. Only through this touch and exteriority can we situate our selves, our body proper: “the body proper can only become such through the irruption of the other” (Murphy 438). Thus, in order to create a sense of somatic

¹⁰ Surprisingly, Gagné introduces telepathic tactility as “touch at a distance”, which she defines as “a type of touch that does not require direct contact, proximity, nor is it necessarily mediated through active tactile interaction” (113). However, in the literary examples she uses to illustrate this telepathic touch (see footnote 6), it becomes clear that characters pass through others, leaving visible marks on their bodies, and thus sharing a tactile memory. I would argue that in this interpretation, the spiritual touching’s supposed immediacy is exactly what makes the touch a means to direct contact, and the ability to pass through others reduces the distance between toucher and touched.

¹¹ Since Gagné’s point of entry into the topic of touch is the Contagious Diseases Acts, it makes sense she focuses so much on proximity: “Through these Acts, the ethics of touch within Victorian England went from emphasizing that the nation could only be maintained if tactility was kept at a distance (an absence of touch), to a belief in the need to contain the nation through proximity (touch being necessary in order to inspect, to police)” (5). However, as we will show further on, this approach runs the risk of overlooking the dangers of being open to the other through proximity.

interiority, we first need to become aware of alterity, exteriority. So far, Derrida seems to agree with Merleau-Ponty, who argues that sensibility is never only a return to the self, but also renders the self available to that which is other (Murphy 444). Thus, reflexivity is perpetually undone or delayed, and through this hiatus or disruption, self-reflexivity is always frustrated, and there will always be a remainder (Murphy 445).

The two philosophers start to differ when they discuss what happens during this irruption of alterity. According to Merleau-Ponty's account of sensibility, tactility gives us access to the interior life of another (through the overlap that occurs when touching), while Derrida makes it very clear this is never possible. Both philosophize on what happens when we reflect on our self, and that this can only be done through exposure to alterity, but Derrida argues this reflexivity is undone in a moment of potential violence, whereas Merleau-Ponty claims it is disrupted because of potential proximity. Thus, Merleau-Ponty focuses on how the encroachment of someone/something other than ourselves opens us to the possibility that this alterity might influence or change us.¹² In doing so, he seems to claim we can reach our self and get to know it by letting others—other selves—reach towards us. Derrida, on the other hand, claims the self can only be appropriated, both by others and by ourselves. When touching, we only ever touch at the limit, never at the heart. Remember, after all, that Derrida is the 'father' of deconstruction, claiming that, as Gutting puts it, "there is no such pure presence of thoughts to the self"—our own self or someone else's—because "[a]ll thought is mediated through language" (Gutting 292). Thus, in our attempts to touch ourselves or others, Derrida argues there's only mediation, supplementarity, and expropriation.

Derrida's emphasis on violence is important, because it illustrates how "identity is ceaselessly menaced by difference, by time, and by the possibility of its own dissolution"

¹² This is what Murphy refers to as 'rehabilitation' when he explains that while "the movement between coincidence and noncoincidence inaugurates sensibility for them both, this movement is itself opened to violence, death, and dispersion in Derrida, and to 'rehabilitation' in Merleau-Ponty" (443). Coincidence here is the unity of self and other, while noncoincidence is alterity, dispersion, and difference (Murphy 435-436).

(Murphy 446), which, as we have seen, is specifically the case when we are touched, when we come into contact with otherness. Without acknowledging this exteriority and expropriation, we cannot think and write meaningfully about the self (Murphy 445). In fact, Merleau-Ponty's approach of proximity and rehabilitation, as Murphy writes, seems to imply a certain unity of that which we sense and senses us (446). The danger of this idea is that it diminishes the unmaking of selves, making it seem like selves can actually be reached (at). As Murphy puts it:

To claim that sensibility is adequation, unity, and synonymy is to submit identity to oblivion. To speak meaningfully of the self, and of the world, is to acknowledge the force of some exteriority, parsing, and rupture. (445)

Merleau-Ponty seems to acknowledge the force of exteriority, but puts it in overlapping, not rupture.

For this reason, it does not only make no sense to approach touch in terms like 'embodied whole' and 'cohesive understanding', but it is in fact quite dangerous to do so. It makes it easy to overlook the certainty that with every touch, there is the 'possibility of dissolution', the unmaking of subjectivity. Following Merleau-Ponty, Gagné does not ignore the possibility of violent touches, but she does neglect to address this "pre-ethical" violence that comes with every touch, and that is essentially "simply matter of fact, an irrevocable truth of the embodied subject" (Murphy 446). Without the possibility of dissolution, there is no embodied subject. As Derrida explains, the embodied subject dissolves whenever we reach towards it. It irrevocably does, because in a moment of disrupted reflexivity, it always becomes mediated. Even when Gagné admits that a certain exteriority permeates every touch, so that both toucher/d and touched/r are changed, she places this exteriority in a shared memory where both subjects hold on to a cohesive understanding of self and other, sharing the ethical responsibility of their shared tactile memory (Gagné 211).

It is also in this moment of overlapping/encroachment that Gagné places spiritual tactility's immediacy. Ironically, she gives Derrida the credit for the claim that spiritual touching can, in fact, be immediate:

[S]piritual touching, according to Derrida, is rightfully classified as immediate, and touching, regardless of its carnality or spirituality is always transitive (250), suggesting both the reciprocity of touch that is seen in Merleau-Ponty's work, as well as the ability of touch to pass through objects and bodies. (Gagné 181)

Unfortunately, what she failed to notice is that Derrida, in the passage she is referring to, is, in fact, discussing the views of Jean-Louis Chrétien, another philosopher. According to Chrétien, it is not human spiritual touch that is immediate, but only *divine* touch. This is a touch that originates from God, and is infinite.¹³ This is different from the touches that occur in the literary texts Gagné discusses, which are all human and telepathic (see footnote 6 and 10). Derrida touches upon Chrétien's work when discussing the deconstruction of Christianity, and emphasizes this distinction that Gagné seems to have overlooked—that between divine or infinite touch and human touch. He comes to the conclusion that human touch is never immediate, since it is always finite and accompanied by reflexivity, and to claim otherwise is a mistake, one that even Chrétien avoids:

In other words: believing that human touching (or that finite touching in general) is immediate is a prejudice, a theoretical error, credulity—and elsewhere Chrétien also mentions “the illusion of its immediacy” ([147]). The genesis of this credulity may be most widespread philosophical naïveté [...]. (Derrida 254)

Thus, Gagné's presumption that, based on proximity, spiritual touch can be immediate, appears to be incorrect.

¹³ “Immediacy is the absolute truth of divine touching, ‘the hand of God,’ his Incarnation in Logos or the Son's flesh—and therefore of *creation* and the act of creating; but it is a ‘theoretical error,’ an ‘illusion’ born from ‘phenomenological occultation’ in the case of human or finite touching in general—and therefore in the case of the *creature*” (Derrida 254).

1.5 Writing on the body

If we follow Derrida's interpretation of Nancy, we cannot avoid applying his ideas to the tactile experiences in Victorian literature. Limits, the impossibility of touching on touch, being in-between, prosthetic—these are all concepts not commonly used in Victorian literature, and not ingrained in or part of a general understanding of embodiment in those days. But even though Victorian writers did not construct or understand touch as Nancy and Derrida did—in fact, if we can believe Derrida, Nancy was the first to break with the generally accepted view of touch as immediate—Derrida argues that there always is (and thus has been) something inherently untouchable to touch in general, and thus also to Victorian touching.

Whether we look at Cohen's, Gagné's, or Derrida's ideas on touching, an image of touch emerges, similar to our earlier description of skin: porous, penetrable, materiality and subjectivity intertwined while constantly making/unmaking, untouchable (after all, we can never touch a touch—'touch' is intangible). For this reason, touch eludes writing that tries to 'touch' upon it every time:

Writing: to touch on extremity. And how is one to touch upon the body instead of signifying it or making it signify? ... how is one to touch upon the body? ... touching on the body, touching the body, *touching* at last—happens all the time in writing ... touching the body (or rather touching this or that singular body) *with the incorporeal* of 'sense,' and consequently, *making the incorporeal touching*, or turning *sense* into a touch [*une touché*].

... By essence, writing touches upon the body. ... (Nancy, *Corpus* 12-13; trans. and qtd. in Derrida 285)

Even in the Victorian era, some novelists, such as the Brontë sisters, already seem to have understood, at least partially, that writing touches upon the body, upon feminine embodiment,

and does so specifically through tactility. However, the touch they lay bare and apply to embodiment and subjectivity is not complete, does not create “a cohesive understanding of the female body,” as Gagné would have it (3). An image of embodiment emerges which is ‘impossible’, just like our skin: permeable, only a limit or boundary, both beginning and end, and thus neither. We will never be able to touch upon the ‘heart’ of Charlotte and Emily Brontë’s sense of embodiment, merely on its limits.

What we *can* do is trace the effects of touching and being touched in the literary works, and research how their characters employ tactility in their strive for autonomy—a theme that comes to full bloom at the fin-de-siècle in the literature of New Women writers such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Victoria Cross. Thus, we will follow the quest for female autonomy through tactile imagination in texts by the Brontë sisters to New Woman fiction; not to create a complete overview of what ‘feminine embodiment’ meant to these women, but merely to sketch out the limits they were able to—dare I say it again?—*touch* upon in their writing.

After all, tactility can never give a sense of complete embodiment, if only because its untouchability makes it impossible to discuss *properly*:

[O]ne still has the impressions that we are always going to be at a loss for a metalanguage with which to say anything whatever about touch, or the touchable that is not in advance accommodated by the skin, exscribed right on the skin. Without even being watched over or pointed out, each word speaks in tongues to the skin, each word has a word on the tongue with the skin. (Derrida 303)

Thus, the predicament and importance of the tactile imagination of nineteenth-century women writers is inherent to itself, and something we can never escape, not in the time these women were writing, and not now, when we read their texts. As Cohen, Classen, and Gagné have made clear, to ‘touch’ is to have the opportunity to uncover processes of embodiment and

subjectivity. However, the following chapters will emphasize that we can merely do so ‘in tongues to the skin’, never beyond that, never complete.

2 Kissing Eyes: The Tactile Gaze

“Kiss me again; and don’t let me see your eyes!” ~ Heathcliff

in *Wuthering Heights* (Emily Brontë 126)

In many Victorian texts, a characters’ skin and eyes are mentioned specifically when the narrator wants to point out a specific trait the character is supposed to have. See for instance John Reed in *Jane Eyre*, whose gluttony makes his skin “dingy and unwholesome” and even gives him “a dim and bleared eye and flabby cheeks” (*Jane* 7). These are the first indications that he is not a nice boy, and we quickly find out he continually bullies and harasses Jane, and even does not have much love for his own mother and sisters (*Jane* 7). The same goes for eyes, as we can see when Mr. Rochester explains why he prefers Jane over his current wife, Bertha: “Compare these clear eyes with the red balls yonder—this face with that mask—this form with that bulk” (*Jane* 440). And when Nelly Dean tells Lockwood about Heathcliff’s return and first visit to Catherine at Thrushcross Grange, she points out his eyes as markers of his repressed violent nature: even though he looks intelligent, she stills sees how “[a] half-civilized ferocity lurked yet in the depressed brows and eyes full of black fire” (*Wuthering* 75). Thus, the characters underline the idea that there is a link between what is outside (skin/eyes, appearance) and what resides inside (character, personal qualities).

As William Cohen argues, Victorian writers placed human essence, and thus someone’s character and morality, in the material existence of the body. Thus, someone’s skin was considered to say something about their character: “As a social signifier, moreover, the color, texture, and appearance of the skin have often been presumed to testify to what resides within or beneath it” (Cohen 65). This is why a young Heathcliff struggles with his “dark-skinned gypsy”-looks (*Wuthering* 5): “But, Nelly, if I knocked him [Edger Linton] down

twenty times, that wouldn't make him less handsome, or me more so. I wish I had light hair and a fair skin, and was dressed and behaved as well, and had a chance of being as rich as he will be!" (45).¹⁴ However, Edgar's "great blue eyes and even forehead" do not make him a better moral character than Heathcliff, but only justify his higher social status more readily. Thus, these texts do not claim that a beautiful outside makes a beautiful inside, but that the characters in these novels, when they see a beautiful outside, are more likely to assume a beautiful inside, or condone less attractive characteristics. A clearness in skin and eyes connotes something desirable, a positivity which imbues not only outward appearances, but has far-reaching consequences for (the perception) of characters' human essence.

What makes this even more complicated is the fact that 'skin' plays a specific role in connection to tactility and visibility. As mentioned before, the skin traditionally was where the sense of touch was thought to be located, and this we also see in these Victorian novels: intimacy between family members and friends is often expressed by touching each other cheek to cheek, acquaintances acknowledge each other by shaking hands, etc. But before it is touched, skin is often considered first by how it *looks*. Skin, one of the main symbols of tactility, is often judged by its visual characteristics because the Victorian characters believe the outside is a marker for the inside. So does Nelly Dean teach Heathcliff that if he wants to outshine the beautiful Lintons, he should tend to his heart: "A good heart will help you to a bonny face, my lad, [...] if you were a regular black; and a bad one will turn the bonniest into something worse than ugly" (*Wuthering* 45). Thus, when discussing skin, this non-boundary of the body, we immediately encounter issues of tactility and visibility, of inside and outside, body and mind, touch and gaze.

¹⁴ Clearly, what concerns Heathcliff here is not only his own character but mostly how his appearance might influence his social status and financial situation. Due to the confines of this research, economics will not be discussed in detail, but it might be interesting to extend this research to the economics prominently present in many Victorian literary texts, including *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*.

2.1 *“When our eyes touch...”*

Derrida starts out his discussion on touching with a question: “When our eyes touch, is it day or is it night?” (2). It is a question that took hold of him, that came of him, to him (Derrida 1). He wants to know whether eyes can manage to touch, “to press together like lips” (Derrida 2). Derrida calls this potential event “[a] kiss on the eyes as one says a kiss on the lips, a kiss of the eyes on the eyes of the other” (Derrida 306). If we take his question literally, it is clear such an event rarely takes place, especially in Victorian literature, since etiquette would not allow such a breach of personal space. However, as Derrida’s question underlines, touching and looking have a long history as probably the two most discussed and thought about senses we recognize.

Just like the eyes and the skin are connected to each other—similar while different, overlapping entities but not quite the same—so too stand touching and gazing in a complicated relationship to each other. These two senses have often been placed in contrast with each other, but can also complement each other. Our eyes are touched by the ‘inside’ of our skin, and consist, just like our skin, of different protective, yet porous, layers. We ‘see’ more because we know how that which we are seeing feels, and we understand better what we feel when we have previously already seen the shape or object we are touching. Touching and seeing are ways to obtain knowledge, to cultivate understanding, but can also be ‘blinding’ and hurtful. Gazing and touching can be a sign of agency and subjectivity, or strip someone of them, objectify.

Derrida starts out not with eyes that see, but with eyes that touch, because this ‘kiss of the eyes’ illustrates why touch is so vital in encountering ‘the other’: touching “resists the ‘specularity’ of all reflexive autonomy” that comes with seeing (Naas 265). When looking, we always return to the self, to our self. When our eyes do not meet, there is not necessarily a ‘you’ that inserts itself in my gaze, an other that disrupts my own sense of identity. That is

why, for a long time, woman was mostly the object of man's gaze; never, as Grand's male protagonist in "The Undefinable" argues, meeting man's eyes on the same level, but looking up, clinging, depending, "so that a man can never forget his own superiority in her presence" (267). In the stories by New Woman writers, female characters acknowledge the power that lies in looking and often challenge their male counterparts by looking back. In fact, already in *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* do we find female characters who look back, who sometimes even raise their eyes to meet another's gaze. What happens in these moments when eyes 'kiss', when "eyes [...] see themselves in the eyes of the other" (Derrida 290)? According to our Victorian female writers, is it day or night when our eyes touch?

2.2 *Let us look at the male gaze*

The male gaze has a famous history specifically in feminist and psychoanalytical theory. Surfacing in the 1970s in discussions of film creation and spectatorship,¹⁵ the notion of the gaze has been fleshed out in the works of Freud, Lacan, and Foucault, and incorporated into feminist theory by scholars such as Sandra Lee Bartky (1979) and Kaplan (1983). The gaze is considered to be something different from 'just' looking and seeing. While looking is done by our eyes, the gaze is associated with the phallus: "woman as passive spectacle and object and man as active voyeur and subject together constitute a proprietary 'male gaze'" (Weeks 467). Thus, what makes a look a gaze is the distance between object and subject: the subject objectifying that which he sees, dehumanizing it by making it different from himself. This can only be done when the person looked upon is constructed as other, separate from the subject, and as Weeks points out in his discussion of the male gaze, "[o]f all the sensory organs, vision most readily confirms the separation of subject from object" (468). Thus, while looking and

¹⁵ See Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), which is "one of the first scholarly attempts to reference male gaze" (Weeks 467).

gazing are not necessarily the same, the distancing quality ascribed to the first is inherent in the appropriation done through the second.

The male gaze is featured prominently in many New Woman stories from the *fin-de-siècle*. In “A Cross Line”, “Theodora: A Fragment” and “The Undefinable: A Fantasia”, the men often gaze voyeuristically on the women they encounter. The lover in “A Cross Line” has some experience studying “the female animal,” and when he first encounters his future lover, his “cold grey eyes scan the seated figure with its gipsy ease of attitude, a scarlet shawl that has fallen from her shoulders forming an accentuative background to the slim roundness of her waist” (48). Meeting Theodora for the second time, Cecil takes extreme pleasure in looking at her:

I felt a keen sense of pleasure stir me as I watched her rise and stand, that sense of pleasure which is nothing more than an assurance to the roused and unquiet instincts within one, of future satisfaction or gratification, with, from, or at the expense of the object creating the sensation. (“Theodora” 13-14)

At this instance, Cecil’s gazing is clearly specular, because the pleasure it gives him returns him to his own instincts. This return to the self is also at the heart of the painter’s gaze in “The Undefinable.” He judges every potential (female) model based on whether he can make anything out of her face and figure, solely for the purpose of having others identify “the undefinable of genius” in his paintings (263).

However, it seems the New Woman writers were quite aware of the harmful consequences of the male gaze. In these three narratives, the female characters return the gaze, thus challenging the passive role the men try to cast them in. The woman in “A Cross Line” looks back with a “frank, unembarrassed gaze” (49) and Theodora often meets Cecil’s eye, for instance when he mentions his imminent departure: “That look seemed to push away, walk over, ignore my reason, and appeal directly to the eager physical nerves and muscles”

(“Theodora” 19). In “The Undefinable”, the painter quickly realizes the feeling of distaste he experiences when seeing his new model stems from the look she gives him:

They were the mocking eyes of that creature most abhorrent to the soul of man, a woman who claims to rule and does not care to please; eyes out of which an imperious spirit shone independently, not looking up, but meeting mine on the same level. (267)

He places her “fault” in the expression of her eyes because the direct look she returns to him is exactly what robs him of his feelings of superiority.

In *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, the male gaze is also thwarted by women looking back. In *Wuthering Heights*, it is mostly Lockwood who struggles with women looking back, thus disrupting his male gaze. Right at the beginning of the novel, he tells us of meeting a beautiful young woman, “a real goddess in my eyes, as long as she took no notice of me” (*Wuthering* 5). However, when she realizes his interest in her and returns his gaze—with “the sweetest of all imaginable looks”—Lockwood shrinks icily into himself, “like a snail” (*Wuthering* 5). As long as he is in the position to gaze upon her beauty, he clearly enjoys himself. Once she stops being a passive spectacle by actively looking back, he becomes repelled by her.

Another character who troubles Lockwood with her gaze is the young Catherine he encounters on his second visit to *Wuthering Heights*. When Lockwood meets her, he clearly admires the way she looks:

She was slender, and apparently scarcely past girlhood: an admirable form, and the most exquisite little face that I have ever had the pleasure of beholding: small features, very fair; flaxen ringlets, or rather golden, hanging loose on her delicate neck; and eyes—had they been agreeable in expression, they would have been irresistible.

(*Wuthering* 9)

What makes her eyes so ‘disagreeable’ to Lockwood is the fact that she refuses to become a passive spectacle, but returns his gaze instead: “I stared—she stared also. At any rate, she kept her eyes on me, in a cool, regardless manner, exceedingly embarrassing and disagreeable” (*Wuthering* 8). In both situations, Lockwood becomes uncomfortable because, as Newman suggests in her article on the gaze in *Wuthering Heights*, he runs the risk of losing the position of mastery and control that comes with being the spectator instead of the spectacle (1032). For Catherine, the consequences are quite severe: in order to retain their positions of power, the men often respond to her brazen looks with violence and name calling (Newman 1032-1033): “It’s yon flaysome, graceless quean, ut’s witched ahr lad, wi’ her bold een, un’ her forrard ways [...]” (*Wuthering* 243).¹⁶

In *Jane Eyre*, Jane too struggles against those who assert their dominance over her, which also happens mainly through gaze and touch: her nephew John Reed often hits her or physically hurts her in other ways, while Mrs. Reed denies her any love and keeps a marked line of separation between Jane and the Reed family, surveying her “at time with a severe eye” (*Jane* 34). Even Mr. Rochester, who loves Jane and wants her to marry him, has trouble realizing Jane has her own identity, not one he imposes on her but a soul or heart that will always remain out of his reach, no matter how much he would like to conquer her.

However, Jane herself uses her eyes in a different manner than Catherine in *Wuthering Heights* does, even though the male reception of Jane’s looks is also troubled. The first time Jane and Mr. Rochester formally meet, he takes it upon himself to judge her character (*Jane* 181), searching her face “with eyes that I saw were dark, irate, and piercing” (*Jane* 178). He orders her to fetch her portfolio so that he might determine whether the sketches she makes are “original” (*Jane* 183). This examination is clearly part of the overall inspection, and the

¹⁶ Joseph’s response when Catherine and Hareton have uprooted a few of his favorite trees in the garden of *Wuthering Heights*: “It’s yon dreadful, graceless queen, who’s bewitched our lad, with her bold eyes, and her forward ways [...]” (*Wuthering* 244, fn2).

fact that the pictures show him Jane is capable of having original ideas and of turning these ideas into visual and tactile actions seems to puzzle Mr. Rochester:

“[...] probably a master aided you?”

“No, indeed!”

[...]

“I perceive these pictures were done by one hand: was that hand yours?”

“Yes.”

[...]

“Where did you get your copies?”

“Out of my head.”

“That head I see now on your shoulders?”

“Yes, sir.” (*Jane* 183-184)

Whereas Catherine stares back into a male gaze, Jane diverts it with her paintings.

The result is that Mr. Rochester remains more civil towards her than Lockwood and Heathcliff are towards Catherine, but here too, the main response is to regain mastery of the situation. Once Jane has made it very clear that these sketches are hers, and hers alone, Mr. Rochester falls into “the aptly patronizing”—and typically male—“practices of connoisseurship and art criticism” (Kromm 380): “How could you make [these eyes] look so clear, and yet not at all brilliant? for the planet above quells their rays. And what meaning is that in their solemn depth? And who taught you to paint wind? [...] Where did you see Latmos?” (*Jane* 187). These paintings make it impossible for Mr. Rochester to see Jane as ‘passive spectacle’, because they underline Jane’s own visual power, and his only solution is to dehumanize it: “As to the thoughts, they are elfish” (*Jane* 187), just like Catherine’s visual power was called ‘bewitching’.

The male gaze is perhaps most prominent in *Jane Eyre* in the character of St. John Rivers, who takes Jane in when she is fleeing Thornfield and near starvation. While his sisters Diana and Mary respect her personal anguish, their brother keeps examining Jane, hurting her with his gaze and forcing her to comply with his wishes:

I felt a burning glow mount to my face; for bitter and agitating recollections were awakened by the allusion to marriage. They all saw the embarrassment, and the emotion. Diana and Mary relieved me by turning their eyes elsewhere than to my crimsoned visage; but the colder and sterner brother continued to gaze, till the trouble he had excited forced out tears as well as color. (*Jane* 519)

St. John does not take immediate pleasure from looking at Jane, but he clearly ignores something his sisters grasp immediately: Jane, as a fellow human being, has a right to privacy, not spilling out or denying the things in her heart. The sisters stand up for her, making clear she has every right to keep to herself whatever she wants, while St. John keeps piercing her with his look. By doing so, he keeps her at a distance, trying to analyze her identity, without giving her the freedom to show him what she feels like is truly in her soul.

In this instance, Jane does decide to meet the male gaze eye to eye. She refuses to tell more than she feels comfortable with, and shows she is not scared of this “penetrating young judge” (*Jane* 519) by meeting his gaze:

“Mr. Rivers,” I said, turning to him, and looking at him, as he looked at me, openly and without diffidence, “[...] I will tell you as much of the history of the wanderer you have harboured, as I can tell without compromising my own peace of mind—my own security, moral and physical, and that of others.” (*Jane* 520)

Just like Catherine, Jane refuses to become a ‘passive spectacle’. Although a meeting of the eyes in *Jane Eyre* often seems less direct and less violent than it is in *Wuthering Heights*, Jane too suffers from the dangers of the male gaze.

2.3 *Mirror, mirror on the wall...*

The male gaze has a different effect in each of these narratives. Just like every female character deals with a direct gaze in different ways, they also suffer from the consequences in different ways. However, in general, the male gaze leaves no room for a meeting of the eyes, for eyes touching. The goal of the male gaze is an immediate return to the self, to the self-importance of the person looking, at the expense of the person they are looking at—as if the gazer is looking into a mirror, only seeing himself. Objectifying the other who is being looked at, the gazer refuses the interruption of another ‘I’ in his “dream of the reflexive or specular autonomy of self-presence (be it that of the *Dasein*) or of self-consciousness, absolute knowledge”, as Derrida puts it (290). We see this time and again in “Theodora: A Fragment”, where Cecil constantly fills in his own dreams and desires when he looks at Theodora. For instance, when he shakes her hand loosely in order not to hurt her, she looks at him and reads the following in her eyes: “Theodora raised her eyes to me, full of a soft disappointment which seemed to say, ‘Are you not going to press it, then, after all, when I have taken off all the rings entirely that you may?’” (19). For the women in the narratives, who are often the object of the gaze, it means they often feel like they are not actually seen.

In Jane Eyre’s case, there are plenty of instances where she is troubled by Mr. Rochester’s gaze towards her, especially during their engagement. His eye seeks hers “most pertinaciously,” but she crushes his hand and thrusts it back to him because his smile “was such as a sultan might, in a blissful and fond moment, bestow on a slave his gold and gems had enriched” (*Jane* 401). He makes clear that once he has “seized” her, “to have and to hold,” he wants to—“figuratively speaking”—attach her like a charm to the chain of his watch-guard: “Yes, bonny wee thing, I’ll wear you in my bosom, lest my jewel I should tyne” (*Jane* 404). The Jane Mr. Rochester sees is a dependent young girl, one who needs to be “dressed like a doll” so that he can see her “glittering like a parterre” (*Jane* 401). In order to

keep him in check, and not become “crushed by crowded obligations” (*Jane* 403), she keeps pushing him away, which results in unearthly descriptions such as “provoking puppet,’ ‘malicious elf,’ ‘sprite,’ ‘changeling,’ etc.” (*Jane* 409). Her refusal to play the submissive role to Mr. Rochester’s idea of himself as wealthy protector turns her in from a woman into a fairy-like creature in his eyes, a description she is all too familiar with.

The result is that Jane never recognizes herself when she looks in the mirror. There are two instances in the novel where she narrates events that prompt her to look at her own reflection in a mirror: when she is punished for a fight she has had with John Reed, and right before she is supposed to get married with Mr. Rochester. In the first instance, after the fight, she is locked up in the abandoned bedroom her uncle had died. The room, with its deep red colors in curtains, carpet, and table cloth, the “high, dark wardrobe,” and its shrouded, “muffled windows” framing a great looking-glass make the already upset Jane superstitious and scared (*Jane* 13-14). When she looks in the looking glass, a strange apparition strikes her:

[Crossing] before the looking glass; my fascinated glance involuntarily explored the depth it revealed. All looked colder and darker in that visionary hollow than in reality: and the strange little figure there gazing at me, with a white face and arms specking the gloom, and glittering eyes of fear moving where all else was still, had the effect of a real spirit: I thought it like one of the tiny phantoms, half fairy, half imp [...]. (*Jane* 15)

Although Jane is looking at her own reflection, all she sees is something other, something separate from herself: as Delashmit and Long summarize it in just a few words, “the image is without doubt a part of the denied self” (32). This denied self is separated from her identity through means of the gaze: Jane objectifies it, separates and in fact denies it as her-self, just like John Reed denies her her visual imagination and Mr. Rochester later casts her as susceptible and dependent. In fact, Jane’s experience in the red room shakes her so much that

it ends in a complete absence of self: she does not remember how she got back to the nursery and supposes she had “a species of fit” because “unconsciousness closed the scene” (*Jane* 20).

The second time Jane gazes at her own reflection, she is about to get married to Mr. Rochester and has just put on her wedding attire. She is getting ready for her wedding day and hurrying to get downstairs, when the French nurse Sophie, who was helping her getting dressed, cries at her: “Stop! [...] Look at yourself in the mirror; you have not taken one peep” (*Jane* 429). And again, Jane experiences a sense of separation, objectification, when looking in the mirror: “I saw a robed and veiled figure, so unlike my usual self that it seemed almost the image of a stranger” (*Jane* 429). While the male gaze typically means a return to the self, the use of the mirror in all these instances create an extra level of distance and separation between the gazer and the one being gazed at: we can move closer to a mirror and thus seemingly closer to the object we are looking at, but we cannot touch it *through* the mirror. Jane sees herself just like she sees her double: as something distant from her, separated, even unrecognizable. From a very early age, the (mostly) male gaze has taught her there are certain aspects of her personality and self that are not accepted; in fact, these aspects are completely ignored, left out, distanced. So much so, that she has internalized this gaze, and applies it to her self and her double, by objectifying them into something that not human, but strange, “half fairy, half imp” (*Jane* 15).

Jane Eyre is not the only female character who does not recognize herself when looking in a mirror. Catherine Linton, née Earnshaw, has a similar experience when she has her last “fit of frenzy” (*Wuthering* 93), caused by a fight between herself and Edgar, who wants her to make a final choice between himself and Heathcliff. Catherine does not even realize it is a mirror she is seeing but thinks she sees a face in a black press. In order to calm her down, Nelly Dean, the housekeeper, covers the mirror with a shawl, but this only helps for a little while:

“It’s behind there still!” she pursued, anxiously. “And it stirred. Who is it? I hope it will not come out when you are gone! Oh! Nelly, the room is haunted! I’m afraid of being alone!”

[...]

“There’s nobody here!” I [Nelly] insisted. “It was *yourself*, Mrs. Linton; you knew it a while since.” (*Wuthering* 96-97)

Like Jane, Catherine does not recognize her own reflection but thinks the room is haunted instead. She thinks she is back at Wuthering Heights, a young girl who runs wild on the moors with her best friend Heathcliff (*Wuthering* 37), and thus, the ‘Mrs. Linton’ she sees in the mirror must indeed be unrecognizable.

The transformation from Catherine Earnshaw to Mrs. Linton starts with Catherine’s forced stay at the Lintons after she and Heathcliff spied on them, and the Linton’s bulldog catches them trespassing. Catherine’s ankle is hurt, and the Lintons take her in for a couple of weeks. When she returns, she is transformed from “a wild, hatless little savage” into “a very dignified person” who needs help getting off her horse, untying her hat, removing her habit, etc. (*Wuthering* 41). Her brother, when he sees her, exclaims: “Why, Cathy, you are quite a beauty! I should scarcely have known you—you look like a lady now” (*Wuthering* 41) and Heathcliff hides himself, instead of greeting her heartily, “on beholding such a bright, graceful damsel enter the house, instead of a rough-headed counterpart to himself” (*Wuthering* 42).

These experiences of looking into a mirror show us that a return to the self by means of a gaze is highly problematic. Jane Eyre has internalized the appropriating gazes turned her way, and thus sees the part of herself that has been denied for so long. Catherine Linton, when gazing in the mirror, does not recognize herself at all anymore. She cannot rhyme her current situation with the time when she was most happy: back at Wuthering Heights, when “the

greatest punishment” she could be given was “to keep her separate from [Heathcliff]” (*Wuthering* 33). Although the outcome is very different, Jane and Catherine both incorporate other people’s expectations of themselves in their own identity, up to the point where they do not recognize parts of themselves as their selves.

When looking into a mirror, Jane and Catherine see something that should be their self, but turns out to be something other than what they identify as their self. Because the female characters in these texts have become so used to being the object of a gaze, the ‘other’ who is being seen, preferably without looking back, they instinctively know an immediate return to the self by means of a gaze is impossible. While the goal of the male gaze is to objectify the one being seen, so that no other self can disrupt the sense of self of the observer, the female gazes in these narratives underline that they can only return to the self—see themselves seeing themselves—when something artificial (such as a mirror) has inserted itself into the gaze. In the spacing that occurs in this moment, something or someone other can disrupt the return to self. In Jane’s and Catherine’s experience, this disruption seems quite traumatic. However, in this traumatic event also lies the possibility of their own identity, as versatile and autonomous as their writers have tried to create them. The force of exteriority they encounter in seeing themselves seeing themselves seems preferable to the illusion of an immediate return to the self, which not only submits the identity of the ‘objects’ gazed upon to oblivion (Murphy 445) but also closes off the identity of the gazer. After all, we can only return to our ‘I’ “*as an other*” (Derrida 34).

2.4 I am his vision, his right hand

It is this female experience, the awareness that the gaze never immediately returns the gazer to its self, that makes the female gaze employed by Jane, Catherine, her daughter Cathy, Theodora, and the female leads in “The Undefinable” and “A Cross Line,” different from the

male gaze directed at them. In Jane's situation, while the male gaze is objectifying and harmful, up to the point where Jane has incorporated it and consequently turns it against a denied part of her self, her gaze towards others is mostly 'searching'. What makes Jane's 'gaze' so different from Mr. Rochester's and St. John Rivers'? First, we have to understand that, similar to there always remaining something untouchable behind touch(ing), there also remains something invisible behind gazing—even more so, because (male) gazing is done with the intention of appropriation, domination, from which the subject flees. Jane 'gazes' with entirely different intentions: she does not want to appropriate or dominate—in fact, she knows from personal experience how harmful this can be—but understand, know. She is searching for that which always remains untouchable, invisible: the other, their spirit. Remember, as William Cohen points out, that the skin is considered to be the tactile and visual location where to find hints of one's spirit or soul:

The skin is the integument that encloses the visceral interior of the body, yet it is also the membrane within which, mysteriously and ethereally, the human essence is supposed to reside. [...] The skin thus forms the border not only between bodily interior and exterior but also between psychological and physical conceptions of the self.

(65)

This is why Jane turns her "searching" eyes on Mr. Rochester (*Jane* 196): she 'reads' his exterior in order to understand his interior, which is why, when he shows her his forehead, she is more interested in the "suave sign of benevolence" that she misses there than anything else (*Jane* 195).

However, realizing from her own experience how harmful the gaze can be, and merely wanting to employ it to 'read' other people, Jane often gazes from a marginal position. Thus, she attempts to keep her seeing unseen. Unseen, she can fully enjoy the experience, having an "acute pleasure in looking" (*Jane* 258), without running the risk of being reprehended for her

visual power. It is this subversive power of looking from the margins that Mr. Rochester acknowledges and in fact appropriates—and confirms it as a feminine space—by posing as a gypsy woman. Disguised as a gypsy woman, he insists on reading the fortunes of all “the young and the single” ladies in the house (*Jane* 287), including Jane herself. In this episode, Mr. Rochester appropriates the visual and interpretive freedom of Jane’s marginal, feminine position (Bellis 644), in order to reconstitute Jane’s character and vision. Using the shade in front of the fire in the library—and thus making it impossible for the recipients of ‘her’ gaze to gaze back—the gypsy woman’s eyes confront Jane “at once, with a bold and direct gaze” (*Jane* 291). Mr. Rochester, as the gypsy woman, shows that Jane’s gazing has not been as invisible as she thought it was: “sitting in that window-seat [...] Is there not one face you study? One figure whose movements you follow with, at least, curiosity?” (*Jane* 295). Jane deflects his question by pointing out she likes to observe “all the faces” (*Jane* 295), thus avoiding having to admit Mr. Rochester is the one she often looks at the most. However, the point is that by asking her about it in these terms, he “casts her as the active observer and himself as the passive object of female attentions,” as Bellis points out (644).

Now, as the gypsy woman, Mr. Rochester reverses these roles: he makes Jane kneel in front of him so that he can examine her face: “I knelt within half a yard of her. She stirred the fire, so that a ripple of light broke from the disturbed coal: the glare, however, as she sat, only threw her face into deeper shadow: mine, it illumined” (*Jane* 294). Describing and analyzing Jane’s eyes, Mr. Rochester makes her gaze visible and legible, thus trying to subordinate Jane to his verbal and visual power (Bellis 643). In his description, he characterizes her vision as a flickering flame, shining like dew, “susceptible”; it portrays pride, but can only avoid “farther scrutiny” by turning away from the opposing gaze (*Jane* 298; Bellis 644). Here, he has almost complete visual power, and uses it again to recast Jane’s character into that of a dependent—influenced completely by those around her like a flame is influenced by gusts of wind or other

changes around it. However, in using his disguise as a gypsy woman in doing so, Mr. Rochester has also acknowledged marginal visibility as a source of power.

Gazing from the margins is safe, because it hides the pleasure and possible desire that might be seen if the gaze is returned. This is why Jane does not only look from the margins but does the most of her ‘soul-searching’ from eye to eye: she does not just search for the individuality in those around her but searches for it specifically in their *eyes*. For instance, when Mr. Rochester proposes to her for the first time and she has trouble believing his true intentions, she engages him in a powerful moment of soul-searching scrutiny:

“You, Jane. I must have you for my own—entirely my own. Will you be mine? Say yes, quickly.”

“Mr. Rochester, let me look at your face: turn to the moonlight.”

“Why?”

“Because I want to read your countenance; turn!”

“There: you will find it scarcely more legible than a crumpled, scratched page. Read on: only make haste, for I suffer.”

His face was very much agitated and very much flushed, and there were strong workings in the features, and strange gleams in the eyes. (*Jane* 380-381)

She does so, in order to assess whether he means it, whether his heart (and soul) are in it. Similarly, Jane reads St. John’s innermost turmoil in his eyes when she witnesses a meeting between himself and Miss Olivier, the girl he loves. When she sees “a glow rise” to his face, his “solemn eye melt with sudden fire, and flicker with resistless emotion” (*Jane* 547), she realizes where his heart truly lies. When Jane visually sees him curb his desire for this girl, it tells her a lot about his character and helps her to interpret his following actions.

In contrast, as we have discussed above, when St. John and Mr. Rochester gaze, they do so to return to their own ideas of Jane’s soul or self. Especially Mr. Rochester does not use

his gaze to understand or search for Jane's soul—on the contrary, he merely sees her as he wants to see her, and is thus desperately shocked when he finally does encounter Jane's spirit. In this event, it is again the eye that acts as a gateway between interior and exterior, the location where subjectivity is portrayed. But this time, Mr. Rochester cannot deflect it to the 'worsted rug' or make it 'turn away' from 'further scrutiny'—this time, it makes him painfully aware of the impossibility of truly getting at it, touching it, appropriating it:

“I could bend her with my finger and thumb: and what good would it do if I bent, if I upstore, if I crushed her? *Consider that eye*: consider the resolute, wild, free thing looking out of it, defying me, with more than courage—with a stern triumph.

Whatever I do with its cage, I cannot get at it—the savage, beautiful creature!” (*Jane* 476; emphasis mine)

Jane's “brittle frame” is in his grasp here, but her soul, or spirit, or subjectivity eludes him “like an essence” (476). In *Jane Eyre*, when eyes meet, they do so in order to catch a glimpse of the owner's soul. However, where Mr. Rochester wants to catch the ‘savage, beautiful creature’ he sees there, Jane merely ‘reads his countenance’. She does not presume she can see beyond the ‘strange gleams’ she sees in his eyes, while he contemplates violence, knowing full well this will only make the spirit flee. Thus, Jane's awareness of the power of the gaze keeps her attuned to the subjectivity of the one she gazes at. It also reminds her that this subjectivity means the other can/might/will gaze back, thereby blurring the lines between gazer and gazed. Jane's gaze is different from its male counterpart, because she does not use it to distance or appropriate the other, but to read it, to understand.

In the end, it is this soul-searching gaze that prevails in the story. By means of Bertha, Mr. Rochester's wife, Thornfield Hall is burned down to the ground, and Mr. Rochester loses his eyesight and a hand in the process. When Jane and Mr. Rochester reunite—“‘In truth – in the flesh? My living Jane?’ ‘You touch me, sir, – you hold me [...]’” (*Jane* 654)—and he

proposes for the second time, it becomes clear that it is exactly these “infirmities” that will turn their marriage into a happy one (*Jane* 671). Now that Mr. Rochester has no choice but to give up his role of “giver and protector” (*Jane* 671) and thus his vision of Jane as poor and dependent, she can meet him in his touch:

“You are no ruin, sir—no lightning-struck tree: you are green and vigorous. Plants will grow about your roots, whether you ask them or not, because they take delight in your bountiful shadow; and as they grow they will lean towards you, and wind round you, because your strength offers them so safe a prop.” (*Jane* 670)

Mr. Rochester’s disabilities give Jane visual and tactile power, and free her from the male gaze. By becoming “his vision” and “his right hand” (*Jane* 679), Jane becomes Mr. Rochester’s ‘mirror’, the other who disrupts his gaze. Thus, Charlotte Brontë ends her novel with a maimed male gaze, and a female lead who feels equal—“as we are!” (*Jane* 378)—to her husband because of this: “I am my husband’s life as fully as he is mine” (*Jane* 679).

2.5 *He dared hardly look*

Whereas Mr. Rochester’s gaze needs to be annihilated for Jane and him to become each other’s life, Heathcliff and Catherine already were entwined from childhood onwards: “Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same” (*Wuthering* 63). In their relationship, objectification is impossible, because there is no distance between their selves: they are each other’s hearts. That is, not until Catherine returns from Thrushcross Grange, where she been taught how to comply with the power dynamics of the gaze: when she returns and sees Heathcliff again, she flies to embrace him, but immediately regrets this when she realizes how dirty he is:

She gazed concernedly at the dusky fingers she held in her own, and also at her dress, which she feared had gained no embellishment from its contact with his.

“You needn’t have touched me!” he answered, following her eye and snatching away his hand. (*Wuthering* 43)

It is Catherine’s gaze who creates the distance here, just like she is the one who eventually breaks their hearts.

It is the same gaze that Heathcliff shuns when he visits Catherine while she is ill, and realizes she is dying: “Kiss me again; and don’t let me see your eyes! I forgive what you have done to me. I love *my* murderer—but *yours!* How can I?” (*Wuthering* 126). Heathcliff cannot understand why she chose to marry Edgar Linton, thus leaving him. According to him, this is the reason why neither of them can be happy now:

“*Why* did you betray your own heart, Cathy? I have not one word of comfort. You deserve this. You have killed yourself. [...] You loved me—then what *right* had you to leave me? What right—answer me—for the poor fancy you felt for Linton? Because misery, and degradation, and death, and nothing that God or Satan could inflict would have parted us, *you*, of your own will, did it. I have not broken your heart—you have broken it—and in breaking it, you have broken mine. (*Wuthering* 126)

While Jane’s story ends in a happy marriage, Catherine and Heathcliff’s love does not, because, as Catherine puts it, “[i]t would degrade me to marry Heathcliff now” (*Wuthering* 63). She loves Heathcliff because “he’s more myself than I am” (*Wuthering* 63), but marries Edgar Linton instead, because he is handsome, young, and because he loves her and will be rich, as she explains to Nelly (*Wuthering* 61).

Thus, Catherine seems to betray her heart because it would degrade her not to do so. According to Martha Nussbaum, there is a similarity between Catherine’s dismissal of what is in her soul and heart (*Wuthering* 62), and Lockwood’s dismissal of the ‘goddess’ he sees at the sea-coast (*Wuthering* 5). Lockwood could not reciprocate the “gaze of desire” once their eyes had met and he knew she had seen his desire, and in the same way, Catherine does not

dare to open herself to the “extreme exposure of true passion, and its links with pain and death” Heathcliff is willing to give her, and asks of her in return (Nussbaum 407). Because she cannot reciprocate his love in all its “nakedness” (Nussbaum 407), they are only truly reunited again death, the result of which is Heathcliff’s smile and wide open eyes on his deathbed (Newman 1038).

In the days leading up to his death, Heathcliff keeps looking at something unseen by Nelly, something that seems to give him both pleasure and pain (*Wuthering* 253). This ‘gaze of desire’ results in a “gaze of exultation” when Nelly finds him “dead and stark!” (*Wuthering* 256). From what Nelly tells us, it becomes clear he is seeing and talking to Catherine in the days leading up to his death. However, this happiness is not yet enough for him: “I’m too happy, and yet not happy enough. My soul’s bliss kills my body, but does not satisfy itself” (*Wuthering* 254). Only in his deathly gaze of exultation does his soul seem satisfied. Heathcliff’s search for his other self and its climax in his death shows us how gazing can be quite dangerous: through it, we have the possibility to make up for a sense of lost wholeness, but this “self-completion” might be synonymous with death (Newman 1038).

This might also explain why the male characters in *Wuthering Heights* are often afraid of a returning female gaze: this returning gaze makes them aware that a return to the self without interruption of the other is impossible because their self is not yet complete (Newman 1038). It is for this reason that Heathcliff teaches Hareton to fear young Catherine’s gaze (Newman 1036): “Don’t use any bad words; and don’t stare, when the young lady is not looking at you, and be ready to hide your face when she is” (*Wuthering* 168). As part of his revenge against the Lintons, Heathcliff likes to keep Hareton full of coarseness and ignorance (*Wuthering* 169), and in order for this plan to succeed, Hareton needs to stay mute and unable to return a look (Newman 1036).

Wuthering Heights underlines the brilliance of this plan by showing us what happens when Hareton does return a look. When Catherine tries to become friends with him, he still refuses to look at her, or shake her hand. Not knowing what else to do, Catherine kisses him on the cheek. Hareton's response to this loving touch is telling: "Whether the kiss convinced Hareton, I cannot tell; he was very careful, for some minutes, that his face should not be seen; and when he did raise it, he was sadly puzzled where to turn his eyes" (*Wuthering* 240). Catherine tries to give him a book as a present, asking him whether he wants to be her friend. Thus, in this instance, the male gaze is not annihilated or avoided but invited. When Nelly looks again at the pair, she sees how they have combined their gaze and are now both looking at the pictures in the book (*Wuthering* 240-241). In a moment unseen (and thus untold) by Nelly, Hareton must have returned a look, and their alliance is sealed by their combined gaze.

Thus, while the male gaze in *Jane Eyre* is superseded by the female gaze, the male gaze in *Wuthering Heights* needs a returning gaze. However, this meeting of the eyes is not free of dangers, as Catherine's betrayal of Heathcliff and Heathcliff's 'gaze of exultation' show us. In fact, the kiss of eyes can only take place outside the realm of storytelling, and with gazes that are 'similar' to one another. Catherine and Hareton are able to have a meaningful relationship without the betrayal of hearts, the proof of which we can see in the sameness of their eyes (Newman 1037) and the joint movement of them: together, they have bent their "radiant countenances [...] over the page" of a book (*Wuthering* 240), and lift their "precisely similar" eyes together when Mr. Heathcliff walks in (*Wuthering* 246). Between Catherine and Hareton, the male gaze is not annihilated or maimed, but invited and then defused: what *Wuthering Heights* shows us is "not a simple inversion in which the woman is permitted to turn the tables with an appropriating look back but a destruction of the hierarchical positioning of male and female that the gendered gaze entails" (Newton 1037).

2.6 *When our eyes touch, is it day or night?*

This chapter started with the claim that the separation between subject and object is a necessary quality of the male gaze: it is the distance between subject and object that makes it possible for the gazer to immediately return to their self, to deny the possibility of a disruption of their subjectivity. This distancing quality of seeing has often been contrasted with the immediacy and proximity that supposedly accompany every touch. In order to touch someone else, we need to come close enough; distance is what makes touch impossible. This seems one of the reasons why Luce Irigaray sees masculine desire expressing itself through visibility, while linking feminine desire with tactility (Young 69). As Weeks explains, the male gazer “looks at a female person as an erotic or aesthetic object” (468), and thus always from a certain distance.

The gaze is applied so that the objects can be understood in a way that fits the observer’s own ideas, so finding his own brilliance reflected in their ‘objectivity’ (Young 69). Young summarizes quite concisely how Irigaray contrasts this with feminine tactile desire:

Less concerned with identifying things, comparing them, measuring them in their relations to one another, touch immerses the subject in fluid continuity with the object, and for the touching subject the object touched reciprocates the touching blurring the border between self and other. (69)

However, she makes very clear that Irigaray immediately blurs the lines between seeing and touching, distance and immersion. She interprets touch as fingers or skin touching surfaces, but at the same time as the epitome of sensuality, including all other senses (Young 69). Thus, vision is not always necessarily distancing, appropriating, but can also be experienced as an immersion in surroundings—in light and color (Young 69). At the same time, while touching is immersion, sensing “within,” it experiences that which it touches and touches it as “ambiguous, continuous, but nevertheless differentiated” (Young 69-70).

Irigaray's discussion of the male gaze and feminine desire highlights how easily we can use our senses to appropriate some else's identity. Vision will not literally break skin, but in distancing and separating, it can 'break skin' from its subject: as feminist theory has illustrated profusely, objectifying women strips them of their subjectivity, to the point where they will internalize the gaze and subject themselves to the insecurities and fears that might accompany it.¹⁷ Irigaray's solution is to attribute tactile qualities to vision, arguing it can also be experienced as an immersion with whatever the viewer is looking at. At the same time, it is quite dangerous to speak of touch in terms of continuity and immersion. If touch breaches the gap between self and other, we run the risk of appropriating subjectivity. Derrida has shown us that touch is anything but immersion: it is potential violence, rupture, and discontinuity. This is why Irigaray emphasizes that toucher and touched are always differentiated.

Thus, every touch and every glance comes with the potential risk of appropriation, both by constituting the skin, the border, for the whole. The other is eliminated, and only an object, shaped by our own self, our own imagination, remains. This is why, in New Woman fiction, we often find female characters who challenge the male gaze directed at them. After all, the looked-on/touched can only be appropriated as long as the looker/toucher does not reflect on the possibility of reciprocity. This becomes very difficult when our eyes touch. Once we realize the subject we gaze at can return the look—can see the desire in our gaze—just like every instance of touching also opens us up to being touched, we have a few options, according to the Brontë sisters: making our own eyes invisible to the other, or engaging them in a meeting of the eyes. *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* have shown us that this 'kiss' of

¹⁷ See for instance Rachel Calogero's research after the effect of the male gaze on appearance concerns in college women in 2004, "A Test of Objectification Theory." With her research, Calogero demonstrates that even the anticipation of a male gaze, since it has been internalized by contemporary college women, result in greater body shame and social physique anxiety. This is exactly the type of internalization we also find in *Jane Eyre*, as she paints her an imaginary portrait of the beautiful Blanche Ingram, opposing it to a chalk drawing of her own "disconnected, poor, and plain" self (*Jane* 238).

the eyes is not easily done: it always comes with the danger of annihilation. At the same time, it also contains the promise of love and life. Thus, in answer to Derrida's question whether it is day or night when our eyes kiss, we can only answer: it can be both. The kiss holds the promise of both day *and* night (Secomb 460): "In the kiss of the eyes, it isn't day yet, it isn't night yet. A nightless, dayless point, still. But day and night themselves are promising each other" (Derrida 307).

3 Self-Touching-You: Feeling One's Self Touch(ed)

I wonder if they all come out of that wallpaper as I did? ~ narrator
in "The Yellow Wallpaper" (Charlotte Perkins Gilman 116)

The question central to the previous chapter can also be read in a different way, as Linnell Secomb points out in her article on Derrida and Nancy: instead of focusing on our eyes, we can also ask ourselves what happens when our I's touch (Secomb 458). According to Derrida, when our I's touch, we mourn, because this touch can only take place through an exposure to death: "This other heart self-touches you only to be exposed to death" (289). Whether we touch our selves—whether I touch my self or our selves touch each other—the 'I' that touches and the 'I' that feels the touch differ. There is even a difference between the I that feels the touch, and the I that is felt by the toucher. As Johnston and Malabou explain it: "There is always a third term, an unknown instance between me and myself. In the end, we have a series of 'you's'" (20). This 'unknown instance' is what Derrida calls 'not-I space' (175). When we reflect on what we touch, it becomes 'other', even if it is our self—hence the exposure to a moment of death and mourning. That is also why Derrida speaks of 'this other heart'. According to him, this is "the ultimate place of absolute mourning", the place where we keep that which we cannot keep inside, our identity:

The sensible but invisible and untouchable place for what one not only keeps committed to memory, not only in oneself, but in yourself in myself, when you are greater still, a heart in me greater than my heart, more alive than I, more singular and more other than what I can anticipate, know, imagine, represent, and remember.
(Derrida 290)

Thus, our heart *is* an other heart, and when we touch it, when our I's touch, it is always a 'self-touching you'.¹⁸

3.1 To self-touch you, my heart

As discussed in chapter 1, to touch is always to feel one's self touched. We can only touch when we can touch ourselves—when we realize that with every touch, our self is also touched. Without this realization, a touch cannot take place. In this sense, every touch is a self-touching you, a “*self-touch skin*” (Nancy, *Corpus* 36; trans. and qtd. in Derrida 278). We cannot touch upon the heart, without being haunted by a limit or skin. Touching hearts is quite literally the limit of touch, since “[h]earts never belong, at least there where they can be touched” (Derrida 273). We cannot self-touch our heart while it is still our heart, while it is still beating. Because we can never self-touch our heart, touch upon our own heart, Derrida claims that we should never be able to say ‘my heart’, unless we call someone else this way (273). This is love, a love that can only be conveyed through a ‘self-touching you’, and the realization that with this love, there is also the exposure to death, death to the other, death to you (Derrida 291). This is why Derrida starts his book with a question about the kiss of the eyes:

[T]he meeting of looks, eyes that see themselves in the eyes of the other should be an example of the ‘self-touching-you’ and be part of tactile experience; in short, they should involve skin—a caress or a kiss, eyes kissed by eyes—if desire or love passed through them. (290-291)

¹⁸ This ‘you’, this heart, is not just a figure of speech, but it is also our body, a “beating of the blood” (Derrida 267). When we talk about our heart as a symbol of our subjectivity, it also touches upon this beating heart, our body, and cannot be separated from it (Derrida 283). After all, our beating heart is just as intangible to our self-touch as our ‘I’: we cannot feel our own heart beating, and no one can hold our heart, can see or touch our whole heart as long as it is ours, as long as it goes through the process of diastoles and systoles.

When I self-touch you (which I can only do through love); when our eyes touch, our I's touch, they touch upon a limit, "lose the proper at the moment of touching upon it" (Derrida 111).

After all, truly connecting with someone's heart, either through touch or gaze, is impossible. Derrida identifies, with Nancy, that what William Cohen calls the human essence (xi) is the heart: "absolute intimacy of the limitless secret, no external border, absolute inside, crypt for oneself of an untouchable self-interiority, [...] inmost core of that which symbolizes the origin of life, within the body, by its displacement of it (*metabolē* of the blood)" (Derrida 267). After all, is "what the 'heart' names" not the "sanctuary of what one keeps when one can no longer keep anything—keep inside oneself, as one often says, to name what infinitely exceeds the inside?" (Derrida 290). Hints of this human essence or heart as a "sensible but invisible and untouchable place" (Derrida 290) can already be found in Charlotte Brontë's approach to embodiment, touch, and gaze, particularly in Jane's character herself. Jane experiences how hurtful other characters are in their attempts to touch on or gaze at her heart, to the point where she herself cannot truly touch on or gaze at her heart: parts of herself are denied. Thus, in order to connect with and understand other characters through vision without 'losing sight' of their inherent invisibility, Jane takes a marginal position as point of view.

Jane gazes mostly, at least most freely, from the margins. Not only is this the only place where she is able to do so without immediately being curbed by male authority, it is also the most considerate place from which to gaze, there where Jane can be considerate of the other's heart (and its invisibility) and its pull on her own: "He made me love him without looking at me" (*Jane* 259). Jane says this about Mr. Rochester, when she is able to gaze on him "without being observed" (258):

My master's colorless, olive face, square, massive brow, broad and jetty eyebrows, deep eyes, strong features, firm grim mouth,—all energy, will,—were not beautiful, according to rule; but they were more than beautiful to me: they were full of an

interest, an influence that quite mastered me,—*that took my feelings from my own power and fettered them in his.* (*Jane* 258-259; emphasis mine)

This awareness of the effect of gazing, the touch of her eyes on his skin, make this an experience of heteroaffection: even though Mr. Rochester does not look back at her, which does not make this a meeting of the eyes, it is a meeting of feelings, feelings that feel themselves in the feelings of the other. Either hiding away from the gaze or employing it for her own means, it seems Jane is aware of what Gagné calls the remainders or remnants, the effects of a touch and a gaze that tries to reach across differences.

To do so from the margins underlines how touching and gazing can never facilitate an immediate return to self, but also renders the self available to that which is other (Murphy 444). This is also what gives Jane the “acute pleasure” she experiences in gazing (*Jane* 258): it “is the heart itself, namely, this other heart that self-touches you, that belongs to you, that gives pleasure only there where pleasure is made all the more intense by not returning to me, by returning to me without returning to me, there where I self-touch you” (Derrida 284). If a touch at the heart is always the limit of touch, is always a self-touching you, can only take place in the kiss of the eyes (Derrida 283), it raises the question what happens in the literary texts, where Victorian women writers touch upon female identity, and whether they are successful in their attempts to represent female desire and sexuality. Can we touch ourselves (in writing)? Do the New Women in our short stories do so?

3.2 “... the ‘self’ is as indispensable as you”

Before we move on to the New Woman stories, let us return shortly to *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre*. Heathcliff’s gaze is more ‘self-touch me’ instead of ‘self-touch you’: in the end, he finds his death in a naked return of the gaze of desire, in what we can only suppose was a return look from his Catherine, his heart. For Jane and Catherine, the gaze they turn on

themselves is not so much a self-touching of their selves, but more a self-touching of the other. The experiences with a denied self seen in the mirror underline how difficult it is for Jane and Catherine to self-touch you: especially for Jane, what she sees is more ‘imp’ than human, more ‘other’ than ‘you’.

For Catherine (senior) it is perhaps even more difficult to self-touch you/her heart, since she is constantly positioning herself as other, opposite to the identity she has been given by those around her: “Throughout *Wuthering Heights* Cathy’s desire is scripted as a scene of otherness that transgresses or eludes the identifications that trope it” (Vine 359). First, as Catherine Earnshaw, she identifies herself with the one character who placed himself outside all identifiable structures in the text (Vine 348): “I *am* Heathcliff!” (*Wuthering* 64). Then, she explains to Nelly that while Heathcliff is her soul, she will still become ‘Catherine Linton’. And again, later on in the novel, when she is Catherine Linton, Heathcliff’s return again upsets her sense of self, in the end resulting in “delirious self-loss” (Vine 352): looking into the mirror, Catherine Linton does not recognize herself, but for a moment thinks she is still Catherine Earnshaw who identified herself as Catherine/Heathcliff. Steven Vine calls this movement of othering ‘wuthering’: “a passing of boundaries that takes the outside in and the inside out, where the familiar is made strange [...] and the strange comes to inhabit the familiar” (340).

Because Catherine is constantly ‘other’ that wuthers, her self keeps eluding her and she clearly has a hard time touching upon it. ‘Self-touching you’ includes both ‘self’ and ‘you’, and without self, it comes difficult to be open to the heart of you:

[I]n order for me to be touched in this way by you, I have to be able to touch *myself*. In the “self-touching you,” the “self” is as indispensable as you. A being incapable of touching itself could not bend itself to that which absolutely unfolds it, to the totally

other who, as totally other/like all others [*comme tout autre*], inhabits my heart as a stranger. (Derrida 291)

Throughout the novel, Catherine has sincere trouble connecting to the other characters. The only one she feels connected to is Heathcliff, but he too does not ‘inhabit her heart as a stranger’—on the contrary, she *is* him and he *is* her soul.

If Catherine is constantly ‘other’ that wuthers, what does that say about the ‘precisely similar’ (not other) eyes of Cathy and Hareton, who, according to Nelly Dean, are Catherine Earnshaw’s (*Wuthering* 246)? Love, a ‘self-touching-you’, is possible in the end, precisely because of the similar eyes. As other, Catherine continues to haunt the text, but as ‘precisely similar’ she can belong. As other, Catherine terrifies the other characters (except Heathcliff). As a meeting of the eyes, she is written back into the conventional narrative structures of a Victorian-domestic plot (Vine 355). However, it is striking this moment takes place in a moment not represented. As Newman claims, “representation is always already dominated by masculine power structures” (1037). The moment these precisely similar eyes touch each other—a moment of self-touching you, a kiss of the eyes—is not seen and has to be imagined, but cannot be written down. This leaves us with the question whether self-touching you is represented in “The Yellow Wallpaper”, “A Cross Line”, “The Undefinable”, and *Six Chapters of a Man’s Life*.

The New Woman was a cultural construct most prominently discussed around the *fin de siècle* (Showalter viii) and served to challenge the Victorian images of women as either angel or whore (Hager 28). Through topics such as economic independence, female sexuality, political emancipation, feminine aestheticism, and relationships outside marriage (Showalter viii; Gagnier 104, fn3), New Woman writers attempted to illustrate the diversity of female identity:

New Woman fiction was about the possibility and potential of a cultural construct that embodied the chaotic potential of social disorder through its constructed instability as an identity; it was about questioning the unitary nature of subjectivity. (Hager 28)

In the short stories we will discuss, this questioning of a unitary subjectivity is mostly done in and through the different relationships of the characters. Thus, the New Woman writers attempted to represent their thoughts on female identity, attempted to touch upon themselves as 'New Woman'. However, as we will see in the next few paragraphs, this self-touching you turns out to be quite problematic: the characters in our short stories find it difficult to recognize the 'you', the other heart in their heart; or, like Catherine, struggle with a fragmented or denied self. What is more, even though topics such as female desire are narrated "with unprecedented candor" (Showalter viii), explicit touching still often remains unmentioned. However, since the New Woman writers clearly strove to touch upon feminine sensuality, we will ask ourselves whether their stories managed to touch their selves.

3.3 *Closer into my heart*

One example of a story that is told with unprecedented candor is Victoria Cross' *Six Chapters of a Man's Life*.¹⁹ It relates how Cecil Ray becomes enamored with Theodora, a "queer" young woman of means (*Six* 10). When Cecil has to move abroad for work, Theodora shows up with the proposition to go with him. In order to avoid a scandal, she is dressed in man's clothes and has cut her long hair short. Because her beauty consists of "features straight as a billiard cue" (*Six* 9) and a "curious masculine shade upon the upper lip" ("Theodora" 26), it is difficult to see that she is not a "handsome boy of nineteen or twenty" (*Six* 114), which, to Cecil, seems to be part of her charm. Therefore, he decides to take her with him. Cecil's

¹⁹ "Theodora: A Fragment" is literally a fragment of a larger narrative, a novel called *Six Chapters of a Man's Life*. Although Victoria Cross had already completed writing the novel in 1894 (before the publication of "Theodora" in 1895), it was not published until 1903 (Mitchell 3).

passion, Theodora's androgynous beauty, and their extramarital relationship "create an atmosphere of ambiguous sexuality" (Showalter xi).

Compared to *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights*, "Theodora: A Fragment" is quite explicit when it comes to touch. Cecil's desire is fired up by Theodora's looks, gazes, and touches. Often, he feels himself quite overcome by the touch of her eyes or hand: "Spontaneously, whether I would or not, [my nerves and muscles] responded to [her look], and my fingers laced themselves tightly round this morsel of velvet-covered fire" ("Theodora" 19). However, throughout the story, these touches often seem to be initiated by Cecil—in fact, Theodora is often described as not playing an active role at all in these moments of touch. The first time Cecil and Theodora shake hands, hers does not seem to return his touch, but merely disappear in his:

It was a very curious hand, so extremely soft that as my fingers closed tighter and tighter over it, it seemed to yield and yield and collapse more and more like a piece of velvet within one's grasp. Where were its own bones and muscles, its own strength and will? I tried to find them by pressing it to my utmost, but it only sank, soft and burning, deeper into my palm and lay there till I released it. (*Six* 34)

A similar experience occurs when they kiss. Although Cecil describes Theodora's lips as "burning" ("Theodora" 36), they remain passive: "She gave me no kiss nor the faintest caress in return" (*Six* 110).

With this narrative, Victoria Cross chose to write a female character who is not afraid of passionate caresses, who even seeks them out, but whose touch is never recognized by her lover. Cecil has trouble finding whatever is supposed to touch him back, and as such, Theodora's touch remains untouchable: her touch seems to be the limit of tactility, only skin ("a piece of velvet"). When they touch, he is convinced she has completely abandoned herself, and this is what makes her so soft and passive. He explains it as a woman's

“compliance”: “It was her sudden, complete abandonment of self, the entire throwing away of her own will, the apparent absolute merging of all volition into another’s, that must have always set ablaze all the manhood of a man who loved her” (*Six* 111).

However, Cecil seems to forget that instead of ‘throwing away her own will,’ their affair is made possible because Theodora *asserts* her will. When she first comes to him disguised as a young man, he does not want her to join him, calling it a “sacrifice” (*Six* 103). However, she makes it clear it is nothing of the sort: “I am making no sacrifice. I am simply striving after my own great wish” (*Six* 104). Cecil argues to himself that her desire to go with him is a direct result of his own passion, and in a way, he is right. Theodora is already able, and willing, to love him in his relation to *his* pleasure instead of in his relation to her own pleasure. This is exactly what Cecil himself has identified as “the only love which is worthy of offering to a fellow human being, the one which elevates—and the only one—both giver and receiver” (“Theodora” 14). Thus, her love is an abandonment of her self: she puts his desires first.

However, it seems like his initial interpretation of Theodora’s passive touch is not entirely correct. As he said himself, the lesson of selfless love is one he had not learned yet (“Theodora” 14). Cecil’s inability to feel Theodora return his touch does not mean that Theodora has denied her self, but that she aligns her self to complement his. After all, before they share their first passionate kiss, Theodora has made it quite clear she does not believe in self-denial. When Theodora comes to visit Cecil, they share a conversation in which they discuss Venus, the goddess of desire, and Shiva, the god of denial. When Theodora places her ring on a miniature of Venus, thus crowning her, Cecil feels an “unexplained feeling of rage”, and responds by crowning Shiva (“Theodora” 29). His response hurts Theodora, and she explains to him that Shiva is a “false, absurd, and unnatural god,” because self-denial is impossible (“Theodora” 30). She prefers Venus, because gods like her “are merely natural

instincts personified” (“Theodora” 30). Thus, her actions do not stem from a self-denial, but from natural, human instincts.

During their travels together, Cecil struggles with what he calls Theodora’s “reliance upon self, this independence, this freedom that she gave to me and took for herself” (*Six* 188-189). Whenever her ‘natural instincts’ incite his jealousy, whenever she becomes “illegible to him” (Rojas 2), he becomes furious. The first instance is when she crowns Venus, the second time is when Cecil returns to their room expecting to see Theodora there, waiting for him, only to find her enjoying her/himself within a group of other young men. As a red line through the story runs Cecil’s burning desire to make her his, to “take her in my arms and hold her, control her, assert my will over hers” (“Theodora” 35-36). However, as Rojas points out in her article on Theodora’s androgyny, whenever Theodora’s action do not fit Cecil’s preconceived notions of a masculinized woman or feminized man (3), whenever she asserts her ‘natural instincts’, a “rage of jealous fury” takes over (*Six* 166).

In these moments of fury, Cecil feels capable of murder: “In those moments I had only one instinct, one thought, the murderous desire to kill her” (*Six* 224). The last time he feels like this is when, after spending some time at an Egyptian place of entertainment, the natives see the couple kiss, and figure out that Cecil’s companion is a woman. Cecil and Theo are stopped from leaving the establishment and are given an ultimatum: Cecil is allowed to leave, but Theo must stay for a week to ‘take care of a sick master’ (*Six* 221). Cecil sees only one way out, and that is to shoot Theodora then and there, in order to save her “honour” (*Six* 225). His wishes are quite graphic, and touch close to the heart: “To check those quick heart-beats, to see the veins drain out their blood, and the whole malleable body grow damp and pulseless, would have been to me now the keenest, supremest pleasure, surpassing even the ultimate moment of possession” (*Six* 224). Theodora, although afraid of him, stops him with mockery and contempt, pointing out that this wish is merely a manifestation of his own “egotistical,

jealous, tyrannical passion” for her body (*Six* 225), and that their lives should be more important (*Six* 226-227).

Despite his fury, Cecil realizes Theodora is right, and that he cannot take from her what has not been given freely: “I had had all from Theodora. True, but all had been given me. I had asked, and she had granted. I had never bent or broken her will to mine” (*Six* 228). The last touch they share before they part is one in which Theodora does not seem passive at all, one that continues to haunt Cecil in his dreams: “All her body burned against me, as we strained each other, breast to breast, her hands clasped my throat like bands of hot iron, her lips on mine seemed drawing out the life” (*Six* 229). While at first Cecil’s own passion is central in the touches they share, here, after recognizing Theodora’s gift, it is no longer her body that seems to disappear in his, but his body and life that sustain her.

However, Cecil’s inability to recognize Theodora’s touch and validate her natural instincts leave Theodora with a trauma that, in the end, make her take her own life. After all, it is not the loss of her honor that breaks her spirit, but her fear that she is repulsive to him now: ““Oh, I have lost you! I know I have lost you! You won’t care for me now”” (*Six* 238). When returned to Cecil after a week, she is assaulted, sick, bruised, and has sores all over her face. She tries to avoid his arms, his touch, but he tries to show her his love by holding her close: “I drew her closer into my heart” (*Six* 241). Here, Cecil’s action foreshadows Derrida’s idea of love: now that his touches do not return himself to his self, he is able to “bend [him]self to that which absolutely unfolds [him], to the totally other who [...] inhabits [his] heart as a stranger” (Derrida 291). Not until now is Cecil able to put Theodora’s comfort before his own, not until now does Cecil realize he loves her unconditionally:

That which I had striven vaguely to attain and had not, in the flush of pleasure and the satisfaction of the senses, I had gained now in pain and shame, and when she came back to me disfigured and degraded—I loved unselfishly. (*Six* 239)

Only after setting aside his egotism, his own self-importance, is Cecil able to love Theodora for who she is, willing to put her needs before his—“to love it in its relation to *its* pleasure and not in its relation to our own pleasure” (“Theodora” 14). After all, pleasure is made all the more intense by “not returning to me, by returning to me without returning to me, there where I self-touch you” (Derrida 284).

3.4 Feeling one’s self touched

When Theodora is recovering from the abuse inflicted upon her body, she soliloquizes on what Cecil must think of her now:

“[...] men only care for a woman for what they can get out of her—their love is of no worth—you can’t rely on them—I can’t meet him—[...]he thinks I ought to have liked being shot, and as I didn’t he will not forgive me—[...]he loved his own pleasure—they are all alike—I doubt if he could love impersonally—[...]and then he’ll talk about his honour—men always do when they want to get rid of a woman—and I can’t live without him [...].” (*Six* 266)

These heart-breaking ramblings touch upon an issue that seemed to concern other New Woman writers as well: men’s self-importance, the absence of a self-touching you because women were never considered to be a ‘self’/‘you’.

With “The Undefinable: A Fantasia,” Sarah Grand shows us how men and women can help each other, but only if men are able to look at women and see more than the iconic images of angel or whore, which only focus on what man can get out of woman:

‘With all my faults, nothing uncommonly great can be done without my countenance,’ this was what she seemed to have said to me; ‘but my countenance you shall not have to perfection until the conceit of you is conquered, and you acknowledge all you owe me. Give me my due; and when *you* help *me*, I will help *you*!’ (“Undefinable” 287)

The story centers on a male painter and his female model, and it builds up to a kiss of the eyes, the moment where the model forces the painter to look beyond the traditional views of women, and really look at her, at who she truly is. In order to truly ‘see’ the woman, to self-touch her with his eyes, the painter needs to open up to the ‘you’ in the self-touching you, without immediately returning to his own self.

When we first meet the painter, he is looking at his last portrait, and contemplating “the undefinable of genius” (“Undefinable” 263), his own genius. Thus, so far, his paintings have served as an immediate return to his own self-importance. However, in this case, he feels the painting does not live up to his own standards, and this worries him. When a new model arrives at his door, she shows him that, in order to paint a ‘genius’ portrait of someone else, he needs to put aside his own conceit, and look at what is really there, not at what the outside he sees might mean for himself. She does so by inviting a kiss of the eyes:

‘Now!’ she exclaimed, clapping her hands together, ‘stand straight and look at me!’

Like one electrified, I obeyed.

‘I am the woman who stood at the outer door of your studio and summoned you to judge me; the same whom, in your spiritual obscurity, you then found wanting. Rend now that veil of flesh, and look! Who was at fault?’

‘I was,’ burst from me involuntarily.

When I had spoken, I clasped my palette, and hastily selected a brush. Her exaltation had rapidly gained upon me. I was consumed with the rage to paint her—or, rather, to paint that in her which I suddenly saw and could reproduce upon canvas, but could not otherwise express. (“Undefinable” 285-286)

Here, the kiss of the eyes clearly takes place in a moment of violence: ‘rend that veil of flesh’. The result is a rage to paint that which he suddenly sees in her. A mist gathers before his eyes, and when it clears up, something the narrator cannot touch upon—her heart?—is revealed to

him: “there penetrated to the inner recesses of my being [...]—But the tone-poets must find the audible expression to it. My limit is to make it visible” (“Undefinable” 286). The touch of her eyes makes it possible to rend her skin, to feel himself touched by her, and return (with his eyes and paint brush) this touch at the heart of the other.

Unfortunately, the opening of the kiss is only short-lived. While the painter is painting, he reflects on what he is doing, and he calls it an ‘exercise of power’: “But never again, I said to myself as I painted, shall mortal stand before a work of mine unmoved” (“Undefinable” 286). He turns immediately from the beauty of what he sees to his own self-importance, and the result is quite “disastrous”: from seeing a “glorious light” in her eyes, he returns to “that cold, critical expression” which he encountered at the beginning of the story, and which repels him (“Undefinable” 286, 267). The model leaves him, and thus the story ends with an unfinished painting and a painter who has learned that men and woman can help each other, but only if he can conquer his own conceit.

Just like Sarah Grand (and other New Woman writers), George Egerton also draws a clear divide between ‘man’ and ‘woman’ in her story “A Cross Line”. However, while man and woman can help each other in Grand’s story, in “A Cross Line” they continually “speak to each other in crossed lines because their psyches are so dissimilar” (Showalter xiii). The female protagonist in this story is a married woman whose thoughts and inner visions are related in detail, while her husband and her lover have no idea what goes on in her head. When she meets her lover for the first time, they have a conversation about fishing. Although she agrees with him that fishing “makes a chap feel good,” he wonders “what the devil is she amused at” (“Cross” 49-50). When compared to her husband, the narrator lets us know that “[t]here is a singular soft monotony in his voice; the organ with which she replies is capable of more varied expression” (“Cross” 53).

These more varied expressions often are not spoken out loud, but take place in her mind's eye. Most memorable is perhaps her eroticized vision of herself, dancing in front of “hundreds of faces upturned towards her” (“Cross” 58):

She can see herself with parted lips and panting, rounded breasts, and a dancing devil in each glowing eye, sway voluptuously to the wild music that rises, now slow, now fast, now deliriously wild, seductive, intoxicating, with a human note of passion in its strain. (“Cross” 58-59)

In this moment, she touches herself with her “inseeing” eyes, and her imagined audience answers her excitement with a “shiver of feeling that quivers up to her from the dense audience” (“Cross” 59). This moment of seeing herself—although an empowering example of female desire which, until the *fin de siècle*, often remained unwritten in Victorian literature—can only take place because the woman places herself outside the traditional English home: the daydream takes place while she lying outside next to a stream, and in the daydream itself she fancies herself in Arabia, in “an ancient theatre out in the open air” with snakes coiling around her body (“Cross” 58).

In her attempt to touch upon “the untamed spirit that dwells in her” (“Cross” 58), she turns her self into an other, an Other, a cultural construct appropriated for her own enjoyment. Her daydream is a gaze in which the “eternal wildness” which she argues dwells in every woman becomes objectified. Not only does she find it difficult to touch upon herself, to self-touch her heart, she is also aware of the fact that although she is often able to help other people, they cannot give her anything in return:

‘I have touched sore places they showed me and healed them, but they never got at me. I have been for myself, and helped myself, and borne the burden of my own mistakes.’ (“Cross” 61)

She prides herself on her self-sufficiency, and realizes that she is “written in black letter to most” (“Cross” 61)—illegible, like Theodora was to Cecil. Like Theodora, this means her heart often remains untouched: the height of intimacy, of touching at the heart, for her is that her lover does not misunderstand her, while he realizes she remains “as impenetrable as a sphinx” to him (“Cross” 61).

Thus, the practice of self-touching you is unfamiliar to this woman; that is, until she realizes she is pregnant. Throughout the story, she suffers from a “qualmish feeling” (“Cross” 51), and when she contemplates that it is strange how things come to life, she realizes something inside her comes is coming to life: “What! she sits bolt upright and holds tightly to the chair, and a questioning, awesome look comes over her face” (“Cross” 67). While contemplating what is happening inside her self, she also loses contact with this self, because it is experienced as other:

I—still I—am the touching and the touched, but if some not-I (material thing, real [reell] space, extension, as opposed to phenomenological “spreading out and spreading into,” and so forth) did not come to insinuate itself between the touching and the touched, I would not be able to posit myself as I, and “say” (as Husserl says), This is not I, this is I, I am I. (Derrida 175)

During a pregnancy, a woman is, within, both ‘me’ and ‘you’ at the same time, completely immersing, fluid, but also ambiguous, differentiated. Her pregnancy *is* a self-touching you: suddenly, she ‘feels’ inside herself, feels herself touched by this ‘you’ that comes to life within her.²⁰

²⁰ In her article on George Egerton’s early stories, Nicole Fluhr even argues that the child is in fact ‘conceived’ by the mother through her relationships with other women: “this mother-to-be conceives (of) her child via imaginative identifications with women: her mother, the memory of whom allows the protagonist to apprehend its existence, and Lizzie [the maid], whose experience of motherhood will provide her with the practical guidance and emotional support that her dead mother is unable to give” (258).

3.5 *I am writing you*

Although critics argue the attitudes towards the idea of a New Woman were quite contradictory at times, a few common themes emerge from the literary texts of the *fin de siècle*: “female sexual desire, maternal identity, and women’s representations of women” (Fluhr 243). Thus, these narratives all deal with relationships, often those between men and women, as the literary texts discussed here illustrate. Within these relationships, we have seen people hurt each other because they do not kiss each other with their eyes/I’s. In “Theodora,” Cecil does not recognize Theodora’s reciprocal touch until he is able to put her interests before his. Only then is he able to draw her closer into his heart. In “The Undefinable,” a painter learns the life-changing lesson that man and woman can only help each other when their eyes kiss. And in “A Cross Line,” self-touching-you becomes a very private, feminine experience when the main character feels something ‘not-I,’ a baby, in her body.

While these narratives deal with touches between and within different people, the writing itself also touches upon bodies. After all, writing, love and sense is “[t]o touch oneself, to be touched right at oneself, outside oneself, without anything being appropriated” (Nancy, “Elliptical” 109-110; qtd. in Derrida 275). As Derrida explains, this is what Nancy calls the “exscribed”: it is “written away or effaced” (Miller 267), meaning that although these texts try to tell us something, they are written only on the skin, on the limit of the limit, just like every self-touching you, and are unable to touch upon the heart. The reader is an essential part of this literary self-touching you: “In the end, your gaze touches upon the same character tracings that mine are touching now, and you are reading me, and I am writing you” (Nancy, *Corpus* 46-47; trans. and qtd. in Derrida 225).

Our last New Woman writer, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, uncannily foreshadows Derrida’s and Nancy’s take on writing and self-touching you with her short story “The Yellow Wallpaper”. While living in a “colonial mansion” (“Yellow” 98) with her family for a few weeks, the first person narrator spends most of her time in a room with “smouldering

unclean yellow” wallpaper (“Yellow” 98). She has just given birth, and they have moved here temporarily because she is to have “perfect rest and all the air I could get” (“Yellow” 100). The story is written in her personal journal, and it becomes clear that although she feels ill, her husband, a physician, does not believe that she is sick (“Yellow” 98). According to her husband, she needs rest in order to regain her strength, but she believes that work might actually do her some good. In order to have something to do, she confides her thoughts to “dead paper” (“Yellow” 98). While her husband and his sister oppose to her writing, because they believe it might make her more tired and nervous, she believes the writing might “relieve the press of ideas and rest me” (“Yellow” 103). Thus, she uses her writing to touch upon her ideas and give her body and mind some rest. However, her writing seems to go beyond that.

Throughout her entries, the wallpaper takes up more and more space in her writing. At first, she describes how she only looks at the paper, which seems to fascinate her almost in a morbid way:

It is dull enough to confuse the eye in following, pronounced enough to constantly irritate and provoke study, and when you follow the lame uncertain curves for a little distance they suddenly commit suicide—plunge off at outrageous angles, destroy themselves in unheard of contradictions. (“Yellow” 101)

As the story progresses, the wallpaper is featured more prominently. It starts to stare back at her: there a spot that “lolls like a broken neck and two bulbous eyes stare at you upside down” (“Yellow” 103). Very soon, she writes she identifies a shape behind the yellow pattern, that of “a woman stooping down and creeping about” (“Yellow” 107). The paper seems to move, and the narrator feels like the woman behind the pattern is shaking it, “as if she wanted to get out” (“Yellow” 108). Taking up more and more space in her text, the woman tells us the paper gives off a “yellow smell,” and starts to show more wear and tear:

There is a very funny mark on this wall, low down, near the mopboard. A streak that runs round the room. It goes behind every piece of furniture, except the bed [which is bolted to the wall], a long, straight, even *smooch*, as if it had been rubbed over and over. (“Yellow” 112)

Once our narrator realizes she has seen the ‘wallpaper woman’ outside, she writes how she means to pry the top pattern off from the under one, and then, when the woman gets out, to tie her with a rope, so that she cannot get away. The story ends when her husband bursts into the room and finds her creeping around the room, her shoulder fitting nicely into that smooch around the wall and most of the wallpaper peeled off.

The language the narrator uses to describe the woman behind the wallpaper is reminiscent of Jane’s and Catherine’s experiences of looking into a mirror: the shape they see is eerie, almost ghostly. However, just like Jane and Catherine, we know the shape is familiar. With Jane, we know it is her reflection merely because she tells us she is looking into a mirror: there is not one moment when she sees herself in her reflection. Catherine also does not recognize herself at first, only to realize later that this was the case because she thought she was a girl again. The narrator of “The Yellow Wallpaper” *does* recognize herself in the woman behind the paper at the end, when she writes down: “I don’t like to *look* out of the windows even—there are so many of those creeping women, and they creep so fast. I wonder if they all come out of that wallpaper as I did?” (“Yellow” 116). Despite the attempts of those around her to keep her from writing, it is this writing that enabled her to touch upon this denied self, to give it shape and color, and finally free it:

‘I’ve got out at last,’ said I, ‘in spite of you and Jane. And I’ve pulled off most of the paper, so you can’t put me back!’

Now why should that man have fainted? But he did, and right across my path by the wall, so that I had to creep over him every time! (“Yellow” 117)

In the yellow wallpaper/"The Yellow Wallpaper," our gazes touch upon the same character tracings the narrator/writer was touching while writing them, and we are reading her, and she writing us.

4 Female Autonomy or a Tactile Offering?

I had had all from Theodora. True, but all had been given me. I had asked, and she had granted. I had never bent or broken her will to mine. ~ Cecil Ray
in *Six Chapters of a Man's Life* (Cross 228).

“The Yellow Wallpaper” has often been read as an empowering story about a very feminine experience. Charlotte Perkins Gilman herself explained in a later article that she wrote the short story because she wanted it “to save people from being driven crazy,” explaining how she herself “suffered from a severe and continuous nervous breakdown tending to melancholia—and beyond” and how she knows it saved at least one woman “from a similar fate” (Perkins Gilman, “Why”). In these narratives, both imaginative and autobiographical, the woman in the story is prescribed as little distractions as possible, and preferably not to engage in any intellectual work: Perkins Gilman was told “never to touch pen, brush or pencil again as long as I lived” (“Why”). Simply by writing her story, by letting her female protagonist tell the story, she defies the “rest cure” forced on her by male authority, and touches upon her own experiences as a body (Showalter, “Killing” 210).

Keeping the topic of this thesis in mind, it is striking to read that Charlotte Perkins Gilman was told specifically not to *touch* anything that could serve as a creative outlet for her intellectuality. The angel in the house was allowed tactile work; in fact, it was expected of her to work in the kitchen, clean the house, sew and nurse (Perkins Gilman, “Extinct” 48). The problem was that this was often the only work considered to be appropriate for women, which was something that did not sit well with women writers. Jane summarizes their “silent revolt” when she tells her reader:

Women are supposed to be very calm generally: but women feel just as men feel; they need exercise for their faculties, and a field for their efforts, as much as their brothers do; they suffer from too rigid a restraint, too absolute a stagnation, precisely as men would suffer; and it is narrow-minded in their more privileged fellow-creatures to say that they ought to confine themselves to making puddings and knitting stockings, to playing on the piano and embroidering bags. (*Jane* 161)

For Jane too, picking up her pen and telling her story has given her a claim on her identity: that of Jane Eyre, and that of Edward's wife (*Jane* 679).

Narrating feminine experiences, female New Woman writers such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Sarah Grand, and others, attempted to destroy the persistent Victorian image of 'woman' as 'angel in the house' (Showalter, "Killing"). As Showalter shows us, many woman writers have tried to kill this image of virtuous shadow, which taught them it was a woman's business "to assuage, to soothe, to comfort, to delight" her 'owner', the husband (Perkins Gilman, "Extinct" 48). This image prevented women to write, paint, or create in any other way "the truth about [her] own experiences as a body" (Woolf, qtd. in Showalter, "Killing" 207). Often being reduced to an image, women had a hard time touching upon those experiences, which made it difficult for them to connect to themselves and to others on a very human level.²¹ Touching a pen, brush or pencil, women writers were able to create a lasting narrative—tangible proof of their thoughts, feelings, and personal experiences. Through touch, a woman can show her intellect to others, and thus connect to them on a human level.

²¹ This thesis deals with nineteenth century, hence my use of the past tense. However, Showalter shows in her article "Killing the Angel in the House: The Autonomy of Women Writers" that the anger against the angel in the house bled far into in twentieth century. Whether we have finally gotten rid of her in the twenty-first is a question for another time and place.

4.1 Autonomous women: dynamic selves

In order to free themselves of the angel in the house, New Woman writers seem to have written their stories with a common goal in mind: that of female autonomy. According to Showalter, not only women writers from the *fin de siècle* have fought in the “war for artistic autonomy”; it is a battle that has been continuous ever since women “picked up the pen” (“Killing” 207). However, female New Woman writers seem to have taken up their weapons with extra fervor. In her article on autonomy and independence, Regenia Gagnier explains that as a trope, New Women were very diverse. What makes them identifiable as a group (and as a type of literary character) is their claim on autonomy (Gagnier 105). As opposed to the self-affirmation of independence often asserted by male authors at the end of the nineteenth century, female writers of the *fin de siècle* focused on relational freedom: “What New Women wanted, collectively, was freedom, autonomy, not ‘power over’ but ‘power to,’ empowerment” (Gagnier 105).

Gagnier explains how autonomy for New Woman writers meant individual development through relationship (106). As discussed in previous chapters, touch specifically is a relational sense: touching always brings us into contact with another, can even make us aware of our self-as-other. We can see this in the literary texts we have discussed so far, even the ones written before Sarah Grand coined the term ‘New Woman’: Jane, Catherine and Cathy, the wives in “The Yellow Wallpaper” and “A Cross Line”, Theodora, and the painter’s muse in “The Undefinable” all claim their own unique identity in relation to the people in their lives.²² Even Mr. Rochester, Heathcliff, the lover in “A Cross Line”, Cecil, and the painter in “The Undefinable” divert from the path of ‘rigid independence’ (Gagnier 106).

²² It might very well be that women focused on individual development through relationships mainly because this was the only option available to them. Complete independence was not even remotely part of their reality, and thus perhaps difficult to imagine. However, characters like Jane Eyre and Theodora show that, even when women were financially independent, and thus did not need others to help them satisfy their basic needs, they still actively sought out and thrived on relationships.

These characters need each other, which we can see in their attempts to let their eyes and I's touch.

“The Yellow Wallpaper” is the cautionary tale of what happens when a woman is denied relationships. The rest cure consists of a minimal amount of distractions, which means her husband discourages her from being around other people, or writing anything, which makes it nearly impossible to keep in touch with those around her. In the end, she even becomes quite paranoia towards those who love her: she keeps her writing a secret to them and jealously monitors their supposed interest in the wallpaper. Above all, she does not want them to find out about the denied self hiding behind the pattern in the paper: “Did that not sound innocent? But I know she was studying that pattern, and I am determined that nobody shall find it out but myself!” (“Yellow” 111). The end result? A woman who is able to connect to her denied self through very tactile acts, such as writing and ripping off the wallpaper, but is driven crazy in the process.

Perhaps one of the most well-known stories of people who *need* each other, *Wuthering Heights* also shows autonomy is all about relationships with *others*. Heathcliff and Catherine (senior) are both unable to develop their selves, because their relationship is not one in which they encounter an other: they are two sides of the same self, and as such, their desire and inability to be together is both self-affirming (“Whatever our souls are made of, his and mine are the same”) and self-destructive (“... in breaking [your heart], you have broken mine”). Brontë resolves this dilemma in the relationship between Hareton and Cathy: although their eyes are precisely similar to Catherine's, they are not the same; and in the kiss of these eyes, they encounter one another. The relationship makes her more caring, and him less uncouth.

The positive effects of relationships when it comes to individual development, the influences of encountering and interacting with an other on one's sense of self, are underlined specifically in “The Undefinable” and “A Cross Line”. In these cases, autonomy is also

inherently female: in “The Undefinable”, man needs the challenging attitude of woman in order to grow; in “A Cross Line”, woman experiences her feminine sense of self particularly in pregnancy. In Sarah Grand’s story, it seems to be the male protagonist who benefits the most from his relationship with his female muse. The muse makes it very clear to him that his undefinable genius can only shine forth when he tries to paint that which he sees when their eyes kiss: he needs to set aside his own ego and try to connect with her subjectivity. She, on her part, admits she is there because she cannot paint herself, and thus needs his ‘genius’ to “rend that veil of flesh” and to paint that which is “in” her (“Undefinable” 285-286). George Egerton gives men even less credit in her story: women will always remain a mystery to them. In fact, the story finds its solution in an almost literal self-touching-you: the protagonist realizes she is pregnant, feels the baby, ‘you’, inside her, and bonds with her maid over this female experience of carrying an other inside her body.

What all these narratives illustrate is that female autonomy, the individual development through relationships, is experienced as an interaction between gazer and ‘gazed at’, toucher and touched, self and other, interior and exterior. While ‘independence’ asks for an affirmation of the self as it is already known, the women writers of the *fin de siècle* were not afraid to write characters with dynamic selves, who develop and change because of the relationships they have with those around them. The tactile interactions confirm their sense of female embodiment, but also defeat their sense of a coherent subjectivity, because the bodies and identities of those around them permeate the boundaries of their subjectivity. Remember, as we have discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, this is also what William Cohen identified in his readings of Victorian literature: the characters’ senses confirm the ‘other’ they encounter, because they interact with each other’s materiality, while, at the same time, coherence/possibility of self is defeated, because this same materiality disintegrates subjectivity.

4.2 *How to kill the specter of the New Woman*

This unmaking in materiality shows similarities with Derrida's claim that we lose the proper at the moment of touching upon it. However, Cohen's interpretation of the formulation of the self through the unmaking (of the body) lies closer to Merleau-Ponty's philosophy than Derrida's (Cohen 132, 133). Cohen argues in favor of a reading that does not, cannot, dismiss the materiality of the body and its influence on Victorian ideas of selfhood and soul. Instead, his reading of Victorian texts "registers the primacy of the material that *is* human and, at the same time, prevents that material from becoming fixed and left behind by an idea of ethereal, transcendent, or universal personhood" (Cohen 131; emphasis in original). However, in his analysis, the emphasis lies on getting to know the self through the unmaking of the material, while Derrida shows us the self is mediated, expropriated. Thus, Cohen seems to imply there is a self to return to, one that is unmade in materiality, while Derrida underlines that even the notion of a self that can be unmade is mediated.

Unfortunately, the same implication lies in the use of the term 'autonomy'. While Cohen and Gagnier, respectively, show clearly that a sense of identity in Victorian and New Woman literature is relational, and thus influenced by an other, 'you', autonomy does not encompass the 'self-touching-you' we have seen is inherent in every tactile experience, because autonomy implies a return to self, the idea that there is a body proper which we can talk and write about. With every touch we have discussed so far, there comes a moment of potential violence, the disruption of any sense of self-consciousness. The 'not-I' that comes with every touch makes our self untouchable, and it is this irreducible spacing that makes autonomy impossible:

You, metronome of my heteronomy, you will always resist that which, in my 'self-touching,' could dream of the reflexive or specular autonomy of self-presence (be it

that of the *Dasein*) or of self-consciousness, absolute knowledge. (Derrida 290; emphasis in original)

Thus, although autonomy seems to embrace a relational attitude towards identity, it implies we can get to know our interiority by letting it come into contact with exteriority. As explained in the previous chapters, self-touching-you makes it clear that it is impossible to return to whatever we consider to be our 'self', because whenever we touch upon it, we appropriate it, which makes it 'other' to us.

For Derrida, this moment of irreducible spacing, of appropriation without incorporation, is essential if we ever want to approach the topic of identity. Remember, "[t]o speak meaningfully of the self, and of the world, is to acknowledge the force of some exteriority, parsing, and rupture" (Murphy 445). If we continue to apply the term 'autonomy' to the sense of embodiment as presented by our literary characters, if we continue to imply in one form or another we can reach them, we are confining them to oblivion. We run the risk of replacing of specter for another: the angel in the house for a New Woman. When we are discussing literary characters and tropes, it sometimes makes sense to think in categories and definitions. After all, these are literary characters, and as such, they already are 'images', words for us to read. But these characters were written by real-life women, human beings who struggled to be seen as such. With his ideas on touching, Derrida has shown us that if we focus on the tactile experiences of these characters, we might engage with them in a 'self-touching-you', we might kill the specter of the New Woman by reaching towards their narratives, while realizing that the spacing between is remains irreducible.

4.3 An offering

Erin Manning, while defining and discussing a politics of touch, points out that touching is always only reaching, an offering between you and me: touching reminds us

... that all gestures are incomplete, that to reach toward the other can never be conceived of as more (or less) than the act of reaching, for the other cannot be *discovered* as such. [...] As I touch you, there is only the saying, the reaching. (§40; emphasis in original)

This reaching is an offering, of me to you, and this can never take place without remainder, without return (Manning §43). Manning attempts to formulate a politics of touch in the context of the tango, and within this dance, something is offered—an act of giving takes place—between two people through touching, and Manning calls this ‘meaning’: “[T]he body excribes meaning, *gives meaning* to an other, without holding meaning prisoner. As I reach out to touch you, I allow the exchange to have meaning, a meaning that *remains* transitory, sensual and sensitive” (Manning §44; emphasis mine).

Six Chapters of a Man’s Life illustrates what happens when a body does not excribe meaning when touching. In this novel, the dynamics of taking and giving play a big role. Throughout the narrative, we often read how Cecil ‘takes’ Theodora’s touch, without recognizing how she returns it. Cecil himself is aware of this, but underscores that he does not take any liberties with her: “I had had all from Theodora. True, but all had been given me. I had asked, and she had granted. I had never bent or broken her will to mine” (*Six* 228). The problem here is that this realization does not come until the end of the novel, when Theodora is being taken away from him. The ‘offering’ between the two characters has not really taken place, because there is no remainder: whenever Cecil touches Theodora, he feels no boundary, and does not realize what she is giving him.

Cecil’s inability to ‘self-touch her’, to set aside his own egotism and to let her know he cares for her, destroys Theodora in the end. Only when Theodora is beyond his reach does he realize what he has lost, and does he wish he had given their relationship meaning. He tries to rectify his mistake by caring for her, but cannot convince her of his love for her. His solution

is to love her “unselfishly” (*Six* 239), but it quickly becomes clear that this too does not imbue their relationship with meaning, at least not for Theodora. The touches in this novel never become a ‘self-touching-you’: while at first, the ‘you’, Theodora, is missing from the equation (not recognized), at the end, Cecil tries to correct the mistake overcompensating, leaving out his self.²³ By doing so, the offering he attempts to make is not received by Theodora, and convinced he cannot possibly care for her anymore, she kills herself.

Thus, an offering entails an act of giving between two people. The meaning that is thus created is similar to what Gagné calls ‘memory’: that which remains, after an act of reaching, giving, is meaning, a memory of the transaction—an absence (as a gap) in the form of a presence (as a gift, a giving meaning, memory). As explained in chapter 1, touching always comes with a gap, a liminal space that belongs neither to the toucher nor to the touched, but a remnant which remains “as a memory on the skin / the body” (Gagné 210-211). Gagné understands this “tactile remainder” as memory: “For every touch there is always a remembrance of the touch—whether the memory is actively remembered or immediately forgotten” (18, fn 4). However, Gagné leaves out the ‘pre-ethical violence’ that comes with every touch. Her idea of the tactile remainder is based on proximity: both toucher and touched, self and you, share the memory, which reduces the distance between them.

As opposed to Gagné, Manning does underline the potential of violence that comes whenever the body exscribes meaning:

We never touch more than a limit, and to touch a limit, to experience a limit, is to face a certain violence, to be face to face with the impossibility of ultimate penetration, to take into consideration our desire, my desire to penetrate you fully. (Manning §52)

²³ Cross claims in the preface of *Six Chapters* that she hopes the text may stand as “a lasting protest against all egoism, all love of love for the sake of pleasure to the lover, instead of the all-glorious and selfless love which desires only the well-being of the loved-one” (7). Although she quite clearly illustrates that egotistical love is disastrous, the alternative, a love without ‘self’, is also highly problematic.

In the world of *Jane Eyre*, the same giving of meaning—which is always violent in its potential²⁴—also occurs in the act of gazing. Facing other characters, Jane experiences “a being-with that must remain, always, a being-without, a simultaneous moment of feeling the direction of your gaze, of your body, and knowing that this touch, though directed at me, will serve to mark the separation, the schism between you and me” (Manning §54). Attempting to care for, understand, and connect with other characters (being-with), Jane does so from the margins, never forgetting the impossibility of a full connection to the heart through gazing (being-without): her strive for independence against the distancing and appropriating gazes from Mr. Rochester and St John discussed in chapter 2 illustrates this very well.

For instance, Jane saves Mr. Rochester by putting out a fire Bertha had started in his bedroom, and when she recalls his thanks, she realizes “[h]ow very near” she had approached him at that moment: “I inevitably recall the moment when I last saw [his figure]: just after I had rendered him, what he deemed, an essential service—and he holding my hand, and looking down on my face, surveyed me with eyes that revealed a heart full and eager to overflow; in whose emotions I had a part” (*Jane* 258). The word ‘near’ shows both hand and eyes reached out in an act of giving: emotions in which both had a part (being-with), while at the same time not completely touching at the heart: “Yet now, how distant, how far estranged we were!” (*Jane* 258). After all, ‘near’ still implies a distance: your heart is not near you, but is you, which I am not; I can only be near. Mr. Rochester holds her hand, but Jane quickly escapes his touch and surveying eyes (*Jane* 224).

Thus, while attempting to connect with other characters through touch and gaze, having to do so from the margins always brings with it a gap, and thus results in a reaching that is not more or less than that. Jane wants to love and give, as do Mr. Rochester and St.

²⁴ Remember, as Aristotle already mentioned in his *Peri Psuchēs*, “the *faculty* of sensation—the tactile faculty, for example—is only *potential* and not *actual*, with the ineluctable consequence that of itself, it does not sense *itself*; it does not auto-effect itself without the motion of an exterior object” (Derrida 6).

John, but each character's gift of touch and gaze is different, and thus, throughout the biggest part of the novel, they fail to accept each other's gifts as they are given. Only at the end of the novel, when Mr. Rochester merely has his touch left to offer Jane, is he finally able to accept her 'heart' and her (for him now invisible) gaze.

As our discussion of *Jane Eyre* has made clear, Jane's gaze is not celebrated above Mr. Rochester's because his is violent, and hers is not. After all, gazing from the margins does not mean that it is done without consequences: in an act of reaching, there will always left a memory, a meaning, a remainder which affects both gazer and gazed, toucher and touched. See for instance Mr. Rochester's very clear cry of pain when Jane gazes at his countenance when he has just proposed to her: she reaches out to him, but in doing so, she tortures him: "Oh, Jane, you torture me!" [...] "With that searching and yet faithful and generous look, you torture me!" (*Jane* 381). However, by gazing from the margins with the goal of reaching, offering, giving, Jane also leaves room—the gap—for the gaze to leave a remainder on her.

Jane's gaze is very consciously a *generous* act, showing "a readiness to give more of something," ("generous, *adj.* and *n.*"). While Mr. Rochester appropriates through his gaze, thus "*taking* as [his] own" ("appropriating, *n.*"; emphasis mine), Jane *gives*, but can only do so when her heart and subjectivity are—while remaining untouchable and invisible—at least accepted as present. In the novel, Mr. Rochester finally does so at the end, when his blindness frees him from only taking: throughout the entire novel, he calls Jane an elf, fairy, imp, etc., but only when he is blind does he need reassurance that she is in fact real, "altogether a human being," to which Jane answers that she "conscientiously believe[s] so" (*Jane* 659). Unable as he was to accept Jane's dynamic self through the gaze, he is now feels the constant need to do so through touching her. Touch and gaze often go together in *Jane Eyre*, especially in so much as they both take place in an act of reaching, leaving remainders both on the gazer/toucher and on the gazed/touched. Only when touching the boundary of Jane's human

skin is Mr. Rochester open for an act of giving between permeable, pervious bodies, dynamic selves (Cohen 132).

Conclusion

A secret offering, as it were, I promised myself. ~ Jacques Derrida

On Touching 302

Touch as a sense has often been located on the skin. However, just like skin—with its different layers and orifices—is a porous, unclear boundary, so touch is a difficult concept to grasp. Already in Victorian times, touch was considered to be multi-faceted. As discussed by Gagné, Victorians had a very troubled relationship with tactility: it was often considered to be inappropriate, but at the same time it was often necessary, and used specifically to acquire knowledge. This necessity of tactility made it an ordinary part of life, especially in the often private sphere of women's life and work, but also made it a dangerous sense to employ and encounter. Touch blurred boundaries, boundaries that made Victorian life safe and orderly, but also restricted.

At the same time, we have seen that touch is necessary if we want to form any kind of identity for ourselves. As Cohen has shown us, this idea has roots in Victorian literature, where we can see that subjectivity is grounded in bodily materiality. According to Victorian writers, bodily experience influences the characters' identity. This goes especially for touch, because every touch is reciprocal. As such, touching/being touched is never simple, and should never be taken for granted. Whatever we attempt to touch, it also touches us. Thus, the toucher is also the touched, the object also subject and the subject object. This realization highlights the reflexivity of every touch. Whenever we reach towards someone else, whenever we attempt to touch them, we physically come into contact with their bodily materiality. It is this physical experience that then shapes our perception of our subjectivity—of both our own and of the other. Thus, there is a gap between the object we touch and our perception of it,

even between the touch itself and how we perceive it. We can never truly touch at the heart of the object; the heart shrinks away from the touch. Just like the heart of the other remains untouchable, out of reach, so we remain out of reach for the other. We only touch the outer skin, the limit of the limit, never beyond that. The self always remains out of reach.

However, at the same time, it is this gap that grants us the room necessary to experience our self. What Derrida calls ‘the heart’ is that essence of who we are, our body proper that can never be touched, not even by ourselves. With every touch we experience, we become aware of that otherness within the object/subject we touch, even within the touch itself. Thus, when we touch ourselves, we become aware of ourselves, experiencing ourselves as ‘other’. However, the second we experience our self as ‘other’, it is lost to us as ‘self’. It is the expropriation, the realization there was never any body proper, only ‘not-I’, that makes us aware of a sense of self in the first place. Thus, with every touch, subjectivity is un/made: without this un/making, there are no unique selves to begin with, because we would not be aware of them.

As we have seen in *Jane Eyre*, touch and gaze merge in Jane’s quest for acceptance of her-self. Jane’s soul-searching eyes try to reach Mr. Rochester’s heart, but it is her touch that, in the end, connects their identities. Every gaze brings the danger of being influenced by the other’s identity, but also empowers the other to look back. This reciprocal nature of the gazes in *Jane Eyre* is what makes them tactile. Jane realizes quite strongly that her identity is more than what others see of her, but also distances herself from parts of her own identity. Only through her tactile relationship with Mr. Rochester, in which both of them leave room for the other’s subjectivity, is Jane able to become happy. Their relationship becomes one of offerings: knowing that touches and gazes can have far-reaching consequences, both characters reach towards each other in order to give meaning to each other.

Just like in *Wuthering Heights*, touch is often violent in *Jane Eyre*, in the sense that it encroaches upon the characters' identity. In *Jane Eyre*, gazes and touches become explicitly threatening around the character of Bertha Mason. In *Wuthering Heights*, all characters leave marks, especially on each other's bodies and identities. Catherine's and Heathcliff's touches cross boundaries, illustrating how, in Victorian times, touch was thought to be dangerous. While Catherine seems to have the power to touch beyond the grave, Heathcliff dominates everyone around him, often physically hurting them. However, in the violent touches between each other, they seem to experience each other's soul as the same, encounter the other in themselves. The narrative only resolves itself when the descendants of so much passion and hatred are able to look each other in the eye, and help each other. Cathy offers Hareton her friendship through a kiss, and in return, Hareton offers her his laughter.

In "The Yellow Wallpaper", the 'not-I' manifests itself in the woman behind the wallpaper, who is freed through the visual and tactile act of writing. The protagonist in this short story goes from gazing at the wallpaper to ripping parts of it off, thus freeing the self her husband tried to contain with scientific authority. It is her writing that unites her with her denied self, showing a female imagination and bodily experience that flourishes in destructiveness. We have found other female experiences beyond the understanding of her male counterparts in "A Cross Line" and in "The Undefinable". In "The Undefinable," the gaze is clearly used as a challenge against the stereotypical figure of the female muse. The identity of the male painter is shaken in its foundation when he feels his self 'touched' by the identity of his mysterious model. The inner gaze of the protagonist of "A Cross Line" illustrates quite clearly that her husband has no idea of her inner world. Although their lines of communication are often crossed—as is also the case with her lover—touches seem to bring them closer together. However, it is the inherently female touch of pregnancy, someone other inside her, that grounds her identity in female companionship.

In these stories, the women attempt to give an offering, but not all of them succeed. The mother in “The Yellow Wallpaper” is not given the chance to offer anything to her family, and also is not given the support she actually needs. In a desperate attempt to claim her freedom, she reaches towards her denied self by writing down her story and ripping off the wallpaper. In “The Undefinable”, an act of giving through a kiss of the eyes is attempted but thwarted because the male painter is mostly interested in taking, and has trouble giving his muse the respect she needs as a fellow human being. In the world of “A Cross Line”, offerings are barely possible: although characters reach, they do not reach other. Only when the female protagonist receives the gift of life is she able to form a connection with her maid, who has experienced a pregnancy herself.

Cecil Ray, Theodora’s lover in “Theodora: A Fragment” and *Six Chapters of a Man’s Life*, brings together tactile gazes, self-touches *and* violent touches in his relationship with her. With his desire of Theodora’s body, Cecil employs tactile gazes to appropriate her for himself. However, when he touches her, she remains completely passive, almost as if his touch is not returned. And in a way, she cannot return his touches: as long as Cecil does not acknowledge her self, she remains elusive to his touch. Cecil does not recognize what she is giving him, while at the same he does not know what he should be giving her. When he is finally willing to offer himself to her, Theodora is unable to accept the gift, because she does not believe him.

In one way or another, all these narratives deal with tactility and female subjectivity. The three main themes we have found in the texts turned out to be the tactile gaze, self-touching-you, and a tactile offering. The tactile gaze manifested itself in a kiss of the eyes, which emphasized how gazes brought promises of both life and death. Female characters struggled against and with a denial of their self, both from those around them, and as an internalized part of their own identity, but through a kiss of the eyes, characters were also

reach towards each other. The self-touch showed us that the acceptance of this denied self, and the realization that, once we reflect on our self, it becomes ‘not-I’, is in fact what makes the realization of ‘self’ possible. The tactile offering kept the way to individual development through relationships open, while underlining that this remains a precarious process. Whether in the form of writing or painting, caring or hurting, pregnancy or rape, a ghostly touch or a tactile gaze, every tactile experience unmakes the characters’ subjectivity. And it is in these moments of potential violence that the female characters of *Jane Eyre*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Six Chapters of a Man’s Life*, “The Yellow Wallpaper”, “A Cross Line”, and “The Undefinable: A Fantasia” fight for their right to claim their subjectivity.

Touches are used to restrain Jane, Catherine, Theodora, & co., to limit them to the socially accepted roles for women in nineteenth century England. However, as the literary texts show us, these same touches give them the possibility to search for themselves. Every touch makes it clear their self is out of reach, cannot even be imagined by themselves or by their fellow characters, and it is this impossibility, this unmaking, that makes their identity possible. If we leave out the reflexivity/gaps that come(s) with every touch, we run the risk of effacing our own self and/or that of others, thus eliminating the possibility to simply be human.

In the nineteenth century, a time where there was a lot of attention for the tension between self and society, empowerment was an elementary step towards any form of ‘self’. But while autonomy seemed to be the right process for this, it might have replaced one image of what women should be for another. Instead, following Derrida’s philosophy on touching, we have seen how our literary characters thrived on relationships in which tactile offerings could take place. Victorian literature is full of characters with dynamic selves: subjectivities that are confirmed *and* unmade through interaction with others. Through bodily interaction,

the literary characters feel the confirmation of their identity, but at the same time, the embodied ‘others’ they encounter force them to acknowledge that they too are ‘other’.

Touch plays a very important role in these interactions, because of all our bodily senses, it is touch that always brings us to our self: every touch brings the characters into contact with otherness, something untouchable in themselves and in those around them. In this sense, the reflexivity and reciprocity that come with every touch makes tactility a necessary ‘tool’ in the female characters’ struggle for their own identity. The ‘not-I’ they encounter in every touch unmakes their subjectivity, but it is in this unmaking in materiality that their selves are realized. The unmaking of the material keeps the heart of our self out of reach, meaning the only self we can ever get to is mediated, expropriated. However, it is this expropriation of the self that makes us aware of the possibility of a self *beyond* the expropriation: the realization we have a ‘heart’ (subjectivity) puts that true heart out of our reach, makes it untouchable, but without the realization, we would never even know we have a subjectivity.

We have started out with the question whether, in order to become autonomous, it is essential for women to apply the effects of touching and being touched to the self. Following the assumption that, in the nineteenth century, women were more in need of empowerment than men, we mostly looked at female tactile experiences. However, as the examples have shown us, reflexivity on our subjectivity is important for all humans, not just women. As our case studies and discussion of Derrida’s *On Touching* have shown, it is a willingness to give meaning in an act of tactile offering—a kiss of the I’s—and to have the body exscribe that meaning, that makes any sense of identity possible.

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